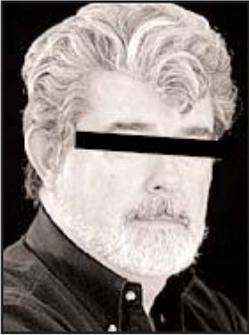


Horror
(Nameless)



An Alert Nerd Zine
CROK
3



Hey ya!

Remember that song, that "Hey, Ya" song? It was so popular way back when.

I remember when I first heard that song, I had the BESTEST idea. I was gonna do a modern update of my smash film about the 1950s, only make it about the 1980s and focus on the growing rap and hip-hop movement in New York City. It was gonna be called American Graffiti, Y'all.

I even called my assistant and said to him, "Assistant, I can never remember your name. What's your name again?"

"Elliot," he says.

"Was that your name last time I called?"

"No. This is my first day," says Elmer. "You fired Alexander because he didn't know all the words to the 'Yub-Nub' song."

"Do you know all the words to it, Ethan?"

"It's Elliot. 'Yub-nub, eee chop yub nub, toe meet toe pee chee keene, g'noop dock fling oh ah...'"

"I get it. Hey, who sings that song?"

"The Ewoks, sir."

"No, Emeril! Not that song! You're fired."

And then I hung up, cause I was pretty upset. I don't know what he was smoking, but it wasn't nicotine, because nicotine makes you feel good and act smarter. My doctor told me so.

So I went to the Best Buy and I asked for the CD and I bought it, and then I called my friend Stevie Spielberg, and he asked his assistant (who always has HIS shit together, which is like TOTALLY UNFAIR, why does he get all the good ones???) to get me the guy who does "Hey Ya."

I called him, but he wasn't there, so I left a voicemail. Here's what I said.

"Hey, ya! No, seriously, this is George, and I make movies and I was hoping I could make this one with you. It's called American Graffiti Y'all and I'd like to make your song the theme song. It may have to have new words, like maybe Ewok words, like 'Yub nub' instead of 'Hey Ya.' I can pay you in Indiana Jones action figures; no one bought that shit. Listen, I have a few—"

And that's when his message cut off. I hope he calls soon!

What will happen to me when I die?

Toodles,

Fake George Lucas

Grok: An Alert Nerd Zine

Editors: Sarah Kuhn, Matt Springer, Chris Stewart

Contributors: Jeff Chen, Sarah Kuhn, Stephen Graham Jones, Samantha Rich, Ivan Sian, Jeff Stolarczyk, Matt Springer, Chris Stewart, Matthew Walden.

Special Thanks to Toren Atkinson for the use of his fantastic cover art - <http://www.thickets.net/toren>

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"What happened to The Alert Nerdian?"

It's coming! And then we're going to compile it and this year's Groks into an annual! And then we're going to keep doing that over and over until we can pump them out with ease.

E-mail us: alertnerd@gmail.com

Read our blog: <http://www.alertnerd.com>

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BIOS

Stephen Graham Jones once arm wrestled a bear and won. In addition to teaching English at the University of Colorado at Boulder and being an award-winning writer, he secretly cries at the end of *Love, Actually*. Read his blog at DemonTheory.net.

Sarah Kuhn lives in Los Angeles with a geek husband, an extensive *Buffy* action figure collection and way too many comic books. She has written for a bunch of nifty publications, including *Back Stage*, *Geek Monthly*, *IGN*, *StarTrek.com*, and *Creative Screenwriting*. She is one fourth of the mighty Alert Nerd collective and also blogs about stuff at Great Hera! (greathera.typepad.com)

Samantha Rich is still emerging from the post-grad-school larval stage. She lives in Missouri with the angriest cat in the world and a DVD collection that cannot be tamed.

Back when the Internets was young, vibrant and paved with gold, **Ivan Sian** contributed insipid, drunken rants to *IGN Sci-Fi*. But after them thar webtubes imploded, he moved along to greater heights, submitting even more infrequent articles to the gone-but-not-forgotten Entertainment Geekly. Now that Ivan is older, he's a little less drunken, but no less insipid. Ladies love him, girls adore him, even the ones who never saw him, he's Ivan Sian.

Matt Springer trims his toenails far less often than he should. Despite this disgusting factoid, he has managed to eke out a living in this workaday world, finding gainful employment as a magazine writer and editor, a marketing/PR flack, and a janitor. He is part of Alert Nerd's four-sided bitchin' content die and has published his first

novel, *Unconventional*, through Alert Nerd Press (press.alertnerd.com). He also blogs at Pop Geek (popgeek.org). He lives with a toddler and his beautiful wife in Orlando, FL.

Chris Stewart was rescued from a life of crime by Matt and Sarah, who put him to work reviling films at Daily Sci-Fi. Jeff Chen called the shots there, so technically he saved Chris, but being excellent re-programmers and handlers, Chris only remembers Matt and Sarah. Jeff is "That really nice guy he met that one trip to LA." The implications are chilling and their plans for him remain unknown. He continues to orbit the world of freelance writing while working in the videogame industry in Vancouver. He also runs Proton Charging (protoncharging.com), a *Ghostbusters* news site and one of the earliest blogs evar.

Jeff Stolarcyk is actually the cornerstone of the Alert Nerd rhombus, despite being the New Guy. When he's not being Sarah, Matt and Chris' Cousin Oliver, he blogs at *ConditionalAxe.com* and about 30 other places. Ladies, he's single. He loves cats, romantic comedies and scotch.

Matthew Walden grew up in Hawaii, Connecticut and Florida. He has worked on the TV show *Lost* and a handful of Apatow slacker comedies. He's also written for *Destructoid* and once lied about Abraham Lincoln on national television. He currently lives in Los Angeles and loves his wife, his cat, Vicodin, and cookies. In that order.

Toren Atkinson spends his time creating, illustrating, and playing role playing games. In his spare time, he draws comics. And then at night, he plays in a rock band that is both nerdy and highly listenable. It's enough to make you sick.

Jeff Chen deserves a bio next issue.



For Part I of this story, please check out Grok #1: Pon Farr
<http://tinyurl.com/4t2ocp>

For Part II of this story, please check out Grok #2: Secret Origins
<http://tinyurl.com/6fotxk>

No one remembers how *The Periodic Seven* ended.

And by “no one,” I mean “the five people who clung stubbornly to the book as it thrashed its final death throes and faded into dusty quarter bin obscurity.” Yes, I was one of those people. This is surprising?

In the climactic story arc, the team faces off against Monstrovore, a gigantic, tentacled beast genetically engineered by Doctor Halogen. Said creature paralyzes its foes by invoking an amorphous sort of dread — a nameless, faceless horror — in their very souls. For three wretched issues, it tortures the Seven, forcing them to confront their worst fears, face their angst-laden demons, blah blah, a shitload of flashbacks and dream sequences, blah blah.

So how do they defeat this monster, this looming threat to their sanity and their lives and civilization as we fucking know it?

They don't.

Instead, Monstrovore picks them off one by one, and we watch our heroes die a series of increasingly gratuitous deaths, ultimately disappearing into the filthy basement of forgotten comic book history.

I know. I *know*. It's a completely batshit insane detour into Shark-Jumping Crazyland, only it's more like this particular storyline clears the shark and keeps running and then trips over a few random potholes before blazing off into the distance, cackling maniacally and flipping everyone — fans! Marvel! — the bird.

At the time, I had no Lovecraftian frame of reference, so I didn't realize that good ol' Monstro was basically a bargain basement take on a Cthulu-esque creation — a Schmithulu, of sorts. But you know what? Schmithulu fucking *terrified me*. I was 9. I didn't know about comic book sales figures and cancellations and vindictive writers who decide to send their doomed titles off in a blaze of something resembling dubious glory. All I knew was that this was the one thing Glory Gilmore couldn't defeat, the one evil she couldn't conquer.

In my adult years, all of my irrational fears have taken on a Schmithulu sort of mantle. Whenever I feel a stab of out-of-nowhere terror — like, for example, the night after I saw *The Grudge* and was afraid to cross my apartment building's courtyard because I suddenly thought the big-mouthed cat boy was going to jump out from behind the stairwell and *kill me* and yes, this was the American version, I can't even bring myself to watch the "real" one, fuck you — I imagine Schmithulu rising up inside of me, threatening to swallow me whole. And that's when I've gotta step up and do a little Buffy-esque posturing and kick his/her/its ass, for the sake of maintaining my own carefully-calibrated equilibrium. And for Glory Gilmore, who couldn't fight back in the end.

Okay. So here's the thing. This is all fine and good when we're talking about creepy movie kids and shit like that. But I'm sort of figuring out that Schmithulu comes in a lot of different fucking forms — all shapes and sizes and whatever. And I'm not equipped for that. So not equipped. Shoulda succumbed to the goddamn cat boy when I had the chance.

**

"You're his only hope."

I sound these words out, trying to re-arrange them into a formation that actually makes sense.

"Are you still there?!" Mitch's voice blares through the phone, high-pitched and strained and very un-Mitch-like. He sounds like a Pokemon trainer, or maybe Linn Minmei in pre-concert stress mode.

"I...hold on." I plant my feet on the floor and push off from the bed, woozily trying to figure out my next step. Clothes. I need clothes. I blearily survey the dirt-colored carpet. There do seem to be a lot of clothes here, but I'm not entirely sure which ones are mi—

"JULIEEEEEEEEE!"

Even though the hand holding the phone has dropped to my side, well away from ear-range, I can still hear Mitch's insistent squawk. I cover the mouthpiece.

After a few seconds of dazedly scanning the room, I snag the piece of apparel that seems closest to me — Jack's semi-infamous Dr. Strange shirt — and slide it over my head. Phone clutched purposefully in my right hand, I slip into the bland, Holiday Innified bathroom, shut the door, and perch myself on the edge of the tub.

"Okay...what?" I hiss, bringing the phone back to my ear. "And also...what?!?"

"Braidbeard's in trouble..."

"You said that part. I want to know about the *other* part."

Mitch lets out a gusty sigh. "Okay. Well, let me back up. Remember his interview with Graham Barrett?"

"You mean the one he lorded over me while I was wallowing in my hangover?"

Another sigh. "Yeah. So...it didn't go so well. Graham's personal publicist gave B a list of taboo topics — stuff he was specifically not supposed to ask about, like personal life shit and spoiler shit."

"Wait." I groan. "I can see where this is going."

"Yeah. So, as you've probably gathered, one of those taboo topics was the movie version of *Solar Knights*. Which, if you'll remember, Graham denounced from the beginning and has refused to speak of ever since."

"Can't blame him," I mutter. "It was so fucking bad — Uwe Boll bad. And let me guess: Braidbeard just couldn't contain himself."

"That's about right," Mitch says ruefully. "He asked the question. And Mr. Barrett, having a reputation of glorious bastardism to maintain, went apeshit, which set off a chain reaction. His publicist freaked on Kirstie and Kirstie freaked on B."

"Okay, I'm still not seeing where the crisis is," I say, trying to tug the insufficient t-shirt over my backside. "It's Sunday. We have precious few con hours left. Won't everyone have forgotten about this by the time the next one rolls around?"

"Well...that's the problem." Mitch hesitates. "She put him on The List."

"Mitch..." I shake my head, even though I know he can't see me. "Come on. There's no such thing."

The List is an urban con legend of fucking epic proportions. It is said to contain the names of journalists who have, for various reasons, been banned for life from the convention circuit. Not just one convention in particular, mind you: it is supposedly circulated amongst the flacks for cons worldwide. If you're on The List, your days of marinating in re-hashed genre celebrity witticisms and junket-provided Coca-Cola products are over. To me, this has always had the whiff of a wild-eyed, all-caps "J.J. ABRAMS DIRECTS TEH STAR TREKS!!!"-type message board rumor. But then, look how that turned out.

"He's on it," Mitch says firmly. "They took away his credentials, his badge — everything. And Kirstie warned him about showing up at WonderCon."

"Okay," I say. I pluck a wax paper-wrapped soap bar from the corner of the tub and turn it over in my hand, scrutinizing the perfectly folded corners. "So he fucked up. I still don't see how I can help, here."

"Julie." Mitch has his ultra-serious voice on. He only uses it when he's discussing the intricacies of his latest D&D campaign or defending George Lucas' right to alter the original *Star Wars* movies (don't ask). "Kirstie...likes you. She thinks you guys have, like, a bond. I bet if you talked to her, it would really smooth things over."

"What?!" I toss the soap aside, letting it clatter into the bathtub. "You want me to grovel to someone I can't stand, all in the name of helping someone I can't stand *even more*?"

"But—"

"No. He dug his own fucking grave. It was inevitable that he would, someday. I'm not going out on a limb for someone who repeatedly acts like an ass and thinks there won't be any consequences."

Mitch goes silent for a moment. "You know," he finally says, drawing out each word carefully, "much as you might hate to admit it, the two of you are pretty goddamn similar in a lot of ways."

"Not funny," I snap.

"You're right," he says. "It's not fucking funny. Because there's at least one key difference. He would do this for *you*."

With a staticky "thunk," the line goes dead.

"Well, fuck you, too," I mutter.

I snap the phone closed in one decisive motion. In fact, it is so decisive a motion that I nearly lose my balance and fall ass-backwards into the tub. I stand up shakily, and pull at the t-shirt, trying to give myself just another inch of hemline. Next time I decide to have a contentious, meandering bathroom conversation, I'm gonna put on some pants.

**

I emerge from my secret telephone lair to find Jack sitting up in bed, awake but not quite alert. He leans back against the headboard, rubbing sleep from his half-lidded eyes.

"Hi," he says, squinting in my general direction. "You're blurry. But I think I love your outfit."

I feel my face flush and bite my lip to keep from smiling. I cross the room, toss my phone on the nightstand, and slide in next to him, t-shirt and all. He puts an arm around me in a way that seems weirdly courtly, like we're at the drive-in movie or the sock hop or something.

"So," he says. "What do you think, Girl Detective? Is this — and by 'this,' I mean completely embarrassing yourself in a *Dance Dance Revolution* tournament — the best con experience ever?"

I angle my body towards his, tentatively resting my head on his shoulder. I suddenly feel as if I'm enveloped in a protective bubble — a chintzy *Get Smart*-ian gadget, plastic and fantastic, holding me slightly apart from him, everything still and perfect and close to the bone. My own Cone of Shyness.

Which is, you know, kind of weird, considering how Not!Shy we both were just a few hours ago.

His fingertips wander away from my shoulder, grazing the back of my neck. An army of rebellious goosebumps marches its merry way through the general area. I don't even know. Obviously, the Cone of Shyness is fucking defective.

"Embarrassing?" I finally say, attempting to feign outrage. "I *shredded*. I probably could have won that shit all by my lonesome."

"Probably," he says. "But remember: my virtuosic *Guitar Hero* star powering got you there in the first place. Never forget the little people in your quest for complete and total arcade dominance."

He grins at me, his eyes teasing, yet still a little lazy and clouded with sleep. My gut flutters, a bizarre brew of exhilaration and total fucking nausea. For one manic moment, I imagine myself bolting through the hotel halls, jumping up and down exuberantly, then collapsing to the ground and puking all over myself.

"By the way," he continues, "I wanted to pick up on something extremely important we were discussing before Claire...you know, interrupted."

"What's that?" I tilt my head, smiling at him gamely.

"The Many Assembled Theories of Julie," he intones, infusing each word with faux-dramatic flair. "Do you, in fact, have one for every major issue to ever plague geekdom, and if so, can I please hear some more?"

"Okay," I say, arranging my face into a mock-serious expression. "Topic?"

"Organic webshooters."

"A reasonable reinvention of a classic device, and certainly not worth the shitload of fanboy tantrum-throwing that ensued."

"Deep Space Nine."

"The superior *Trek* in every way. And anyone who prefers *Babylon* fucking 5 isn't worth talking to."

"Buffy Summers' ultimate soulmate."

"Angel."

"What?!" he looks genuinely surprised. "You would pick Angel?"

"I'm cookie dough." I grin at him, deciding to leave it at that.

"Huh." He shakes his head bemusedly. "So your romantic nature extends beyond Cyclops/Phoenix 'shipping. I like that."

"Shut up." I nudge him the ribs.

"Okay, Okay," he says. "Is there anything you want to quiz me on in return? I don't have as extensive a library of well-considered nerd talking points as you do, but it's only fair."

"Hmm," I say. "Well, given the wide range geek events you probably go to — and the mass amounts of alcohol at said events — I still don't quite buy that this is your first...con-quest." I raise an eyebrow. "Surely there have been others?"

I expect him to get a chuckle out of my oh-so-clever terminology, but instead, he tilts his head to the side and looks at me intently. I notice that his hair is sticking out comically in the back, pillow-mussed into a vaguely pyramid-like formation. "No," he says softly.

I tear my gaze from his, twisting the end of the bed sheet around my finger. That exuberant/pukey feeling is just *raging*.

"Oh, hey," he says, perhaps sensing my recurrent urge to vomit and affecting a more casual cadence, "why are you getting urgent phone calls so early in the morning? Hot scoop?"

"Hardly," I say. I briefly recount the tale of Braidbeard and the Pissed-Off Brit.

"It's just...dumb," I conclude lamely. "Mitch and I don't really fight. I dunno." The final moments of our phone call flicker through my brain and I flinch a little.

Jack nods thoughtfully, giving my shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "You know..." he says. "In our limited time together last night, I did kind of get the impression that you and Braidbeard were...um, friends."

"Well, we're not," I say. "We're more like...arch-enemies who occasionally come together for a mutually-beneficial goal. Like Professor X and Magneto."

"Wouldn't helping him out this time sort of be...that?" he asks, brow furrowing. "Like you'd be maintaining the balance on the con circuit and preserving the sanctity of your mighty — if slightly dysfunctional — trio?"

"Why are you so bent on taking Mitch's side?" My shoulders tense and I suddenly feel as if I'm positioned in the most uncomfortable way possible. Like a puppet whose strings are being yanked, I lift my head from Jack's shoulder and sit up straight. "I mean, he basically implied that I'm...I'm...some sort of unfeeling, bitchfaced automaton." I train my eyes on my lap. "Do you think that, too?"

"No, of course not. But..." He hesitates, then speaks carefully. "You have this thing where...you kind of *want* people to think that."

The words hang in the air. Something about them is so precise, so weighted and specific, they echo through my head and lodge themselves in my brain, repeating and repeating and repeating.

My chest tightens. I swallow hard, trying to clamp down on the wild thread of desperation worming its way through my gut. "Since when do you know me well enough to comment on...my *things*?" I say. It comes out sharp and spiteful, a harsh exclamation point of a statement.

Surprise registers in his eyes, then confusion. "Hey," he says gently. He reaches over and brushes an unruly clump of hair out of my eyes. "I didn't mean..."

"Oh, I think you did," I say, my voice colder than I intend it to be. "Just say what you want to say, Jack."

He leans back against the headboard and lets out an exasperated sigh, his face slowly clouding over.

"Fine," he says after a tense moment, his tone low and firm. "You want me to be honest? Your whole deal has been pretty obvious to me since the moment we met."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

He gives me a look that's unnerving in its directness. "It means you're really fucking scared."

A wave of blinding frustration engulfs me, robbing me of my ability to form a single coherent thought. Not even LiveJulie is coming to my rescue. "I don't know what I'm supposed to say to that," I say, my voice shaking dangerously. I crumple the edge of the sheet in my fist and shake my head vehemently, as if such forceful acts will give me some modicum of control over the situation. "This...this is why I don't do...stuff like this."

"Right," he snaps. He pushes himself out of bed, pacing the room feverishly. He's clad only in out of season, holiday-themed boxers with reindeer and snowmen all over them. The sheer ridiculousness of this juxtaposition magnifies his anger in a weird way, makes it more pointed. He finally comes to an abrupt halt, crossing his arms over his chest and frowning at me.

"I *like* you," he says. It almost sounds like an accusation.

"Well, I really don't know *why*," I growl. "Considering what a scared, heartless bitch I am."

He exhales sharply, raking a hand through his hair. The rickety hair-pyramid shifts to one side, but remains standing. "Because..." he says. "Because when you're not obsessing over maintaining your carefully crafted 'I'm above this shit' persona, when you're not walling yourself up in the Fortress of Emotional Solitude, when you're just being *you* ...you're pretty fucking cool."

He tilts his head, his gaze boring into me. "But apparently, all of that is impossible for you to deal with. Accepting actual, non-automaton feelings means giving up a teeny, tiny bit of control, and you can't do that...can you?"

Those last two words come out plaintive, an almost-hopeful question that evaporates into the air between us.

I stare at him for a moment. The tension has fled my body and I feel like I'm wilting into the soft, creaky mattress. His eyes hold mine. They really are ridiculously blue.

Suddenly, I want so badly to say something, to say anything, to somehow take us back to where we were five minutes ago. But the words won't come. Because I know he's right. Because I *can't*.

I hug my arms to my chest and turn away. Out of the corner of my eye, I see him look down at the floor, as if trying to memorize every tiny flaw of the hideous carpet, every cigarette burn and loose fiber.

Finally he says, "I need to go."

I don't say anything. I don't try to stop him as he slowly pulls on his clothes, claps his hand over his back jeans pocket to make sure his wallet's there, and heads for the door. I sit mutely in bed, twisting the sheet into different formations, examining my nails, occasionally staring out the window. I keep expecting him to turn back and look at me as he's leaving, but he doesn't.

**

An hour later, I'm finally trudging through the con center. My messenger bag thumps rhythmically against my hip, dragging my overloaded shoulder down with every foot-fall.

I stop in a quiet expanse of hall near one of the stairways, a section with floor-to-ceiling windows that look out onto the city. This, truthfully, is one of my favorite parts of the convention center: not the jam-packed dealers' area, not the sweaty panel room where everyone piles in eagerly, awaiting two hours of impressive, expletive-laden Kevin Smith monologuing. Here, you can sit on the floor-level window ledge and eat your shitty hot dog and read your new *Fables* trade and feel like the stomach-churning energy of GinormoCon isn't going to knock you on flat on your ass.

I stare out the window for a moment, calculating how many hours I have to endure before I can leave for the airport. As I turn away, preparing to enter the fray, a figure sitting on the ledge several windows to the left catches my eye. He's hunched over, eyes downcast and just slightly catatonic-looking. And his scraggly braids are even scragglier than usual.

I sigh. Figures.

I trudge over and plop myself down next to him. We share a moment of heavy silence.

Finally, I say it.

"Braidbeard. What the fuck were you thinking?"

He looks up, blinking slowly, as if coming out of a trance. "I...I just wanted to know." His nasal tones are muted, almost thoughtful. "And it would have been such an awesome scoop. I would've gotten linked everywhere...I'd be the one who got him to talk about it."

"It's just...it seems like such a risk," I say. "Graham Barrett doesn't exactly have the most cuddly reputation."

"I know, I guess I didn't...think about that. I just thought, if I can get in there, if I can get the interview and ask the question..." he trails off.

I nod. I suppose thinking critically — thinking beyond whether something "suxxors" or "pwns" — is probably not Braidbeard's most developed skill. Then again, it would seem that it's not really mine, either.

"I talked to Reg," he says abruptly. Reg is Cineplanet's rather scowly editor-in-chief. "He said...he said it's cool. He said maybe it's time for me to tackle another beat. Like music or something." His words are matter-of-fact, but his voice quavers.

I picture Braidbeard amongst the heaving throngs at the Warfield, mixed in with vintage-swathed hipsters, aging punks, and legions of bored girls wearing non-prescription cat-eye specs. I see him, notepad in hand, too-big Wolverine t-shirt hanging off his spindly frame, attempting to look unimpressed. I visualize him being jostled from side-to-side by a gaggle of uncaring Ethan Hawke look-alikes in moth-eaten bowling shirts,

all trying to get into the groove of a band they claim is "overrated." I suddenly want to punch them all in the face.

"Wait here for a second," I say.

**

If it's at all possible, the Media Holding Area looks even more depressing than usual in the waning hours of the con. A few disheveled journalists are draped over folding chairs, comparing back issue finds and "I was so drunk..." stories. A general air of desperation and finality hangs in the stagnant air. This is it. Until next time.

I spot Kirstie flitting about, clipboard in hand. I march over and tap her on the shoulder. She whirls around, beaming. "Jules! You're still here!" Inexplicably, Kirstie seems to have just as much energy now as she did at the beginning of this thing. Her hair tower is as flawless as usual, and her mask of makeup doesn't appear to have budged since I last saw her. Maybe this is *her* mutant power. Or maybe she just overdoses on NoDoz.

"Yeah, you know me — in it 'til the end. Listen, Kirstie. I heard that something happened with my...er, pal, Braidbeard?"

Her face goes a little Dark Phoenix-y and she frowns. I almost expect her eyes to blacken, obliterating the pupils. "What a mess," she says. "I know *you* would never do anything like that, Jules. It's a serious infraction."

"Of course," I say, in what I hope is a soothing voice. "But...I really don't think he meant any harm. He's just really passionate, you know? He's a huge fan of Graham's work, and well...he probably just got a little over-enthusiastic."

She shakes her head, still frowning. "I just can't have the talent upset," she says. "It's important for them to feel like GinormoCon is a super-fun experience."

"Right," I say. "But I know Braidbeard really well and I'm sure this is a one-time thing. He's learned his lesson. It's just...he really loves this stuff. He fits in here in a way that he doesn't fit in anywhere else."

Kirstie cocks her head and looks at me quizzically. I realize that dragging out the violins probably isn't the way to go with her.

"Look," I say, "if you could maybe just reinstate his credentials and take him off The List — with the understanding that he'll never interview Graham Barrett again — you would be doing *me* a huge favor. Whaddya say...er, girlfriend?"

The shift is immediate. The Dark Phoenix visage vanishes into the ether, and suddenly, Kirstie is grinning at me like I've just suggested we go chug Cosmos and pick up inappropriate men together. "Well..." she says. "I guess it'll probably blow over by the next con, anyway. What the heck! Oh, but Jules — there's no 'List,' okay?" she winks at me broadly.

"Right," I say, trying to approximate a stagey wink of my own. "Of course."

We stand there for a moment, frozen in a state of smiley awkwardness. "Um...Kirstie," I finally say, "maybe at the next con, we could...have lunch. Or get a drink or something."

Her grin gets wider, straining the corners of her cheeks. The effect is Jokerishly unsettling, yet I feel a tiny surge of affection. "That would be fabulous," she says. "Two crazy gals on the con circuit — you and me!"

"You and me," I agree.

**

For once, Braidbeard has actually listened to me and is still perched on the exact same window ledge, affecting the exact same hunched-over slouch. Either that, or he's just too beaten down to move. Mitch has joined him and appears to be attempting the pep talk thing.

"...the music scene in the Bay is awesome, B," I hear him say as I stride into earshot. "I can go with you to the shows — it'll be cool."

"Fuck that," I say. "You don't want to hang out with those posers." I toss Braidbeard's laminated press badge into his lap and sit down next to Mitch.

Their heads swivel in my direction so fast, I swear I hear a little "whoosh" sound effect. Braidbeard gawks at me, then looks down at his badge. He holds it up to the light, as if unconvinced it's the real thing.

"How..." he says reverently.

I shrug. "I talked to Kirstie. You're off the hook, but don't be trying to interview his excellency — aka Lord Barrett — any time soon. Also, you fucking owe me."

Mitch presses his lips together tightly and stares at his sneakers. I can tell he's trying not to laugh.

Braidbeard stops stroking his badge for a moment and fixes me with an uber-serious gaze. "Anything," he says solemnly. "It's a debt I intend to repay."

"Okay, Okay, no need to make things...weird," I say. "Why don't you take that and go cover something."

He nods vigorously and hops up, braids swinging to and fro. "I need to catch the *Star-gate* panel — I want to ask Ben Browder if there's any truth to the rumors about a *Farscape* movie. Personally, I think they sound *completely farfetched*, but my readers will just *die* if I don't at least ask the question. But I guess I'll see you guys at the *Periodic Seven* panel later?"

"Maybe," I say neutrally. "I'm thinking of cutting out early."

"Whatevs," he snorts, finally regaining a little of his usual bravado. "I know you've got more stamina than *that*."

And then he's off, racing down the hall, disappearing into the crowd of similarly bespectacled fanfolk.

Mitch watches him go, then turns back to me, raising a quizzical eyebrow. "That was nice of you," he says.

I lean my head against the window, watching the mass of people stream in and out of the con center, identical plastic swag bags clutched in hand. "Is that so weird?" I say. "For me to do something nice?"

He studies me for a moment, then turns to look out the window, taking in the parade of plastic bag lemmings. "Why aren't you going to the *Periodic Seven* panel?" he asks.

"I'm tired," I say. Truth. "I want to go home."

He nods slowly. We watch as, down on the street, a civvies-clad con-goer gets her picture snapped with a pair of Jack Sparrows. One is more convincing than the other, who hasn't even bothered with the eyeliner.

"Where's Jack? Camden, that is," he says, tilting his head toward the twin Sparrow tableau.

I shrug. "I don't think that's gonna work out."

"And why is that?"

I try to brush him off with another shrug. He lets that hang for a moment, then reaches over and lightly places a hand on my arm. "Julie."

I abruptly turn from the window, shaking him off in the process, and lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees. I fix my gaze on the carpet, like it's the one I'm talking to. "It was never going to work out," I say, motoring through the words, trying to get them out as fast as humanly possible. "It was a supremely stupid idea — not even an idea, really. More like an...*impulse*. It's better that it didn't go any farther than it did."

"Okay," he says. "I'm not even sure what 'it' is in this scenario, but okay. Great, fantastic. I'm glad you're so satisfied." He lets out an exasperated sigh. Out of the corner of my eye, I see him run a hand over his forehead, as if trying to stave off a particularly inevitable migraine. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

My head snaps up. "What?"

"You heard me."

"I...nothing. I mean, I just like to keep things simple."

"Right. Let me translate the technobabble and put this in layman's terms for you. I'm fucking Geordi and you're Counselor Troi."

I open my mouth to object, but he holds up a warning hand. "Shields," he says. "With you, it's always shields. Human interaction that's more complex than, like banter? Fucking shields *up*, Captain!"

"So it's either shields or a Fortress of Solitude," I mutter. "Awesome."

Mitch ignores me, bent on his rant. "And at the end of the day, those shields really work for ya. Because here you are, arguing with me via rapidly disintegrating *Star Trek* metaphors when you could be spending time with a guy who entered a fucking *Guitar Hero* contest just to impress you."

"It's not...it's not like that," I sputter. To my horror, my voice cracks. I swallow hard as rogue tears prick my eyeballs.

He softens a little. "Then what's it like?"

I take a deep breath and turn back to the carpet, trying to think of the right words. "I like what I like," I say. "I like sticking with Marvel titles even after they've crossed into the realm of undeniable Liefeldian badness. I like arguing with you about why Donna Noble trumps both Martha and Rose as The Doctor's companion..."

He looks like he wants to protest, but I forge on, motormouthed and unstoppable. "I like going home and knowing exactly which TV shows I'm going to watch and in what order. And while I'm watching TV, I like looking at spoiler shit on the 'net, because I like knowing what's going to happen next. And this whole weekend — not just Jack, but all of it, the drinking and the Dance Dancing and the, I don't know, *bonding* with Braidbeard... I feel like it doesn't go with what I like. It doesn't go with *me*." I prop my chin on my fist, staring contemplatively into space.

"Okay," says Mitch, nodding encouragingly. "I can see all that. But here's a question: if the way you're doing things now is so perfect and, presumably, you get to go back to doing everything exactly the way you like to do it in a few short hours...why are you so upset right now?"

I frown, open my mouth and close it. I don't have a good answer for that. Suddenly, I'm thinking about cutting a few of those Marvel titles from my pull list.

"Julie." Mitch says my name gently, stretching the second syllable out a bit. "What do you want? Don't overthink it, just say the first thing that pops into your head. Right

now, this moment: what do you want?"

As my brain slowly absorbs the question, I'm overloaded with images. Blue eyes, divulging the mysteries of issues #10-14. Sickly-looking sandwiches, lit up in all their vending machine glory. Hair pyramids.

I get a flash of that exhilarated-yet-wanna-vomit sensation and I suddenly realize that it's both the best and the worst feeling I've ever had, that I want to experience it again and again and again, that I can't quite explain its appeal, but it's there: unmatched, undeniable. It's a...kind of being scared. Not Schmithulu. Something much better. And suddenly, I know. I want to stop being afraid in one way so I can be totally fucking freaked out in another. I want...

"...Jack," I say out loud. "I want Jack."

Mitch nods, a slow grin overtaking his face. His eyes are full of pride, like I've finally conceded on the whole Donna-Martha-Rose debate (I never will!).

"Okay," he says, nodding. "Okay. So how can we make that happen?"

"I don't know. I...don't think he wants to talk to me."

Mitch cocks his head to the side, his eyes taking on the undeniable light of a born schemer. He appears lost in thought for a moment. Then: "Give me your bag."

"Uh..."

"Give it to me." I pass him my crammed-to-the-gills messenger tote.

He rummages around, pushing aside leaky pens and battered, candy-colored press kits. Finally, he finds what he's looking for.

"Yes." He grins, brandishing the no longer mint-on-card Glory Gilmore. I forgot she was still hiding out in there.

He rotates her arms above her head, so it looks like she's doing an awkward, stiff-limbed victory dance. "Her powers still blow," he says, eyes twinkling roguishly. "But she came to you for a reason. And I think I know what it is."

**

"This is so not going to work." I cradle Glory in my sweaty palm. I visualize myself magically transferring my nerves — the inner Schmithulu, currently rearing its ugly, ugly head — into her smooth, plastic form.

"Shhhh." Mitch nudges me. "Don't be a pussy."

"You know, that's really sexist and offensive," I hiss. "And I hate that word."

"Okay," he whispers back. "Don't be a vag—"

"Shut up!" I growl, loudly enough to attract death glares and shushes from the Sailor Moon cosplayers seated directly in front of us.

"Sorry," I murmur.

We're wedged into our chairs in the con center's largest ballroom. Up front, larger-than-life versions of Jack and Claire Yardley emote their way across a giant screen, enacting a particularly poignant *Periodic Seven* moment. Something about lives lost and trust regained? Oh, fuck, I don't know. I'm too busy freaking out.

The clip ends. As the crowd claps enthusiastically, the panel's moderator strides onstage and oh my fucking God, it's Mr. Tux. Only not wearing a tux. Are those khakis? My mind is seriously blown. "Wasn't that FAN-TASTIC?" He grins toothily. "Let's welcome our

panelists!"

They file out to another round of cheers and seat themselves behind the long, microphone-and-water-bottle cluttered table. Claire is there, as is Rudy James, who plays Dr. Halogen. The show's fortysomething creator, Josh Daniels, plops down between them, his Cubs baseball cap and air of studied slovenliness giving him away as a non-actor. Jack sits on the end, propped up in his chair, his head lolling to the side like a deactivated robot's.

Mr. Tux cycles through the standard array of "gosh, this show is neat and maybe tell us what happens next, even though I know you really can't, spoilerzzz!" questions. Josh does most of the talking, lacing his sentences with eminently quotable witticisms. Claire interjects with a flirtatious quip or two. Rudy gives rambling answers that somehow encompass evolution, genocide, and the current state of slam poetry as an art form, prompting Josh to interrupt when he can with a smooth, "What I think Rudy's trying to say is..." Jack mostly just nods along.

I squirm the whole time, unable to come to a remotely comfortable seated position. Mitch elbows me. "Relax," he mutters.

Finally, Mr. Tux opens the floor to audience questions, inviting crowd members to form a line at the microphone up front.

"Go," Mitch whispers. He reaches over and gives my free hand — the one not clutching Glory as if she is my only tether to this world — a squeeze. "It'll be okay."

I launch myself out of my seat and bolt up front, managing to secure the third place in line. Josh, Claire and Rudy stare intently at the fans piling in front of the microphone, feigning interest in the imminent barrage of questions. Jack isn't even trying — his eyes are downcast, and he's staring intently at his water bottle, as if it's going to offer him some Guardian of Forever-esque platitudes. He doesn't see me.

Fan #1 has a long, complicated question that seems to involve the show's continuity as it relates to actual physics. Josh does his best to answer, then jokingly asks if she'd like a job as technical advisor. She has the good grace to laugh it off. Fan #2 wants to sing a song he composed especially for Claire. She plasters an indulgent smile on her face. "Isn't that sweeeeet," she coos when it's over, bringing her palms together in a delicate golf clap.

And then, the microphone is staring me right in the face. I feel my heart slamming into my breastbone, and I picture it popping out of my chest, going all 3-D and cartoony, like I'm Pepe Le Pew and I've just spotted that stupid cat who can't seem to avoid errant cans of white paint. I tighten my grip on Glory and try to let Mitch's words echo through my head, Yoda-like and zen-ifying. "It'll be okay."

"Um," I clear my throat. My voice sounds so loud, reverberating through the mic. "I have a question for Jack."

His head snaps up and he spots me, his eyes going all big.

"Well...go ahead, then, young lady!" Mr. Tux says jovially. I can't believe he doesn't recognize me from my stunning victory the night before. Whatever, Mr. Tux.

"Well, actually...it's more like a, um, gift," I say.

"Okaaaaaaaaaay." Mr. Tux raises a suspicious eyebrow, undoubtedly anticipating that I am about to proffer a lock of my hair, a portable Travis Trent shrine, or worst of all, a script. "Well, I'm afraid we don't usually allow..."

"It's okay," Jack interjects. His voice is hoarse, but firm. He meets my gaze, his eyes full of questions, and gives me a little nod.

I propel myself forward to the stage. The top of the table is at forehead level, so I raise

myself onto my tiptoes and set Glory's plastic form in front of Jack. I keep my eyes trained downward. I can't look at him.

My task completed, I turn on my heel and hurry away, bypassing my seat next to Mitch and opting to stand in the very back.

"Well, uh...thank you," says Mr. Tux. "Why don't we move on to the next question?"

The next fan in line asks about the long-rumored movie adaptation of the show. Josh starts to answer, but I tune him out. I can only focus on the silent figure at the end of the table as he turns Glory over in his hands, his face blank.

God. Why did I let Mitch talk me into this?

Then, he sees it. The tiny note, the folded scrap of paper tied to her foot. He looks puzzled for a moment, then tugs it free and starts to unfold it, his brow furrowed. My way-too-loud heartbeat roars in my ears. Oh, *frak*. I can't take it anymore.

I push through the ballroom doors and run.

**

I don't know where I'm running to. The corridors seem endless, a ridiculous maze of mellow blues and greens and off-whites appropriate for any manner of corporate event. At some point, I hazily realize that I left my bag in the panel room. Oh, well. I'm sure they'll let me on the plane with no...ID. I'm sure! I'll just explain the whole story and that'll be that! Who wouldn't let me on the plane after hearing my sordid tale of sex and woe and fandom?!

I finally see stairs. Oh, good. Stairs are good! Stairs lead DOWN. Down and fucking outta here! I clatter down the stairs and keep running. I see the food court bouncing into view, and the sickening smell of fried, over-processed food seeps into my nostrils.

And in that moment, I suddenly become aware of a vaguely thunderous sound behind me, getting louder and louder and louder. I screech to a halt in front of the food court and whip around, breathing hard.

And there's Jack. He's running, just like I was only seconds ago, and he skids to a stumbling stop in front of me, doubling over, trying to catch his breath. I open my mouth, hoping to make words come out, but I'm frozen in shock. And it only gets worse when I look up. Because apparently, that thunderous sound was courtesy of the whole goddamn panel audience sprinting through the con center en masse, hot on Jack's heels, a supremely nerdy tribute to the running of the bulls.

They all stop when he does, practically in unison. The effect would be hilarious if it wasn't so...well, *insane*. I scan the crowd. I see Mitch and Braidbeard, craning their necks to get a better view. I see Josh and Rudy (no Claire, but then, she probably can't run in her skyscraper heels). I see Mr. Tux, looking none too pleased that his panel has apparently been completely hijacked.

Jack finally straightens up, his breathing evening out. He takes a step toward me. I still can't move.

"What...what are you doing?" I finally manage, my voice twisting up at the end like a deranged chipmunk's.

"I'm chasing you," he says. His face is flushed, but his tone is mild and his eyes are hooded, revealing nothing.

"What are *they* doing?" I gesture to the crowd.

"WE FOLLOWED HIM!" someone yells.

"Mr. Camden decided to leave the panel right after you presented him with your...gift," says Mr. Tux, his voice dripping with disdain. "Even though we technically still have 15

minutes left.”

“HE LEPT OVER THE TABLE,” someone hollers.

“IT WAS FRAKKIN’ AWESOME!” screams someone else. “I TWITTERED IT!”

I turn back to Jack, feeling like I might keel over at any second. He produces a white scrap of paper from his pocket — my note — and holds it up questioningly.

I am suddenly excruciatingly aware of the hush that’s fallen over the crowd assembled around us. I feel twin flames bloom on my cheeks and tug self-consciously at my hair, which is at its most disastrous and antennae-like after my unanticipated bout of physical activity. “Jack,” I whisper. “Can we go somewhere more...private?”

He takes another step toward me, closing most of the gap between us so that we’re nearly toe-to-toe. “No,” he says. His eyes are still guarded, but one side of his mouth turns up in a lopsided grin.

“Okay,” I say crossly. “Fine.”

I hesitate, trying to remember everything I wanted to say. Oh, fuck it. This situation isn’t really lending itself to impeccable speechifying.

“This weekend has been really...weird for me,” I say. “I feel like I’ve been a complete fucking freak the entire time.”

“LOUDER!” someone yells.

“WE CAN’T HEAR YOU!” another heckler chimes in.

“She said she’s a FREAK,” Jack calls out helpfully.

“And,” I continue, trying not to get rattled, “you were right. I am scared of a lot of things. You know...human feeling type things.”

Over Jack’s shoulder, I spot Mitch and Braidbeard, who have managed to elbow their way to the front of the pack. They give me dopey thumbs-up gestures.

I pause. That nameless horror, that senseless dread, thrums through my entire body and I know I must look exactly like Glory Gilmore right before she met her ultimate doom. I scrunch my hands into fists and attempt to summon every ounce of superheroine panache I can muster. I am going to fucking smack you down, Schmithulu. You are nothing but a third-tier, poorly-conceived, fucking rip-off piece of shit bad guy and you can go *fuck yourself*. Because I am going to say this next thing. I am. Here we go. I take a deep breath.

“The thought of being with someone absolutely terrifies me. The thought of not seeing you again is...worse.”

I scrutinize his face, which has remained fairly expressionless throughout my oration. Complete silence has descended on the crowd and the con-goers eating in the food court have abandoned their sausage rolls and Starbucks, preferring to gawk at the impromptu Theater of Angst we’re putting on.

And then, slowly, that smile — the one I misjudged so much in the beginning, the one that kickstarts that delirious happy-barfy feeling — overtakes his face. There’s an added dimension to it this time, an unabashed tenderness that makes those stupid tears well up in my eyes all over again. And before I know what’s happening, he’s folding me into his arms, pulling me tightly to him, whispering in my ear. And he’s saying, “Nice work, Girl Detective.”

He pulls back, one arm still encircling my waist, and reaches over with his free hand to smooth my hair-antennae away from my face. Then he tilts down and I tilt up and we meet in the middle, his lips finding mine.

I'm dimly aware that there seems to be some applause going on, maybe an "awww, yeah!" or two. But it fades to a background burble and everything — the grease-drenched food court smells and the stale convention air and just, well, *everything* — falls away and it's just me and him, wrapped in a protective bubble of our own. I guess I don't mind sharing my Cone of Shyness.

We finally pull apart, breathless. I am not thinking of much beyond really wanting to kiss him again when an exaggerated sort of throat-clearing sound breaks through the air.

Dammit, Mr. Tux. You sure do know how to fuck up a nice moment.

"ALRIGHT," bellows Mr. Tux. "Well. What a way to end GINORMOCON! AM I RIGHT?!" The crowd cheers in the affirmative. Mr. Tux looks totally exhausted. "Okay," he mutters. "So let's all move along. Doors close at 6."

The crowd starts to dissipate. Food court enthusiasts return to their sausage rolls. Jack and I just stand there for a moment, awkward and shell-shocked. He looks at me thoughtfully.

"What?" I ask, suddenly self-conscious.

A bemused grin pulls at the corners of his mouth. "I *have* to know," he says. "Why Angel?"

I groan, crossing my arms over my chest. "Haven't I made enough substantially embarrassing confessions for one weekend?"

"Please?" he widens his eyes, making them all guileless and Bambi-esque. Goddammit.

"Alright," I concede, throwing my hands up in the air. "So you know that crossover episode in season one of *Angel*? 'I Will Remember You'? Angel becomes human and he and Buffy can finally be together and then he realizes that he actually has to go back to being *not* human — you know, for the greater good? So he does, but then Buffy's memory of their one perfect day is wiped out and it's just him all alone with this tragic knowledge and this total fucking sacrifice?"

"I seem to remember such an episode," he says.

"Okay," I say. "That episode always makes me cry."

He cocks his head to the side, eyes dancing with amusement. "That's it?"

"That's it. Angel wins."

He nods, as if this makes more sense than anything else in the world. "Seems reasonable," he says.

He reaches into his back pocket and produces the six inches of plastic that brought us together. Glory Gilmore. He presses her into my hand.

"She's yours," he says. "She always was."

I study her for a moment. Her tiny arms are still raised in victory. "I know," I say. "But I've been thinking. Maybe you could take care of her for me. And then I could come visit...her. In L.A. Sometime."

"Oh, yeah?" He gives me a slow smile.

"Yeah," I say. "After all, I would need to make sure you weren't slackin' off. Looking after somebody else's action figures is serious business."

He holds out his hand. I pass her back to him and he tucks her in his pocket, then

reaches over and laces his fingers through mine. We stroll toward the big glass doors, away from the last gasps of GinormoCon insanity.

"So," he says. He waggles his eyebrows at me in a way that's probably supposed to be borderline lecherous, but is mostly just dorkily endearing. "You have an hour or two to spare before you catch your plane?"

I look down at our intertwined fingers, feel the warmth of his palm against mine, and squint into the sun as we pass through the doors and emerge onto the street, surrounded by the endless rush of wiped out conventioners. And I say, "I've got time."

Sarah Kuhn isn't going to tell you what was in the note.



SO PERFECT

By Stephen Graham Jones

The killers in this story are Tammy and Brianne. They're 17. Well, Tammy's 17, but Brianne always lies that she's 17. They're both juniors at the new Danforth High School, "Home of the Titans," rah rah rah. As to where "Titans" comes from, none of the students really know. The complete name of the school is Susan B. Danforth High School. They're not really sure who she is either. The suburb they live in isn't old enough to have any history. The year Tammy and Brianne were born, the land their Geography class would someday sit on probably had a cow standing on it, if anything. No titans, anyway.

As for Tammy and Brianne, you've seen them before, at all the malls and department stores. Here's a typical Tammy/Brianne conversation:

"And did you see her nametag?"

"Don't even start."

"Like I would be using somebody else's credit card, though? Please."

"Shh, shh. She might be listening. Her dad's got to be in prison or something, right? To let her work at a *register* like that?"

"You're making excuses for her."

"No. I just don't want my car to get keyed. You know how these people—"

The girl they're talking about here is Joy Kane, known in the halls of Danforth as "Candy Cane" because of the red and white stockings she wears every day. Her job is adding tax to the purchases of her classmates, and checking identification. And her father isn't in prison; he's dead.

But Joy will be up soon enough. We're talking about Tammy and Brianne. Right now they're taking the long way out of the mall, to swing by the display window of the pet shop. Not because they want to hold the puppies or kittens, and especially not the birds or lizards, but so — this is a game they play — they can bend over at the waist to tickle the glass, like all they can think about are these cute little adorable animals.

The reason they do this is so they can waggle their peel-off tramp stamps. Today Tammy has the typical blue curlicues, Brianne a baseball with the word Focus as the brand, but they've also tried the If You Can Read This, You're Too Close one, to great effect.-

On a good day, they can fill the sitting area behind them in 15 minutes, and then pretend to be oblivious, shake their way out to the parking lot to laugh and laugh in Tammy's car.

On a bad, though, all they'll attract is the junior high crowd.

Today is a bad day.

After the pet shop they glide through their favorite purse store, study themselves in the three-way mirror for an explanation.

"What'd you have for lunch?" Tammy asks Brianne.

This is also a typical conversation for them.

"Just coffee."

"You're lying. It had whipped cream on it."

"Pig."

"Slut."

"You wish."

Still though, they leave together.

As for Joy, her shift goes over four hours later, and, walking to the corner where her mom will pick her up when she gets off, she doesn't key anybody's car, has forgotten all about Tammy and Brianne, really.

**

Two days later is a Friday. Tammy and Brianne are having a tanning contest on Brianne's back porch. Her dad, home early from work, is washing the Irish setter. The dog's name is Frederick.

Because it's funny to her, Tammy keeps arranging her bikini so as to make Brianne's dad have to look somewhere else.

"Did you see her today?" Brianne says, her voice bored and hot.

"Who?"

"Candy Cane."

"From the other day?"

"She remembered you, I think."

"Probably wanted to see my driver's license."

Brianne laughs about this, adds, "Like she doesn't know that horizontal stripes aren't really helping those trunks she calls legs?"

"They're probably supposed to distract from that sweater she always wears."

"Distract whom?" Brianne says, turning herself over on the chair, her skin glistening.

After that, they just watch Brianne's dad wrestle with Frederick. It's the best kind of comedy, as it pretty much confirms everything they think about the class of people he represents.

"What's he doing now?" Tammy asks after about 20 minutes.

"He's not supposed to do it while the hair's still wet."

"Perfume?"

"It's for, like, ticks, I think."

Tammy sits up, lowers her glasses. "It keeps them off, you mean?"

"Something like that."

"Just from that part of Fred's *neck*?"

"It goes everywhere, I don't know. He's not supposed to do it while the hair's wet, though," Brianne repeats. "It waters it down or something."

Tammy keeps her sunglasses tilted to watch. She's never seen anything like this —

shouldn't the gardener be doing it, maybe? It is entertaining, though, Frederick squirming out again and again, his eyeballs white and desperate against all that shiny bronze fur.

But then Tammy has to turn over. Brianne follows. Now they're both staring through the plastic slat of their lounge chairs, into the grass.

"I've petted Fred, though," Tammy finally says, her fingers spreading apart from each other.

"What? No, it doesn't — you can't get it on you, after it's been on a few hours. It says so on the package, I think. Safe for children."

"You've done it...*applied* it or whatever?"

"Of course not. He keeps the box in the garage, by my mom's extra keys."

"Beamer or Volvo?"

"They're in the same place."

"But — you . . . he wouldn't need to put that on Fred if there wasn't a problem, right?"

"A problem?"

"Ticks," Tammy almost whispers, as if saying it might attract them, or make them real enough to hear her anyway.

Brianne laughs to herself, says, "He's a dog, T. Why don't you try to be paranoid or something for a change?"

Tammy shakes her head in mock amusement, but is really studying the grass, for bugs.

Where she should be looking is on her towel, though.

One corner of it is trailing into the grass.

Crawling up it, still flat and brown and coppery, a tick.

**

That night while Tammy and Brianne are in the parking lot of the pool with all the other Danforth students, Brianne's dad starts throwing up, can hardly catch his breath.

Brianne's mom calls them, tells them to meet her at the emergency room.

This messes up everything they had planned for the night.

"You go on," Tammy tells Brianne.

She's standing by Bo Richardson, and never stops smiling as she says it.

"You're driving, T," Brianne says, smiling too, her eyes so pleasant.

"Show me later," Bo says to Tammy, pushing her lightly away, his hand large on her shoulder.

What he's talking about are the tan lines Tammy's promised him.

The whole way to the hospital Tammy doesn't say anything, and neither does Brianne.

"Well?" Brianne says to her mom, finally.

Her mom is eating a pastry from the snack machine. It sickens Tammy.

"It's poison," Brianne's mom says, leaning forward to touch both of them, as if she used to be them or something. "From the, y'know. Frederick."

"The tick medicine," Brianne says.

"Your father got it on his skin," Brianne's mom nods.

"He'll live though?" Tammy says.

"Yes, dear. Don't worry about—"

By this time, however, they've already stopped listening, are already, in spirit, back at the parking lot with Bo and Seth and the rest, Joy out at the edge of that crowd, rubbing out cigarettes with the toe of her Wicked Witch of the West boot. At least that's what Brianne calls it.

And of course, the rest of the weekend, except for when they sneak out, they're at Tammy's mom's house. Just because Brianne's dad is too gross to be around. The next time they see him is Monday morning, before school. They're only there to pick up Brianne's belt for Tammy to wear. Like every time, too, Tammy makes a production of cinching the belt in over and over again, like it won't get small enough for her.

"What have you been eating?" she says to Brianne, on the way down the stairs.

"Bo Richardson," Brianne tosses back quietly, and Tammy pushes her. It's in play — well, half in play, anyway — but Brianne stumbles forward anyway, into her dad, just rounding the corner.

"Girls, girls, girls..." he says, adjusting his tie.

It's the only thing he ever says to them anymore.

"Dad," Brianne says, stepping back, studying him up and down. "You look — how old are you?"

This has to be a joke, though. Or an insult. Both. Her dad shakes his head like a sad clown and leaves. They get the story from Brianne's mom anyway: over the last 48 hours, Brianne's dad has lost thirteen pounds.

Thirteen *pounds*.

Neither of the girls can say anything.

**

At the fitting for their bridesmaid dresses two days later (Brianne's slut cousin Clarice is pregnant, and doesn't have any real friends), they have the seamstress pin their dresses tighter and tighter.

"It's supposed to *hang*, though, sweetie," the seamstress says to Tammy.

Tammy's studying herself in the mirror.

"It will," Tammy says back, and then her eyes catch Brianne's, and they look away.

In the ashtray of Tammy's car, now, where it's been since lunch, is the tick medicine.

In what should be Texas History the next day, a Thursday, they're standing in the girls' locker room together. Nobody else is there. It's just them and, on the plastic bench between them — wood would be unsanitary — one dose of Frederick's tick medicine.

"How much do you want to lose?" Tammy asks.

"From where?" Brianne says back.

They're talking like they're in church.

Tammy smiles, nods to herself, then, all at once, moving fast so she won't have time to think, she breaks the tip off the applicator and turns it over onto her fingertip, daubs a print of it behind each ear. Like perfume.

The fumes burn her eyes a little.

She blinks fast, pretends it doesn't hurt, and passes the applicator to Brianne.

"Thirteen pounds," she says.

Brianne, trying to be careful, turns the vial upside down once, fast, on the thin skin of each wrist.

And then it's over.

"Trig?" Tammy says, holding her breath a little.

"You can't smell it, can you?" Brianne asks, trying to nevertheless.

"Safe for children," Tammy recites, and then it's Trigonometry, and, an hour later, the nurse. Because they've each started throwing up. From the Chinese food they ate at lunch, probably, right?

The nurse doesn't smile, just sends them home.

**

By Saturday, the next time they see each other, Tammy's lost eight pounds, Brianne six.

"You've been eating," Tammy accuses.

"Could you?" Brianne says back.

The answer is no.

That night they float through the parking lot like runway models, their bellybutton rings glinting in the moonlight, and, this time when Bo and Seth and Davis ask them if they want to hit the Yogurt Shack, they do, and order all they want, and even pretend that it makes them a little drunk.

Really it's the 14 pounds they've shed.

From across the parking lot Joy watches them, and at one point Tammy sees her watching, and keeps smiling anyway, maybe even smiles more, then drapes herself across either Seth or Davis or that other guy from Ashworth or wherever.

It doesn't matter.

On Wednesday, they're going in for the second fitting for their dresses.

To make it to size, on Sunday night in Tammy's basement they lock themselves in the pool room and tap the tick medicine out from Brianne's hollowed-out old lipstick tube.

"The notes will still be good," Tammy says, the applicator in her hand again.

The notes are the ones the nurse wrote for them; they're good until they're well again.

"Like I'll miss Trig," Brianne says, smiling with one side of her face.

"Or ever need it," Tammy adds.

The blouse Brianne's wearing is Tammy's.

A week ago, she'd have been able to fit into it, sure, but it wouldn't have fit, either.

Now, though — even Seth has taken a second look.

This time they each lose seven pounds in 48 hours, and Tammy doesn't ask if Brianne's been eating anything.

**

At school on Friday, Tammy sees Joy watching them again, and nudges Brianne.

They're in the cafeteria. *Eating.*

The only thing Joy's touched on her tray — she doesn't ever go off-campus for lunch — is her pudding. The foil is peeled back.

Tammy scratches at a spot under her hair and says, "I bet she's got a whole closet full of those tights. One for Monday, one for Tuesday..."

Brianne laughs into her Coke, has to look away.

"Maybe she wants to kill us," she says behind her hand.

"By committing fashion suicide, then hoping we catch it too?" Tammy says back, and then they have to leave the cafeteria altogether. Not to the bathroom, though; this is an eating day.

That afternoon in their lounge chairs in Brianne's backyard — the pool boy's there, and he's even more fun to bother than Brianne's dad — Frederick keeps trying to chase a butterfly. Either the same one or the first one's twin, they can't tell. It always dives for the bushes then flutters back up a few minutes later, its shadow on the grass torturing Frederick.

It gets him thirsty enough that he has to come over, lick the sweat from the sides of their legs.

"The salt," Brianne explains.

"Pervert," Tammy says down to Frederick, scratching the top of his head with her long nails.

Frederick eats it up, finally creaks his body around to hook a hind leg up behind an ear, motorboat a furrow into his fur.

"I thought he was fixed," Tammy says, shaking her head away.

"I don't think you can get pregnant just by touching them, T," Brianne says, lowering her leopard print sunglasses to see what Tammy's talking about.

"The stuff's supposed to keep them from scratching like this, right?" Tammy says, sitting up, her top starting to slide off, the pool boy suddenly very still.

"I told you," Brianne says. "It all got on my dad's hand."

"He didn't do it again?"

"You want me to remind him?"

"What, you think he counts how many he's got left?"

"He's kind of scared of it now anyway."

"Can't you make him stop, though?"

By that time the pool boy's come to the rescue. Tammy just points down to Frederick.

"What's he doing?" she says to Brianne, drawing her legs up now.

The pool boy smiles, kneels down by the dog and comes up half a minute later with a plump grey tick, its black legs pedaling the air.

Tammy squeals and climbs the back of her chair. Brianne laughs.

"Kill it!" Tammy's saying, working up to a shriek.

"Why?" the pool boy says, holding it out before him — Tammy's forgotten about her swimsuit by now, and does have some stark tan lines — "When they're like this, they're full of babies, yeah?"

"Then—then—?" Tammy says, the back of her hand to her mouth.

"The toilet," Brianne says for the pool boy, who still hasn't looked away from what Tammy's not worried about. "*Right?*"

Which is when Brianne's mom steps out to see what's going on.

Instantly, the pool boy's posture changes and he's already heading for the bathroom they've let him use once before.

That night after dinner, stepping into the guest bathroom herself to check her face before Bo drops Tammy off, Brianne sees, smeared on the toilet seat, on purpose, the tick.

Without the medicine, even, she throws up into the sink until her eyes are hot.

When she steps into the dining room 10 minutes later, Tammy's waiting.

"Start without me?" Tammy says.

Brianne doesn't answer, just calls out to her mom that she's taking the Volvo and, instead of taking just one application from the shelf in the garage, she palms them all.

"Why?" Tammy asks, far enough away from Brianne's house that it's safe.

Brianne shakes her head no, doesn't say anything.

**

That Saturday, between trips to Tammy's upstairs bathroom, her mom calls up to the girls that Jill is pregnant too, now.

"Slut," Brianne says, smiling, a dab of vomit still at the corner of her mouth.

"Three, two, one..." Tammy smiles back. It's the launch sequence; staying unpregnant is all about timing, they know.

As her mom explains to them the next morning, what this means is that Jill is out of the wedding. Because she's only 15. "It wouldn't look right."

"She's *showing?*" Tammy says, stacking her plate with French toast she's not going to eat.

"It's the principle, honey," her mom says back, fixing both girls in her eyes for a second longer than absolutely necessary.

"Then it's off?" Brianne says.

"The wedding?" Tammy's mom falsettos, blinking fast to show what she's meaning here, "heavens no. We just need an understudy."

"By Saturday?" Tammy whispers, incredulous.

"I'm sure you have just scads of friends..." her mom trails behind her, off to wherever. Church, maybe, after two hours of make-up and a handful of pills.

In her wake, Tammy and Brianne are silent, and then the bite of toast Brianne tried to sneak works its way up her throat and she's bent over the sink, dry heaving, Tammy guarding the door, waiting her turn.

That night, showering before the parking lot, and whatever might happen after the parking lot, Tammy's fingernail breaks off while washing her hair and the blood from her scalp seeps down over her face. The only reason she realizes its blood, even, is that it's gritty. And then she's throwing up again, and more, until her mom knocks on the bathroom door with the palm of her hand.

At her house, her hair still in her towel, her body too, Brianne walks through her living room to the garage.

What she's carrying is the box the tick medicine was in.

All that's left in it now is one half-application. The other eight are in the secret pocket of her purse.

The pool boy's in the backyard again, too, doing his thing.

Brianne smiles to herself, holds the towel on her head tighter than the one on her new body.

In the garage, it's easy to see where the cardboard box had sat for however many months. It's a small square of light-colored wood. The rest, all around it, is stained brown, and greasy. Brianne looks behind her, like the pool boy's suddenly going to be standing in the door, and then follows the stain up the wall to the next shelf, all the gardening stuff.

The bottle of fertilizer her dad bought off the infomercial is leaking.

"Surprise," she singsongs to him, in her mom's voice.

It's why the cardboard was so greasy. It makes her look at her fingertips. With a spade she nudges the box into place, steps away, and then finds a reason to step outside. What she's pretending to look for is an earring she lost the other day.

What she's thinking about, though, on her knees in the grass with the pool boy, her towel barely there anymore — "Thinking about Tammy now?" she wants to say to him — is the blood on the toilet seat.

If he would do that when her parents weren't looking, what else might he do?

Ten minutes later, her towel all the way off now, she finds out, and wonders if he's even washed his hands since touching that toilet seat, and somehow that makes it even better.

At the parking lot an hour later, Tammy appraises her and finally says, "You've been eating again, haven't you?"

"Something like that," Brianne shrugs, no eye contact, and then the night swallows them again.

**

Three days later, the Wednesday before the wedding, Tammy and Brianne are standing at Joy's register again.

"Like you don't know me," Tammy is saying.

"It's, y'know, policy," Joy says back, watching a rounder of clearance shirts out by the aisle.

"I see you at school," Tammy says.

Joy doesn't say anything back.

"You could be pretty, y'know?" Tammy adds, offering her license, holding it like it's the most boring thing ever.

Joy takes it, compares it to the signature on the card, and hands it back.

"Gee, thanks," she says, wanting to drill a dimple into her cheek with an index finger. "Who wouldn't want to be prettier?"

"Thinner, I mean," Tammy says like a secret, flashing her eyes to Brianne.

But Brianne's not following yet.

"How would you like to be in a wedding with us?" Tammy says then, now *not* letting Brianne catch her eyes.

"This is a joke," Joy says back, sliding the receipt across to Tammy.

"No," Tammy says. "The wedding's a joke. The dress is already ready, though. It's — you. Just about 10 pounds lighter."

"It would look good with your boots," Brianne adds, the muscles around her mouth tense like a smile.

Tammy kicks her a little where Joy can't see.

"Bo's going to be there," Tammy says. "And the rest of them."

"And I care about that?" Joy says, too fast.

"I wouldn't know," Tammy shrugs, signing the receipt, pushing it back. "Have you ever been in a wedding?"

Joy just stares at her.

Her mother's, Brianne just manages to hold back.

"Everybody's looking at you the whole time, you know?"

"At the bride," Joy corrects.

"Not this time," Tammy says. "Let's just say she's...carrying more baggage into the ceremony than—"

"The engagement photos were from the face up," Brianne interrupts, in step at last.

"It's the part of her most guys prefer, really," Tammy adds.

Joy rings the register open, stuffs the receipt in, says, "So what are you trying to say here?"

"I'm saying that you're not...what? 'Candy Cane?'"

"Right," Brianne chimes in, biting her top lip.

"I don't want to be like you, if that's what you're thinking," Joy says.

"Of course not," Tammy says, her voice a bit colder now. "I'm just saying. The final fitting is at 7 tonight. Here."

She writes the address on the back of her customer copy, slides it to Joy.

"This is a joke," Joy says again. "You said the dress was too little anyway."

Tammy smiles. "No," she says. "The dress is just about the right size, I think. You just need to slender down a bit."

"By Saturday," Brianne says.

"Ten pounds?"

"It's not impossible."

"Look at us," Brianne says, striking a mock-glam pose.

"I'm not going to be there," Joy says, sliding the address back.

"Of course not," Tammy says, but doesn't take the address back either.

**

Thirty minutes after they're gone, Joy studies herself in the three-way back in the dressing rooms.

A bridesmaid?

She laughs at herself.

But then she remembers the way that Brianne-one had angled her body over, to show how little extra she was carrying.

Joy looks in the mirror again, and then turns sideways to look, and then shakes her head no, just keeps collecting clothes from the stalls.

A bridesmaid, yeah.

Except — it's stupid and she knows it's stupid — what if Bo Richardson really is there?

It could be like all the movies, where the charity case loser girl finally puts on mascara, shows up at the dance, the air suddenly different around her, charged.

Which Joy laughs at as well.

She's not 12 years old, after all.

But what if she gets to keep the dress, too?

This stops her.

Is that how it works at weddings? It would be cut specifically for her, after all.

Not that she would ever wear it again, of course.

But it might be fun to burn at the parking lot or something.

First she's going to have to fit into it, though.

Just in case Bo's really there.

"What's that about?" her mom asks at 5, nudging Joy's smile with the knuckle of her index finger.

"Nothing," Joy says.

Just to show that she's not taking it seriously, Joy shows up to the fitting 20 minutes late. With a friend, Lacy.

"So this is it?" Lacy says to Tammy, fingering a peach-colored spaghetti strap out from a rack.

"Where'd you get those boots?" Brianne asks back.

Everybody grins uncomfortably, and then Brianne keeps Lacy in the waiting room while Tammy leads Joy by the arm back to the curtained stalls and the fitting pedestal.

"So what do I do?" Joy says, smiling with one side of her face.

"Nothing," Tammy says, "this is all me..." and starts taking measurements with a tape from what looks like a tackle box.

"You mean I don't try it on now?"

"Not like — not like you are, no," Tammy says, her lips tight around a straight pin she's not going to be using.

"What do you mean?"

"We don't want to, you know, stretch it or anything."

"Listen, I don't—"

"No, I say that in the nicest way. But, you can make a dress smaller, but you can't really let it out. That's all. There's not enough material. That's why you always start big."

"Then I can't do this, right? Is that what this is about? God, I don't even know why I'm here."

"Because you want to be beautiful," Tammy whispers up to her. "Now, what size shoe do you wear?"

Joy stares down at her for a long moment, then finally looks away, to the idea of the waiting room.

"Seven," she says.

"Is that men's or women's?" Tammy asks right back.

Joy smiles with her eyes.

"Even if I don't eat for the next two days—" she starts.

"Leave that to me," Tammy says. "Did you see what I ate in the cafeteria today?"

"I wasn't watching, sorry."

"A piece of *pizza*."

"Crust and all?" Joy asks.

Tammy smiles, isn't stupid.

"I'm just saying," she says, measuring from the point of Joy's shoulder to the round bone of her wrist, "there are ways."

Joy looks down along her arm.

"I thought they were sleeveless," she says.

"Just being sure," Tammy says back, and then does the other arm. "You're naturally dark, too, so that's good. It'll be a nice contrast against the fabric."

"It?"

"Your sk—your tan."

Joy blows air out her nose at this. Thinks, *Lifestyles of the Rich and Bitchy*.

"This is a joke," she says again.

"If you're not coming, you might let us know," Tammy shrugs, stepping back, threading the pin from her teeth. "I mean, I know another girl."

"She needs to lose 10 pounds too?"

"No. She's perfect."

"Then why me?"

"Because — I can't be telling you this. But...God. I saw Bo looking at you the other day. I think he likes your tights or something. He said something about — it was gross. Licking, and a candy cane?"

On accident then, Joy smiles.

"So tell me," she said. "If I were going, I mean. What's this trick?"

"To what?"

"Ten pounds," Joy says, her voice perfectly even, and Tammy looks up, as if to make sure she's serious.

**

Tammy had come up with the plan in the department store, right there at Joy's register, and then whispered it to Brianne in the aisle before they were even out of the store.

All she had at first, standing there having her ID checked, was Joy, throwing up in the middle of the ceremony. Because Clarice was a slut, obviously. Because of the example she definitely wasn't (to say nothing of Jill, the whore), Tammy's mom had been tightening the reins the last few days. Joy throwing up during the vows, then, it would be like a sign. Like revenge.

The problem was getting to that image, though.

Like Brianne said all the way to the car, it was complicated. If they were in a movie, maybe. But this was real life. Susan B. Danforth Detention Unit and Vomitorium. It was a word she'd heard in World History last year.

Tammy knew it was complicated, she said. But she knew Joy, too. Her kind. She was jealous of what Tammy and Brianne had, of how Bo and Seth and Davis would all lift their chins and smile when they walked in.

She didn't want to be Tammy and Brianne, so much, but she did want Bo to notice her like that. At least once.

Anybody would, right?

He was Bo, after all.

There was nothing complicated about that.

After the measurements, Tammy leads Joy into one of the fitting rooms and pulls the curtain shut behind them.

"What?" Joy says. "This where you cut my arm off?" She holds it out as if weighing it in her mind.

"This way's better," Tammy says, flashing the applicator between her thumb and index finger.

Joy narrows her eyes, then has to squeeze over against the wall as Brianne wedges herself in.

"What is it?" Joy asks.

"Just some diet stuff," Tammy says, nodding to Brianne. "We stole it from her mom. She got it in Greece or somewhere."

"On a cruise," Brianne chimes in.

"Then it's not legal?" Joy says, her eyes watering from the fumes.

"You're really worried about illegal substances?" Brianne says back.

"FDA illegal," Tammy clarifies. "Not DEA illegal."

Joy smiles. *With* them, for the first time.

The punch line of the joke is supposed to be giving Joy enough antacids or something the day of the wedding that she stops throwing up, and then give her another just before the ceremony. Only that last tablet is something else. Red food dye, maybe, so it looks like she's dying.

It's going to be perfect.

"Well?" she says, holding the applicator up, and, to show it's not dangerous, she dots her fingertip with it, swirls that finger behind each ear.

"That's all?" Joy says.

Brianne has it now, is rubbing a drop between her wrists. "We just need to, y'know, burn off a couple of pounds by Saturday, yeah? I mean, I lose anymore, I'm going to be back to an A cup."

Joy takes the plastic applicator.

"Greece?" she says.

"They don't wear tops to their bikinis over there," Tammy says, like that can be the clincher: Greek women, skinny enough to go topless.

Joy laughs to herself about this, studies the applicator, and says, "So, what? One drop is two pounds?"

"Here," Tammy says, and pinches the applicator away, upends it on Joy's wrist until her skin is slick with it, "now just hold it and count to 20."

At 10 seconds Joy starts coughing from the fumes, but doesn't let go.

"Ten pounds," Brianne's saying, smiling.

**

By Friday morning, the stomach bug the nurse had diagnosed them with again has run its course again, and they make it to school in time to breeze through lunch.

Sitting on her side of the cafeteria, hunched over the table, is Joy. She's pale, looks clammy even from this far away, and, Tammy and Brianne can't be sure, but it looks like her tights aren't even so tight anymore.

"She'll thank us," Tammy says, holding her books tight to her chest.

"If she keeps it off," Brianne adds.

They don't talk to her, though, and Joy doesn't look up to see that they aren't talking to her.

"Maybe her dad makes her come to school anyway," Brianne says on the way to Trigonometry.

"From prison?" Tammy asks with a smile, then slows for Seth at his locker, which turns into Davis and Bo as well, which turns into being five minutes late.

Brianne glares at her when she finally waltzes in.

Tammy glares back, adds some oomph to it.

On the other side of the classroom, hiding, is Joy. She isn't lifting her head from her desk.

Tammy shrugs to Brianne about it and Brianne shrugs back, makes the *eeek!* shape with her mouth.

Halfway through class is when it happens, the thing that will spark an investigation which will span four high schools and never once interrogate either Tammy or Brianne, our killers here.

All at once, in the middle of Mr. Connors taking up last night's problems, Joy slings her head up from her desk. A line of vomit strings down from her lip. And there's more coming.

She's trying to hold it down, though. Trying just to look over at Tammy and Brianne, her fingers clenched around the edge of her desk.

When she can't talk, she finally lurches to a half-stand of sorts, lifts her arm to point across the room. At Tammy.

Tammy opens her mouth as if to say something then looks behind her, at the chalkboard.

"Wha—?" she starts to say, her fingertips touching her chest now in consternation, but then Joy is losing everything she's been trying to hold down, only it isn't just the bile and whatever that Tammy and Brianne already know so well. This time it's blood, clumpy and dark, and when her throat isn't big enough to turn her inside out, it starts seeping from the corners of her eyes too, and her nose, maybe even beading up through her unmoisturized scalp.

For a half-second Tammy is too shocked to react, but then her instincts kick in and she slams her open palms onto her desk and screams. Not in terror so much as in protest. Of having to be witness to this. It infects the classroom, the hall, and even the nurse when she gets there.

Though Joy is unconscious by now, there's still blood gurgling past her lips, her sides contracting over and over.

Somehow Brianne thinks to raise her hand, ask without being called upon if what Candy — what *Joy* has is catching, or what?

The nurse just keeps staring down at the blood, finally has to support herself with the chalkboard, which gives under her weight, sends her toppling into the brown metal trashcan.

By 2:30, classes are cancelled.

It's so the paramedics can carry Joy down the quiet hall and out the door, a sheet draped across her face because it doesn't matter anymore if she has air.

Tammy and Brianne watch, their eyes saucers, and then they get in the car and put their seatbelts on and creep away, both Tammy's hands on the wheel.

"Shit," she says, minutes later.

"Exactly," Brianne says back, then looks over to Tammy. "Can Deborah still fill in, you think?"

"Deborah?"

"Tomorrow," Brianne says, her tone all about how obvious this is.

Tammy nods once, then again, yes: Debbie, her sister's ditzzy friend.

The ride home is silent, no radio even, but then, standing from the car, using it to steady herself, Tammy gets out a shaky "Hungry?"

Brianne laughs, doesn't even answer.

**

The day of the wedding is also the first day of Joy's viewing. There's going to be more of a crowd at the wedding, though, Tammy and Brianne know. And anyway, except for Lacy, who's already been kicked out of Danforth twice in the short time it's existed, nobody knows that they've ever even *known* Joy, much less stood in a dressing room with her. And anyway, it had been mostly to help her, really. It wasn't their fault she'd turned out to be a pig, and slopped so much of the stuff on.

And, while Tammy had promised Bo a show at the wedding if he showed up, she's confident she can still give him something to remember, anyway.

All days are salvageable, if you're really committed. If you can still smile.

Of course, though, Tammy doesn't know what Brianne doesn't even know she knows: the super fertilizer compound from the infomercial.

At the bottom of the leaky container is a warning not to eat any of the fruit this fertilizer has helped grow. It's for fruit and vegetable pageants only.

Brianne's late to the dressing room of course, but that's just because her mom's made her go stand around the flagpole at school and hold a candle.

Because Joy was in Tammy and Brianne's grade, too, Clarice of course cancelled the rehearsal dinner last night. "In *honor*."

Tammy had thanked Clarice for both of them and then gone to the parking lot alone. It was empty, everybody already at one of the memorial services.

Twenty minutes later, Brianne showed up in the pants she was only just now fitting

into right. She stood from her mom's Volvo, smoothed her pants down along her hip and looked across all the empty asphalt. Even the pool was in mourning.

"They think she was a saint or something," Tammy said when Brianne was close enough.

"Maybe I should try some red and white tights," Brianne said back.

Walking through Brianne's living room an hour later, Frederick growled at them like he knew.

But that was stupid.

"It won't...she must have been on something else too," Brianne finally whispers to Tammy, the next morning. Not over breakfast — they're going to be on *display*, after all, right? — but at the long vanity in the dressing room at the church.

"At least they'll be able to keep the flies off her now, yeah?" Tammy smiles back in the mirror, then turns before Brianne can register the joke.

Their dresses fit so perfect they each almost cry.

"Well?" Tammy says, shrugging in anticipation, her eyelashes tittering.

Brianne takes Tammy's hands in hers and bites her lower lip, and then the music's started and their groomsmen — nothing special — are walking them up the aisle, and every note the organ plays is for them.

It's perfect. Even better than that. Like bathing in the silvery flash of cameras, in the powdery scent of groomed flowers. The ashy taste in the air is candles.

Tammy scans the audience for Bo, and he's there with the rest. But, on their lapels, they're all wearing black — *ribbons*?

For Joy. Of course.

The bitch.

She can't even let Tammy and Brianne have this one day.

"Bend your knees," Brianne whispers to Tammy and Tammy just keeps smiling. In heels like she's got on, what other choice does she really have?

Moments later Clarice is waddling up the aisle on her father's arm, and Brianne is laughing without smiling, and Tammy almost gives in as well, at the corners of her mouth. Instead her eyes just cry a little, but that's to be expected.

Except — and this is where things start going wrong — as Clarice gets closer, Tammy looks over to Brianne to be sure they're seeing what they're seeing: under Clarice's dress, her lace and ivory *wedding* dress, is she really wearing motorcycle boots?

No wonder she got pregnant.

But there's something...

Tammy closes her eyes.

Joy again. The boots are the same.

Tammy grits her teeth, smiles past it, then, when it's time to rotate 40 degrees over, to witness this travesty, she sees a flash of red and white stripes somewhere in the pews, but can't keep her eyes there without drawing attention.

She's dead, though, Joy.

Dead dead dead.

Maybe not next year, but the year after that anyway, the kids are even going to be calling her “Killjoy” or something, Tammy knows, and then she’ll just be a plaque in front of a tree that probably won’t even make it two summers.

So, instead of being paranoid, Tammy smiles and stares past Brianne’s hair, up to Clarice and her catch of the day, and is only just starting to get bored with all the preaching that comes before anything can even happen — the reception is what matters, she keeps telling herself — when she sees something shiny and brown grope out from under the left strap of Brianne’s dress.

A tick, its body impossibly flat.

Tammy looks away, dipping her chin as if swallowing.

Five seconds later, the tick’s gone.

But.

Tammy closes her eyes, holds her tissue to her nose as if trying to control herself. Or, not as if, just not for the reason everybody thinks.

In her hair in the shower that day.

The reason she could never find the scratch in her scalp was because it hadn’t been a scratch at all, but one of those pregnant ticks, bursting. The grittiness in the blood, in the tick’s blood, had been — it had been baby ticks.

Tammy lowers her tissue to her mouth, is breathing faster than she wants to. Finally she has to reach out for Brianne’s back just to keep from losing her balance.

Brianne turns around pleasantly, sees the danger Tammy is in, then turns back around just as pleasantly. Takes a polite half-step forward, even.

Tammy shakes her head no, just a little — there are two hundred and twelve invited guests — but then it starts to rise in her throat anyway, everything she hasn’t eaten that morning.

“I can’t—” she starts, and loses the rest all over the back of Brianne’s peach dress, and it’s red, even, and she was right: it does look perfect against that silk. Classic.

For a second Tammy tries to believe that she’s imagining all this, torturing herself, that this is a side-effect of Frederick’s drops, but then the blood still coating her teeth, it’s gritty.

Tammy shakes her head no, her hand rising to her mouth.

For the worst instant of her life, Tammy looks out to the crowd again, for Bo to, she doesn’t know, help her? Not see her? Please?

But, instead of Bo or Seth or Davis or any of them, what she sees instead, staggered in a pew behind an old couple, is Joy. Just sitting there alone, her milksop hair tucked behind each ear.

Slowly then, so Tammy has to see, Joy opens her mouth, her head turned just sideways enough for Tammy to see that she’s lifting her tongue, trying to show Tammy something.

“What?” Tammy says weakly, and is on her knees now, her fingertips to the front of her lower teeth, and then past them, to where the floor of her mouth meets the base of her tongue.

Lined there like pigs at a trough are the engorged bodies of nine ticks. And they're bigger than the one from Frederick, too, are like grapes, or cherry tomatoes, or plums, or, or—

It doesn't matter.

All that does is that they have to come out.

Starting at the left, Tammy pulls on the first one until it pops, flooding her mouth with gritty blood, and then the second one's torso tears away as well, and she's crying now—*two hundred and twelve people!*—and by the time the first of the groomsmen's fathers are able to rise from their pews, offer medical assistance, Tammy has pulled her tongue out by the root, and has started on the large tick hanging by its mouth from the back of her throat.

Standing above her, Brianne is in a kind of shock, she knows. Like this is all happening on the other side of thick, soundproof glass.

For her, there's no stockings or boots or faces in the congregation.

Instead, in her lower stomach, there's just a — not a kick, but a surge of sorts. Like life, raising its wet head. From the pool boy, she knows. Out in the grass, which had to have been infested.

How could she not have remembered that?

Over the next few months of therapy and sympathy and dieting she'll try to hide it, of course, her stomach, and then, with the last application, she'll even try to kill it, but the only thing that finally works is Frederick, lunging for her in the kitchen one afternoon, trying to dig it out of her with his teeth and his claws. It's a suicide mission for him, of course — Brianne's dad has him put down that afternoon, in a ceremony nobody attends — but it also makes things awkward for a moment in her curtained room at the hospital, when the doctor steps in with the blood results. Behind him on wheels is an ultrasound machine.

Brianne firms her lips and looks away.

When the image resolves on-screen, instead of the hazy outline of a giant tick like Brianne expects, it's a baby girl.

"Just like Joy," Brianne's mom whispers, her hands in cute little grandmotherly fists under her chin, her eyes wet.

"Joy?" Brianne hears herself say, all other noise suddenly gone.

"Clarice's girl..." her mom says, her voice hesitant like how could Brianne not know this? "Fattest little thing you've ever seen."

Brianne breathes in deep once, twice, thinks of Tammy in her padded room, and then the doctor has the ultrasound all over her slick lower stomach, trying every angle.

The noise that was suddenly gone a moment ago was the heartbeat.

Brianne's mom stands, the stool clattering away behind her.

"What?" Brianne says.

"It's—it's...I'm sorry," the doctor stammers.

Brianne smiles a sleepy smile, like she's more drugged than she is.

"It's okay," she says, "just...do you get it out now?"

Already she's thinking of the jeans she wore to the parking lot that last night. Because

of Tammy, everybody's going to be crowding around her until graduation.

The doctor focuses in on her, then on a spot beside her, Brianne is pretty sure.

"In cases like this," he says, "your body just reabsorbs the—the..."

Brianne's mom is already crying, though, her dad pulling her close, hiding her face in his chest.

Brianne swallows, nods, and looks up to the doctor.

"How many—" she starts, unsure how to phrase it even though it's the most obvious question in the world, "how many calories is that, do you think?"

When nobody answers she decides it must be a lot, a truly unmanageable amount, too many to even say in mixed company, so, later that week, locked in the basement, hunched over with an art knife, she does the procedure herself, and then decides that she might just want to shorten those intestines too, maybe even loop them together front to back, so they're a closed system.

It's makes so much sense that Brianne laughs a little, and then looks up when the light above her lowers to almost nothing.

It means the garage door is grinding up on its long chain. Her parents are home.

But she still has time.

"Just...here," she says to the assistant she can see now, in the dark. The assistant is standing beside her, holding a silver tray, her red and white tights stupid against that nurse dress.

Brianne balances a piece of her lower intestine on the blade of the knife, deposits it on the tray with a plink, and then pushes the sharp point deeper into her stomach, her assistant leaning down over her shoulder to help, saying over and over *there, and there too*.

There's more fat than Brianne ever would have guessed.

Things will be better once it's all out, though.

She'll be perfect then.

"There," the nurse says again, pointing to a section Brianne really should have seen, and Brianne smiles — of course — reaches down for it with the knife just as her parents' footsteps are crossing the ceiling above her, a world away.

AUTOTAXONOMY

Naming yourself for internet consumption

By Samantha Rich

I can't help but feel that we're losing something with the latest fork in the internet's evolutionary tree. User-friendly social networking giveth (many excellent ways to waste time; RIP Scrabulous) and it taketh away (any belief that people might be generally good and sane), but one thing that I don't think enough people consider when they think about how the internet is changing is this: we're losing the value of a good pseudonym.

The ever-expanding devourer of worlds that is Facebook is the biggest example of this: it not only encourages, but, if you go by its actual TOS, requires you to use your real name. How boring. Where's the challenge there? Where's the art? Where's the 45 minutes spent frowning at the "create account" page, trying to come up with a combination of letters and numbers that expresses your inner self without putting up a tiny "Hi, I'm an idiot" flag for the rest of the internet (or at least the forum in question) to see?

In some ways, this trend is a step backward, to earlier internet times and ways. I have a living fossil to serve as an example here, my very own coelacanth: my father, who is still using AOL out of some deep-seated stubbornness or perhaps psychosis. He has the same account he created when he first set up internet service in our house in the early '90s, with a screen name in the most basic format — first initial, last name, string of automatically-generated numbers.

Using your real name online has the virtue of being easy to remember. Depending on how common your name is, you might have a shot at being reasonably unique in the fora

you frequent. But geeks tend to come to the internet with a different agenda. We want to wear our allegiances on our sleeves, or at least on our pseudos. We seek out groups of our own kind and congregate to talk about the things we love, and when we do that, we want to brand ourselves with something that will stand up and declare our preferences.

This is an urge that should be resisted.

Geek pseudos are more creative than standard pseudos, but there's a fine line that needs to be held on to with both hands. Naming yourself after something in your current obsession of choice (such as, oh, off the top of my head...legolasgirl15, farscapeluvr, mulderismydaddy) seems like a good idea at the time, but when your interest wanders, or your character preference changes, or you get into the flamewar to end all flamewars that you hope nobody will remember in a few weeks, that name is going to follow you like a lead weight around your ankle.

Swapping Ys in for random vowels is another common naming technique that can either work really well or leave you embarrassed a few years down the line; likewise adding in extra Ns and Es or substituting numbers for letters. Generally speaking, standard spelling is your friend, especially if your pseud is also your e-mail address. A lot of brilliant e-mails, rich with what I assure you was deathless prose, have been typo'd into the great beyond because I forgot the particular clever misspelling in question.

So what *does* make for a good pseud, then, Miss Know-It-All? Weirdly

enough, looking around the little corners of the internet that I frequent, it seems to be just taking a few common words and stapling them together. A noun and a verb, maybe an adjective and a verb, even a couple of nouns — just pick some that sound good together and go with it. If they sound good to you, they'll probably at least be a little bit memorable to others. For a while I went by *ninja_midget*, which is admittedly stupid but memorable. Basic ones like *purplefrog* or *bouncesoffwalls* tend to stick, too. Sometimes the simple things with no particularly deep meaning really do linger the longest in the overloaded echo chambers of the modern mind.

Bits of poetry or song lyrics are also pretty common, but they tend to blend right in with the above, because that's how poetry and music gets written: ordinary words that someone realized sounded kinda good together.

Then again, it's possible that I'm just bitter and defensive because I never did figure out the perfect way to work a really good geek in-joke into my pseud. Oh, how I tried.

And no, I'm not going to tell you what I ended up using. Like most geeks, I value my split identity. Who I am under my online pseud is me, but better — a little more outspoken and clever and fun, a little more comfortable. After all, that's the goal in the end: making a mask that feels like you.

Samantha Rich needs an election detox.

I was thinking the other day, I can't think of many jokes involving horror. Maybe I'm not thinking hard enough. Or maybe horror on its own serves the same purpose as dark comedy - all the bad stuff of life in a safe, copable package - so, why would they need to merge? Then I remembered one and it's less about horror than the horror is an excuse to play with language and swear. But it's possibly my favorite joke. Stop me if you've heard it. Or buy me a drink and get me to tell it with all the acting out and gestures.

Two nuns are driving down a lonely desert road one night, on their way to whatever it is that waits for them and would convince them to drive through the night. Sick kids probably.

Suddenly, a vampire leaps out of nowhere onto the hood - it is a snarling, feral creature that only barely looks like a human. It glowers at the two juicy mortals inside the car, grins, pulls back a fist covered in old, dried blood and gore, then begins to smash and tear at the windshield.

The two nuns, terrified, begin to scream as loud as they can. Together they scabble to keep the creature's claws away from them, while looking for a way to drive it off.

They swerve wildly. They stomp on the brakes. They even blare the horn, flash the headlights, and turn on the wipers. But to no avail - with washer fluid dripping down its face, the nuns can see the cold, patient eyes that will wait forever if it has to.

One of the nuns turns to the other and says, "Sister, show him your cross." The other composes herself, rolls down the window, leans out...

"Get the fuck off our car!"

Chris Stewart sez tip your waitress.

LOVE, LOVECRAFT STYLE

By Matt Springer

"We have to stop meeting like this," the creature gurgled.

It had no "mouth" as a human might normally define it. Rather, the front of its "face" was dominated by a single gaping orifice. Sounds that emerged from this "mouth" had to navigate from a tiny voice box deep within the creature's throat and through the congealing mass of bile, blood, and drool that accumulated regularly near the bottom of the "mouth."

Hence they "gurgled."

Becky had quickly discovered that the creature's speaking voice was perhaps its most unattractive feature, which was saying something, since the beast reeked of unspeakable death and its touch was paralyzing and cold.

Becky just happened to like paralyzing and cold. That's all.

"Where did you learn that?" she purred.

"I...see...telly...visor..." belched the creature, struggling with each word.

"Oh, Coo-coo-lulu, you're so cute." Becky reached up and stroked her Coo-coo-lulu's thin membrane of skin, covered with slime and primordial sweat and glistening in the flickering light of an old black and white television. Coo-coo-lulu was watching *Gun-smoke*.

"Wan...eah...din..."

"Yes. Let's eat dinner."

She opened a wicker picnic basket she'd found in the garage and carefully removed a baggie from the top containing a sandwich and fruit. Then she lifted a towel out of the basket. Maggots caressed the decaying form of a dead rabbit, nestled atop a pile of withered flowers and dead leaves.

Becky dumped the basket's contents onto her parents' silver serving tray, the one Aunt Nina had given them on their wedding day. She set the tray in front of Coo-coo-lulu and flipped off the TV.

"Dinner time, honey."

Again, a gurgle. She smiled and opened her sandwich.

**

At age 16, Becky Callahan considered herself to be a world-weary veteran of the battlefield of love, the one she'd heard Joan Jett sing about on a cassette tape she'd bought at Goodwill for a quarter.

To date, she had called three guys "boyfriend." Nestor was a fellow fourth-grader whose impression of Arnold from *Diff'rent Strokes* made her snort milk through her nose. Joey took her to her only high school dance and then made her buy her own Dilly Bar at Dairy Queen afterward. Keith had dumped her just a few months ago because he thought she was too "tight."

She wasn't sure if she loved Coo-coo-lulu, and she definitely wasn't sure if she'd call him her "boyfriend." For one thing, he wasn't a "boy" based on any definition of the word she knew. She also couldn't really see a future for them, and even for cynical Becky, the girl in homeroom's back row with the purple fingernail polish and the Tom

Morello sticker on her binder, any possibility for teenage romance was bound up with the inevitable vision of a formless lifetime together. True love doesn't have an ending when you're in high school.

Sometimes, Coo-coo-lulu felt like a fleeting attachment she might outgrow, like Bratz or Pokemon. Sometimes, he felt like forever, something that had always been and always will be.

She could not possibly know, but she had felt dark eternity at his touch.

**

Becky opened the screen door slowly; she had discovered a slight creak in the hinges, and although she'd secretly applied WD-40 one Saturday when her dad was at the gym, the door still moaned on occasion.

It was 2:30 a.m. on a school night. Discovery at this stage would be near fatal.

Before leaving to meet Coo-coo for a very late dinner, she'd performed her usual showy nighttime routine — sit in chilly silence with Dad in the living room watching an old *Seinfeld*, disappear in her room for a half-hour, then emerge again for a perfunctory "good night" and peck on the old man's cheek.

Then she went back into her bedroom, carefully arranged some pillows in her general shape on the bed, opened the window, and crawled out into the night.

The first few times she snuck out, she'd actually tried returning through the window, until she realized it was idiotic to risk the noise of climbing back in that way when the house was dark and she could just use the damn door.

As always when she came home this late, the house was empty and filled with the shuddering clatter of her father's snoring. She stepped gingerly through, avoiding the spots where she knew the boards would creak. She entered her bedroom and collapsed onto the bed.

**

"Is something going on?"

"What?" Becky knew the word came out too sharp when she saw her dad wince; it was early and it was breakfast and she was exhausted, but if she wanted to continue undetected, she didn't have the luxury of crabbiness.

"Hey, take it easy. You just seem really out of it this morning."

"I'm fine." A weak smile, to appease Dad. It seemed to work; he relaxed into his dining room chair.

"How about dinner at Olive Garden tonight? I know you love the breadsticks."

"Um...I have a project for school to finish." If she kept the lame excuses related to her studies, it seemed to dull the sting of her rejection. Seeing him, sitting near him, even speaking with him like this — it made her want to run away, to sprint for her room and crumple into sobs on her bed.

He reminded her of Mom. Constantly, unavoidably, relentlessly reminded her. Mom was dead, and Dad was here, and it destroyed her.

"Okay, kid." Dad smiled weakly. "Maybe this weekend."

**



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That night, Becky arrived to find her Coo-coo-lulu missing. The dank sewage pipe where he usually sat nearly motionless was empty. Becky noticed that the television set she'd brought him had been knocked over, its screen shattered and hollow.

She heard a noise — something like a mix between a cow's moo and twisting metal — it came from just over a small ridge. The night seemed darker there. She dropped her backpack and climbed up. Her line of sight crossed over the top of the hill.

The doctors told her father that some intense trauma in that single instant had collapsed the synapses of her brain; it had essentially imploded. Somehow it continued to operate at a basic level, but Becky would spend the rest of her life in a hospital bed. She was essentially a vegetable.

Unable to tolerate the anguish of watching his daughter decay in a bed, Becky's father agreed to end her life support. He sat there, next to her, until her final breath.

"I love you, Becky," he said.

"I love you, Coo-coo-lulu," she whispered as she died.

THE TALE OF THE GALLANT SAILOR

By Matthew Walden

Long ago, when wishes still came true, there lived a father who performed his service to the world as a reactor operant on a nuclear submarine. Second class petty officer of the United States Navy, Sir!, was his rank and Northrop Glitten was his name. This is his story...

**

Northrop Glitten possessed a wish, and in many ways his wish possessed him as well, because this distraught and haggard sailor would stoop to unspeakable acts in order to see his wish realized. He wished for his son, Archimedes Glitten, to take out the kitchen trash. Just once. Without being asked. This was not much, of the possible requests a father could make.

In the Navy, aboard the *USS Hammerhead*, Northrop learned to keep his bunk clean at all times. A man should take pride in his sleeping quarters. It reflected his honor and his sense of duty. Northrop wished to impart these values to his son, even if he had to transmit his message across the frequency of realpolitiks.

Now, it happened one day that Northrop became angry, for when he returned home from another grueling day at the Naval Sub Base New Berkshire (which, as you know, in those days was located off the east side of the Onwendan River in Langbrim), he discovered his son had once again forgotten to take out the trash before leaving for school. And this after giving the boy a thorough thrashing the evening before for the same offense. Northrop was willing to give quarter where quarter was requested, but please.

So Northrop did what any reasonable father of the time would have done and poured the kitchen trash onto his son's bed. He rolled up the sleeves on his dress white uniform (another day saluting someone else's promotion) and flipped the garbage can over. Soggy lumps tumbled out of the green Rubberkeeper onto Archimedes' Black Sox comforter: yellow and pink globs of discarded chicken innards, paper towels sopping with orange juice, tiny granules of coffee grounds already finding their way into the crevices of the bedding, empty Natrisol drink pouches (the silver aluminum twinkling under the afternoon sun rays which slinked through the blinds on the window), the morning's *Ledger*...oh, and, let's not forget, the fetid cat litter someone had squirreled away in their room. Northrop dumped that over, too, the green and blue rocks exploding into a foul chalky cloud as they rained upon the 10-year-old boy's mattress.

Archimedes, may you choke on the dust of your own sloth! You've made your bed with your laziness. Now you must lie in it. Northrop stood above the pile with malicious glee, anticipating his son's return. He took joy in this phase of his anger. Taking action made him feel like a man, which made him feel less alone. Northrop coughed and felt his chest wince and clatter. He harrumphed his throat clear and sat at the edge of the bed. His stomach folded over itself and his undershirt clung along the ridges of his sweaty gut. Thank god the weather was turning. The humid Langbrim summers always gave way to razor-edged falls. Days shortened and shadows lengthened. No more of that filthy heat. Everything cool and arid as it should be. We could all do to breathe easy.

The front door creaked, interrupting Northrop's reverie. Archimedes' blithe steps became slow and heavy as he turned the hallway toward his bedroom. He sensed his father's presence along with an awful smell curling its way across the foyer. Trouble. The only time Dad came into his room was for trouble. Archimedes glanced into the reflective surface of his father's service plaque on the wall and adjusted his closely cropped brown hair. He dabbed a thumb in his mouth to moisten it, then rubbed it around his lips, wiping off juice stains. Putting on a good appearance could soften an impending punishment.

"Sir?"

Archimedes said it like a question, creeping into the room with his head bowed. His father stood at the corner of the bed, his face shaking in anger, his immense jowls swinging back and forth like loose pouches of dough. The force of the man's tremors flung his black and silver eyeglasses from his face.

"Son. Look at your bed. You know why it's covered with garbage? Look up! Look at me when I talk to you."

Archimedes began to cry. Northrop shook his face harder. It grew red and slick, the anger becoming a physical presence in his body. The lines in his forehead multiplied as the frown ripened on his face. His hair, normally slicked back with pomade, was now in disarray. Strands peeked out from behind his ears and hung down in front of his eyes.

"You better suck it up. I oughta tan your hide. You know what your grandpa used to do when I didn't take out the trash?"

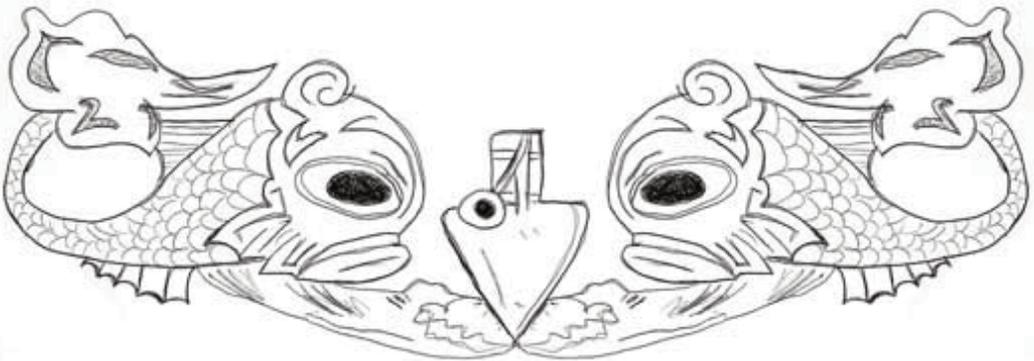
Archimedes shook his head while sobs rattled his chest.

"Well, I won't even tell you what he did," Northrop continued. "But I will tell you this. You're lucky I'm your dad. You can't ignore your responsibilities. When I say the trash has to be taken out every day before school, I mean every day before school. Not just Wednesdays. Not when you feel like it. You can't just blow me off."

Northrop snatched Archimedes by the shoulders, his fingers digging into the collarbone. He shoved him toward the pile of garbage, tugging his collar in a large furl so that he could hold him in place. As if he were a dog. Archimedes face hung so close he could practically taste the rank slops. The bitter acridness of bile surged up his throat. Northrop knelt next to his son in order to properly stare him down.

"How can you be proud of this bed? It's disgusting," Northrop yelled. "Food grows mold. Do you want to poison our house? Because that's what you're doing. Now, clean it up. I don't want to come home and find the kitchen trash still full. Comprene?"

Northrop pinched a small swatch of flesh on the back of Archimedes neck, you know, to get him to answer. If it didn't hurt so terribly, it would have struck Archimedes as a strangely juvenile action. He continued to cry. He felt too ashamed to look his dad in the face. He also felt afraid. Should he start to clean up the trash? When his dad said clean it up now, did he mean *now* now? Or just the rhetorical now? If he could get out of the situation without a spanking, that would be something. One tactical misstep and Northrop's USN belt, the one with intertwining dolphins engraved on the buckle, would fly out of his pants loops to lash out at Archimedes' back and neck, just as it had on many previous occasions.



Perhaps out of nervousness, perhaps for other reasons, the young boy grew faint and a piercing jolt of nausea attacked his stomach. He felt the pain expand and lurch in-

side him. Archimedes sunk to the floor, gripping his stomach in his hands. He rolled into a ball, cowering under the monstrous figure of his father.

Northrop clucked his tongue. If Justine hadn't given him a girl of a son. The sun must have just escaped the clouds, for the room began to glow in the afternoon heat. Northrop raised a hand to shield his eyes. His eyebrows felt damp from sweat and he began to recognize the extent of his tirade. Time to wind it down. He yanked the cord on the blinds, but the room remained bright. He picked up his glasses from the floor, put them on, then took them off again, poking the pair in his son's direction.

"Wrap all this junk in your sheets and toss'em. Sleep on that bare mattress tonight. See if it makes you appreciate a few things. When you're done whimpering on the floor you can set the table for dinner. I love you, son, but don't be such a pansy."

Northrop turned to leave, stepping over his son's curled body on the floor. Something smacked Northrop on the temple and he whirled around in anger.

Two years ago, Northrop had furnished a pterodactyl for his son out of papier-mâché. They hung it from the ceiling with wire. Now every time Northrop left the room, its artificial beak would make a beeline for his forehead. Northrop tore the dinosaur from the ceiling and hurled it into the corner, its red and gray acrylic paint chipping as it landed on the hardwood floor.

"Lousy, nickel-and-dime," he said, slamming the door to the room.

Archimedes remained motionless on the floor, waiting for the throbbing cramps in his stomach to subside. They had painted it together.

**

Later that night, the two dined on blackened finch without much conversation. An old Glitten standby, both the dish and the silence. When they finished, Archimedes spread his homework out on the dining room table and began his daily recitations. Northrop washed dishes in the kitchen, singing an old sea chantey to himself. Steam from the sink's basin hovered around his face.

*When you wash those dishes
better make'em shine
Don't leave a speck of ocean brine
Your soul feels clean with no dirt around
A sailor's life for me
I'll never run aground*

Northrop had developed an elaborate system for washing dishes over the course of many mess-hall watches. He couldn't bear to get germs on his hands, so he always used a pair of school bus yellow dishwashing gloves. However, after a few uses, the outside of the gloves became dirty, encrusted with flecks of meat, stained with red blotches from various sauces and smelly like a sour sponge. It wasn't long before the dish gloves themselves were too dirty for Northrop to put on. He'd have to touch the outside of at least one with his bare hands in order to get to the protection the insides offered. So Northrop always carried around an extra pair of what he called "buffer gloves." He would boil these in hot water to ensure their sanitation. These being sterilized, he would put on a single glove of the buffer pair, then proceed to fit his other bare hand with one of the dirty gloves. Then he would remove the clean glove, set it aside for another boiling and slip on the remaining dirty glove. Neither of his hands would have to touch any of the outside germs for a single second. Northrop chuckled to himself at his ingenuity. Nothing like dishwashing to lift the spirits.

When he finished stacking their plates from dinner, Northrop wandered over to the table to assist Archimedes.

"Watchya got there, pal?"

Archimedes hesitated, wary of arousing his anger.

Northrop patted Archimedes on the shoulder and took a seat next to him.

"Science homework, uh? How's the teacher handling it? She's not teaching you anything I warned you about, is she? Strictly the facts?"

"No, Dad. Only the facts."

They covered this conversation every fall semester when Archimedes got a new teacher. Only evolution. Only the facts. Northrop, having gone through intensive training to acquire his position as a nuclear reactor operant, thought of himself as the scientific type and wanted his son to grow up with a rational outlook on the world, unclouded by myth.

"Good. Good. So let's look at that homework, slugger. We'll worry about metaphysics when the time comes."

Archimedes slid his notebook toward his father and took out the folded worksheet with his assignment. They were learning about colors in class, about heat absorption, wavelengths, and the reflection of light. *White pigment reflects light and black pigment absorbs it. He needed to memorize that. Red pigment soaks up green and blue light and sends back only the red light waves, so the object looks red. Color does not belong to an object; it is only light thrown back.* The implications shocked him. Did that mean that on its own everything was colorless? If a tree is brown in a forest and nobody looks at it, does it still make a color? Northrop went through the text with him and assured him: yes, even though our eyes and brains "translate" wavelengths into the correct colors, the wavelengths still exist out there on their own, even without us present as receptors. Archimedes' existential crisis was abetted for the moment.

They moved on to the experiment detailed in the worksheet. Archimedes cut out four strips of scrap paper and drew a different circle on the center of each strip with colored felt tip markers. Northrop prepared a bowl of water and placed a candle on each side. He then hung a string between the two candles and they used clothespins to attach the four paper strips, leaving their ends to dangle in the water. They watched the water slither up the strips and laughed as it reached the colored circles Archimedes had sketched. The green circle spread out to the sides in blue and yellow arcs as it reacted with the water. The purple and red circles drooped down to the bowl and retained their original colors. The black circle dribbled out shades of orange and red and blue.

The colors breathed in front of them, bringing life to the stark austerity Northrop demanded of their home. Northrop elucidated the differences between the colors of light and the colors of ink, smiling at the recognition of his own intelligence in his son's eyes. They scratched out griffonage in Archimedes' notebook. They hugged, they cleaned up. They both slept that night with a brief glow of filial connection.

**

"I forgot it. I'm sorry."

"What do you mean, you forgot it, Archimedes? Do you mean you forgot to bring your science assignment or you forgot to do your science assignment?"

Ms. Leech paced in front of her fourth grade classroom. Her bouffant hair puff wiggled atop her head with each step, resembling a plate of black jello. As she came closer to Archimedes, he noticed the terrible stench that always followed her: a cross between a boys' locker room and mothballs. Her orange and green floral print dress clashed with her gaudy pink blush, all of which played up the jaundiced skin tone of her face. She gestured dramatically with each verb in her sentences, waving her stubby hands in front of her portly body.

"No ma'am," Archimedes answered. "I mean, yes ma'am. I did it last night. But I left it this morning. At the house. I was late for the bus. I'm sorry."

"I have my suspicions, young man. As your teacher, I take lying seriously. I won't graduate a class full of liars. You are in the fourth grade now, Archimedes. Much, much too

late for lying, I'm afraid. It's time to start taking honesty seriously. Honesty is my policy and I would suggest you make it yours as well. As far as policies go, it's one of the best."

Ms. Leech paused and glanced about the classroom. "No, no. This simply won't do. And your classmates, honey. You're not just lying to me; you are lying to them too. Class, I want you to pay attention. Your fellow student is lying to all of us about his homework assignment. And what do we do with liars?"

"WE PUT THEM IN THE CORNER," the class responded.

"And why do we put them in the corner?" Ms. Leech swung her arms in small circles.

"BECAUSE LIARS ALWAYS LIE THEMSELVES INTO CORNERS."

The class knew it by heart. Ms. Leech was tough on lying. She could spot a liar like god spots leopards, or so she thought. However, as Archimedes' case proved, she was actually quite bad at spotting liars, often prosecuting the innocent, while at other times allowing herself to be persuaded by the crudest concoctions from her worst students. In fact, she was so bad at weeding out the real culprits that she initiated many would be truth-tellers into the field of perjury through sheer fright.

"Can you lie in front of your class like this, Archimedes?" Ms. Leech asked, and then added in a low whisper, "Can you lie in front of God?"

"No ma'am. I don't wanna lie."

"Well, tell us the truth, then. You didn't leave you work at home, because you never completed anything to leave at home. Isn't that right?"

Archimedes hesitated, then provided the answer Ms. Leech wanted to hear. "I didn't do my homework. I lied. I'm sorry. But I won't lie again. That's the truth."

Ms. Leech beamed. She had brought goodness into the world.

"Archimedes. I'm proud of you. I want you to stand in the liar's corner. But, honey, stand in that corner with your head high. You made an important step today. The first person we lie to is ourselves, and when we finally tell the truth to ourselves, it makes, well, I don't know if I'm allowed to say this, but you deserve to know...it makes Jesus happy."

Archimedes stood up from his desk and moved toward the liar's corner at the head of the classroom. An agonizing walk. The glaring eyes of his classmates burned shame into his back. He wasn't a liar and he didn't want to go. Absentminded maybe, lazy certainly, but not a liar. Now he had to endure this punishment, his honor sullied by Ms. Leech's cruel obsession.

Standing in the front of the room, the shame seeping in, Archimedes felt the same searing pain enter his stomach as the afternoon before with his father. His eyes began to water and the room around him grew fuzzy at the edges. He dropped to the floor and pulled his knees to his stomach, making a perfect ball. The class leaned forward and gasped. Ms. Leech, who was busy writing Archimedes' name into her leather bound Liar's Ledger (she kept a running tally of her students' deceitfulness), heard the commotion and turned to look. The students were enthralled. A few chairs fell over as the children sitting in them passed out from the sight of Archimedes. Leech's eyes scanned the classroom until they came upon Archimedes' limp body. She began to cry and ran to his side.

"Oh, honey! That is marvelous! A little angel ball curled up on the floor. You are the cutest thing I have seen today. Archimedes! You never told us you had this talent."

Archimedes remained motionless on the floor. Although the pain in his stomach started to subside, he decided to feel the situation out. Surely his teacher meant to belittle him — her praise couldn't have been sincere. And why was the whole class looking

down at him with their mouths agape in awe? Archimedes had expected to elicit pity, but from the looks around him, it appeared he had both excited and shocked his classmates.

One by one, the students began to gather around Archimedes, giggling, whispering to one another:

"Can you do that?"

"Hell no. That looks tough."

"I've been friends with Archimedes for a while."

"I knew him before you did."

"I taught him how to get in a ball. He's just copying me."

Archimedes had impressed his class. And Ms. Leech was beside herself: "Angel, honey. That is an amazing talent. That talent came straight from God himself. Class, only a boy with an honest heart could have such form. Look at how his back arches in perfect symmetry with his legs. And the way he's got his arms clasped around his knees, he could be a saint. Simply majestic."

Ms. Leech walked over to the intercom and called the front office. "Carrie, yes, this is Ms. Leech in 17-B. Fourth Grade. Can you send Peter down? We have a situation with a student. Archimedes Glitten. Thank you."

Archimedes gulped. The school principal was on his way. It had been an elaborate ploy to punish him for lying. Time to get off the floor.

"Oh no, honey," said Ms. Leech, urging Archimedes back down. "You stay there in your beautiful ball. I'm just tickled. This is even better than admitting your lie. Lord, I have an idea. Cookies for everyone in the class! A cookie party to celebrate our class hero, Archimedes!"

A big cheer went up as Ms. Leech ran to her desk and pulled out a box of chocolate pirouettes. The class knew about the cookies. She'd been saving them for the day she didn't have to write anyone's name in the Liar's Ledger. So far, that day hadn't come. But now she was giving them away because Archimedes had lied and then crawled into a ball like a coward. This was too much for him. The teacher tore off ragged sheets from a brown paper towel roll and plopped them down on the students' desks, followed by two cookies each. She bent down to whisper in Archimedes' ear, "Don't worry, child. I'll let you take the rest of this box home when we're done."

It all felt wrong. Like a good dream you can sense is about to take a turn for the worse, careening through the guardrails. Too frightened to get up, he lay there puzzled as his classmates feasted on account of his timidity.

"Helloooooo?" Principal Nickerson poked his head through the door. "Heard we got some problems with a Mr. Glitten?" The principal of Langbrim Heights Elementary always appeared elegantly dressed (he wore double breasted suits from Bradley's, but he wore them so well that no one could tell) and his face carried a full red beard that directed attention toward his eyes, which glistened with a distinct merriment. He had a wide girth and a joyful demeanor that often reminded students of a younger Santa Claus. Nickerson had a tough side, however; according to rumors, if you crossed him he'd give you a paddling so bad your eyes would bulge. No one had experienced this directly, but it was the word at the tetherball court.

Nickerson rubbed a crease in his cheek with his forefingers and bent over to examine Archimedes. Upon completing his cursory inspection, the principal stood up, issued an ear-splitting "Son!" and clapped his hands once. A hushed "oooooh" flittered over the classroom. The students set down their cookies and waited for the principal's judgment. Archimedes grimaced on the floor.

"Ha ha, tiger! Look at you," Nickerson bellowed with pleasure. He smiled and tugged his pants up toward his overhung belly. "Never in my life have I seen such a spectacular performance. I'd be a fool if I could pull that off." He turned to address the class, "Look at this slap sucker on the floor. Incredible. A regular warrior in your midst." He turned back to Archimedes, squatting down on the floor, to whisper to him, "You little acrobat. How do you contort your body into such a magnificent shape? You employing some kind of magic?"

"No sir. My stomach hurt and I fell down."

"Yes! I'm sure that's it, you silver-tongued rascal. I understand. An artist must never reveal his secret." Principal Nickerson stood up again and straightened his tie. He called Ms. Leech to his side with a come-hither gesture and they went to the back of the room.

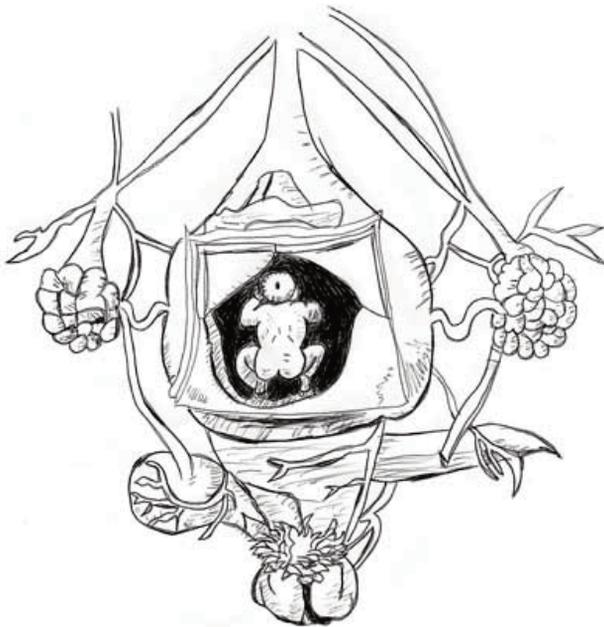
"Listen here, Leech. You did the right thing. I think we both know that boy has something special with his floor-ball trick."

"I know, Peter. He's one of my favorites."

"I'll tell you what I'm gonna do. I've got a buddy who's the Assignment Editor over at WMAZ News. He's looking for local interest stories; keep a pulse on the community, that sort of thing. I'm gonna give him a jingle and see if we can't get our boy wonder here on TV." Nickerson flashed a toothy smile at her. They both glanced back at Archimedes writhing on the floor, looking terribly confused.

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Northrop, dressed in the blue jeans and faded Allegiance Bowl shirt he had thrown on in a scrambled rush after work, paced across the news studio's plush blue carpet. He felt nervous for his son and he still hadn't figured out exactly why he'd been invited on the news. When the studio technicians ran through their rehearsal a few minutes ago, Northrop watched in distant amusement as everyone swooned over Archimedes. It looked to Northrop like the boy merely assumed the fetal position.



Nothing too interesting; sort of unmanly if you asked him. But whatever. If his son got attention for it, well, he wouldn't begrudge him that.

The newsroom harbored too much disorder for Northrop. Wires ran across the floor in tangles. Discarded scripts and sheets of paper littered the studio. Workers, carrying boom mics and ladders, scurried past. Someone could at least take the time to vacuum, Northrop thought, bending over to pick up a snapped rubber band strand off the floor.

Next to Northrop, at a table outside the set, stood the production coordinator, Steve Kormack. He had been quite the congenial host to the Glittens when they arrived, introducing them to the staff, giving Archimedes tips on poise and enunciation. Northrop didn't like the way he walked, though. All limp and jittery. Steve looked even more frantic as they closed in on the five o'clock airtime. However, his rapid-fire instructions to the staff sounded like the orders of a drill sergeant.

"... so then, page 20 next — strike. That'll be camera one for the reader, into senior footage — the first on reel two. Are you staying with me? They've written in a page 22 with the city government correspondent's studio spot, although, who knows? That might fall through. If it does, we've got the soft feature pad of the kid with his trick. That'll be happening here and we'll sit him on camera four. Someone will have to come up with a CSO for that. We should use the morning show's coffee table. I suppose they'll want to throw his name and school on a lower third also. That'll be on scanner two and we'll slot it after commercial to give him time to prepare..."

Northrop shook his head as he eavesdropped. He'll stick to his job as a sailor, thank you. He leaned forward, rubbed Archimedes on the back and ruffled his hair.

"You ready for this, pal? You nervous?"

Archimedes had put on his dress clothes. A pair of khaki slacks, a white office shirt and a Norman Rockwell tie his Dad had let him borrow. The last time he had dressed up had been for his mother's service and the clothes, six months later, still did not fit. They hung loosely around his thin frame, making him look younger than his 10 years.

"I'm fine. My stomach hurts though."

"I'm not surprised. All the crawling on the floor you've been doing...that can't be good for you."

Archimedes inhaled a big whiff of his father's submarine smell. Northrop usually came home drenched in it and it would stick with him even after he changed out of his uniform.

"Hey, pops. You really stink, you know?"

"Oh yeah? You smell like bratty kid."

"That's not as bad as rusty pennies. You're worse than the gym."

Northrop laughed. "That's just the smell of the ocean. When a man lives his life at sea, he starts to smell like it. Now on our subs, we have to go underwater for long periods of time and the oxygen in the air gets used up by all the sailors." Northrop loved explaining his job to his son. "So we have machinery to purify our breathing air. We take some water out of the ocean, pass an electric current through it, and that separates the oxygen from the hydrogen. Make sense?"

"No," Archimedes giggled.

Steve jaunted up and grabbed Archimedes by the hand. "I'm gonna have to borrow little chief here. We're ready for him. Turn around for me, Archimedes." Steve lifted up the back of Archimedes' collar to tuck his tie out of sight. "There we go." Steve stood back to admire him. "Looking fierce! Aren't you just the belle of the ball?" Northrop grunted. Steve excused himself and shoved Archimedes in the right direction.

"Knock it out of the park," Northrop called out as they seated Archimedes at a coffee table in front of a green screen. Archimedes looked around from his vantage point on

the studio floor. Four imposing cameras sat stationed in front of him, each manned by an operator wearing a headset. To his right he could see the newscasters taking their seats and shuffling through papers. Several bright lights shone directly in his eyes. They threw off tremendous heat and he felt beads of sweat trickle down the sides of his stomach.

A short woman with high cheekbones and horn-rimmed glasses ran up to him from the side. She also wore a headset. "Hey, Archie. My name's Nancy. I'm the Floor Manager. You'll need to keep your eyes on me, because I'm going to point my finger down at you like this when I want you to start, okay?"

"Okay."

"You're going to do great. The anchors are going to give us a little intro and you'll be on soon after that." Nancy ran off to the side. Over to the right, the anchor picked up his pencil and squinted his eyes, testing poses in the monitor in attempts to make his face appear intelligent. The camera operators all swung into their positions. Turbulent music with staccato beats flooded the studio. Archimedes pictured a chain gang of prisoners shoveling tar in time with the tune. He pinched the sides of his pants tightly and blinked his eyes twice more than necessary.

He could hear Nancy speaking into her headset. Here it comes: "Four, three, two, one. Up on one. Cue him!"

The anchor smiled and let it roll. "Good evening. I'm Donald Runchard and thanks for joining us for news at five. Coming up tonight: In a peaceful rural setting earlier today, two senior citizens appear to have been savagely beaten by a group of angry cub scouts. A tragic incident eyewitnesses are calling nothing short of gruesome.

"And it can happen any time, without warning. It's a new door-to-door insurance scam involving tropical night lizards, and it can cause serious damage to your home landscaping. Tonight, 'Eyewitness News' reveals how to protect yourself in a story you'll only see on Fourteen."

Archimedes tuned him out, staring with all his focus at Nancy for his signal. He felt the rumbles of his recurring stomach pain and prayed it wouldn't flair up, not at this, perhaps the most crucial juncture of his young life so far. He wondered who was watching and what would come of it all. Maybe he could get himself into a movie. A rippling kick in his stomach cut his thoughts short and he let out a meek groan. The broadcast continued and Archimedes listened with his attention divided between his stomach and his ears:

"...an elegant herbal solution to delirium tremens with Dr. Straeffler on Monday. And when we return, a spirited student from Langbrim Heights Elementary will perform a stunt live from the WMAZ studios. You'll want to stick around for that one."

"Yes, and Donald, he is soooo cute. I saw him rehearsing earlier this evening and I think he'll just blow us away."

"Well, Cheri, not literally, let's hope. I wouldn't want to see that."

"Don. You stop that."

"Back with more news."

It was almost his turn. If he could only get his stomach to calm down. He squirmed in his couch seat. Nancy came back to his side of the room and smiled at him from her position behind camera four. Music filled the studio again.

The anchor began, "In a minute we'll check in with our Doppler 14 forecast. Will tomorrow be another picture perfect day? But first, this story. You've heard of it before. The Fetal Position. But did you know it could be an art form? Live from our studio, Archimedes Glitten, a 10-year-old boy from Langbrim Heights, shows us how it's done. Break it down for us, Archie."

And there went Nancy's wave. But Archimedes couldn't even stand up. Pain tore across his entire torso. His spine was a wrung out towel, choking his stomach with spasms, making it impossible to catch his breath. Archimedes glanced up at his father who stood in the shadows behind the piercing stage lights. Northrop chewed on a fingernail and glared back at his son. Archimedes leaned forward to get up before nausea thrust him back into the couch. Organs cartwheeled inside his body. It was the worst he'd ever felt. He managed to eke out a whisper, "...I can't..."

If there was anything Northrop loathed more than filth, it was cowardice. "Can't? Or won't, boy?!!" Northrop erupted from the sidelines. Before anyone could stop him, the angry father tore onto the set and charged toward Archimedes. Archimedes saw his father running toward him, saw the belt flying out of the loops on the blue jeans, but he was in too much abdominal pain to feel either fear or embarrassment. Northrop leaped over the coffee table, folded his belt in half and began to slap it across his son's back. Unable to contain himself any longer, Archimedes poured the contents of his stomach all over the couch and the studio room floor.

Nancy screamed in the background, "Station ID! Station ID! Roll the VTR!"

Northrop came to his senses and halted his beating. He meekly threaded the belt back through the loops on his jeans and wiped the sweat from his forehead. The news crew stood before him horrified, so he gave them an apologetic look, with a gesture toward Archimedes, as if to say, "What would you have done?" Archimedes had made quite a mess. The couch looked like it had been sprayed with mud.

Northrop noticed a few coffee grounds mixed in with the soupy pile. He knew he shouldn't have poured the trash on his son's bed. Look at what happens, he thought. And Jesus, is that blood in there, too? They're going to have a hell of a time de-staining that couch. While Northrop inspected the vomit, Steve huddled over the unresponsive Archimedes.

"Looks like you did a knock-up job on this one, Dad. You better take him to the hospital," Steve said.

Northrop ignored him, scooped up the frail Archimedes into his arms and made for the exit. Archimedes looked up at his father and wiped his face off on the sleeve of his dress shirt. Northrop thought of stopping him, but a quick glance across his shirt and pants revealed the damage had already been dealt.

"I'm sorry. I was dizzy."

"It's okay. I didn't know you were sick. Let's go to the doctor's."

As Northrop stepped outside the studio into the foggy September evening, he could hear the meteorologist delivering his report. "*Things are still uncertain, but you can expect some major changes over the coming weeks...*"

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Archimedes stretched out across the examining table and flinched as the protective paper crinkled beneath his naked back. The slightest sound now, even paper rustling, increased his pain. Northrop hovered above him making mild stabs at conversation; he'd heard somewhere it was important in emergencies. Keep them awake. Keep them talking. He found he had little to say.

"So talk to me, buddy. How you feeling? You like movies, right? How 'bout baseball, huh? How them Sox doing? We're gonna smash 'em this year, right? Smash 'em."

Archimedes grunted. He didn't feel like talking. His eyes scanned the room while his father droned on. He saw a chart on the wall detailing the innards of a human being.



He never imagined he had all those parts swimming around inside him. It's a wonder people didn't feel ill all the time. He looked at the shelves with trepidation, noticing various utensils, things that could poke his eyes, things that could get shoved up his nose, the rubber hammers they might use to hit his knees. He wondered where they kept the shots and hoped he wouldn't get one.

The door to the room swung open and a woman wearing sneakers and pink pajamas traipsed in. She stuck her pen between her lips and tugged her brown hair back into a ponytail, which made her look younger than her complexion suggested. She shook Northrop's hand.

"I'm Dr. Janet. I understand Archie's had a big night?"

"Well, they had him on the news for a school performance, but that got cut short because of his tummy ache." Northrop thought he'd pitch the short version. Having to explain it made him feel small pangs of responsibility.

Dr. Janet flipped through some rainbow colored records on the counter, then took a seat in the gray swivel chair to her left and slid up to Archimedes.

"Hey. You feeling bad? Where does it hurt?"

"In my stomach. Also, everywhere."

"You didn't swallow any grizzly bears, did you? You got any bears swimming around in there?" Archimedes began to laugh, then abandoned the idea. It felt good to smile, but it hurt too much.

"Okay. I'm going to push a few places on your stomach and you're going to tell me if they hurt or not." She began with light touches on the front of his abdomen. "We're gonna press here, and here, and a little over here. Did any of those hurt?"

"They all hurt."

"They all hurt, huh? You're a tough boy, though. You've gotta be tough if you're a TV star." She pressed harder above his belly button and gently punched the lower right section of his ribs. She then hooked her finger on a section and asked Archimedes to breathe deeply. He exhaled as another pain shook his body.

"Good job! You lay right there and I'm going to talk to your dad in the hall for a sec-

ond. We'll get little handsome fixed up for those girls in his class."

Northrop followed her into the hall. They both leaned against the aged yellow wall to allow an elderly woman in a wheelchair to wobble past.

"Mr. Glitten. I'll be honest with you. There could be a host of things wrong with your son. The gastrointestinal system is complicated and there's not a lot we can tell you from a physical examination. I'll tell you this. I don't think it's his appendix. He's got an extraordinary amount of tenderness and his stomach seems to be enlarged. There's definitely some generalized peritoneal irritation. That's not good. I know he's young, but there's a good chance we'll need to do an exploratory laporotomy. This'll give us a look around his abdominal cavity so we can find the exact location of his troubles. We don't necessarily have to do this tonight, but we'll want to do it soon. We'll run some gastrointestinal x-rays, but those don't give us a look at everything. If he's got problems with his pancreas we won't be able to tell from those. I just want to give you a sit-rep. You could be spending a good deal of time at the hospital in the next few days. You'll need to explain to Archimedes what's happening, but be gentle so you don't aggravate his condition."

Northrop nodded. He thought they'd pop by the E.R. for some antibiotics and nausea pills and be on their way. What the doctor just described sounded serious. He'd better fess up.

"He threw up at the news station. Do you need to know that?"

"Yes, Mr. Glitten. We need to know that. Didn't you check the box 'no' on the form?" She flipped through her records.

"Well, uh, I didn't want to embarrass him. You see, it appears he somehow or other, I don't know how it happened..." Northrop fidgeted. "He seems to have swallowed some coffee grounds at some point."

"What?" Dr Janet's hand rushed to the back of her neck and she juttet her chin forward.

"Well, when he threw up, it looked like a sprinkling of coffee grounds mixed in with the vomit. A bit of...blood, too." Northrop's gaze darted toward the ground and he shrugged his shoulders, worried that this information might betray his culpability. But he might as well have it out if surgery was at stake.

"Mr. Glitten! Coffee grounds? That's usually a sign of a bleeding ulcer. The blood takes on the color of coffee grounds because the surrounding tissues of the ulcer crater have begun to erode. We have to get an operating room immediately."

Northrop felt his breath catch. "It's that serious?" he asked.

"Yes. It's a type of internal hemorrhage," Dr. Janet called over her shoulder, already running down the hall. "I'm going to find the surgeon on duty. Stay with Archie."

Northrop crept back into the room, sat in the chair next to the table and grabbed the pale hand of his son.

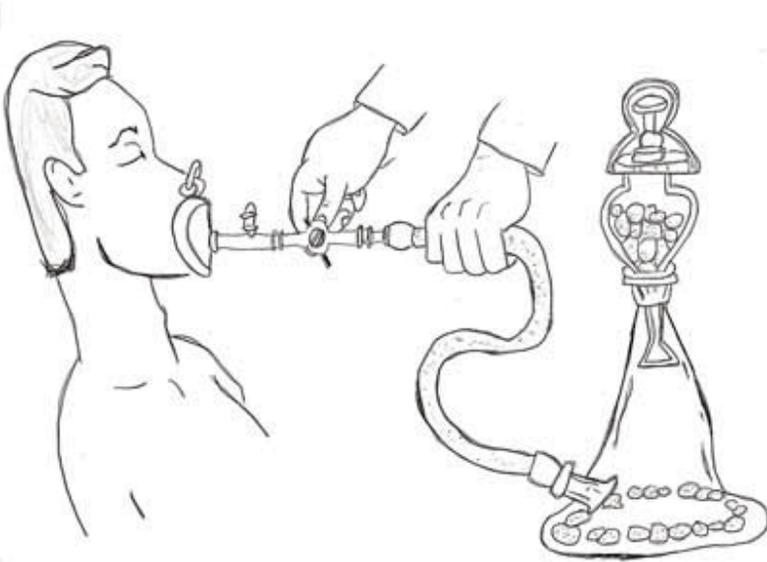
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Three hours later, Northrop found himself walking circles in the hospital snack room. He couldn't stand the waiting area. It depressed him. He'd noticed a couple that had just gone through a nasty bout. The husband's arm sat in a splint and the wife rolled around in circles in a wheel chair, whimpering while she nursed gashes on her arms and legs. The husband had a narrow face that drew to a focused point, like a weasel. He kept darting his eyes around the room, as if to ascertain if someone suspected him. Northrop had to get out of there. He didn't understand how anybody could up and attack a family member. He and Justine had come close over the years, but Christ, if he couldn't hold himself back before raising a hand. I mean, you just never.

The cool emptiness of the snack room posed a different problem, however. At first he

wanted time alone with his thoughts, but now they ran away from him, tearing down corridors of possibilities he wasn't prepared to entertain. Internal hemorrhage. Hopefully, they were keeping up the blood transfusions. Hopefully.

Northrop mumbled the ABCs to himself. Then he went through the multiplication table.



He made it up to the middle teens before his thoughts invaded again and he had to confront the possibility his son might die. "One in four," he kept repeating to himself, "One in four don't make it." That's what Dr. Janet had told him. It would be tougher since he was so young.

Northrop yawned in spite of himself and began digging through his jeans for quarters. It was getting closer to midnight and he needed something to keep him going. To fall asleep now would be disrespectful. He found some change and grabbed a diet soda from the snack machine. The can tumbled down with a few clunks and Northrop popped open his drink, feeling a slight relief at the hiss of the fizz. The liquid's active carbonation slid down his throat and into his belly. Northrop laughed. Bubbleheads. That's what the rest of the Navy called submariners. An affectionate term, even if it sounded pejorative. Northrop laughed some more. He thought of someone whose head had been replaced by a large bubble of soda. No face, just soda. He couldn't contain himself. He let out a roaring laugh. The soda in his throat surged up and burned as it made its exit through his nose. Northrop laughed harder. Sticky soda droplets covered his arm. His shirt got doused as well.

A stocky man in mint green scrubs with a blonde flattop haircut walked in on Northrop's giddy explosion. He glanced at Northrop's drenched shirt and walked toward a vending machine. He bought some potato chips and chuckled with his back to Northrop, "Looks like you're having a fun night."

"Not really," Northrop responded, still smiling. "But I'm hanging in there. How 'bout you, sir?"

"Let me tell you," said the gentleman as he turned around. "Had a night you wouldn't believe." He sat down at a round plastic table in the corner, opened his chips and began to crunch away, gesticulating and smacking through a flurry of crumbs. "The craziest horse apples I hov sheen in my life!" Flecks of potato chips tumbled out of his mouth into a pile on the table.

"So, we got this fella in the OR, right?" he continued. "He's sedated and it's a pretty standard procedure, a gastrectomy, nothing we haven't seen before. By the way, my

name's Gary; I'm a surgical assistant here. Trying to earn my stripes, as they say." He leaned forward and extended a hand. Northrop declined, noticing the potato chips and grease, but tossed him a friendly wave and took a seat next to him.

"Northrop. Pleasure." Northrop settled into the seat and took another sip of soda, hoping he wouldn't think of bubbles.

Gary went on, "So we'd made an incision to the left of this guy's midline, which runs vertically down from below your ribs right here to just below the navel." He demonstrated to Northrop on his own stomach, seeking to impress him with his firm grasp on the procedure. "We cut through the layer of fat beneath the skin, and then the muscle beneath the fat, and finally the fibrous sheath surrounding the abdominal cavity. We pull this stuff to the side and you get a good look at the organs inside. Since I'm new, I got the fun job of putting clamps on the gushy stuff to make sure there's no seepage. We don't want any residual contents spilling out. That would be nasty." Gary laughed, revealing a mouth full of post mastication potato mush.

"Well, we all notice looking at the stomach there, not only is it bleeding, but it looks like something's inside it, jumping around. Like it's trying to get out. I'm not putting you on, bro. I mean, imagine a fist trying to punch through a wad of silly putty. That's what it looked like! So I'm just standing there, using the suction machine, which by the way is a beauty, right? She's got these large glass reservoirs where we send all the patient's blood through tubes. I so wanna buy one. Put that baby in my fish tank, throw a black light on top of it. You can dig it. I know you party. But yeah, but so, all this blood's just spraying out and I'm sucking it up with my tube, like it's no big deal, like I seen it all before. 'Cause we got some bigwigs in there and I've gotta front like I know everything.

"Meanwhile they're trying to get this dude some massive transfusions because he's losing a lot of blood and the main surgeon's like 'Let's cut this fool open and see what's going on' and I'm all 'hell yeah!' So they slice open his stomach..." At this point Gary leaned forward for dramatic emphasis. Northrop half expected a punch line.

"They cut it open and inside there's a *Sphyrna Corona*! Just flopping around in there like it was in the ocean. I still can't believe it."

"What is that?" Northrop asked.

"A hammerhead shark, dude. Don't you know your species terminology? Can you see it? A hammerhead shark just chilling out in this guy's stomach? Bobo the clown knows how it got in there, okay? Well, we pull out the shark and put it on the anesthetic trolley, because that thing is just squirming around and it's slippery and we don't know what to do with it. The shark sits there wiggling for a while and slowly stops moving after giving a few jerks." Gary demonstrated these as well, lurching forward in his chair. "Meanwhile, everyone in the room is like, 'Whoa, did we just see that?' You know? What a night. Hammerhead shark. Unbelievable." Gary leaned back in his seat and put his arms behind his head. "How bout you, Norty? You in the soda business there?"

"Me? Huh?" Northrop looked down at his wet shirt, then back up at Gary. "Oh, no. Just had an accident. I could tell you a few stories though. I'm a submariner." Northrop did have some stories to tell. He had in mind a particularly surly tale about a night in Taiwan a year back on his three-month deployment. This story was true, too. Not some cockamamie concoction about a hammerhead shark.

Before Northrop could spill his beans about the debutante ball and the kidnapped orphans, Gary slapped himself on the forehead. "Oh man oh man oh man. Did you just say you drive submarines? Stupid! I'm so stupid. Is your last name Glitten?"

"I don't know if *drive them* is the term I would use."

"Gary, you're such a numbskull. Bro, I'm sorry. The nurse hasn't talked to you yet? She was supposed to tell you. I feel like such a heel. Spouting off like that." Gary looked genuinely upset. "You've got a kid, right? His name Archie?"

Northrop uttered a muted yes. Gary scooted his chair across the floor and put his meaty

arm on top of Northrop's shoulder. "Mr. Glitten, sir. I hate for you to have to find out this way, but the story I just told you about the hammerhead shark? That was little Archie."

This made Northrop cross. Not a funny joke. What guts. Northrop waited for Gary to start laughing, because when he did, he was gonna sock him one right in his smartass mouth. But Gary didn't laugh. He just turned bright red and his eyes got glassy. "I'm so sorry. My big mouth. You must think I'm a...it's just been crazy. You see something like that, you tell the first person you run into."

Gary took his hand off Northrop's shoulder and wiped his eyes on his mint green sleeve. "Archimedes was a fighter. He tried to hang in there. I'm sorry. He just lost too much blood." Gary stood up and walked out of the snack room. If he had a tail it would have drooped between his legs.

Northrop stared ahead and mulled. Dr. Janet bumped into Gary as she ran into the snack room. One look at his sad sack countenance and she could already tell. She noticed Northrop at the table in the corner, her face taking on a forlorn expression. "Mr. Glitten. I'm so sorry. Gary told you the news? About the shark? He shouldn't have. We tried to find you in the waiting room. It's just. Huh. What is there to say? It is what it is. Did you...do that to him?"

Northrop stood up, shaking his head. The objects around him in the room came out of focus and took on a glow of fuzzy white light. He felt dizzy and the whirl of the electronic vending machines faded into the background. His ears popped. Janet mouthed something but he couldn't hear any words. He continued shaking his head, swinging his jowls as he pushed Dr. Janet to the side and walked into the hallway. The half empty soda can dangled upside down in his fingers' loose grip as he shuffled down the corridor. He left a trail of brown soda splashing on the linoleum behind his squeaking sneakers.

When Northrop arrived back home at 2 a.m., he slammed the white Styrofoam cooler down on the dining room table. He still hadn't regained his senses. He went over the facts to see if he could make heads or tails of them. Archimedes in a ball. Archimedes on the news. Archimedes vomiting. Archimedes in surgery. Archimedes with a hammerhead shark in his stomach. Archimedes dead. That seemed to be the procession, but too much information remained missing in the middle. Things like this don't happen. He had never heard of anything remotely resembling this. Northrop wanted to cry. But the mystery clouded his head and overshadowed any feelings of grief. How had the shark gotten into his stomach in the first place and how did Archie manage to walk around with it in there all day?

They had allowed Northrop to take the hammerhead shark home with him. The hospital staff didn't know what else to do with it. Might as well go to the father. Now, back at home, without the slightest possibility of sleeping anytime soon, he decided he had to take a look at it. He lifted the red handles of the cooler to the side and pried off the lid. A sweet and salty seaweed stench poured forth. Northrop gazed in and, sure enough, a hammerhead shark, about two feet in length, rested at the bottom of the cooler. It lay on its side with an ugly eyeball oozing out from the broadly rounded, hammer-flapped head. The grayish brown tone across its face moved into a speckled white near its mouth. A few bloodstained teeth with smooth-edged cusps jutted out. Northrop noticed blood on each of its five gills. He reached into the cooler and jiggled the shark's dorsal fin, then its pelvic fin. They felt firm in his hand, like plastic toys. He'd done a lot of fishing, mostly off the Long Island Sound, but he'd never pulled in one of these before.

Northrop tilted the cooler over and slid the shark onto the heartwood table. He'd received the table as a gift from his own father when he announced his engagement to Justine. They'd carved it together from an American White Ash in the family's backyard over a series of cold fall mornings. Northrop had looked forward to their outdoor work each morning; it was the most open his father had ever been with him. He explained to the young Northrop the constitution of good table wood, how to be wary of the placement of the tree's natural knots, how to make decisive cuts with his knife without looking backward, how to navigate the thick fibers and leave marks that bore your

intentions. The moisture in his breath condensed and formed tiny clouds in the air as he spoke to his son, lending gravity to his words. He'd described how much he hated his boss at the power grid and discussed his love for potatoes au gratin. He told Northrop to never settle for anything in this life, because it would eat at his insides like a cancer.

Now, 18 years later, Northrop felt bad about throwing a rotting shark on top of the table. But desperate times. He flipped on the overhead light. The shark rested on its belly, stretching across the length of the table. Northrop pictured it leaping to life and thrashing across the dining room. But the shark remained still, anchored by the weight of two extinguished lives. He pressed down on its snout and found the skin rough, like sandpaper. A clear jelly seeped out of the shark's pores and Northrop jerked his hands away. He took three steps backward, then walked around the table, looking at the shark from all the available angles, as if that would get to the essence.

There it was. A hammerhead shark. His boat's namesake had killed his son. Northrop gave the shark an angry shove. It rolled across the table in lopsided flops. Northrop punched it across the top of its head. It oozed a swab of jelly into the cracks between his fingers, covering his knuckles in thin fish paste. He shook out his hand, slinging the moisture off. He stood back and shoved his hands into his back pockets, unsatisfied. How do you take revenge against something that's already dead?

He ran to the air condition closet to grab some supplies. He returned with a few car wash buckets, some newspaper, a container of bleach, a carton of plaster of paris, and his hunting knife. He set all of his materials on the floor, apart from the knife, and took a seat at the table. "Okay, scallywag. Let's take a look at those teeth." Northrop lifted the shark onto his lap and pried open its mouth. He yanked it open as wide as he could, stuck his knife over the front of the jaws and began to slice away at the flesh around the teeth with his five-inch blade. Dark cherry shark blood poured over Northrop's hands and into his lap. The shark teeth gave him a few nicks on his hands, so some of his own blood found itself in the mix. Northrop halted his work and sighed as the blood trickled off his jeans onto the beige carpet below. Too late to stop now, he thought. You have to let some things go.

As he continued to cut around the jaws he came across a tough point of cartilage. He gripped the knife with both hands and sawed back and forth until he cleared the section. He dug out the hardened knob from the flesh and threw it aside. He had almost finished, but a piece of mouth still clung to the body. He would have to cut through the gills. A shame, really. The shark would have made a fine mount for the fireplace, but not after sustaining this damage. Maybe he could display the shark with the opposite side facing out. He hacked away at the flesh until he could separate the jaw completely.

Northrop scraped away the gums and discovered three new rows of teeth waiting to come through. "You're a carnivorous pistol, aren't you?" Northrop laughed. He'd never felt such utter devastation. He was also enjoying himself. He stood up and poured the bleach out into one of the blue buckets. The biting aroma filled the house and Northrop stifled a cough. Mixed with the smell of the fish it made for quite the... Northrop sensed bile rising from below and got back to work. He threw the jaws into the bleach to soak them clean and returned to the table.

He had made a mess so far. A pool of blood had collected underneath his chair, spreading out on the carpet in lopsided ellipses. Better finish draining the rest of the sucker so he could gut him. Northrop pulled one of the remaining buckets to the table, held the shark high in the air and with a swift slice of his knife, lopped off its tail. Blood trickled down into the bucket at a steady stream now, hitting the bottom in a furious patter of rain. Northrop smiled the way he smiled when he felt furious. His glasses had slid to the bottom of his nose. He nudged them back up, but his bloody thumb left a red fingerprint on the left lens that partially blocked his vision. He gave the shark's body a few remaining shakes (it was still bleeding, but at a much slower rate) then set the carcass back on the table, belly up.

The animal was in terrible shape. With both its front and back ends hacked off, it resembled a grotesque thanksgiving loaf. Northrop's plan for stuffing the creature looked unreasonable at this point. He had let himself lose control and his cuts did not bear the

mark of surgical precision. Nevertheless, he decided to move forward. A sailor must never let a creature of the sea get the best of him. Northrop plunged his knife into the shark's greasy belly and made an incision. He opened the loose flaps of the skin, nudging forward a large boomerang shaped organ. Must be the liver. Northrop removed the green mass from the body, tearing with his fingers where it was still connected. The liver felt heavy and slippery with oil. He plopped it into the bucket that held the shark's blood.

He returned his attention to the spread open cavity. The rest of the shark's organs fanned out from the center in a loathsome buffet: the esophagus with its fingerlike tendrils, the J-shaped stomach sac with its longitudinal folds, two pinkish lobes that were probably its pancreas, and a dark elongated tube. Northrop had never cleaned a shark before, but he felt pretty sure that was the spleen. He cut open the shark's stomach and poked around the entrails with his knife, pushing aside green algae. And shrimp. Three or four partially digested shrimp sat there in the shark's stomach. It must have left the ocean recently, then! The mystery deepened.

Northrop lifted the carcass over the bucket and began to scrape out the organs. When he had removed most of them, he started to chip away at the meat clinging to the cartilage. It felt good to empty this shark of its life. He would have liked to have killed it, but this felt like suitable vengeance.

Northrop's eyes took on a gleam. He would eat the beast. Take it into himself. He had heard that shark made a fine steak. He wouldn't be able to manage that with these little scraps, but he could certainly whip up some flakes.

Northrop threw the carcass to the side, reached into the bucket and began to rummage through the blood and organs, picking up the tiny chunks of flesh he had chipped from the skeleton. When he had a good handful he ran to the kitchen and spread them out on some plastic wrap. He washed his hands in the sink, the blood from his hands circling the drain in a red stream. Northrop searched the cabinets for flour, lemon juice, some yeast, and a bottle of Guinness he kept on hand for cooking. Working up the batter in a bowl, Northrop began to sing to himself.

*Cooking up the shark that killed my son
Gonna show this pistol how it's really done
Don't forget the pepper and a pinch of salt
I think we both know who's really at fault*



Northrop flung some water off the tips of his fingers into the saucepan's heating oil. The water sizzled. He lowered the battered shark flakes into the pan and stirred them with a spatula. When they reached a golden brown hue, he removed them from the pan and let them drain on some paper towels, the grease spreading outward in small yellow circles.

He poured himself a glass of water, prepared a plate, grabbed a fork and walked down the hallway to Archimedes' room. Northrop sat on the bed with his plate of fried shark and looked around. The dresser drawers lay half-open with clothes spilling over the sides. Videogame wires crisscrossed in tangled patterns. An open board game with stacks of cards in the center had been spread out across the middle of the floor next to laser tag equipment, an aluminum baseball bat and a pile of dirty towels. Messy, messy. When Northrop hotbunked on the sub, he always kept his area clean for the next inhabitant. Common decency demanded it.

Northrop impaled a chunk of fried shark on his fork and lifted it to his mouth. The meat felt tender against his tongue and easy to chew. The taste was terrible. It resembled ammonia, a smell Northrop was fond of, but not in this context. He'd never had the desire to eat ammonia — just clean with it. He tried a few more bites, but the acidic flavor grew the more he put into his mouth.

A morbid thought sprinted through Northrop's mind: if the shark had been living inside Archimedes, there's a good chance the shark might have chewed on some of Archimedes' stomach. Which meant that right then, he could possibly be eating parts of his own son. Northrop noticed a sickness growing over him, an intimate sense of revulsion. He threw the plate of food across the room and the porcelain shattered when it hit the wall. Northrop rolled over on the bed and clutched his stomach. He could tell he needed to throw up. It had been an evening of regurgitations.

Northrop's glasses fell off as he retched. The pool that collected on his bed didn't look like coffee grounds, though. It looked like gray bubblegum floating in pink lemonade. He coughed for air and twisted the corners of his shirt while he waited for his breath to return. After minutes of gasping and blubbering, Northrop was spent. He tumbled forward onto the sheets, falling under a deep sleep, his clothes filthy with a mess of fluids, his face wet with tears.

Matthew Walden recommends a sensory deprivation tank to settle your nerves.

YELP REVIEWS!

By Ivan Sian

The Arkham Waffle House
(Corner of Dunwich Ave. and Bloch St.)



Cindy N.
"Shoes and Cosmos Make Me Happy"
Arkham, MA

Even though it seems like nobody sleeps in this town, Arkham doesn't have much of a nightlife. The only places to eat late at night are here and the Denny's across town. We had to wait a little while and would've gone home, but we were STARVING. Still, when I got my hash browns, I ordered them "scattered, smothered, and covered" NOT "scattered, smothered, covered, slimed and coated in entrails." Another time there was a HAIR in my food. YUCK! One star.

Brittany W.
"Loves to Eat!"
Arkham, MA

So we're all like FINALLY seated and the waitress come over and she's so RUDE. I'm all like trying to order and she's all like "Your souls are forfeit to the Great Old One Hziulquoigmzshah! It matters not what you consume, for your very bodies shall provide sustenance for all!" and I'm like "Just bring me an All Star Special." Sheesh. I don't even know why we come here. Zero stars if I could.

James H.
"Tired of Immortal Space Beings"
Boston, MA

I don't know why this place is called "The Waffle House" when all anybody ever orders is the hash browns, which are GOOD. They should just change their name to "Hash Brown House," because when I'm here I only pay attention to their yummy

hash browns. Oh, and the walls dripping blood. It's kind of hard to miss that, too, but "Bleeding Walls House" probably won't win too many people over. I give 3 stars!

Yog S.
"Insert Funny Headline Here!"
A Dark Dimension Beyond the Reckoning of Mere Mortals, NJ
Delicious! I highly recommend this Waffle House to all those who require the flesh of lesser beings seared upon a grill of hellfire. Mere mortals cannot comprehend the POWER of a Grilled Texas Double Patty Melt. Ordering thusly, mortal knees tremble at its sight! I grant to the Arkham Waffle House FIVE stars. And do not forget the free refills of Diet Coke, either.

Adam "Two Sheds" S.
Arkham, MA
Why is this place so popular? There's always a line out the door! Sure, it's cheaper than Denny's, but it's not THAT much cheaper. The burgers are the only things that are halfway decent, but is it worth the wait? I'm not so sure. OK, so there was that ONE time everybody at Denny's got sucked into a black void never to return, but I think that was probably just that one time. I'd still take their Moons Over My Hammy over the crap Waffle House serves, so consider me a Denny's guy! Two stars.

Ivan Sian has stared into the mouth of madness...and found your mom.

MY TATTOO

By Chris Stewart

You'll probably never see it.

And I'm not going to show it to you here. I'm not even going to describe it to you. I'm not inclined to post it to the Internet in any way, shape or form. If you want to see this tattoo, it'll have to be in person. And if you want the full story behind it, that will require a drink.

But I will tell you its main purpose.

I got it the best way possible – after years of pondering and the achievement of a difficult task. I had rolled the dice, and unlike the cliché I just trotted out would suggest I did not win big, nor did I lose it all. I had instead persevered. And that was important.

We were also in the middle of some of the worst years many of us had seen in awhile – all around us seemed like madness. Man's inhumanity towards man had morphed into naked, lazy evil. Evil that consisted of those that insisted that war without end was a solution, that the system was fine and could run forever without crashing, that tazers were a harmless policing tool, and so on. Meaning they were a sticky evil that you could not slay with a sword and worse yet, if you weren't careful, you could turn around one day and realize you'd ended up on their side.

So imagine overcoming a huge, personal challenge with a decent amount of success and being faced with a metaphysical in-box piled high with papers stamped "Just Plain Wrong – Bwah-ha-ha!" What do you do? Well, you call upon every novel, comic, painting, song, statue, and hero you have ever admired, you hold them tight in your heart and mind, and you determine that you will fight monsters.

A brief aside – a number of years back I met some great people, people who wrote for a living. Actually, most people I know write for a living, but this is a particular, local group. And they wrote Horror. This was the perfect excuse to reacquaint myself with the genre, which I'd always enjoyed, but never completely embraced in a fanboyish way.

In reacquainting myself with Horror, I started reading more Horror magazines and through the magazines, I found myself haunting various messageboards. And I began to notice something within myself compared to many (not all – I will admit I'm generalizing, but I'm generalizing a real majority here) that love Horror. To truly love horror as they did, you identified with the monster. Dark creatures were their superheroes, each one offering something they thought they could see reflected in themselves. Some were attracted to the idea of immortal power, the inability to die and be forgotten, the terrible respect, and most, if not all, fully-embraced the idea of being an outsider. Goth, as a simplification, is finding and absorbing characteristics of fictional beings that are misunderstood and marginalized by society. Vampires are broody, beautiful heroes, hated by all because they are better - who wouldn't want to be part of that, eh?

Now, don't get me wrong – I enjoy the idea of a vampire with a soul or an undead creature that never asked to be roused from its sleep. But I also couldn't fully forgive that for the most part, these creatures existed to harm, not help.

It was because of this, perhaps plainly obvious, observation, that I realized that I did not cheer for the vampire, I cheered for the vampire hunter. I didn't identify with the ghosts, but rather with those that busted them. All of them exemplify-

ing traits that we would all do well to take on ourselves – knowledge is power, analysis and understanding is critical, and the courage to act is paramount.

And at the same time as all of this, I was finishing my Herculean task, I was disappointed in the world, and - holy shit - an uncle. The next generation was here and there was still so much to be done.

And so, I made a decision to do whatever I could, as much as I could, and when I could not, I should at least be able to help others make the same decision. I booked an appointment and two days before Halloween, I lay down and had a reminder indelibly inked onto my arm. Picking the location and orientation took nearly as much time as the decision to get the tattoo. I was displaying it for others to see, I was putting it somewhere where I could see it, often without deliberately wanting to look at it.

And like I said, perhaps one day I'll give you the full run down. I will explain the choice of the design. I will translate it for

you, because yes, it's not in English (but let me tell you, this isn't a casual expression of a philosophy, maaaaan. That I think means something profound, but actually means "I hump trees", maaaaaan. It means exactly what it says. I've just deepened that meaning, personally). I'll even tell you about some of my thoughts about how it may expand in the future. It will take time, but it will be a good discussion, in a pleasant atmosphere, over a nice beer.

But until that day, I will tell you what it means the same as I tell the rest of the world; those that see it in passing and ask what it means, with no real interest in hearing the full story.

"It says, 'I kill monsters.'"

Chris Stewart kills monsters. Why would his arm lie?



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So This Ghost Walks Into A Bar..

By Jeff Stolarcyk

It's 3 am, and the temperature in the basement is dropping rapidly. It's gone from 65 degrees down to 52 over a period of 30 minutes. "Are you a male entity?" Joe asks to my right. "Make the device go off twice for yes," he instructs we-don't-know-who, referring to the EMF meter placed on the floor two meters away from us. Within 30 seconds, one beep sounds in the silence, followed after a pause by another.

"Are there other entities in this room with you?" Beep Beep.

"Is there an evil entity in this room?" Beep Beep Beep Beep Beep Beep with no delay at all.

**

As a long-time, dyed-in-the-wool horror buff, I've got an unnatural fascination with ghosts, even though I'm not always of the opinion that they exist. As a literary construct, the ghost is great, even if ghost movies aren't ever as great as they could be in the post-*Poltergeist* age. My horror fandom led me to a similar eerie fixation on real-life ghost hunters, the ones found on Sci Fi and Discovery and the History Channel, and especially the ones that guest on that venerable fringe-culture radio staple *Coast to Coast AM*.

So it's not exactly surprising that, in search of nameless horror, I went looking for ghosts with a local group of paranormal investigators.

In late September, Joe Shock of Northeast Pennsylvania Paranormal Investigations calls and invites me along with them to investigate Scranton, PA bar The Banshee. Employees had contacted NEPPI about a pair of full-body apparitions and other paranormal events, including one report of a physical attack in the basement of the pub. Staff members

have their own rumors about turn-of-the-century mass graves in the basement of the building, and several patrons corroborate the activity the staff has experienced.

I flip my cell phone closed and tell a coworker, "The Banshee is haunted." They nod slowly, the nod that people nod when they're accommodating idiocy. "Yeah," he tells me. "I know." It's amazing how many people will casually admit to believing in ghosts.

The Banshee is haunted, and I'm the last person to know about it, despite having been a patron for years. During my graduate fellowship days, I'd schedule tutoring sessions there in order to keep my daily diet of draft cider and potato soup free from interruption. I still have dinner or drinks at the pub at least once a month. I've been a patron since the bar opened its doors and never once have I been spooked, scared or startled. When I heard from NEPPI that they were going to investigate the building, my curiosity was piqued. Several friends and acquaintances freely admitted that they'd heard odd noises or seen anachronistic figures out of their peripheral vision, drawing back the curtain on a side of the sprawling Irish pub that I'd never seen before. I was going to learn about it, though, and I'd be in the company of experts.

**

There are at least two major groups of "ghost hunters" in Northeastern Pennsylvania and, based on what I know about both, NEPPI is the more reputable of the two. As I help the crew — team leader Joe, Tony and Jeff — set up their equipment, I take the opportunity to talk shop with them, camcorder in hand. They run down what each of the cameras, recorders and meters does, what bells and whistles each has, and how each piece of gear is used in documenting or disproving a haunting. All of the equip-

ment they use comes out of their own pockets, and NEPPI doesn't charge clients for investigations or canvas for donations. Even after an hour with them, it's clear that they're not doing this to make money, get famous, or sign a TV deal. During one of our conversations, Joe even admits that he suffers a lot of teasing from his coworkers. "But later, I'll be alone with them in the break room, and those same people will be asking me for advice or asking about something they saw or heard," he says with a smirk.

The group is amicable and frank, joking with me about the super-serious youths on A&E's collegiate reality series *Paranormal State*. "We are now entering Dead Time," Jeff intones in allusion to the show. They talk about conducting an investigation with TAPS, the ghost hunters on Sci Fi's aptly-named *Ghost Hunters*, and Joe doesn't divulge any details out of respect for the other team, but he does remark that there are concessions made for the television audience. Over Cokes in the barroom (none of us are imbibing alcohol), we talk about their recent investigations at Fort Mifflin near Philadelphia and at Andy Gavin's, another Irish pub in Scranton. Earlier in the week, Joe emailed me a collection of EVPs (Electronic Voice Phenomena — phantom voices on digital recordings) from Gavin's, the most striking of which is a husky, Irish-brogued voice that seems to be counting, though it's far from crystal clear sound. The voice is warm and jocular, and according to anecdotal evidence from the other bar's owner, the speaker is a former employee — an unlikely proposition, considering the man in question is dead.

Joe became involved with paranormal research after a personal experience that he couldn't explain, and, like me, Tony and Jeff are lifelong horror buffs out to satisfy their curiosity about the paranormal. The NEPPI team is passionate about its work, but it's also rational, and Joe reminds me several times that their primary goal is to debunk as much of the reported haunting as possible. Far from

being crackpots or wild goose chasers, the investigators are methodical and skeptical. Maybe more importantly, they are normal guys with day jobs and families. They are doing this to learn something about the nature of the world.

That doesn't mean they haven't had personal experiences since, though. On a recent investigation at Fort Mifflin, near Philadelphia, Tony was accosted by an unfriendly entity. "Entity" is the term they use for "ghost." "We're not certain what they are," Tony tells me as we check camera batteries and set up equipment. "They could be ghosts, or elementals, or maybe even something demonic. We don't know." But Tony, like the others on the team, and like the home and business owners that invite the group to investigate claims of supernatural activity, believes that something is out there.

We have recording equipment on each of The Banshee's floors — the main dining area on the ground floor; the private party room on the second floor, where many report seeing an apparition of a small girl; the attic, mostly used for storage; and the basement, where the majority of experiences befall The Banshee's employees. "Whatever is upstairs here is not malicious," the waitress who first contacted NEPPI tells us, "but the thing in the basement is." She tells us that she's been shoved by the basement entity and has a distinct feeling of being watched whenever she's in the room. It was a feeling I had minutes earlier when I was shadowing Tony and Jeff. I hold my tongue.

In addition to the little girl in the white dress, there is also a man in a black suit and hat. He's been spotted on the stairwells to the second floor and basement, and according to one story, a young boy was found wandering in the basement, claiming "the man in the black hat" beckoned him to follow. In the boy's version of events, the man in the black hat was carrying a rope. What nobody knows about these apparitions is how they are related to each other, to the presence in

the basement, or to the history of the structure they haunt.

The building where The Banshee stands now was not always a pub. Prior to its current life, the building was a department store, and its identity before that is something of a mystery. The waitresses claim that, during an epidemic at the turn of the century (TB, flu, yellow fever, depending on who you talk to), the basement of The Banshee was used to store corpses from a nearby hospital. At the time of the investigation, no evidence had been uncovered that this ever actually happened, but the story has managed to become a potent part of the pub's lore.

**

Once all the patrons have cleared out for the night, the investigation team and I get started. I go to the second floor with Joe and Tony. Jeff takes the basement by himself.

When Joe tells me we're going to try to use a Ouija board, I'm almost ecstatic. Almost. Pop culture has set us against the things since, well, forever. I also know from the *Witchboard* movies that sometimes what comes through the board is worse than a ghost, but I tell myself to keep an open mind.

The Ouija isn't a standard part of a ghost hunter's arsenal; Joe's brought it along to see what will happen. He attempted the same experiment at a prior investigation and got surprisingly active results. Aside from a few tics, bumps and jumps, the board's planchette stays silent and immobile after nearly an hour of questioning. If The Banshee is haunted, its spirits do not want to communicate with us.

In the quiet dark, we ask questions without expecting answers and train our cameras on the blackness, searching for electronic proof. Earlier in the night, one of the team remarked that ghost hunting is incredibly boring except for the short

bursts in which interesting things happen, and it's so true that the act of waiting becomes painful.

That's when Jeff, clearly spooked, asks for extra help in the basement.

Trailing behind Tony, we drop our hands off the planchette, snatch up our flashlights, and hustle from the second floor through the barroom and down into the basement. I half expect something to grab me as I rush out of the stairwell. Nothing does. Jeff is safe, though he's been rattled pretty badly by the sound of a breaking bottle. Using our lights to scan the room, we can't find any trace of the broken bottle until we find two employees still hanging around, one of whom dropped a bottle while taking out the night's trash. Our first scare of the night has been debunked.

After our first sweep of the basement, we find an inexplicable EMF hot spot in the middle of the basement's front room. We also discover that all of the cameras and recorders set up in that room are now either dead or nearly out of power, despite everything being fully charged before we started only a few hours ago. My own handheld recorder is behaving erratically, but still has full power. We start questioning and monitoring the responses we get on the meters. I'm not going to say we're communicating with something, but I will say the timing of the spikes and beeps on the meter is definitely intriguing.

**

That brings us back to 3 am in the basement. After a cursory walk through the rest of the building, the entire team gathers in the basement to try another EVP session.

"Are there other entities in this room with you?" Beep Beep.

"Is there an evil entity in this room?" Beep Beep Beep Beep Beep Beep with no delay at all.

Using this schema, we confirm that the male entity's name begins with the letter Q and that he has a daughter here with him. In the best of circumstances, thorough research can corroborate these details, but the consistent problem of this investigation has been a lack of reliable history to refer to.

My initial instinct about the investigation is to say that whatever has happened in The Banshee to the waitresses is most likely the result of them scaring each other with ghost stories. But what happened in the basement isn't easily explainable. Was it all a fluke? Possibly. We didn't see any apparitions, didn't hear any voices, and didn't experience any poltergeist activity; the Ouija planchette did not move on its own. Though none of the events that earmark a movie haunting manifested themselves, there's still

research to be done on the hours of film, audio and photographs that were taken during the investigation and they could likely contain spectral images or EVP. Analyzing that data takes longer than a commercial break. As always, reality is never as glamorous as reality TV, but it can be just as rewarding. The NEPPI team confesses to a certain boyish glee whenever they can find a piece of evidence they can't explain away, bringing them one step closer to finding out what's really out there.

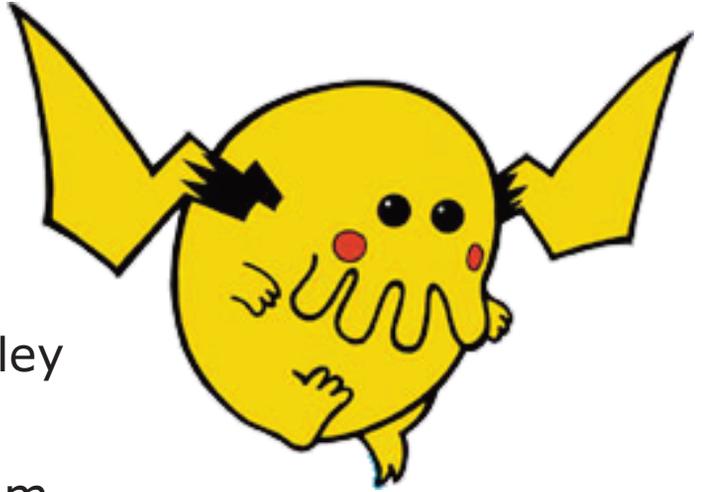
You can read more about NEPPI at www.northeastpennsylvaniaparanormal-investigations.com.

Jeff Stolarcyk needs an old priest and a young priest.

Lovecraft, Pokemon, or Samoan Athlete?

By Ivan Sian

1. Drifblim
2. Brown Jenkin
3. Konishiki
4. Koga
5. Tcho-Tcho
6. Tana Umaga
7. Lloigor
8. Wilbur Whateley
9. Quagsire
10. Solofa Fatu
11. Delia Ketchum
12. Manu Tuiasosopo
13. Yuggya
14. Iron Masked Marauder
15. Lofa Tatupu
16. Migo



Pokethulhu - Copyright 2000,2002,2007 Chaosium

Answers: L=Lovecraft, P=Pokemon, S=Samoan
 1)P 2)L 3)S 4)P 5)L 6)S 7)L 8)L 9)P 10)S
 11)P 12)S 13)L 14)P 15)S 16)L

NEXT ISSUE
IN
GROK
Extra Life

WE'RE LOOKING FOR
CONTRIBUTORS!
TEXT AND ART!
alertnerd@gmail.com

Coming Q1 2009!