

CROK



RETCON

Grok #5: Retcon TOC - December 2009

Correction

By Ivan Sian
Page 2

Slimed in Klutziness

By Rob Bloom
Page 4

Lunch of Two Worlds!

By Daniel R. Faust
Page 11

Startling New Storylines Resulting from J.J. Abrams' *Star Trek* Retcon

By Ivan Sian
Page 13

My Epic Win

By Sarah Kuhn
Banner by Jeff Chen
Page 14

Ten Little-Known Marvel Universes

By Ivan Sian
Page 28

The Letter Home

By Matt Springer
Page 29

Inside a Writers' Room Attempting to Retcon My Life

By Ivan Sian
Page 33

The Tale of the Gallant Sailor, Part II

By Matthew Walden
Page 34

Grok: An Alert Nerd Zine

Editors: Sarah Kuhn, Matt Springer, Chris Stewart, Jeff Stolarczyk

Images used under Creative Commons License:
Photo for cover by Craig Grobler (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/entropy1138/>); photo for "Lunch of Two Worlds!" by sarchi (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/sarchi/>); photo for "Startling New Storylines..." by six steps (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/sixsteps/>); photo for "The Letter Home" by avlxyz (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/avlxyz/>); photo for "Inside A Writers' Room..." by alcomm (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/alcomm/>); photo for "Gallant Sailor" by fotogezi (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/fotogezi/>)

All articles and images are copyright their respective creators. Any and all characters, images, and properties are copyright their respective owners. No infringement is intended.

E-mail us: alertnerd@gmail.com



Correction

In the last issue of *Grok*, we referred to Magneto as "a Marvel Comics mutant supervillain and archenemy of the X-Men." In actuality, we meant to say "a Marvel Comics mutant supervillain who is actually a misunderstood anti-hero due to his persecution by Nazis and who ultimately befriends Charles Xavier while facing down Hydra, creates a Brotherhood of 'Evil' Mutants, and is de-aged by the omnipotent alien The Stranger but then returns to adulthood, continuing to wreak havoc against the heroic X-Men. Eventually, Magneto is spirited away by another omnipotent alien, The Beyonder, who sides Magneto with the heroes, which ultimately allows for Magneto's short-lived redemption wherein he takes on the identity of Charles Xavier's cousin, Michael, but then joins the evil Hellfire Club, subsequently murdering the Savage Land's Zaladane and renouncing his alliance with the X-Men. At this point, Magneto declares his once home Asteroid M a haven for mutantkind; in addition, he discovers that his prior redemption was only due to genetic tampering by Moira MacTaggart. Magneto attacks humankind again, is repelled by the X-Men, almost kills Wolverine, is put into a coma by Charles Xavier, is cloned, is revived, attacks the planet again, and is then mortally injured by Wolverine. Soon after, island nation Genosha is devastated by Charles Xavier's heretofore unknown twin sister (who Charles murdered in the womb), leading the X-Men to another powerful mutant healer, Xorn, who later turns out to be Magneto, who has spent months plotting to kill the X-teams, who is later revealed to *not* be Magneto but instead Xorn's heretofore unknown brother who was able to masquerade as Magneto as well as duplicate his powers and who also bears a strikingly similar grudge against the X-Men, but is most notably NOT Magneto. Later, Charles Xavier is shown to meet with a now-healed and completely Xornless Magneto who becomes part of the House of M, is later de-powered, is re-empowered by Xorn again, has his mind controlled so as to battle several superheroes and is then sent into a coma. Later, a newly de-powered Magneto, who has been hiding with The Morlocks, is asked to revive a newly fragmented Charles Xavier. Upon doing so, Magneto disappears once again, only to show up re-empowered and attacking the X-Men in San Francisco. It is then discovered that Magneto's powers are the result of the High Evolutionary's manipulations. When Magneto is next seen, he appears to have renounced his previous evil ways, pledging to help the X-Men restore peace between mutant and humankind."

We regret the error.

—Ivan Sian

Bios

Rob Bloom has written for the Cartoon Network, *McSweeney's*, *CRACKED*, Fresh Yarn, Monkey Bicycle, Funny Times, NPR, and the Travel Channel, among others. In 2008, Rob's original screenplay, *Suburban Bravery*, was made into a short film, produced by the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre, and shown as pre-feature entertainment in movie theaters across the country. Rob is also the writer of a regular humor column, which has been praised by the Erma Bombeck Writing Institute as well as by his parents who proudly display it on their refrigerator with magnets shaped like fruit. He's currently in search of representation and the perfect black and white cookie. To read more of his work, visit RobBloom.com.

Jeff Chen would like us all to think he's fake. We know better.

Daniel R. Faust was raised in the backwoods of Brooklyn, NY, where he currently resides with too many books to count and several unfinished manuscripts. He enjoys comics, cheese, coffee, and movies with robots. He'd love to uncover the secrets of time travel and invisibility. He'd also like a jetpack.

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)

Back when the Internet was young, vibrant and paved with gold, **Ivan Sian** contributed insipid, drunken rants to IGN Sci-Fi. But after their 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 has worked as a magazine writer and editor, a marketing/PR flack, and a janitor. He is part of Alert Nerd's four-sided content die and has published two books through Alert Nerd Press: a collection of his Star Wars writing, *Poodoo*, and his first novel, *Unconventional*. 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 Sarah, who put him to work reviling films at Daily Sci-Fi. 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 ever.

Jeff Stolarczyk 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 JeffersonStolarship.com and about 30 other places. 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 *Deconstructoid* 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.

SLIMED IN KLUTZINESS

By ROB BLOOM

Prologue

The brain's a funny thing when it comes to memory. For example, I can't recall what color underwear I'm wearing right now but I can tell you in a heartbeat that I was wearing a California Raisins "Let's Party, Dude!" T-shirt when I got smashed in the head by a dodge ball in third grade and the gym teacher, thinking about the mounds of paperwork he'd likely be facing if he reported a concussion, told me to "shut up, lie down on the bleachers, and sleep it off."

So what is it about the brain that makes the storage of these memories possible? Turns out that just beyond the central gyri and the longitudinal thingamafulcrum resides the *Spazzbrum*, a squishy sausage-like thing that remembers every horrible, embarrassing thing that's EVER happened to you. Yes, from the time you farted loudly while reading from the Torah at your bar mitzvah to the first time you met the people who would eventually become your in-laws and, thanks to a gas station Subway sandwich, you puked all over their bathroom (that one still stings a little). Anyway, despite all the grief the Spazzbrum has caused me over the years, it is the reason I'm able to remember the following story in such gruesome detail.

Early on, I became obsessed with TV game shows. I was completely fascinated by this shiny world where toothy hosts with slicked-back hair made every moment feel important, as if the future of the world was riding on whether or not a contestant knew the retail price of a quart of motor oil. But more than the crisp \$100 bills or the promise of a "brand, new car!," what really fascinated me about game shows was that ordinary people (and by "ordinary people" I mean "people that looked like my school's lunch lady") could play a major role in a TV production.

Tic Tac Dough. Sale of the Century. Classic Concentration. The 1980s were a fantastic time for game shows. So fantastic that I actually enjoyed getting sick because it meant staying home from school and watching hours upon hours of game show schlock. Hell, I was more than willing to swallow a little cough medicine if it meant a hearty dose of Dr. Barker ("have your pets spayed and neutered!"), Dr. Dawson ("Suuuurvey Says!"), and Dr. Whatshisname from *Press Your*

Luck (“No whammies, no whammies, stop!”).

And then there was *Double Dare*, Nickelodeon’s innovative game show for kids. I say innovative because, for the first time in television history, a game show dared to answer the age-old question: “what if we take a couple kids, cover them in a mysterious-yet-colorful slimy goo, and have ‘em pick plastic boogers out of a gigantic rubber nose?”

For advertisers, it was the perfect formula (messy + gross = ratings hit). For kids, it was the chance to live vicariously through the lucky contestants who got to do things like hurl pies at one another, dive face first down an ice cream-covered slide, and cannonball into a chocolate pool—all without a grownup shrieking about the mess you’ve made.

Oh yeah, you could also win money and cool prizes. See, on the show, two teams of two competed each other, answering a variety of questions ranging from ridiculous (“how many eyes does Michael J. Fox have?”) to downright hard (“what is the square root of 891305122.4?”). Now if a team got stumped on a question, they’d “dare” the other team to answer. If that team didn’t know, they’d “double dare” the other team who would then, either answer the question, or opt for a “physical challenge”—a rotating variety of different stunts that, more often than not, involved a player flinging something (i.e. bananas) across the stage for their teammate to catch with some kind of apparatus (i.e. their pants). All this built up to the show’s finale: a 60-second race through a wonderfully messy obstacle course.

For all the above reasons, *Double Dare* quickly became my favorite game show and I had wanted so desperately to be on that stage catching bananas in my elastic blue tracksuit pants. The reality, however, was that Studio City was a world away from our house in the Orlando ‘burbs.

Everything changed in 1989. That’s when Orlando launched its plan to become “Hollywood East” by opening two new theme parks that doubled as full-working studios. Hold on, it gets better. One of the parks, Universal Studios, included, get ready, Nickelodeon Studios.

Thank. You. God.

Now it turned out that God—obviously a fan of watching kids get slimed—was only getting started. See, in early 1990, The Orlando Sentinel announced that Nickelodeon was holding auditions for *Family Double Dare*. HUUUUUGE. This was my chance to participate in, not only a game show but, one of my all-time favorites! All I had to do was convince my parents and sister to audition.

That turned out to be pretty easy. My sister, 18 months older and classically com-

petitive, happily agreed. (Though, just to be safe, I had been fully prepared to whip out the “Do this for me and I’ll make your bed for a month” card). My parents were also on board. No real surprise there. After all, *Double Dare* was kitsch at it’s finest and my parents loved kitsch. From their collection of *Howdy Doody* and *Welcome Back, Kotter* lunchboxes to the department store mannequin positioned in our kitchen, our house was like one of those cool stores in near-abandoned strip malls that’s filled with vintage toys, trading cards, chatchkies, and other trinkets from your childhood.

So with all Blooms on board, my dad called to set up an audition. He was told by the receptionist, “wear comfortable clothes because you’ll be performing a simple physical challenge.” It was on. Later that afternoon, we sat down to watch the show together. Immediately something jumped out at us: these families were really, really athletic. I don’t know why I never noticed this before—maybe I was too caught up in the whole “wouldn’t it be cool to be smothered in seltzer” factor to realize—but catching oversized rubber frogs in frying pans while being blind-folded required *real* athletic skill. Now, with an audition date scheduled, I started to watch the show with new eyes. And what I saw scared the crap out of me: the contestants who I once idolized now looked eerily similar to the kids that tormented me daily in gym class.

Now it was one thing to be laughed at by the 20 kids in my gym class (“Easy out! Easy out!”); it was another to be humiliated in front of a national TV audience. Before continuing, I should explain that Blooms have never been what you’d call “athletic.” Not that we didn’t try. Hell, I tried every sport from soccer to karate and while it’s true that these trial periods typically lasted about three weeks, I had learned:

- I didn’t like to sweat.
- I didn’t like to hang around other kids who were sweating.
- Wearing the team uniform was cool—until it got sweaty.
- Gatorade is for drinking; not for pouring over your head.
- A and C
- All the above

And let’s not forget that whole can’t catch a ball/throw like a girl/complete and total lack of coordination syndrome that has plagued Blooms for centuries. But the challenge that lay ahead wasn’t some meaningless game of P.E. dodgeball or painfully long game of volleyball; it was *Double Dare*! And because of that, we were determined to kick butt at our audition. So much so that we did something completely unorthodox and totally crazy: we practiced. We actually transformed our living room into a makeshift *Double Dare* set and practiced different physical challenges.

Seriously.

My sister and I, standing on one side of the room, flung tennis balls to my parents who tried catching them in cowboy hats, sombreros, or other accessories from Halloween costumes from years past. We had races where we wore giant clown shoes (another Halloween favorite) and games of catch where we tossed tennis shoes into pots. We even dug up my old tricycle and pedaled zigzag around a line of cones in our foyer.

After a week of strenuous practice, two things were clear:

1. We had roughly the coordination of a pile of mud.
2. Because of that, our only hope of making it on the show was to somehow find a way to stand out from every other family.

About a week later (despite the fact we practiced every day, we had somehow become *less* coordinated), it was time to audition. As we drove along I-4, my heart raced at the thought of seeing Nickelodeon Studios. After all, this was going to be my very first taste into the magical world of television! I was going to be in a real-life working soundstage! I was going to be surrounded by spotlights, cameras, and props! I was going to...

a rundown office park?!?

Something had to be wrong. Where was the giant Nickelodeon sign...or *any* sign for that matter? And where was the green slime? The only thing that came close was the mold growing on the front door. This was all wrong. We walked through the front door and saw a torn sheet of notebook paper posted with black duct tape on a far wall:

D.D. Auditions

----->

We followed the arrow and walked down a long hallway. At the end was a woman in her late 50s sitting behind a bridge table. With dirty blonde hair and slimy leathery skin, this woman was the last person I'd expect to find at a kid's network.

"Who are you?" she barked in a gravelly voice that sounded like equal parts life-long smoker and razor blade gargler.

"We're here to audition," my dad said.

"Obviously. What's your name?"

"We're the Blooms."

“Wait over there,” she nodded at the wall.

My confidence was fading quickly. I had expected the bright and vibrant world of Nickelodeon. Instead, I was in the black and white world of Nick at Nite—minus the canned laughter. About twenty minutes later, a door opened and out walked a family of four. They were everything we weren’t: tall, blonde, and tan. They were all smiles as they strut down the hallway and looked us up and down, their eyes saying “Easy out! Easy out!”

A minute or so later, a man, a youthful 40 with sandy blonde hair and a neon orange Nickelodeon shirt, emerged from the room. After a brief consultation with leathery lady, he looked at us.

“Bloom family?”

“Right here!” my parents answered together, way too enthusiastically.

“Well, let’s get started then.” He gestured toward the room and we followed.

“My name’s Gary,” he said. “This’ll be pretty simple.”

“Gary, before we begin,” started my mom. “We’ve got something to say to you.”

“What?”

[SPOILER ALERT: What happens next is embarrassing. It’s also ridiculous. It’s one of those things that you look back on after the fact and wonder justwhatinthehell you were thinking. Anyway, at the risk of further embarrassing myself, as well as my sister and parents who were so kind to go along with the whole “Double Dare” experience in the first place, I’ll proceed. Just remember, you’ve been warned.]

Like I said, we knew we weren’t going to get by on our athletic prowess alone. So, as a surefire way to impress the casting director, we came to the audition with a little something extra: a song.

That’s right. For some reason, we thought, “hey, if we can’t climb monkey bars blindfolded, we’ll sing our way into the show!” It was just like Lucy scheming to get a spot in Ricky’s show, only a lot less funny. Here now, published for the first time anywhere, is the song.

[Sung to the tune of “New York, New York”]

*Start spreading the slime
We’re ready to-daaaay*

*We want to be contestants on
Fam'ly Double Daaaaare
Our tennis shoes
Are longing to stray
We'll run that obstacle course
In the fastest waaaay*

This went on for three more verses before we finished with a show stopping display of jazz hands and the toothiest smiles we could muster. We waited for Gary to shower us with praise. What we got instead was a really long silence. Finally he said something.

"You know, um, contestants don't sing on the show," he said.

"Yeah, we know," my mom said in between breaths. "We thought we'd give you something special."

Yes! Our plan to stand out was working!

"Right. Let's get going. I need you to do a physical challenge."

Do you know that feeling you of dread you get before diving off the high board, taking a final exam, or if you're a Bloom, doing anything that requires athleticism? Multiply that by 20 and that's how we felt at that moment.

"Here's the deal," Gary said, handing my dad a lemon. "Put this under your chin, then pass it to each other without using your hands."

That's it? No throwing? No catching? We could handle a little lemon passing, no problem!

Gary called, "Ready, set, go!" and were we off and running. My dad tried passing the lemon to my mom. Thirty seconds later they were still trying. I caught a glimpse of Gary, he seemed concerned. We were in trouble. Finally, my parents managed to pass the lemon, which meant it was now up to my mom and me. With the lemon under her chin, my mom leaned down to pass it to me. The lemon fell to the ground and rolled.

And that's when things really started to go really, really wrong.

My sister yelled, "What are you doing?!?"

My dad shouted, "Pick it up! Pick it up!"

My mom and I scrambled, Three Stooges-style, after the lemon.

“C’mon, you’re messing up!” my sister screamed.

“Hurry, hurry!” my dad added.

Finally, my mom grabbed it and tossed it to me. Big mistake. I didn’t catch the lemon. Instead, it fell to the ground *again* and rolled across the floor *again*. My dad started laughing uncontrollably and my mom wasn’t far behind.

“Hurry! You’re messing up!” my sister said. “C’mon, c’mon!”

I grabbed the lemon and placed it under my chin. Now with the clock racing and the pressure on, I did the only thing I could to salvage the mess we’d created: cheat. Violating the cardinal rule of lemon passing, I used my hands to transfer the fruit from my chin to my sister who was quick to point out, “stop cheating, Robbie!”

Mercifully, Gary stepped in.

“Uh, thanks for coming in.”

And then, the most ridiculous question in the history of ridiculous questions. Asked by me: “are we gonna be on the show?”

Gary looked at me paused. Maybe he was seriously considering putting us on the show! Maybe just maybe we had impressed him with our song and, well, unique physical challenge!

“We’ll, uh, let you know.”

Then again, maybe Gary was just trying to find a polite way to let down a 13-year-old kid.

Epilogue

After the audition disaster, it was business as usual in the Bloom household. My parents continued to laugh through the times when life gives you a lemon...and you drop it. My sister, always the competitive one, became the official “rule policewomen” in the house and ensured that games of Monopoly were not only played fair and square but also ensured they were no longer fun. As for me, I watched as that season’s episodes of *Family Double Dare* came and went and, eventually, accepted the reality that maybe Gary didn’t lose our phone number after all. Yeah, that hurt. Meanwhile, I continued to obsess about the mystical world inside the TV screen and dreaming that one day I’d be a part of it. Assuming I wouldn’t have to pass a lemon under my chin, of course.



“Welcome to Armand’s,” the hostess said. Her grin never wavered, not even when she saw the figure standing before her.

He was tall and muscular, dressed in black from head to toe. A pointy-eared cowl covered his face, a pouch-laden belt ringed his waist, and a long, black cape hung from his shoulders.

“Can I help you, sir?”

He scowled. “I am the night.”

“Of course you are, sir.” The smile remained in place. “Table for two?”

“I work alone. It’s safer that way. You aren’t qualified to do what I do. THIS ISN’T A GAME!”

The hostess simply nodded. She came out from behind the podium carrying a single menu. “Table for one, then.”

She led the caped customer into the dining room. Armand’s was the kind of establishment that did better during the dinner hour; so, despite being only a little bit after 1, the main dining room was practically empty. However, the few diners present couldn’t help but pause mid-bite or mid-sentence and stare as the hostess led the strange newcomer by their tables. In fact, the figure moved so silently that, if not for the reactions of the other diners, she would have assumed no one followed her.

“Bruce?”

The caped figure pushed the hostess to the floor as he spun around, ebon cape billowing. He dropped into a crouch and scanned the room.

“Bruce. It’s me. It’s Clark.”

The voice came from the table next to which the grim figure presently crouched. It belonged to a handsome, well-built man dressed in blue and red. His smile was

warm, his blue eyes twinkled with the gentle easy-going manner of middle America.

“Clark?”

“That’s right. Please, Bruce, have a seat.” Superman slid a menu across the table. “So, chum, what have you been up to?”

“Chum?” Batman growled, as he scanned the menu. “Are we shark fishing?”

“You seem different, Bruce. Is everything okay?”

“I am the night.”

“Yes...” Superman said. “That’s kind of what I’m talking about, old friend. You seem darker than usual. Angrier.”

Batman leaned forward, jabbing a gloved finger towards the Man of Steel. “Dark? Angry? You’d be angry too if your parents were both dead, Kent!”

“Bruce, my parents are dead.”

“Not *those* parents. The Kents.”

Superman shook his head. “Bruce.” He sounded more concerned than confused or upset. “The Kents are dead.”

“No,” Batman snarled. “I’ve met the Kents. Several times. What’s your game, Clark?” Batman studied the Kryptonian sitting across the table from him. He brought his keen detective skills and attention to detail to bear. He looked like the Superman he had always known...

“Bruce, you know my adopted parents died shortly after I started my career as Superboy.”

Batman leaped to his feet, knocking back his chair and sending breadsticks rolling in all directions. “Superboy? What the fuck, Clark? What the hell is going on here? None of this is right.”

In the blink of an eye, Superman was in front of his friend. It was easier than usual to avoid Batman’s assault, almost as if he had never seen Superman fight before.

“Bruce, old chum, please. Stop this.” Dodging a slew of punches, Superman almost missed the razor-tipped Batarang coming right at him. Almost. Whatever hi-

tech materials Bruce used to make his equipment were no match for a Kryptonian's heat vision.

"Bruce! Calm down. What would the Justice Society say if it saw two of its founding members fighting like this?"

That caught the vigilante off-guard. Taking a step back, he studied Superman. "The Justice Society? We didn't found the Justice Society. We weren't even born during World War II." Although, now that he looked closely, Clark did seem a little older. He had faint lines around his eyes and at the corners of his mouth, and his dark hair did have a touch of grey.

"Don't tell me you don't remember the time you, Dick, and I straddled the sixteen-inch guns of that battleship."

Batman glowered at the person he had thought was Superman. "I have no idea who you are, but you aren't the Clark Kent I know." He reached into a pouch on his utility belt and withdrew a single capsule. "Alfred was right, I should have had lunch with Kyle instead."

Batman lifted his hand over his head and, before throwing the capsule to the floor, simply announced: "I am the night."

Superman coughed momentarily as the smoke from Batman's capsule filled the restaurant. Regaining his composure, the Man of Steel inhaled and drew all of the smoke into his powerful lungs. Once Batman's smokescreen had dissipated, Superman checked on the handful of patrons still in the restaurant.

Even though no one was injured, the strange behavior of one of his oldest friends concerned Superman. And, in addition to the suddenly illogical actions of one of the most logical men he had ever known, one other small detail vexed the Kryptonian.

Who the hell was Kyle?

Startling New Storylines Resulting from J.J. Abrams' *Star Trek* Retcon

By Ivan Sian

Instead of the Stardate, every mission log now begins, "Dear Sally..."

Sulu and Khan fight to the death for last remaining White Castle burger.

Half-black, half-white Bele takes control of *Enterprise* in pursuit of half-white, half-black Barack.

Kirk encounters fearsome saurian race The Gorn. They fail in their attempt to sell him car insurance.

Kirk convinces an all-powerful computer to self-destruct through guile, logic, and pressing control-alt-delete at the same time.

The Galileo 7 crash land on Taurus II. Spock and McCoy jockey for leadership. Meanwhile, Benjamin Linus lies in wait.

Kirk and Spock, captured by the matter-controlling Excalbians, team with Lincoln and Surak to fight the evil Genghis Khan, Kahless the Unforgettable, and Jon Gosselin from *Jon and Kate Plus 8*.

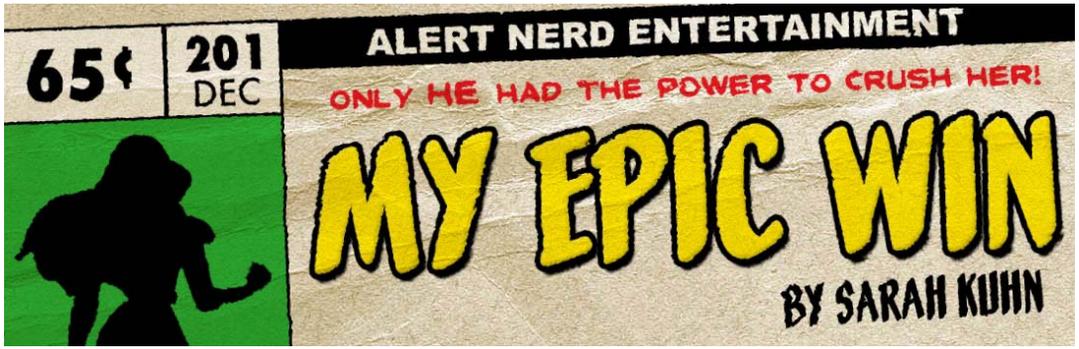
With no planet Vulcan, Spock must act out his pon farr urges on a surprisingly willing Montgomery Scott.

The crew of the *Enterprise* play a cat and mouse game with a planet-eating Doomsday Machine that looks suspiciously like Hurley.

The *Enterprise* is hurtled back in time to convince Keri Russell she should have never cut her hair for *Felicity's* second season.

The *Enterprise* must contend with cute, cuddly, exponentially-multiplying life forms in the shape of Greg Grunberg.





Editors' Note: This story is a mini-sequel of sorts to the Alert Nerd Press novella One Con Glory. You can probably enjoy it without having read said novella, but trust us: it will be WAY BETTER if you have. You can purchase One Con Glory right here: <http://www.alertnerdpress.com/books/one-con-glory/>

**

"You will never convince me that *All-Star Superman* is *not* totally overrated."

"But...but...the indestructible flower! And Lois Lane as Superwoman! How can you not like that?"

"God, that issue pissed me off. Lois Lane gets all these amazing abilities and still manages to end up playing cheesecake prize in some superpowered dick-swinging contest."

"Well, yeah, but then they go to the *moon*."

"You are never going to win this argument."

"Fine. Wanna make out?"

I feel a rebellious smile pull at the corners of my mouth. *Dammit*.

I bite my lower lip to keep said smile from taking over completely, but it's too late—there's a hand sliding over my hip, there are lips grazing the sensitive curve of my neck, there are...a ton of other things making me forget how fundamentally stupid that whole "going to the moon" plot twist was.

"You know," I say as my breathing goes all uneven, "this isn't how I used to resolve my nerdfights."

He pulls away from my neck and cocks an eyebrow, grinning away. "Oh? Well, did you conduct these fights while lounging around almost completely unclothed in bed?"

I give him all the glare I can muster—which, truth be told, isn't very much.
“*Maybe.*”

He shakes his head, bright blue eyes dancing with amusement. “Lying liar.”

Okay. I *am* a big, fat lying liar. But it's not like I had real cause to nerdfight whilst lounging around in bed until Jack.

Until I morphed from *The Girl Who Shut Out All Potential Suitors For Fear of Disrupting Her Meticulously Ordered Geek Lifestyle* to *The Girl With a (Really Hot) Boyfriend That Lives An Unfortunate 300 Miles Away*.

“Hey,” he says, smoothing my unruly hair away from my face. “You seem... distracted.” He tilts his head to the side, forehead crinkling up in that befuddled way that I've come to find completely fucking adorable. (I mean, if we're being honest—he's pretty adorable all the way around, from that sleep-mussed coffee-colored hair to the razor-sharp cheekbones to those...very talented lips.)

It's thoughts like these, by the way, that occasionally make that Girl I Used To Be want to barf. Well, fuck her.

“Are you hungry?” he asks. “Maybe it's time for some breakfast-like thing?”

I roll onto my side, bunching the pillow under my head, pulling a sheet around my (almost completely unclothed) form. The first time I stayed at Jack's fairly modest Hollywood Hills bungalow, I remember expecting him to have some sort of ridiculous 5000 thread-count silk sheets. You know—*TV star sheets*. But no, his bed is swathed in regular old cotton numbers, topped off by a fairly awful “single straight dude let loose in Bed, Bath and Beyond” striped duvet.

“Waffles?” I finally say.

“Waffles.” He nods firmly, all business. “Okay.” But before I can even think about sitting up, his arm snakes around my waist and he pulls me close, lips returning to my neck, then drifting lazily over my collarbone and moving toward my—*oh*.

“You still want breakfast?” he murmurs into my skin.

Yeah, so *All-Star Superman* is totally overrated.

You know what else is overrated?

Waffles.

**

“Euuuughhhhhah! *Blech!*”

“Sorry, Braidbeard—is there something you’d like to say?”

“I’m just wondering if there’s a *reason* we’re being subjected to your porny bedroom antics. Which, by the way, contain the worst frakking dialogue this side of Padnakin in *Attack of the Clones*.”

“...‘Padnakin’? Really?” I shoot a long-suffering grimace at the pasty, bespectacled beanpole sitting next to me.

He glowers right back. “That *is* the accepted name-smash.”

Before we can continue our eight kazillionth round of sniping, the deep voice of reason intervenes. “Guys,” says Mitch, raising a beseeching eyebrow in our direction, “we’re gonna be here for at least another hour, probably. Can we table this message board slash Twitter-worthy exchange for now?”

He gifts us with an indulgent-yet-serene smile, looking for all the world like a massive, freckled Buddha: calm and collected, even under the direst of circumstances. Like, say, circumstances wherein you find yourself locked inside a freezing cold office building two days before Christmas.

As with most things, this is all Braidbeard’s fault. The three of us were on our way to a dollar-theater showing of *2012* (shut up), when he decided the disturbingly-named “Men’s Pocky” was the only satisfactory snack accompaniment. As said flavor of Pocky is apparently only available at select Pocky-selling locations, we *just had to* stop by the CinePlanet offices and liberate Braidbeard’s stash from his desk.

What we didn’t know: with everyone on vacation for the holidays, the company has employed some super-ninja-like security measures. Once you’re in, you can’t get out. The super-ninja *locks* take over.

We’ve managed to track down and call the security firm responsible for this mess and someone’s supposedly on their way to free our sorry asses—but it could take “up to an hour.” Which probably means at least two.

“Let’s get back to the point at hand,” continues Mitch, pulling a fuzzy stocking cap over his ears. “I don’t really object to all the Cinemax-by-way-Comic-Con content you’ve got goin’ on—though I have to say, it does conjure a rather choice image of Bret and Jemaine popping up in the background, all ‘it’s *business* time.’ I do, however, take issue with a couple things. One: your waffle declaration is total blasphemy. And two: Are you *sure* Mr. ‘I’m the Face of The CW, Bitches’ doesn’t have nicer sheets?”

I roll my eyes at him. “They’re perfectly serviceable. And honestly, now I feel less self-conscious about my glamorous ‘underpaid girl reporter’ bedding when he visits *me*. Now do you guys want to hear this story or not?”

“I *guess*, but maybe you could take some creative license and change the setting to something a little more...*palatable*,” sneers Braidbeard. “Like a nice café or something.”

“We didn’t go to any cafés.”

“Okay, a diner. The frakking wax museum. Whatever. Just somewhere that’s not... ‘Jack’s Bed.’”

“Well, that *is* where we spent most of the weekend.”

“Damn, Julie.” Mitch chuckles, spinning around in one of the cheap foam ‘n’ plastic office chairs. The tassel on his stocking cap whirls in the air like a tiny yarn propeller. “From nun to full-on ho. You’ve been down to L.A. how many times in the last five months?”

“I dunno. Every other weekend...ish?”

“And you probably haven’t seen a single one of the amazing sights So-Cal has to offer.”

I grin at him—more than a little smugly. “Oh, I’ve seen *plenty* of amazing sights.”

Braidbeard mock-gags, slumping against a file cabinet. “GROSS.”

I stand up and pace around the office, pulling my puffy coat closer to my body. “This is why I need more female friends,” I mutter.

“You’ve got Layla,” says Mitch.

“And I fucking love her,” I say. “But whenever I want to talk about, um, *things* with Jack, she wants to talk about...*things* with you. And that’s a little weird for me.”

A dreamy smile spreads across Mitch’s face. “Mmmm. All *good* things, right?”

“Mostly,” I say. “Though I didn’t need to know that ‘Galactus’ is the preferred nickname for your—”

“Blaaaaaaaaagh!” Braidbeard flops onto the floor, clamping his hands over his ears. “How did you two losers end up having so much regular sex? And why do I

have to hear about it?” He writhes around, agony personified. “THERE. ARE. FOUR. LIGHTS.”

I rub my hands together in a futile attempt to generate heat. “Alright. Let’s see if I can start at a more...G-rated point in this story.”

**

A...good while later, I’m nestled against Jack’s shoulder, falling in and out of a state of half-sleep, enjoying the feel of his fingertips brushing lightly up and down my back. [“Or,” says Braidbeard, “you are doing all of this at a café. Where you are sitting three feet apart and wearing *turtlenecks*.”][“And eating a giant stack of syrup-drenched waffles,” adds Mitch. “Fuck, I’m hungry.”]

“Hey,” he says softly, rousing me from my dream-like meditation. “I was wondering if you have any, like...plans for Christmas.”

I tilt my head, sleepily scrutinizing his expression. He’s going for “casual,” but there’s a note of full-on anxiety underneath it all. Jack tends to project an easy kind of self-confidence...which means my heart crumples like a soggy paper bag whenever I sense that he’s completely unsure about something.

He has *no idea* how endearing he is right now.

“Well,” I say slowly, “my dad is off on his great retirement adventure—I told you about the Winnebago—so I’m thinking I’ll do a triple feature at the AMC Van Ness. Popcorn for dinner, the whole nine. I do have a standing invite to spend the day at Layla’s place...but frankly, she and Mitch are at a super fucking disgusting point in their already-schmoopy courtship and eight straight hours of that might do me in.”

I reach up and brush his floppy hair off his forehead. “Why? You want to come up to San Francisco and join me for a day of thrill-packed holiday movie-going? Cause I’d be totally in favor of that.”

“I, um...” His eyes shift from side to side, wandering around the room, eventually resting on some vague spot near his rather impressive shelf of action figures (all Marvel in here, with Glory Gilmore front and center—DC’s in the kitchen).

“I was actually thinking, sweetheart...maybe you’d want to...come home with me? To Oregon? Meet...my folks?”

He finally meets my gaze, smiling shakily. Only now I’m not really taking note of his endearingness—I’m too busy experiencing the jolt of white-hot terror crashing through my gut.

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out.

Fuck. I am Black Canary, robbed of her sonic scream. A de-powered Buffy, unable to prise open a simple jar.

The Girl I Used To Be is all, "I told you so."

**

"Okay," says Mitch, shaking his head. "First of all? 'Sweetheart'? And *I'm* schmoopy?"

"Yes, yes, I know," I say crossly, feeling my cheeks flush. "'Sweetheart' ... sometimes 'baby,' even. Fuck off, I like it."

"I just thought you'd go for a geekier term of endearment," he says, throwing me a teasing grin. "Like...Pretty Bird, if we're going with the Black Canary thread."

"Imzadi," suggests Braidbeard, waving around his now-open box of Men's Pocky.

"Princess Peach," says Mitch, reaching over and snagging a piece of chocolatey, testosterone-laden goodness.

"Glorious Fembot of Divine Beauty and Wonderment and Totally Hawt Sexin'," says Braidbeard.

"Alright, enough," I growl. I tug my sleeves over my freezing hands, which are slowly but surely metamorphosising into claw-shaped popsicles. "Maybe I'm, you know...*slightly* traditional in some respects."

"If by 'traditional,' you mean 'horribly boring,' then I so agree," mutters Braidbeard. He pulls his stripey Doctor Who scarf (a Tom Baker-approved replica of the much-celebrated original, as he will readily inform you) over his face, muffling his nasal intonations. "This story is currently about as interesting as the Paulo and Nikki episode of *Lost*. I think you need to add a frakkin' robot."

"Robots do make everything more awesome," concurs Mitch. "Trufax. But seriously, *sweetheart*...let's get back to your freak-out."

**

There are a lot of words coming out of Jack's mouth. I'm just trying to keep up.

"—and I know we haven't been, like, *us* for very long, but I talk about you all the time and I was just telling my parents how you tracked down all those old *Strange*

Tales issues and surprised me with them and they were like, ‘We don’t know what any of those words mean, but she sounds amazing’ and—”

“Idontknowifcanmakeit!” I squeak.

His eyebrows knit together. “But...you just said you don’t really have any plans...”

“The triple feature is plans. I was really looking forward to it. You know how much I love popcorn.”

“Baby...”

“I mean I really fucking *love* it. Even the fake butter. *Especially* the fake butter. Goddamn, what do they put in that stuff? It’s like...a perfectly-conceived algorithm of lard and crack.”

“Julie.” There’s a dangerously serious note in his voice that stops me cold in my motor-mouthed tracks. He sits up very straight, crossing his arms over his (extremely delicious—yes, I can’t help but notice, even now) chest.

[“Meanwhile,” squawks Braidbeard, “the kick-ass robot in the background *distracts you* from noticing stupid shit like that.”]

A shadow of hurt passes over his face. “Do you not want to meet my family?”

“I...” I sit up and angle my body so I’m facing him, pulling the ugly duvet around me. “I just...you know. Once I have a plan, I like to stick to it. And you guys probably need, like, bonding time, right? I don’t want to horn in on that. Weren’t you telling me about some insane annual Camden family Scrabble tournament? I’m *terrible* at Scrabble. Everyone makes fun of me—it’s kind of traumatic. I would fuck up whatever scoring curve you guys have got goin’ on.”

He frowns. “You know...” He lets out a mighty exhale, raking a hand through his hair. “A simple ‘no’ would be okay. ‘No, I’m not ready. No, it’s too soon. No, I don’t...feel that way about you.’”

The Girl I Used To Be recognizes that we’re about to enter a *serious danger zone*. And yet, she does nothing to stop me.

“But...that’s not it...” My voice wavers.

**

I stop abruptly. Four eyes bore into me, laser-like in intensity.

“Then...what is it?” demands Mitch.

“Yeah,” says Braidbeard. “This is finally getting good. Especially with the robot in there, tracking your every move with his super-awesome sub-dermal recorder.”

I hug my arms to my chest. So. Fucking. Cold. “Ehhhhhh,” I hedge. “I dunno. There’s not much left to this story. Maybe we should switch to a more scintillating topic—like how much ass Kathryn Immonen is kicking on *Runaways*.”

“So much ass,” says Mitch. “There, topic closed. Back to you.”

“I still think Whedon’s run is *vastly underrated*,” mutters Braidbeard.

“Anyway,” interjects Mitch, shooting Braidbeard a warning look. “The whole point of this story was so you could finally reveal to us how, exactly, you first said...a very important configuration of words. To Jack. And we haven’t gotten there yet.”

“I think we’re close enough,” I say. I pluck the last piece of Pocky from the crumpled box. “And B, you know I worship at the altar of all things Joss, but his *Runaways* stuff tastes like warmed-over *Buffy* with a side of hokey-ass time travel.”

“WRONG.”

“Oh, for...” Mitch pushes himself out of his spinny chair and stomps to the middle of the room. And starts jumping. Up and down, up and down. The floor seems to shake under his not-inconsiderable mass, a series of seismic booms.

“What...what are you doing?” My head bobs in time with each jump.

“Try...ing...to...keep...warm. AND.” He points a shaky, jumpy finger in my direction. “Not...stop...ping...til...you...fin...ish...sto...reeeeee!” His face starts to go a little red.

“Jesus frak,” says Braidbeard. “Finish your magnum opus, Julie.” He snatches a stapler off one of the desks and waves it around threateningly. “Otherwise, I’m gonna staple my eyelids shut so I don’t have to see all that—” He gestures to Mitch’s bouncing form. “Blubbering up and down.”

“Alright, alright.” I stand up, stretch, and plop myself into Mitch’s abandoned chair, then inhale the Pocky in two bites. “Huh. So when they say this stuff is ‘for men’...that just translates to ‘dark chocolate’?” I shake my head in disbelief. “Okay. Let’s do this.”

**

“But...that’s not it...”

“Okay.” Jack’s forehead crinkles and he rests a tentative hand on my shoulder. “So...can you quit with the freak-out monologuing and just *tell me* what it is?”

I take a deep breath. “It’s...I mean...I know you’re really close to your family. Like, weirdly close—Scrabble tournament close.”

“Right, and...?”

“And...you are, um, as necessary as the air I breathe. Every tick of creation’s clock—EVERY FUCKING TICK—occurred only so that we could someday *find each other*. You see this watch? DO YOU SEE IT? When my father gave it to me, he said, ‘You can set your heart by this watch.’ It stopped October first. The day we met.”

I look at him meaningfully. “Darling, you are *my epic win*. I LOVE YOU.”

Then the robot bursts into spontaneous, mechanical applause and Jemaine and Bret pop up behind us, the dulcet tones of “it’s business...business time” rolling trippingly off their tongues and we have acrobatically mind-blowing sex on 5000 thread-count sheets, even though we’re also sitting in a café, eating waffles and wearing turtlenecks.

**

CRASH. Mitch lands after a particularly exuberant jump and gapes at me, his dedication to floor-shaking exercise momentarily forgotten.

“Okay,” he huffs. “That is *not* what happened.”

I spin around lazily in my chair, examining my nails. “How do *you* know?”

“Well first of all,” says Braidbeard, “I’m pretty sure you cobbled together that ‘speech’ from the far superior DNA of *Fables*, the Dark Phoenix Saga, and that one episode of *Alias*.”*

“And,” says Mitch, “you suddenly sound like a lobotomized Bella Swan and not like...you know, you.”

“And,” says Braidbeard, “you met Hunky McHotsalot in *July*.”

I stop my spinning and raise an eyebrow. “Really? *All that* is what gave it away? Not the robot? Or the sudden presence of a geekcentric folk-comedy duo? Or... the *turtlenecks*?”

Shaking his head, Mitch plants himself in a stray office chair on the other side of the room and pushes off, rolling up next to me. “Tell us what really happened. Give us the actual ending to this story.”

I slump back in my seat. “It doesn’t...I, um, don’t come off so well.”

Braidbeard dumps the sad, leftover crumbs rattling around in the Pocky box down his throat. “Do you ever?” he asks, mouth ringed with chocolate bits.

I bite back a bile-laced retort. The man has a point.

**

“But...that’s not it...”

“Okay.” Jack’s forehead crinkles and he rests a tentative hand on my shoulder. “So...can you quit with the freak-out monologuing and just *tell me* what it is?”

I take a deep breath. “It’s...I mean...I know you’re really close to your family. Like, weirdly close—Scrabble tournament close.”

“Right, and...?”

“And...well. They might not like me.”

“Of course they will.”

“No! No ‘of course’! That is *so not* an ‘of course’! I don’t think you understand—”

“Because you won’t explain it to me!”

“I’m trying...”

“Then just answer the question! Why are you freaking out so hard?”

“Because...”

“Because why?”

“BECAUSE I LOVE YOU, STUPID.”

I burst into tears. Not pretty “my eyes are sheening over with the delicate sparkle of Liv Tyler in *Armageddon*” tears. Big, ugly, fucking full-body *sobbing* tears. I can’t see anything through the rather prodigious glaze of snot, but after a brief, stunned moment, I feel Jack gathering me close, wrapping his arms tightly around

me, whispering soothing nonsense sounds into my hair.

I cry for what feels like a horribly extended period, my messy sobs finally devolving into pathetic little hiccups. Jack gives my shoulder a gentle squeeze.

“Baby,” he says softly. “What exactly do you think is gonna happen, here? Like, if my parents don’t immediately want to adopt you or something ...that’s it for us?”

“Maybe...I dunno. I don’t know—*hic*—how to do any of this stuff. Relationshippy stuff.”

He cups my face in his hands, thumbs gently brushing leftover tears from my cheeks. “I think,” he says carefully, “people just sort of figure it out as they go.” Those blue eyes are searching my face in a way that’s so earnest—so perfectly, painfully open. From day one, that’s how he’s been with me.

I pull away from him and flop back onto my pillow with an undignified “whump,” hair spilling everywhere like a scribbly black cloud rendered in crayon. He settles in next to me, propping his elbow on the other pillow, waiting for me to talk.

“You—*hic*—have the power to crush me,” I say. “Decimate me. Like...like Genosha, but with, you know...feelings. I’ve never given that to anyone.” I give him a shaky smile, willing myself to continue. “I thought...when I took that first step and told you I wanted to—*hic*—be with you, I thought that was the fucking scariest thing I’d ever have to do. But it keeps getting scarier.”

He reaches over and brushes my hair off my face, his mouth quirking into a bemused grin. “And you think you’re alone in all that?” he says, shaking his head. “Crazy girl.”

He studies me for a moment, his expression so tender, my heart starts getting that soggy paper bag feeling.

“I get scared too,” he says. “Sometimes I think maybe you’ll decide you do, in fact, prefer your previously uncomplicated hermit-like existence to...well, this.” He smiles ruefully. “And that would decimate *me*.”

I consider that for a moment, his words arranging and rearranging themselves in my head, a jumble of seemingly random letters and syllables. I slowly roll onto my side, regarding him thoughtfully.

“Really?” I finally say. “I could totally crush you?”

“Well, yeah— ”

“Rip you to shreds?”

“Yes, but— ”

“Leave your heart—and possibly other vital organs—broken and bloodied in some kind of emotional gutter? By the road of your *soul*?”

He sits up and runs a hand over his face, seemingly exasperated—but I can tell he’s trying his damndest not to laugh. “My God,” he says. “So this is what it’s like when Emma Frost develops actual emotions.”

“*Hey.*” I sit up straight and jab my index finger into his chest. “For the last time. I’m a Jean—not an Emma.”

“*Such* an Emma,” he says affectionately. He captures my hand in both of his, gently uncurls my fist and presses a kiss to my palm.

“And by the way, White Queen,” he says, blue eyes locking on mine. “I love you too.”

I lean into him, curling my body around his, willing my heart not to explode into a big, sloppy mess of goofball joy. “I know.”

**

“WoooooooOOOOooooooow.” Braidbeard raises a mitten-covered hand in my direction. “Up here, Han Solo.”

I give him a dutiful high-five.

“And now,” he announces. “I really have to pee. Honestly, Julie, that story was longer than the *completely unnecessary* ‘good-bye’ montage at the end of *DS9*.” He scampers off toward the bathrooms.

Mitch leans back in his chair, raising a skeptical eyebrow. “‘I know’?! Really?”

“Yes.” I allow my head to flop back into the office chair’s decidedly non-plush headrest and cover my face with my hands. “But, see...it wasn’t a Han thing, it really wasn’t. In that moment...I *did* know. I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life, and it felt kind of amazing.”

I lower my hands back to the chair’s flimsy plastic armrests and frown into space. “That’s probably another fantastic example of me being...not great with the relationshipy stuff, though.”

Mitch studies me for a moment, his face unreadable. “I dunno,” he says slowly. “I think you’re doing pretty okay.”

I cock my head, disbelieving. “Have you actually heard anything I’ve said, here? The *true* parts, I mean. The parts where I freaked the fuck out on my boyfriend and called him ‘stupid’ during a pivotal moment in our relationship and expressed glee at my ability to rip his still-beating heart from his chest and stomp all over it?”

Mitch gives me a patient grin laced with more than a little condescension. “Julie,” he says, “even with all the scary love crap going on right now, do you have any desire to go back to—as Jack calls it—your ‘uncomplicated hermit-like existence’?”

“No.”

“And didn’t you say those three little words to him first?”

“Yes.”

“And aren’t you meeting your boyfriend—who, by the way, seems pretty enamored of you and your special brand of *crazy*—in a matter of hours to drive up to Oregon and get introduced to his potentially terrifying parental units?”

“If we ever get out of this stupid building.”

“Okay.” Mitch smiles triumphantly. “All of those things would’ve been completely foreign concepts to you five months ago.”

I nod slowly. “Yeah. I guess. It’s just...that Girl I Used To Be? Sometimes I think she’s still there.”

“Of course she is,” says Mitch. “But it’s not like that girl was solely defined by shutting herself off from people. She was also just, you know...*you*. And you’re still you, but now you have...a secondary mutation. You’ve become semi-accustomed to putting your emotional equilibrium on the line for someone else.” He lays a hand on my arm, squeezing lightly. “I’m proud of you, White Queen.”

My face flushes and I grin a little in spite of myself. “Don’t push it, Galactus.”

“Hey,” Braidbeard says, emerging from the bathroom, “I think I hear someone downstairs. Maybe it’s the guy from the security company.”

The three of us clatter down to the lobby area. Outside, a harried-looking guy in a khaki jumpsuit is unlocking the big glass doors. Two other figures peer over his

shoulder, trying to see inside the building.

“Hey,” says Mitch. “It’s Layla. And—”

“Jack,” I say, a dopey grin threatening to split my face in two.

The security guy finally gets the doors open and our imprisoned trio spills outside, thanking him profusely. Braidbeard even gives him an awkward little back pat.

“Oh my GAWD!” Layla captures me in one of her bone-crushing hugs, squeezing all the air out of my lungs. “I just got your guys’ texts. And luckily, Julie, I was at your apartment—you know, familiarizing myself for house-sitting duty—when this one pulled up, all set for road-trippin’.” She releases me and inclines her head in Jack’s direction. “So we decided to come rescue you.”

“Not that we actually could’ve done anything if the security guy hadn’t showed up at the exact same time,” says Jack, grinning. He folds his arms around me, brushing his lips against my cheek. “Hi,” he whispers in my ear. My face is starting to hurt from smiling so hard.

“Awwwwwwww,” coos Layla, clapping her hands together. “Come on, boys, let’s let these two get started on their big adventure. Mitch, honey, why don’t we take Braidbeard out for some hot chocolate?”

“A movie, too?” Braidbeard asks hopefully. “We were supposed to go see a movie today.”

“Anything you want, sweet,” beams Layla. She links one arm through Mitch’s and the other through Braidbeard’s and marches off, chattering all the way. “What movies are out, anyway? You guys know I don’t really see that much...is there something with that girl who sings on those ‘Cotton’ commercials? The one with the bangs? I guess she’s an actress too because— ”

As she leads them to her car, Mitch looks over his shoulder, eyes dancing, and mouths “White Queen.” I ever-so-subtly flip him the bird.

Jack pulls back from our embrace and rests his hands lightly on my shoulders. “Listen,” he says slowly. “I know you agreed to this whole family Christmas thing, but if it’s really freaking you out...we don’t have to go. I’ve got transportation.” He gestures to his aggressively non-descript beige Toyota, situated on the other side of the parking lot. “I can always call and tell them we changed our minds. And we can go anywhere—just the two of us. Seriously.”

He’s looking at me with that ever-potent mix of earnestness and barely-contained anxiety. I feel something release deep inside of me and The Girl I Am Now—who,

really, is just a weepier, super-deluxe-ified version of *The Girl I Used To Be*—smiles up at him, open and free and ready for anything.

“Come on,” I say. “Oregon or bust.” I slide an arm around his waist and steer him towards the waiting car.

“Um, by the way,” he says, fishing his keys out of his pocket, “there *is* an annual Camden family Scrabble tournament.”

“...what?” I let go of him and stop dead in my tracks.

“And just so you know: I don’t think ‘cutthroat’ is strong enough a word. Aunt Liz will totally shiv you over a triple-word score.”

I lean against the car, crossing my arms over my chest. “I changed my mind. Let’s go to Hawaii.”

He moves in close, resting his hands on the top of the car on either side of me, hemming me in. “Too late,” he says bemusedly.

I throw him a look of mock-exasperation. “Okay,” I concede, winding my arms around his neck and pulling him closer. “Ultra-competitive board-gaming with a bunch of strangers it is. But I’m only doing this because I love you.”

He gives me a smile, slow and sweet. “I know.”

**With apologies to Bill Willingham, Chris Claremont, Debra J. Fisher and Erica Messer*

Thanks to everyone who suggested geeky terms of endearment, particularly Sarah Stevenson, Jason Urbanciz, K.D. Bryan, and the Alilain-Horns.

Ten Little-Known Marvel Universes

By Ivan Sian

Like Retcons? Hate Retcons?

Thank the creation of DC’s Earth 2 (and all other comic book multiverses) for them. However, some are better known than others.

Earth 31: Earth where *Spider-Man 3* did not suck.

Earth 321: Bizarre Earth where Wolverine is only on THREE superhero teams.

Earth 420: Earth where the only known superheroes are Woody Harrelson, Matthew

McConaughey, and the band Cypress Hill.

Earth 590: Earth where the Fantastic Four’s exposure to cosmic rays resulted in fatal leukemia.

Earth 80756: Earth where Alpha Flight is the premiere superhero team. Also, same Earth where everyone like Molson, flannel, universal healthcare, and curling.

Earth 3294: Earth where Soviet Union did not fall, therefore freeing up Marvel writers from coming up with increasingly ludicrous

explanations for the Black Widow’s former membership in the KGB.

Earth 2134: Earth where the only known mutants are Charles Xavier and the chick on *Total Recall* with the three boobs.

Earth 3213: Bizzaro Marvel Universe where “Hello” is “Goodbye,” Captain America is evil, and I actually get service on my Sprint/Nextel cell phone.

Earth 0987: Earth where Michael Bay is considered a genius; poop tastes like chocolate.

Earth 876: Earth where members of the Squadron Supreme are named “Superman,” “Batman,” “Wonder Woman,” and “The Green Lantern.”

The Letter Home

By Matt Springer

Albert Forsythe, Esq.
President and Chief Executive Officer
Cluck-Cluck Ltd.
1800 Wingfield Road
Lake Mary, FL 32779

Mr. Forsythe,

I undertake these steps, this journal of my aggrievances, on this 13th day of August, in the Year of our Lord two thousand and nine, in order to create some permanent document of the conditions under which I have suffered lo these many months.

I should perhaps start with a thorough accounting of my history and credentials, in order to lend the tale I tell an additional veneer of legitimacy.

I was among the first workers hired by Walter Gronski in 1998 to serve as his opening team for the Orland branch of Cluck-Cluck Speedy Chicken, a distinction I was proud to have achieved after proving my value for seven years at the Oak Lawn location. I have humbly worked as assistant manager of the Orland branch since that time.

For me, it has never been an entitled right to work for Cluck-Cluck Ltd.; it has instead been a profound privilege and honor. Opening the Orland location was the highlight to date of my career, perhaps surpassed only by meeting yourself at the 2005 Chicklings of the Year awards dinner. I was narrowly edged out for the award by a young handicapped fry cook, but it was still a pleasure to shake your hand and exchange pleasantries.

(As an aside, I have since sampled Mr. O'Neill's French fries, and I must wonder if his physical ailment resulted in any sympathy votes for the award in question, as his product seemed sub-standard by any reasonable Cluck-Cluck benchmark, soaked in salt and nearly dripping with excess oil. At the risk of munching on sour grapes, perhaps a revote is in order?)

Were there songs written as the great heroic ballads of old, focusing not on the conquering of exotic lands but on the opening of new fast food locations, the bards would have told exquisite tales of those early dawning days in Orland—the clean hiss of fresh oil hitting the stainless steel of virgin-clean fryers, clouds of fine flour suspended in the air as tender boneless breasts were delicately coated in our trademark Busy Batter, the dulcet tones of the Cluckers as their greatest Cluck-Cluck hits played on repeat over the complimentary jukebox that has become a Cluck-Cluck Speedy Chicken tradition coast to coast.

Those were heady days, Mr. Forsythe. We were younger then, and perhaps too proud, but not unjustifiably so. Our product was top drawer and our willingness to go each extra mile for the customer passed every test placed upon it. Many was the occasion when I or another Chickling would drive down countless streets in search of a car we remembered from the drive-thru, only to find the car and deliver a complimentary basket of Cluggets as apology for a mistyped order. I look back on those times with great fondness and yearning.

I recall that when you were first hired, you were roundly criticized in many an informal employee gathering for your lack of experience in a Cluck-Cluck kitchen. This means you will not understand me when I say that I have always loved the unique rhythm of a Cluck-Cluck location in full swing. Enter during any of our several daily rush times, say from 11 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. for the lunch crowd, and there is a singular music in the way our team moves through its paces. It has always been a delight to my eyes and ears, one of the true pleasures of my life.

I am sorry to say that it has been several months since that music has rang out from the Orland location. Since the unfortunate circumstances surrounding Mr. Gronski's unwilling departure as manager—a step I personally disagreed vehemently with but remained silent on due to my loyalty to the storied Cluck-Cluck brand—our quality, morale, and business has entered a tailspin from which I am fearful it may never recover.

You are surely well aware that upon Mr. Gronski's dismissal, a gentlewoman named Leslie Strut was dispatched by Corporate to take his place. I shall refrain from commenting on her worth as a human being, but inasmuch as I do believe such worth is inexorably linked with one's value as an employee of Cluck-Cluck Ltd., let me just say that her qualities in almost every worthwhile respect are sorely lacking.

First, there was the Sanka Incident, in which she forbade us from serving Mr. Fenrickson his morning cup of Sanka because, and I quote her here, "We don't sell Sanka, we sell coffee." Excuse me, Sanka IS coffee. The swill we mix with hot water and pour into the Styrofoam cups? That's deer piss. (Pardon my language, but if you spend any time at all on the CluckCluckCoop.net boards, you'll understand the reference.)

Then, Leslie abruptly canceled our annual Cluck-Cluck Christmas Caroling Stroll. For years Walter and I have organized an informal group to walk the neighborhood near the Cluck-Cluck and sing seasonal carols, handing out free Cluckwich coupons as we go. It's become a tradition covered by local news outlets (enclosed you'll find a 2003 story from the Orland Park Press) and appreciated by those we touch with our small, warm holiday gesture.

However, citing "corporate policy," Leslie issued a memo just three days before the event informing all employees that under no circumstances would she approve any paid overtime for employees who chose to participate in the caroling rather than report for their shift. I will confess—as I read the memo, my eyes flashed with little white globules of anger. I departed work early that day under the guise of "woman problems," only to spend the afternoon sitting in the parking lot of our Tinley Park location, slowly consuming a Fresh Chicken Clucklet. It marked the first (and only) time I have felt it necessary to lie about my physical condition and abandon my post early.

The straw that broke this particular camel's back arrived just last week. I was working a double on a Saturday; it had been scheduled for months and I was honestly looking forward to it. Some may choose to worship in a church on their holy day; my church is my restaurant, and I choose to serve Cluck-Cluck.

That morning upon my arrival, Leslie informed me that I would not be required for the second shift. Without consulting me, she had moved Alyssa into my afternoon slot at the take-out window. I replied that in no uncertain terms would I be giving up my shift. As I told her that day, I have worked too hard and too long to let some seventeen-year-old brat with a skinny ass, working for makeup money to hussy up her face for those scrawny deadbeats she calls "friends," claim my rightful place at the store's "window to the world," as Walter used to call it.

Leslie laughed nervously, and my first shift continued.

At 2:17 p.m. (approximately), Alyssa arrived to relieve me. Trying to be as friendly as possible, I let her know that there had been a mistake and that she should go home. Her face registered confusion (well, more confusion than the baseline confusion it displays naturally) and she rolled her eyes at me (which makes me INCANDESCENT with anger) and reported immediately to Leslie.

Leslie came over and asked what was happening; I informed her again that I would be finishing my double shift and that if she had a problem with it, she could take it up with my boss. She replied that she was my boss, and I made it clear that I worked for one man, and one man only, that man being the late, departed Walter Gronski. "Mm-hmm," came the reply from Willie, a sweet old man who typically worked tidy duty in the dining room but had since Leslie's arrival been dialed into the standard rotation like the rest of us. I knew his time at the

burger station was aggravating his sciatica.

In front of a full complement of employees and SEVERAL CUSTOMERS, Leslie then proceeded to draw all attention to herself and inform the assembled that in case they had missed something, SHE was now the manager of the Orland location, and that if they wanted to cooperate with her to make good food and serve our customers, they were welcome to do so. If they were interested in causing trouble over perceived slights and jealousy, they could find another fast-food chicken chain to call their own. I believe the word “KFC” may have been mentioned, and it hit like a dagger through my heart.

To my extreme dismay, most of the other employees APPLAUDED. What had I done to deserve such betrayal? I always gave Rhonda’s kids extra Jolly Box toys when they came by for dinner; I’d attended Lance’s commitment ceremony to his Pekinese; Judy and I had been exchanging funny birthday cards for years. Now they were cheering for my demise?

I met Alyssa’s glare, and the look of smug satisfaction on her (pardon my language) fucking kid face is perhaps what pushed me that last inch over the edge.

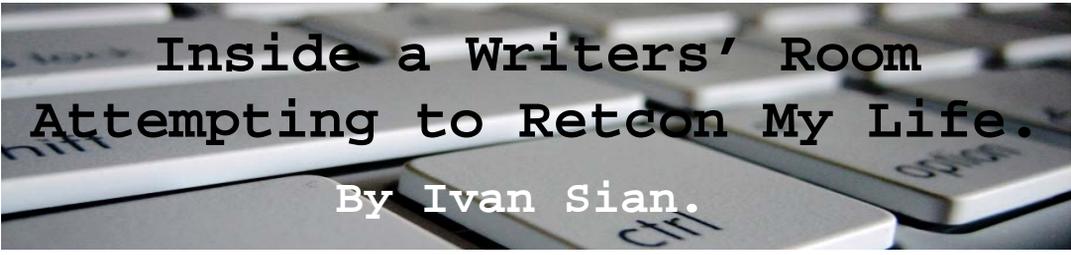
Mr. Forsythe, I read in your Wikipedia entry about your service in Vietnam. Perhaps you experienced a similar feeling to the one I had that day. In that moment, I watched myself being myself, as though there were a fictional surveillance camera suspended from the ceiling and wired directly into my brain. Both within and without my own body, seeing all I was doing yet somehow unable to influence it, even if I wanted to, which I didn’t.

I grabbed her arm and screamed as I plunged our hands together into the fryer. My scream continued as hers began. We joined together for the only time in a shared emotion. As others in the restaurant struggled to pull us apart, Leslie wept. I continued to scream and I did not stop until the sedatives took hold in the ambulance.

And as I drifted into unsought slumber, Mr. Forsythe, all I could think was that this NEVER would have happened if Walter Gronski was still manager.

I await your reply.

Regards,
Alice Plunk



Inside a Writers' Room Attempting to Retcon My Life.

By Ivan Sian.

"Okay, okay, so what do we have here? He's fat, out-of-shape, and surly."

"Perfect anti-hero—except for the fat part."

"And he's terrible with the ladies."

"But is he REALLY terrible with the ladies or is he actually GAY?"

"Hmmm...gay would make him more sympathetic."

"Then how do you explain that he spent the better part of his life asking women out, only to be shot down in increasingly humiliating ways?"

"Overcompensating?"

"I like it!"

"But gay guys don't let themselves get out of shape!"

"I got it! He's a gay war veteran who, because of a battle injury, could no longer work out...so he got fat."

"War veteran? That IS pretty hot these days...c'mon, people, what else you got?"

"He used to be kind, gentle and upbeat, but ever since he got back from Iraq, he's been dark and moody."

"But he's been dark and moody for the past 20 years."

"The FIRST Iraq war!"

"Good, good. What else?"

So while in Iraq, he was caught in a mortar attack. Guy, his squad commander, thinking he was dead, left him behind. He then spent the next 14 hours crawling to safety where he was ultimately found by..."

"...THAT HOT CHICK FROM *HOUSE!*"

"Which explains both his bizarre hatred for Guy Fieri AND his creepy obsession with that chick from *House!*"

"Even with him being gay!"

"You got it!"

"Perfect! Wrap it up, fellas! Fill in the details and somebody order a pizza!"



The Tale of the Gallant Sailor, Part II

By Matthew Walden

For Part I of this story, please check out [Grok #3: Nameless Horror](#). Here's your "previously on": Northrop Glitten, the gallant sailor of the Northeastern Coast, reached an impasse over household chores with his son Archimedes. After Archimedes experienced severe gastrointestinal discomfort, his father rushed him to a hospital. Surgeons discovered a hammerhead shark thrashing around inside the young boy's stomach. Archimedes did not survive the operation. Just before passing out from exhaustion, Northrop performed an impassioned necropsy in his dining room on the mysterious shark that had killed his son.

Northrop dreamt of himself wandering through the hospital's endless white corridors after his son's death, searching for his car keys, rummaging through stacks of papers at the orderly's desk. You've looked above everything. Now look under. He wound up alone in a room with Dr. Janet. A terrible moan came from the hallway and they floated out to investigate, toes pointed down, their feet trailing inches above the ground. Dr. Janet spotted a disembodied head resting in the lid of a cardboard box with gray tufts of hair sprinkled across the scalp in small patches. She yanked on Northrop's elbow and put a finger in front of his lips. They both peered down in silence at the moaning head. It didn't look like it had been forcefully removed from a body; there were no lines of demarcation that would indicate it used to belong to a neck or torso. Just a round head, fully formed and self-contained. The bodiless man looked up from the cardboard lid at Northrop floating above and moaned a few more times, putting on a performance just for him.

"Oh. Oh. I'm not very happy. Not too happy right now."

Dr. Janet and Northrop exchanged a glance, eyes squinted in resigned and total pity. Northrop jutted his lower lip toward his nose. Wasn't he a case? Causing a ruckus over his missing car keys, feeling sorry for himself and his troubles, when this poor son of a gun didn't even have a body. Of course he's not happy. How could you manage to be, as just a head?

“I’m sorry, sir. I can’t think of anything to do for you.” The words felt stupid the instant they came out. But what solace could Northrop have offered to someone so destitute?

“But my mustache hurts. Do *something*.”

Northrop had missed the salt and pepper chevron plastered across the man’s upper lip when he first glanced down, but when the shock of recognition finally hit he almost swallowed his tongue.

“Dad? Is that you?”

“It’s your pappy but I’m not happy.” His dad’s eyes closed in a sorrowful droop. He had been a fortress of strength in Northrop’s life, even if that unwavering stoic exterior made Northrop despise him. Whatever his failures as a human, his father had never acted like anything less than a man. Without that strength, though, without the conformity to an ideal, all the sacrifice of human connection and vulnerability, what had it been for in the end? The un-scalable mountain had been tunneled through by a deflated, saggy head resting on a discarded scrap of cardboard.

“Dad. I need help too. Archie’s dead, I think. How come things don’t click anymore? It hurts to breathe.”

His dad’s eyes rolled back open and he spoke with a loose tongue flapping back and forth inside his mouth. “If the child is father to the man, then death is the father of the child. But woe to him who betrays the Son of Man. It would be better for him if he had not been born. The hand of him who is going to betray me is with mine on the table.”

Northrop fidgeted. “Oh, about the table...I can clean that up right away. The shark’s blood: not that huge of a problem. Dr. Janet? Does the hospital have any kind of industrial disinfectant I can use?”

His dad’s head jittered on the floor. “You ruined it, Northrop. I invited you to my table to dine. And now you’ve spilled blood on my memory.”

Northrop had never felt shame cut this deep. His mouth opened to respond, but words wouldn’t come out, as if the wind had been knocked out of him. His dad rolled around in circles on the cardboard lid below. Northrop tried to yell, stretching his mouth open in silent exasperation. He floated down the hallway with his legs turned up at an angle above his chest. He reached out to grab onto the wall and caught onto a bolted metal hospital sign advertising the blood donor clinic. The need is constant. The gratification is instant. Give Blood. Northrop felt his grip on the sign loosen as an inexorable force tugged at his body, his fingers

weakening at the joints. The letters on the sign transformed into a language he couldn't understand, but knew that he should. The words felt both ancient and familiar, like a message older than the world: εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ Ἀρχιμήδης καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος.

He let go of the sign and fell backwards and sideways, plummeting to the end of the corridor and crashing through the double doors, before flinging himself against—

Northrop's eyes flittered open and he awoke, shocked to find himself in Archimedes' bed. Shocked, then dismayed. In those hazy and promising moments between sleeping and waking he had convinced himself that Archimedes' death had all been part of the same long nightmare. But here he was, lying in his son's bed in the same position he fell asleep the previous night. It must have happened. His heart sunk.

He didn't look forward to the job of calling relatives and making funeral arrangements. He didn't look forward to life without Archie. Worst of all, he did not look forward to cleaning up last night's mess. Maybe he could move into an apartment. Make a fresh start. And Justine. Well, that's a whole 'nother bag of mess. She probably didn't even deserve to know.

Northrop got out of bed and walked to the wall where he had thrown the plate of shark meat. He examined the floor then spun around. There was no evidence of his fitful pitch. No broken plate shards or ammonia flavored shark flakes. Had he woken up at some point in the night and cleaned up the mess? Northrop wouldn't put it past himself. He rubbed the corners of his eyes to remove bits of itching sleep crust. His hands were spotless! He didn't have any cuts from the shark teeth. He looked down at his clothes and they were spotless as well. No disgusting blobs of brown fluid or red blood.

"Archie!" he called. "Archie!" Northrop jogged down the hall. He peeked into the dining room. The tightness in his chest eased and he took a deep breath that fluttered on the exhale. No blood stains on the carpet, no bucket filled with entrails, no shark jaws floating in bleach, no mauled carcass waiting for him on the table. He shuddered at the reminder of his father's chastisement. It *had* been a dream and Archimedes was probably out in the backyard right then, jumping on the trampoline, playing with the water hose, oiling up his bike gears. Northrop ran through the den, knocking over the mahogany recliner on his way to the porch.

He scanned the perimeter of the yard as he stepped through the screen door. Okay. No Archie. That's fine. Probably at a friend's house. He walked back into the family room, flipped on the light switch and yelped.

In front of him, on top of the fireplace, enclosed in an ornate glass display, sat the hammerhead shark. Northrop inched closer. The shark's tail had a note pinned through it in Northrop's handwriting:

*"This Beast of the Sea was Laid to Rest by the Hand of A Gallant Sailor
in Suitable Vengeance for the Death of his Beloved Son."
—Northrop Glitten, USS HAMMERHEAD*

Bits of sappy newspaper stuck out through the shark's gills and tiny lines of clear thread ran through the areas Northrop had cut with his knife. Northrop couldn't recall stuffing the shark after his dissection rampage and he certainly didn't remember cleaning anything up. But he did remember a certain looseness of clarity. The dead shark's eye glared at Northrop from the side of its hammer.

Distant relatives shuffled into the parlor and shook Northrop's hand, gave him hugs, told him to hang in there. A few asked why Justine couldn't make it, but a wave of the hand and a silent shrug sufficed. Pink lights shone down above the open casket, giving the pallor of Archimedes' face the illusion of health. They had dressed him in his baseball uniform at the suggestion of his little league coach. The funeral home had done a stand-up job, particularly after the autopsy. This, by the way, had saved Northrop's hide.

The hospital had been prepared to call the Department of Children and Families, particularly after his explosion on the news, but there were no lacerations on Archimedes' esophagus, no harm whatsoever to any of Archimedes' body. There should have been. At two feet long, you'd think there'd be a little damage if someone had shoved the shark down his throat. It was as if the shark had just materialized in the boy's stomach. No one knew what to think. But the hospital staff respectfully kept their mouths shut as Northrop circulated the partial truth that Archimedes had died during an emergency gastrectomy. The shark would remain a secret.

Floral arrangements, sent by friends and coworkers in lieu of their presence, lined the front of the sanctuary. Over in the pews, Northrop's brother Jed had busied himself with making a travesty of the proceedings. He found a reluctant audience in Ms. Leech and Gary, the surgical assistant, who had shown up still feeling guilty about his callous delivery of the news. Jed showed off his polka dot musical tie to Gary; when you pressed the front, it played *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*.

"Heh, heh. Did ya know? Check it out, it beeps music. Push it right there. It's simple." Jed resembled Northrop closely except for his hair. What remained of it had already finished turning grey. A few liver spots speckled his face and his teeth had clearly not received proper care over the years. He wore a tan corduroy suit and

green snake skin boots, neither of which expressed the somber attitude appropriate for the occasion.

“Hey. Check out these boots. I used ‘em for disco when I was younger.” Jed gestured at his left and right foot respectively. “Dis-go dis way and dis-go the other way. Disco!” Ms. Leech adjusted her blouse and Gary scanned the room. They didn’t want to be cold to Jed, but they didn’t feel comfortable laughing.

Jed’s boots made temporary indentations on the red satin carpet but left a jarring impression on the rest of those who had come to view Archimedes. He ran up to the casket and whipped out a disposable camera. “Don’t worry, folks, I won’t use my flash.” Jed snapped away, preserving the memory of Archimedes’ hollow shell. Jed eventually sidled up to Northrop and threw his arms around him. “Nort. Nort. You gotta carry the line, bud. Jesus, he sure looks peaceful in his baseball costume. A real slugger like his dad. I bet if we slapped some stubble on his cheeks and threw some glasses on him we could fool people into thinking that was you in there. What a trip.” A slap-slap on Northrop’s back and Jed took off to spread his peculiar brand of mirth to the remaining attendants.

“We are aboard this dismayed vessel in order to suffer,” Northrop muttered, gripping the pew in front of him for support. Something had gone wrong. They’d given him someone else’s life, not his own. The Navy chaplain spotted Northrop chewing the side of his cheek and walked up to place a comforting hand behind his head. “You know, it’s okay to be angry. God is big enough for our anger.”

The attention of the room turned toward the chaplain and they listened to catch a sliver of the counsel he offered. Northrop collapsed into his arms with a high-pitched sigh. Everyone felt relieved. Northrop had saved the funeral before it began.

In the weeks that followed, Northrop lost the presence of mind to maintain his position as a nuclear reactor operant. In fact, Northrop wasn’t even allowed to remain a sailor after his Situation Normal when he returned to work after his hardship leave. After Archimedes’ service, Northrop had continued to degenerate. Some buddies from his sub, under the guidance of the ombudsman, had tried to help him out by cooking the occasional meal and calling to check in. But none served as the life preserver he needed as he sailed the choppy waters of loneliness, guilt and depression.

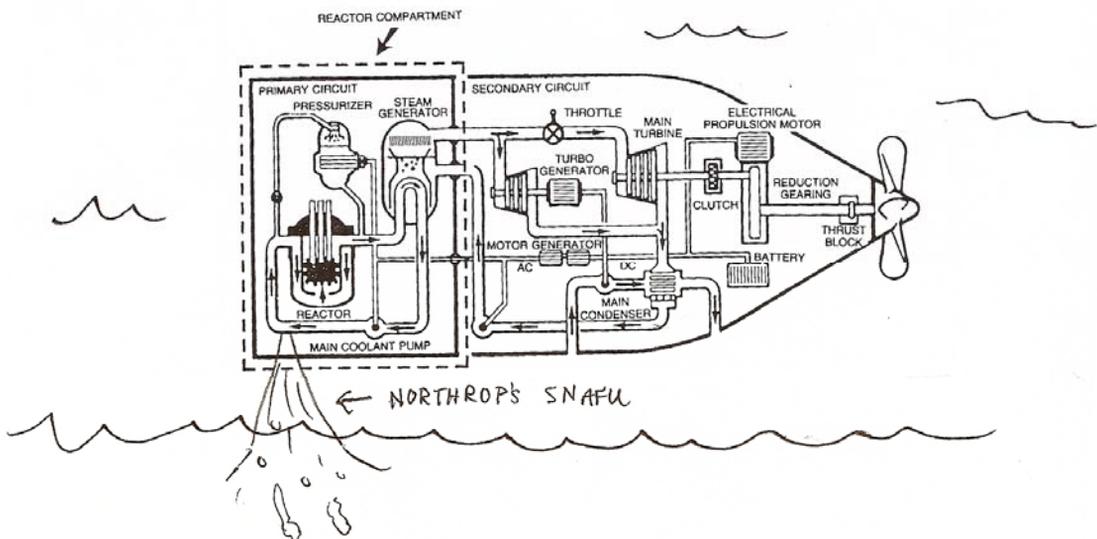
He began showing up to his watches late, sporting an uneven gig line, unshaven, circles under his eyes, hair frizzy and unkempt. At first, everyone took it easy on him, considering his recent troubles, but Northrop eventually committed an offense so grave that even the US Navy couldn’t find it in her heart to forgive.

Northrop had tagged out while the *USS HAMMERHEAD* was in port. Tagging out is when you go against a danger tag on a piece of equipment, a serious ordeal in any case, but particularly in Northrop's line of duty.

Northrop didn't mean to. He had just been tidying up around the sub. He thought he smelled garbage piling up, so he went to eject the Trash Disposal Unit as a favor to his fellow sailors. Rotten bug juice gets to smelling nasty. Northrop hadn't gotten much sleep, however, and he was barely in a position to take out his own kitchen trash, let alone operate equipment on a submarine. It wasn't until the Engineering Officer of the Watch screamed in his face that Northrop snapped to.

"Petty Officer Glitten! What in the hell are you doing? The bull nuke is going to be all over our ass behind this. For the sake of Sampson and Delilah! You know I like you. I told you I like you. But this is major. You're gonna eat this one."

Northrop had been in the reactor compartment, not the starboard side just forward of the enlisted mess, as he had assumed in his haggard state. And it wasn't the TDU lever he had pulled, but the lever that opens the valve to the primary coolant, which draws heat away from the reactor core. Luckily the EOW jumped in before anything terrible could happen. No overheating, just a tiny leak of coolant into the outside water.



But the repercussions for Northrop proved drastic. The Navy's Director of Nuclear Reactors knew the damage to the environment was negligible; a little nuclear coolant in the Long Island Sound never hurt anybody. If the EPA department up-

holding the Federal Water Control Act disagreed, they could take liberties with a duck as far as the DNR was concerned. And although Northrop's accident had incurred no damage against the ship, it was a flashing indicator of Northrop's increasing incompetence. So they offered him a plea bargain. He would accept a dishonorable discharge, no questions asked, and in return, they wouldn't have him court-martialed.

"Everyone goes home happy this way," they assured him at Captain's Mass.

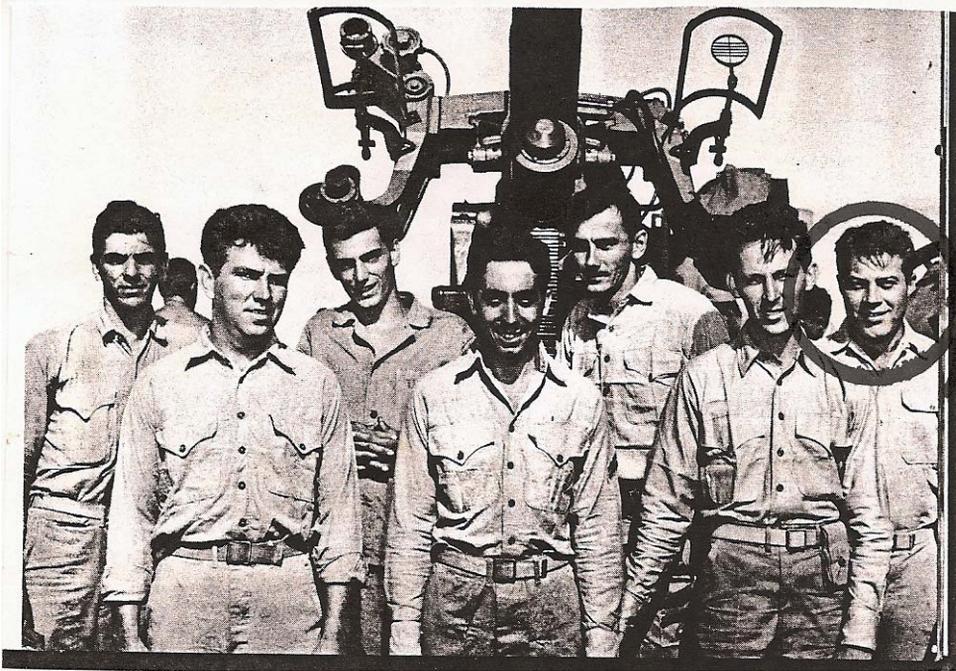
But Northrop didn't go home happy. How could this life-long sailor learn to live without the sea? He went home dejected, ready to call it quits on more than just his job.

Northrop sat in the den with his head in his hands. No distractions, no son to take care of, no more adventures on the high seas. Nothing except for his thoughts, which had dried up way too quickly.

He reached over to the coffee table and picked up a black and white photo of himself. He had just joined the service at the time, working to earn his dolphins. It reminded Justine of the best in him: a Northrop who wasn't afraid to let loose. He used to be ticklish. He used to crack jokes. He used to pour cold water in your shower, bake cookies, dress up for Halloween. What was that costume that had her choking from laughter? That's right.

Northrop had filled a clear garbage bag with multi-colored balloons and waddled around the neighborhood trick-or-treating with Archimedes in tow. It didn't look anything like a bag of jellybeans.

Northrop didn't change in a day. His personality just slipped away a drop at a time during the slide into full-fledged fatherhood. It would be too easy to say he made sacrifices at the altar of career. Something more subterranean had eaten away at his spirit. It stemmed from a fundamental dissatisfaction with himself: what he wanted measured against what he had become.



Increasingly, he felt like the lie he had told Archimedes about Justine's departure had been a mistake. At the time it seemed like a logical decision, a natural out-flow of events he had no control over. Why cause the boy any undue heartache over his mother?

It began like this: Justine wanted to pick up a kitten for Archimedes on his birthday. Archie had been prattling on about it for months and, why not, every child should have a pet. Northrop protested. Should they really disrupt the flow of things? They had a routine. They kept the house in immaculate condition. If you spent half your living days crammed into a steel tube thousands of feet under the ocean, climbing up and down narrow stairwells, ducking under the low hung ceiling of the operation control room, elbow to elbow with sweaty men and electronic chirps, the crushing compactness of it all, well, when you got home, you'd want to stretch your arms in your castle. An uncluttered visual field. Empty white space stretching between the chair and the television. These proved crucial lubricants for the engine of Northrop's soul. Without order in his home, without open vistas of air, how could he negotiate the fragile demarcation between work and rest?

Justine brought home the kitten anyway as a surprise to both Archimedes and Northrop. It introduced the typical litany of minor irritations, from sprinkling its black fur all over their Almond Monroe loveseat to pissing in the corner of their bedroom. Never mind that the black and white tuxedo kitten had a soft spot for Northrop, rubbing up against his legs as soon as he came through the door. Never mind that Archimedes loved her to pieces, taught her to fetch, played hide-and-seek with her as they frolicked through the house together like new siblings.

The cat had also picked up fleas from the pound and Northrop would scratch them off his legs while he watched the game, pinching them into black splotches between his forefingers, announcing each catch to the family: "The fleas haven't stopped. Your cat's filthy." Either the kitten couldn't pick up on the hostility in his voice, or it didn't care to, because she would simply roll on her back with her paws outstretched toward Northrop, enduring his tirades and answering back with love and amusement. "Get!" Northrop would lunge at her and she'd scamper away behind the curtains.

Northrop purchased two adult-sized flea collars on his way home from work the next week and doubled them up around the tiny nine-week-old kitten's neck. She yelped and squirmed backward, tried to scoot her face across the carpet to wriggle out from under them, but the collars remained firm. "Now you're worth something," Northrop said, patting her firmly on her backside. The kitten trotted off into the kitchen, issuing out pitiful fuck-you howls. Northrop found her two hours later when he went to grab a beer from the fridge. She had fallen asleep inside her water bowl. How could that even be comfortable? Northrop tore off some paper towels to dry her off, and lifted the dripping wet, almost weightless cat into his arms. She drooped over the edges of his palms. Her tiny pink nose had developed a thin yellow film over the nostrils.

Northrop dug a hole in the backyard and buried her in a shoebox before Justine and Archimedes returned from grocery shopping. Later, when they came home and unloaded their bags from the station wagon, Northrop staged an escape. As soon as Justine opened the front door he yelled, "Wait!" and shoved her aside, chasing off down the sidewalk after an imaginary kitten, calling out in vain. He helped Archimedes post missing signs in the neighborhood for the next three weeks. Cat still missing. Answers to Piss-Ant. Sure, there was guilt. Where there once were fleas, there was guilt. The way Northrop looked at it, he had broken even.

Until one morning a month later when Justine stood waiting with Archimedes for the school bus at the end of their block. A neighborhood collie sidled up to them on the edge of the sidewalk, carrying a drooping package in its mouth. Justine noticed Northrop's name scrawled in black marker across the soggy cardboard shoebox. The dog set it on the sidewalk, but when Justine bent down to grab it, he clamped down his teeth and shook his head back and forth vigorously, the way it would play with a towel. The box tore in half and out tumbled Archimedes' missing pet, a thin, decomposed skeleton covered in green and yellow matted fur, double wrapped in flea collars and the brown tissue packaging left over from Northrop's leather loafers. Justine thought quickly. As much pleasure as she would get from laying into her husband over this kind of infraction, no mother would want her son to see a rotting kitten corpse. Before Archimedes got close enough to inspect the grim package's contents, she scooped it into her arms and ran back to the house to confront Northrop.

Justine left for her mother's house in Greece the next evening. It had been in the cards for a while. She didn't leave a note, didn't say goodbye to her son, couldn't bear to tell him she was leaving or explain the circumstances of her departure. Northrop expected half as much from her. She'd done this before. After Archimedes' third birthday, she had left on an unannounced vacation. Sent them a postcard telling them she had gone to find herself on a Thessaloniki kibbutz. Northrop didn't even know such a thing existed. When she returned nearly a year later, he explained to her that if she ever left to find herself again she needn't bother returning, and to see how she found that.

This time, Northrop changed their phone number, sold her station wagon, told Archimedes his mother had been killed in a car accident and threw away the one letter she'd written asking them for money. Once a flake, always a flake. Northrop broke the news to his son in the best way he knew how. They both got dressed for "something important" and drove past an outdoor funeral Northrop had looked up in the *Ledger's* obituaries. They never got out of the car. They just sat there with the motor running, dressed to the nines, watching as pallbearers lowered the casket of a stranger into the ground. Northrop spun a noble tale: how Archimedes' mother had swerved off the road and smashed into a pole in order to avoid a cat running across the street, how she would have wanted them to both be happy, and for them to avoid thinking about her if it made them sad. Northrop had clutched his face in his hands, letting out what he hoped sounded like a snuffle. Who knows? Maybe it was even Archie's cat she had saved that fateful evening. They kept the cat litter in Archimedes' room, just in case it ever returned.

"Kind of breaks your heart, doesn't it?" a voice asked from behind Northrop. At first, Northrop ignored the voice, preferring to remain with the memories sparked by the photo. It wasn't the first voice he'd heard in the last week. He'd walk down the hallway to the master bedroom and the house would reverberate with throaty whispers. Lying in his bed late at night, a faint gurgling noise would creep into his ears. Northrop paid no attention to these, could be the house settling or his brain cells stewing in the mire of his depression. This voice today, though, was much louder and much harder to ignore.

"That's the saddest picture I've seen in my whole goddam life. Myaah!"

Northrop turned around to face the fireplace. He set down the framed photograph and shuffled over toward the source of the noise. After picking up the miniature shovel from the antique brass utensil set, he removed the black metal screen to the fireplace and poked around in the grey ashes. He dropped the shovel and picked up the log tongs and poker, weighing each in his cusped palms. He used the tongs to pick up a few charred remains of wood, tossed the chunks into the air, then took a swing at them with the poker. The poker connected, sending the wood flying across the room into the opposite wall. It left a black

smudge against the khaki wallpaper Justine had picked out. Northrop had always hated the color. He wasn't sure why he was fiddling around with the remnants in the fireplace. He'd filled the days since his discharge with similar activities.

"Up here. I'm talking to you. Stand at attention soldier."

Northrop looked up at the mantle where the stuffed hammerhead shark rested. Or previously rested. Because at this point, the shark had begun to wriggle around within its glass casing. "Do me a favor will you, Northrop? I can't get enough air in this glass here. It's a real pain in my tail fin."

The shark's mouth grimaced and contorted as it pronounced each word. It looked like it didn't have much experience with talking and each sentence entered the world with painstaking enunciation. Perhaps the thread that held the jaws in place slowed them down as well. Northrop laughed at the shark straining its mouth into small o-shapes in order to pronounce the correct sounds.

"Ah, a smile, eh? I knew we'd get one out of you soon enough. Tut tut. Now, get me out of this case before I knock it off myself," the shark demanded, arching its head, ready to attack. Northrop stood in rapt attention, too fascinated to move.

"All right, ya chicken choker, if it's gotta be this way, then we'll play your game." The shark's voice reminded Northrop of Jimmy Durante. Husky and breathless. Good night, Mrs. Calabash...where-ever you are. The shark scrunched its body up and swung its large head toward the glass. The casing inched forward on the mantle. The shark swung again, its body giving off a rubbery squeak against the glass. The case now dangled off the edge of the stone mantel and the shark sucked in air through the gap.

"Yeah, that's the good stuff. That's where you've been," it said, taking in large gulps of air. It turned its attention back to Northrop. "The least you could do is drill a few holes in this display case so I could breathe. Turn on the TV every once in a while. Slide me a magazine. Just because I'm on display doesn't mean I ain't got feelings, see? Myaah!"

The shark gave one last lunge and fell to the floor with the display case. Northrop jumped back just as the impact of the crash spread shattered glass across the room. The hammerhead landed on its back in the middle of the glass pile. It thrashed on the floor, corkscrewed its mass and leapt inches into the air.

"C'mon! Get me off this glass. You think it's fun down here? I'm getting cut."

Northrop inched closer. "You're not going to bite me?"

“Bite you?” the shark replied. “I’m here to help you. Now pick me up before my skin gets punctured and the papier-mâché spills out. I won’t be much use to you as a ball of skin.”

He does have a point there, Northrop thought. Whoever heard of a ball of shark-skin helping anyone? He’d see what the shark had to say for itself. He picked the creature up off the floor, set it on the pastel flowered couch to his left, carefully brushed off the fragments of glass stuck on its skin, then shuffled back to get some distance.

“Where you going? Do a friend a favor. I’ve got this terrible itch next to my dorsal fin. You could scratch that for me?” Northrop walked up and scratched the shark’s fin. It gurgled in what he assumed was analogous to a cat’s motor. As a last minute reality check, he picked up the shark to examine it for wires, electronic gadgets, *something*. Maybe the Yeoman’s wife who brought him tetrizzini last week had pulled some kind of animatronics prank. But alas, it appeared to be the same shark Northrop had dismembered that fateful evening. Nothing awry. Just a taxidermist’s nightmare. Northrop had solidly entered the grounds of the unreal. He set the shark back down on the couch.

The shark sucked in a few gulps of air through its mouth and its gills quivered as air rushed out through them. “It’s just not the same as getting your oxygen from water.” The shark coughed a little and then smacked its mouth. “Hgem. Well, Northrop. I think you know why I’m here. You’ve made a wish and I’m here to answer it.”

“What wish?” Northrop asked.

“You’re joking right? I shouldn’t need to tell you. Your wish for Archimedes to take out the kitchen trash, of course. You wished hard enough for your son to get off his lazy ass and pitch in and we listened. You’re a strong sender. So I’ve been granted the authority to fulfill that wish for you.”

“You lying sack of seaweed!” Northrop jumped on the couch, straddling the shark between his legs, twisting its head with his hands. “His lazy ass? It’s your fault he’s gone!”

The shark squealed and wriggled under Northrop’s excruciating grip. “Let me go! Myaar! Your son is still alive.” Its rough skin chafed against his palms as it shook back and forth. Northrop loosened his hold. The shark coughed and sputtered as waves of tremors worked their way through the skin on its upper ridge. “You’re a wet blanket aren’t you? Why dontchya go soak your fat head! If I had a penny for every bell bottom with an edge that needs sanding. Yes, I know you think Archimedes is dead, but I’m happy to say it isn’t true. He’s alive and well, and I can help you find him.”

Northrop's chin began to crinkle up, so he removed his glasses and pinched the top of his nose between his eyes. He'd found that by applying pressure this way it would often prevent him from crying. If he knew which way was down anymore, he'd find a way to crawl there and disappear. He got off the couch and backed away from the shark, not sure where he was headed, he just knew it had to be away.

"Hey, sailor boy. You going to find us some hooch? Cause you're not the only one who could use some, uh, spifflication." That about did Northrop over. He'd always wondered what it felt like to lose your mind. He'd seen some late night documentaries on the subject and found himself succumbing occasionally to the whole mystique of tortured souls. He could tell you now on this end of it that it wasn't anything special. It felt like shit.

"You ain't got much to say, do you? I understand how a man of your sensibilities could find this all upsetting. Your son is hiding, Northrop, because he fears your anger. But I will help him return to you, he will take out your trash, and then, having fulfilled my obligation to your wish, I will return to the ocean and disappear from your life forever. Myaah!"

Northrop wanted to believe. If he could get Archimedes back, everything would be okay again. He could find another job. They would do science homework, wash dishes together, dust furniture. It could be damned beautiful.

I mean, what do these things look like until they happen, right? And then it's that strange story everyone hears but just accepts. They don't happen until they happen. That's why there's no precedent on public record.

"Look, it's all the god's honest," said the shark. "I'd cross my heart if you left me one to swear by. Puh-dump. I'm joking with you, putz. No hard feelings. But I can tell from your eyes you want in. Now comes the fun part. I've got some special powers to help us search for your son. I know you don't know nothing from nothing yet, so I'll walk you through it all easy. If you bring me outside, I'll let you try her on for size. Myaah! You're gonna love this, see?"

Northrop decided to give it a shake. If the shark tried anything funny in the backyard, he'd just kill it with a rake and throw it in the garbage. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Northrop picked up the shark and carried him out through the screen door. The fall had settled in by this point. The breeze bristled against his unshaven face. The leaves on the family birch tree had already started to shed their color.

The shark darted its head, taking in the scenery. Northrop kept a tight grip on the ungodly bundle in his arms, ready to defend himself if necessary. "Lift me above

your head,” the shark commanded. Northrop obeyed, holding the shark toward the sun.

“Northrop, look on my belly. You see that incision where you mercilessly removed my guts? I want you to yank out the first few stitches. But only a few. We don’t want the papier-mâché to leak out.”

Northrop followed the shark’s directions, unraveling the clear thread he still had no recollect of sewing. Something he hadn’t thought about much since the morning after Archimedes died—he couldn’t remember stuffing this fish and reassembling it.

The shark continued to bark orders while Northrop held it aloft. “There should be a tiny half inch hole down there. I want you to put your lips to it and blow as much air as you can through my body.”

Northrop felt ridiculous. It’s a good thing his yard had a fence so no one could see him. He still blushed when he brought his lips to the tiny aperture between the loose skin flaps. He inhaled through his nose and was surprised to find the shark smelled little worse than musty newspapers. He blew as hard as he could into the creature. The shark puckered its mouth into a small circle. Northrop’s breath traveled out its body and produced a sound instantly recognizable. It sounded just like a bassoon, his instrument of choice in the second tier service concert band he’d thrown together. They’d play for local festivals and little league games, never coming anywhere close to concert hall proficiency. “I’m no Horatio Hornblower, but I love to make a bassoon of myself.” A joke he’d always crack no matter how many unsympathetic ears it fell on. It had been a while since he’d picked up the clown of the orchestra, but he fell right back in that afternoon.

“That’s right, keep blowing,” the shark urged him on. “I think it’s working.” Northrop blew harder and the hammerhead issued out a mournful melody. It sounded like “Anchors Aweigh,” but in a minor key, as if the fighting spirit of the Navy had eaten a lunch that didn’t quite agree with her. The music broke down Northrop’s shell, though. He felt transported from his backyard to a place within his soul he kept closely guarded. It made him feel more like himself, like something bigger than his petty concerns had come by and swabbed his deck.

“See, Northrop? I knew you’d like this music. It takes a true sailor to appreciate. Relax. Let the cool wind rush over your body. Think of a color that makes you feel happy.”

Northrop closed his eyes. White. Pristine and heat-reflecting. Open vistas with no demands on his conscious. He opened his eyes to a transformation in his backyard. At first, it looked like the wind had ripped the grass up from its roots. As his vision adjusted, he saw that the grass was still there, but it was changing color,

blade by blade, a rippling white overtaking his fenced-in dominion. The hammer-head's song faded away with Northrop's breath.

"Look at that! It's like a white cancer eating out the filth. We'll do all right together. The sailor and the scallywag. Bring me over to that tree. I'll show you what else I can do."

Northrop carried the shark over to the birch tree next to Archimedes' trampoline, the jumping bed and frame pad already on their way toward suffocating underneath a barrage of fallen brown leaves the tree had shed over the weeks since Archimedes' disappearance.

"Why don't you hop up there, dewdropper. If you blow in my hole again, we'll do a number on this chunk of bark. Chip-chop, Nort."

Northrop gave the trampoline a few light test jumps. The wind blew through his hair as he flopped around. A small tinge of pain shot through his shins. It had been a while since he worked them like this. It reminded him of standing for maneuvering watch on top of the submarine when they'd pull out of port, alone with just a few other lookouts and the Officer of the Deck. Nothing else matched that unique combination of exhaustion and triumph. Peering out over the water, the loud silence of the wind whipping past as he stood at attention, binoculars in hand, the sun sending its haphazard golden reflection across the surface of the water on a direct path toward him: rarely had he felt so acutely the majesty of being a man.

He blew into the shark again and the mournful bassoon solo filled the air around him. He imagined this is what the Pied Piper's music must have sounded like. A profound feeling of rootedness sunk in: he was on the trampoline in his tiny yard, and yet he was also at sea standing tall with a steel tube of men working beneath him in the ocean below.

Largeness in smallness, smallness in largeness. A tear slipped down and splashed on Northrop's wrist while he hummed along with the tune, a sense of despair dovetailing and intertwining with the steady beat of purpose. Could action rise endlessly, tension mounting past climax without ever reaching a conclusion? He dug a hole for himself in the moment, one he hoped to find his way back to later.

"Think of some more colors Northrop. Don't be afraid to cry. Torpedoes do it too when they can't shake the horrors. Don't hold back."

Northrop closed his eyes and let his imagination steer him toward places he'd always been afraid to go, neighborhoods in his memory where he kept his car door locked as he cruised through, eyes locked ahead. He thought about what his father's empty brown eyes must have looked like when the Coast Guard found him

washed up on the shore of the Onwendan River, his dark blue pea coat glazed with caked-on salt, his arms entangled in strands of light green seaweed, knotted together around bulbous pods of kelp. The seaweed unraveled off Northrop's dead father and reached out toward him, exploding into a kaleidoscope of colors: carnation pink, turquoise blue, wild tangerine, jungle green, all coalescing in tremendously complex patterns. Lavender circles turned into maroon stars turned into mahogany triangles turned into cornflower reams of noodles. Northrop felt alive with his grief. He began leaping on the trampoline again, blowing with everything he could muster into the shark, the music reaching a blistering pitch. Northrop opened his eyes. The tree in front of him crawled with the colors he had brought into the world, like sparkling rock candy. Hundreds of leaves fluttered with life as the wave of music washed over them. The trunk and branches proved the most shocking to Northrop; they'd taken on a color he didn't even recognize. It wasn't merely an alteration or different shade of a base color, but something entirely unfamiliar. Something new.

To Northrop, that afternoon it felt like a singularly spiritual experience. A new beginning. He didn't know, couldn't know, how it must have looked to his neighbors next door, just over the fence. The ten-year-old twins, Helen and Cassandra, both in Archimedes' class at Langbrim Heights, had been scrawling pictures of giraffes and lizards on their back porch with colored chalk. Their work came to a halt when they heard the terrifying music groaning out from the Glittens' backyard. They described it to their parents that night as the sound of bagpipes shoved through a garbage disposal. And though they couldn't present a convincing case to their bemused mother, they swore they saw Mr. Glitten's head hopping in the air over the ridge of the fence with a hammerhead shark in his hands. It looked to them, although they couldn't be sure, like he was chewing on the shark's belly. All of this was scary enough, but the kicker was the birch tree, which they claimed had melted into black mud, dripping splotches all over Northrop's face.

Northrop, sufficiently impressed by the shark's color abilities and stunned by the enchanting music in the backyard, signed on to the shark's plan. The hammerhead explained to Northrop that Archimedes had decided to hide somewhere in Langbrim as a different color than his true self. He had camouflaged himself to blend in with his surroundings. All Northrop had to do was travel through town with the shark, playing music and changing the scenery until Archimedes appeared through the contrast of the new colors. The shark assured him that Archimedes would want to come home immediately and take out the kitchen trash once he saw how much his father cared about him.

"There's a cost for my services though, of course. I know you didn't think you'd get a free ride. I don't accept payment in wooden nickels, if you catch my drift. What you saw this afternoon was merely a preview. Like when the vacuum fella

pours dirt on your carpet and only cleans up half of it. If we're going to paint this town to hell and back, my special talents are going to require a lot of energy. Energy only you can provide. Myaah!"

So Northrop set up camp in the bathroom with the equipment the shark had requested for the procedure: fourteen dinner bowls, a plastic straw, and a razor blade. When the shark gave the signal, Northrop's job was to slice open his wrist and bleed, just a tiny amount, not very much, just a little nipper of blood, he *promised*, into each bowl. This would only take a short amount of time, half the afternoon *at most*, and when the shark had reached critical energy capacity, they could go out and take Langbrim by the tail and put it in his pocket. Archimedes wouldn't have a corner to hide in.

The shark gave Northrop the go-to nod. Northrop looked down at the razor blade pinched between his thumb and finger, thought of all the fond memories he had of cleaning gunk off the kitchen floor with this little buddy, and realized that in their journey together he never predicted they'd reach these crossroads. He wondered if this is how it happens when you decide to kill yourself: under the blanket of self-delusion. He steeled himself for the eventuality of the icy beyond and dragged the razor across his left arm. The white skin of his wrist curled up around the blade like pencil shavings as he slashed the three-inch line the shark described as "customary for the occasion." He gritted his teeth in anticipation for the blood and pain, but neither came. His arm didn't well up with blood and apart from the slightest tugging sensation, the cut didn't set off any raw nerves.

"Good. Good." The shark worked its jaw with ravenous impatience. "That means the blood has finished coagulating. Go on. Shake that wrist over the bowl for me."

Northrop flipped his wrist over a bowl and shook out his wound. Small blue pellets, each about the size of a grain of sand, spilled out of Northrop's incision. You'd think he'd broken open the hourglass at the center of the world the way the teaming heap of miniature blue crystals poured out of him. The edges of his vision blurred out and the creeping, sickly sweet scent of ammonia filled the room.

"That's good work for now. You look tuckered out. Why don't you pass me that straw and you can take a rest while I suck these down. They don't make your kind with much get up and go these days, do they? Hey, I've got a joke for you. What do bassoon players use for birth control?"

"What."

"Their personalities."

Northrop smiled. Hey-yo. Watch out. He didn't know Danny Thomas was in town tonight.

"You liked that one? All right. I got another for ya. What's the difference between a bassoon and a trampoline?"

"You take your shoes off before you jump on a trampoline?"

Northrop had actually heard that pearl before. Definitely apropos. He reached over to tuck the straw into the shark's mouth before slumping down across the cool white linoleum. Such weakness and tiredness all over. A pinch in his back. A scratch in his throat. He allowed his face to rest on the floor, and why not, he kept it clean enough, even in here. He could barely keep an eye open. The shark wriggled up to the edge of the bowl and sucked up Northrop's blue blood particles. Its fins flapped at a frantic and happy pace, like a dog's tail. The tiny crystals went up the straw into its mouth and seconds later came tumbling out of the gill slits on its sides. In one end and out, well, some others. They spilled across the bathroom tiles and sprinkled in around the ridges of the grout lines. Northrop's compulsions got the best of him and he struggled up to grab a broom for the mess. That's when the throbbing pulse of the whirring bathroom fan in his ears synched with the black flashes ripping across his vision, enveloping him as he lost consciousness and twirled back to the floor.

Over what felt like weeks, the shark drained Northrop of his blood. He would rouse slightly to the sight of the shark nudging the razor blade toward him with its head. Northrop would first slice his right wrist, then a location farther up his arm, then back to his left wrist, then another slice, then another, bleeding his blue crystal sand powder into the bowls on the shark's demand, passing in and out of consciousness. "Eight more bowls to go," he thought he heard. And then six. And then the number of bowls jumped back up to eleven, then down to three. The hazy blur of the events left him too weak to count and vulnerable to manipulation. At one point Northrop woke up from the sting of the shark chewing and sucking directly on his arm. Northrop yanked on it with what pitiful strength he had left. He yelled the silent protest of frozen souls lost in dreams. The shark had grown to more than double its original size. It felt wet and slippery as it rubbed its stomach back and forth across Northrop's chest. He couldn't tell if he was drenched in sweat or in sea slime. Unable to shake the shark, Northrop succumbed to the violent gnawing on his flesh and fell back asleep.

"Get a towel and wash off all this goozlum!"

“Hey, swabbie! Get a towel and wash off all this goozlum. Looks like I pulled a Daniel Boone all over your front. Many apologies. I haven’t gorged myself like that in decades. Fuck, I’m ready to go! Let’s do this. Wake up, you shit. Myaah!”

Northrop came to with the hangover of fifty nights in a drunk tank. His gritty blood pebbles blanketed the entire bathroom floor. He looked down at his shirt, drenched in a salty pudding of mucous. The shark rocked side to side with enthusiasm in the bathtub.

“I gotta hand it to you. That blood of yours was a real delicacy. Such a distinct flavor. I picked up a strong musk on the mid-palette, but with a light, airy finish. It hit the spot. Now I got enough energy to have consensual relationships with a whole school of dames! You know any women around here loose in the hilts? Wait, of course you do. You’re married!”

“You’re such a pill,” Northrop said, pushing himself into a sitting position.

“Yeah and so’s your old man.”

Northrop rubbed the front of his shirt and pulled back trails of sticky slime. He had to hold back from pulling a Boone himself. He stood up with careful precision, gripping the sink basin for support. After he had taken his shirt off, he got his first real look in the mirror. The feeding had aged him significantly. He looked like his older brother Jed, the divine ass. Northrop had lost large patches of hair and what remained had turned a sinewy silver, drained of vitality. A dozen hard wrinkles had folded his face into distinct partitions. His jowls hung forward with loose skin and liver spots collecting under his chin. Luckily, his arms seemed to have skipped the months-long, lugubrious healing process and bestowed him with greyish-purple battle lines along their lengths. He’d already look crazy enough walking down the street while blowing into a hammerhead shark. He didn’t need to top off the sight with a broken open body spewing forth mystery pebbles.

A shower and a fresh set of clothes left Northrop with renewed vigor. He threw on a tan corduroy jacket with fleece lining and jogged outside barefoot to rummage through the trunk of his metallic blue 78 Squalo. He tossed out the spare tire, greasing himself with black streaks across his white t-shirt and palms. The tire rolled off the sidewalk and into the street before spinning and wobbling to a stop across the yellow divider. Northrop paid it no mind. He had an action plan. He found his black leather golf bag and shook out the clubs into the trunk. Two firm cuts with his pocket knife down each side of the bag and a quick run into the house to throw on a belt and some sneakers and he was off, with a belligerent shark thrown over his shoulder and the far-off look of unrepentant determination in his eyes.

Northrop marched through his subdivision to a turnabout at the intersection next to the gas station before he realized he had no idea where to look first. If he didn't plan a systematic approach, it could take him weeks of changing colors without even coming close to finding Archimedes. He slung the golf bag over his shoulders down onto the sidewalk below, unzipped the lid, and kneeled over to confer with the shark.

"Where am I headed? You got any tips?" Northrop could see his breath in slow moving clouds of mist.

"I'm half tempted to let ya wander around loose out here for hiding me like your retarded nephew," the shark said. "But I've got my own set of business to attend to. The faster we get this over and I can get onto my next gig, the better. You're not exactly the life of the party. Last John I had was more of a *Dawn*, if you get me. Real foxy chick. Classy on the outside, though. And the wish she had...phew! I'll tell ya, it wasn't another dime-a-dozen, dead son downers. No disrespect, of course."

"Just tell me where the hell to go."

"All right. Fort Driffwold. The Langbrim Fall Festival at Fort Driffwold. It's where Archimedes sat on your shoulders at the fourth of July this summer. You tied a glow stick to a helium balloon together. Let it float up into the fireworks exploding above. You twos high-fived when the balloon popped and the glow stick fell back down into the crowd below. Real touching moment. Gives me a hard-on thinking about it. Father and son, sharing a mo..."

Northrop zipped up the golf bag. He knew where to go. Archimedes, you'd better be out there.

NEXT ISSUE:

AVATAR

MAY 2010

WE WOULD LOVE YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS!

PLEASE CONTACT SARAH@ALERTNERD.COM FOR
MORE DETAILS.