



PULP ASYLUM

April 2026
Issue 11

Dangerous Women

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On The Cover:

Witch Riding of a Goat by Albrecht Durer

This issue's cover art is [Albrecht Durer's](#) 1501 etching, *Witch Riding on a Goat*--one of the history's great images of female mayhem!

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ACID TO ACID

H. Marin



I watch through the plex observation window as one of the newest Operation Goatherd variants bleats and spews a fluorescent green stream onto a mound of soggy pizza boxes, empty cans, grease-splotted paper towels, soiled, discarded underwear. I wrinkle my nose, considering whether or not my new post is a punishment.

The goat suctions its mouth to the epoxy floor, slurping up the puddle of liquified garbage.

“...and the abdominal corrosion resistance issue?” I ask, making a note on my clipboard.

I’d never seen the earlier variants, only heard the horror stories from other agents. For a moment the mound of trash is replaced by a coil of half-dissolved goat intestines.

Dr. Sara El-Hamza levels her bronze eyes at me, radiating authority, though this is merely residual from a past life. This is her lab as much as this is my clipboard.

“That hasn’t been an issue for several variants, Mr. Bell. I understand you’re new to this posting, but surely your notes are up to date?”

A challenge.

I don’t take the bait. Researchers assigned to the domes are always looking for superficial excitement. I can’t blame her.

“The longevity study looks good, and the projections for the 6D herd are promising. I’ll need a final headcount; the last update you sent us counted five-hundred and thirteen animals. The deadline is four months to deployment, given the estimated environmental cessation date, and—”

Dr. El-Hamza puts a cigarette between her teeth and lights it. “How much longer?”

I hesitate. She means, *how much longer am I going to be here.*

I know the answer to this about as much as I know how much longer my own mandated contract will last, which is to say, not at all. “Estimates from Dome C-313 show we have about a year before the atmosphere turns catastrophic. Your mandated contract with the Benign Absolute Governance and NuEarth Technologies states—”

“I know what it states,” she snaps, ignoring the goat as it begins to bawl, hungry for more.

My eyes dart to the clunky plastic box secured around her ankle. Its red light blinks assurances.

“I saw a doe the other day, past the dome’s perimeter,” she says, quietly. She is not speaking to me. “A doe and two fawns. I haven’t seen deer in decades. Not since...”

The heat? The floods? The unbreathable grit?

She takes a drag of her cigarette and walks down the corridor, speaking over her shoulder.

“Be sure to come back for the presentation. We’re going to change the world.”

#

Four months later, the clinical lighting of the corral makes my teeth ache. The standing area is populated by the exalted witnesses to the world's salvation, the ones who built the domes and implemented the Scientific Deployments of 2268—conglomerate executives, eccentric billionaires, The Supreme Leader, the General, the CEO of NuEarth Technologies.

Everyone quiets as Dr. El-Hamza walks to the center of the staging area. Her steps are rigid, a silver remote white-knuckled in her right hand, her left curled behind her back. She stops and surveys the crowd.

“I am pleased to present the conclusion of Operation Goatherd, culminating in the perfected specimens of the 6th sequence, D-type.”

She presses a button on the remote and a counterweight metal door lifts behind her.

Synonymously, the standing room door auto-locks from within.

Whirr, click. Asset preservation.

A band of goats trots out around her, drooling rivulets of lime ichor, mouths soft vortexes of bubblegum flesh. Someone gasps. Salvation is not beautiful.

“As I’m sure you know from your rigorous surveillance,”—she smiles benignly, like they’re all in on the same joke—“this herd has been genetically modified to dissolve and digest humanity’s mistakes. Through six years of trial and error, I have developed system-wide corrosion resistance to their enhanced stomach acid, modified their MC4R genes to ensure that they are rarely satiated, and improved their PPP3CA and AMH sequences, resulting in increased likelihood for multiple births to ensure the longevity of the herd. Once I set them to their task, they will be unstoppable. The majority of the herd has completed their programming and are being released into the wild as we speak.”

Dr. El-Hamza’s eyes are molten.

“This herd has been classically conditioned with the use of trigger words to re-learn their primary diet. When this word is spoken, they divert from their natural diet of grasses to their learned alternative—man-made waste.”

A goat belches, bile spraying onto the guardrail, sending up a thin rivulet of smoke. The CEO of NuEarth recoils, disgusted.

Dr. El-Hamza drops the placid smile. She is cold now, clinical. An indentured scalpel.

“Despite your façade of preservation, while the Earth withers you design bigger cars, deeper mines. You don’t want change; you want the planet’s acquiescence. You twist the natural structures of the world until they break, and you don’t even feel them snap between your fingers.

Stunned silence.

“My creations will not only fix humanity’s mistakes, but the mistake of humanity.”

The General’s hand trails slowly back to his holster—he left his weapons at the gate.

“Changing their diet to include a third classification wasn’t easy,” Dr. El-Hamza says. She pulls her arm out from behind her back. It is missing from the elbow down, the wound half-heartedly cauterized. A goat licks a droplet of her blood from the floor, cries for more.

The surge of bodies toward the door is panicked and immediate. A meat grinder, jammed.

Her eyes have settled into a far-away smolder—she is beyond the lab and the dome and the gasping planet. The trigger is inaudible; I read it on her lips.

“Justice.”

The room explodes into oil-painted smears of pink, splatters of red, ribbons of chartreuse.

#

Far above, next to an air vent in the dome's exterior, a doe pricks her velvet ear toward the subterranean screaming, then lowers her mouth back to the moss.

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WILL PURDY AND THE SKY

J. Nathan



Will Purdy approached two dragonous basalt columns pushing up through the waving prairie grass. The charged air between them smelled of summer storms and lightning strikes. Purdy knew he shouldn't mess with such things, but he was desperate.

He'd followed Henry Whitier, that charmed bastard, here seeking answers. Purdy watched him ride through the columns and disappear under the brilliant azure sky.

It's a trick, his mind hollered, anxious and agitated. I should be back at the ranch, keeping what's left of the herd safe. Protecting my property while it's still mine.

But there was another voice deep in his chest that despaired. *This is my last play. I can't go back east. Who could leave after seeing a sunset stretch for miles, ablaze with colors only dreamt of? Penelope could, that's who. Well, I won't follow her.*

With one last yearnful look at his beloved sky, he urged Zephyr gently forward. The horse fretted and danced sideways, but Purdy was the boss and had his way.

Through the columns they went. The world toppled about in waves and windstorms, striking Purdy breathless. When clarity was restored, the soft swaying grass was replaced by sharp jagged rocks, cold air, and a steep mountain pass.

Whitier was also there. Fifteen years his senior, Whitier gave Purdy a look of paternal patience, his hands folded atop his pommel while he waited for Purdy to adjust to his surroundings.

"You're a long way from home, Purdy." Whitier greeted his pursuer.

“I will not mince words. I’m here for your luck.” Purdy struggled to catch his breath.

“Luck, hmmm?” Whitier pondered the idea.

“Your herd escaped the Texas fever—that’s awfully lucky. You bought out both Mason and Covington when they suddenly high-tailed it back east. Some say you’re fixin’ to make your own frontier fiefdom. That’s the kind of luck I need.” Purdy said.

Whitier stared with hawkish eyes at the greenhorn, then decided.

“Come if you’re coming, but,” Whitier warned, “it isn’t a hidden silver mine if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“I don’t care what it is,” Purdy said truthfully. *Just so long as I can stay.*

Whitier turned Paladin to face the trail going higher into the mountains. Purdy followed cautiously having never ridden such terrain.

“You made it through your first winter—an admirable feat. No shame in heading back east; older and wiser for it.” Whitier quietly condescended as they climbed higher and deeper into the mountains. “Frontier life is harder-”

“You won’t push me out,” Purdy grumbled. “Ten years in the territory don’t make you god.”

“That’s not-” Whitier started all fiery, but then exhaled and spoke barely above a whisper, “You’d be surprised by the gods out here . . . and the tribute they demand.”

A sharp turn in the trail revealed the yawning mouth of a cave and dark depths beyond.

Whitier dismounted, gave Paladin a reassuring pat on his muzzle, and entered the cave. He didn’t seem to care whether Purdy followed him or not. Purdy told Zephyr to stay put.

Zephyr whinnied his displeasure, but to no avail. His master was gone.

Purdy’s eyes adjusted to the dim glow of the cave. The cool, pleasant air put him at ease.

He paid no mind to the rocky floor that made walking slow and arduous, nor to the walls when they turned from sharp razors to soft curves. Curves not unlike human skulls—hundreds of them pocking the cave walls like an ancient ossuary.

Whitier stood up ahead before a myriad of tunnels where the cave walls stretched to cathedral heights. Purdy spied several patches of sky sending dancing beams of light to the cave floor, and his heart ached to know such wonderment.

There was a faint sound of staccato tapping from deep within the tunnels. Whitier shifted away, uneasy. The tapping grew to a ruckus that filled the cavern and Whitier reflexively touched the silver revolver at his hip.

Purdy heard singing in his mind. The kind of melody his mother used to hum while she worked her needlepoint in the evenings. The tune calmed him so much so that Purdy didn't even flinch when the giant arachnid queen emerged from the darkness.

Herdsmen, the Queen's words curled up inside Purdy's head like smoke, *whom have you brought before me?*

"His name is Purdy," was all Whitier said.

Merriment danced in the Queen's glassy black eyes as she beheld Purdy, who stared back in quiet reverence.

Purdy, what do you wish from me?

Purdy's mind cleared of smoky words and the answer came forth. "I want the sky."

The Queen cocked her head, intrigued. *How so?*

"It's like nothing I've ever seen before. Words can't—I can't leave it. I would do anything not to leave it." Purdy's voice trembled, coming so close to the heart of things.

The Queen spoke solemnly. *You want a place where you and your sky can be together, always.*

Purdy, teary-eyed, nodded.

The Queen addressed Whitier. *Your tribute is agreeable, Herdsman, go and be prosperous. We shall meet again in the autumn.*

Whitier eyed Purdy silently, sadly, and reached for his gun.

Your conscious is noisome. The Queen's disgust was striking. Our deal was struck long ago. Do not forget how your empire was bought. Begone!

Whitier swayed violently under her words, like a tree fighting to stay rooted in a terrible storm, then went still. A cold and bitter darkness filled his eyes; he was powerless to do anything but leave.

The soft humming grew louder once again and enveloped Purdy in the warmth of a winter quilt. His wish had been granted and he was content, even as he felt a stinging coldness touch his heart.

The Queen carried him like a precious treasure high into the cave, higher than her other treasures. High enough that Purdy had an unobstructed view out one of the openings, where nothing could come between him and his beloved sky . . . for a time.

J. Nathan is a speculative fiction writer living in the Pacific Northwest. She is greatly influenced by Ursula K. Le Guin and Shirley Jackson. You can usually find her out on a run through the woods or rambling about reading and writing on Bluesky [@jamielnathan.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/jamielnathan.bsky.social).

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THE KNOWLEDGE POOL

Ben Williams



The high sun beat unrelentingly upon Qandar, baking its stony streets. The witches Narsa, Yovi, and Subin stood at the edge of Anabasis Agora, observing its gathering crowd. Several patrolmen and a holy partizan flanked a circular dais at the center of the agora, a newly installed addition to the space, where a templar stood addressing the mass of people. The

witches saw by the templar's garnet raiment he was of low rank, a novice of the White Church sent to interface with Qandar's citizenry.

"It is simple," the templar spoke. "Announce yourself to the Knowledge Pool and state your query. Its wisdom shall be yours. Come, see for yourself. You there," he said to a burly man in a grey cap and open vest, "Try it." The man looked behind himself, then turned back to the templar. "Yes, you. Come. Witness this miracle of the One True God."

The man ascended the dais's two steps, their pearlescent tiling bright in the noonday light, and went to the broad reflecting pool at its center. He looked at it, then back to the templar. The templar motioned at the pool. "Announce yourself."

The man addressed the pool. "I am Ablayar the Bronze Maker." He turned again to the templar.

"Speak your query," the templar urged.

"Show me the Sapphire Palace at the Sea of Isles."

The witches could not see the pool's surface from their vantage, but they saw Ablayar's eyes grow wide as he gazed into it. He doffed his cap and spread his arms, turning his face

to the sky. "Praise to the One True God!" A murmur went through the crowd, and people queued to take their turns.

"I want to try it," Subin said to her sisters.

"Right now?" Narsa asked. "In front of a templar? What will you say, 'I am Subin the Witch. Show me how to formulate an elixir of contraception?'"

"They would arrest you on the spot," Yovi said.

"I will say I am Subin the Seamstress," Subin said.

"This is not a plausible lie," Narsa retorted, motioning to Subin's chemical-stained cloak, herb pouches, and potion case.

"Then what do you suggest?" Subin asked.

"I suggest we return later when the crowd has thinned, and the templar is gone." Narsa covered her eyes and looked skyward. "And besides, do you really want to wait in the heat for all these people to take their turns? I do not."

"Nor do I," Yovi said.

“Fine. Let us cool off with drink and come back when the sun is down,” Subin said. Narsa and Yovi agreed, and the witches went down Spirit Street to the Melondrop Taverna, where they whiled the afternoon, enjoying fruit, roundbread, and bowls of melonwine under the shade of the canvas panels suspended above the taverna’s courtyard.

#

Three wandered into the night through the taverna’s clacking curtain of blue and gold beads, cheeks rosy with the blush of melonwine. Subin brushed breadcrumbs from her garb and hiccuped. Narsa lifted her hands and spun.

“Sister, you are going to fall over,” Yovi cautioned.

“Oh,” Narsa said, stopping her spin with a sway. “Right, bad idea. To the Knowledge Pool!”

The witches went up Spirit Street. The sun had been down for hours and the street was empty. They reached Anabasis Agora, where only a single patrolman remained by the darkened dais. He leaned lazily on his spear while he ate a somsa, oblivious to the witches watching him.

“I would rather he were not present,” Subin said.

“Can you lead him off?” Narsa asked to Yovi.

“Let us see,” Yovi answered, stumbling. She spread her arms, closed her eyes, and transformed small into a crow. She ascended into the dark. Seconds later, she glided down, splayed her talons, and snatched the somsa from the patrolman’s hand. She circled the agora, cawing, dangling the somsa at the man, then drifted down Silver Street. The patrolman swiped at the somsa, swore at her, and gave chase. Narsa laughed out loud.

“Quickly,” Subin said. She led Narsa to the dais, to the pool at its center. It was framed with brickwork bearing depictions of the Vanquisher’s pursuit of the Necrologer through the steppe, and their clash upon the banks of the River Zaf. Its water glimmered in the starlight, reflecting the heavens not from its placid surface, but from deep within.

“Strange,” Narsa said. She rubbed her eyes and leaned forward. “Why are the stars inside it?”

“And why does the water not show us our faces?” Subin added.

“You are right! Our reflections are nowhere to be seen.”

“Perhaps I should acquire a sample,” Subin said, reaching into her case.

Narsa grasped Subin's arm and shook her head. "Don't." She retreated a few steps from the pool, bringing Subin with her. "Something is not right," she whispered. Narsa closed her eyes and reached her hand forward, searching the pool for magical energy. Soon she discerned it, a sensory conduit within the waters, surveilling from some dark place. "Do not announce yourself to this thing."

"Why not? What is the harm?" Subin asked.

"You! Get away from there!" a voice shouted from the edge of the agora. The witches looked up to see the patrolman returning, somsa in hand, but now missing his spear.

"Time to leave!" Subin said. She and Narsa ran in the opposite direction along Silver Street and veered into Pith Alley. Subin peered back around the corner. The patrolman had not pursued.

Yovi the Crow appeared from the dark and transformed again into a woman as she landed in the alley. "What did you learn?"

Subin turned to Narsa. Narsa brought her hand to her chin and tapped it with her finger. "I am not sure."

#

Qandar woke beneath dawn's silver sky. Merchants prepared their stalls in alleys and squares throughout the city. The scent of roundbreads baking in tandyrns filled the air. People came to Anabasis Agora and joined the forming queue, waiting to query the One True God's miraculous Knowledge Pool.

But deep in the White Church, below its great sanctuary and towering arches, past iron doors guarded by Silver Men, within The Theocracy's secretmost archives, two grey-bearded templars in crisp white robes trimmed with crimson and gold opened their prodigious tomes, set out their inkwells, and readied their quills. They stood by the Font of Seeing and gazed into its crystalline water.

A young man's reflection appeared, eyes vibrant and beard dark. "I am Showvoz the Bricklayer." The templars recorded his name and appearance. "Show me the father of the One True God."

The templars looked at one another. "Heresy," one said.

"Indeed," the other agreed. They made notes, and one of them glanced toward the chamber's edge, where black-cloaked operatives stood silently in the shadows. One of the operatives nodded to the templar, then receded from the room.

The templars returned their attention to the font. Soon, another face appeared.

Ben Williams lives in Los Angeles, where he can frequently be found outside, observing the ravens in his neighborhood. You can find him online at <https://benthewriter.neocities.org>.

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ALL THE PRETTY LITTLE ONES

Georgia Riodan



The drive from the bar to her apartment wasn't terribly long, but at 2am, the streets' silence made Lorna eager to get home. She thought about her date as she drove. He had been admirably respectful—pulling out the chair for her when she arrived, paying the entire bill without question, never looking directly down at her clearly-exposed cleavage—but he walked the line of being a bit *too* respectful. He didn't compliment her. He didn't hit on her.

He didn't even hug her goodbye; he simply walked her to the car, held the door for her, and made sure she was closed in securely before waving her off. She had at least hoped he would have held her hand or told her she looked pretty in her deep v-neck top.

On the bright side, they had talked until well past the kitchen's closing. If nothing else, he could keep up a sprightly conversation. And he *was* attractive, certainly her type, though she couldn't remember exactly what color his eyes were. The date just wasn't what she had expected. When she got home, she'd text him and let him know she had a nice time and see if he suggested a second date. Maybe the next date would be better. Maybe first-meeting nerves had gotten the best of him.

Lorna pulled into the lot behind her apartment complex, sliding her SUV between two smaller, thinner cars. She sighed to herself. It was much later than she'd anticipated. The back of the complex loomed over the parking lot, casting a wide shadow over the cars. She didn't have a back door to her apartment—the downfall of living upstairs—so she would either have to leave the parking lot and circle the complex to reach the front or she could cross the lawn between her complex and the one aside it and hope the side stairwell was unlocked. Sometimes it was. Sometimes the paranoid woman who lived in the apartment next to the entrance locked the door for her own sense of security, which would be fine, if all the residents had a key for it.

She opened her car door and swung herself down, landing a bit clumsily on her skinny black heels. She looked around to see if anyone saw her stumble. The parking lot was empty of people, full of parked cars and the two twin dumpsters. She reached across the driver's seat to grab her purse.

A blinding, shooting pain radiated up her leg from the base of her foot. She shrieked, sliding backwards from the leather seat and onto the gravel. As she fell, she felt the same pain strike her other foot from under her car. She pulled her legs into herself, screaming, and saw two neat little slices across the back of her ankles. Blood was already streaming down into her shoes. She twisted herself sideways, trying to gain leverage on her knees, throwing the weight of her body forward in a desperate attempt to start crawling. A hand reached out from the depths of the car's underbelly and grabbed her left ankle, just above the cut, and yanked her. The force of it caused her to hit her head both against the ground and the metal of the car as she was dragged into the darkness.

And then it stayed dark.

#

"This is why you need to stop dating women," Owen said, his speech muffled by the bite of bagel in his mouth. "They're terrible at communicating."

“I *did*,” muttered Dylan, giving his roommate a half-hearted glare. “For six months. Remember? I was seeing that guy—”

“Oh, the gym bro! Yeah, I remember him.” Owen’s mouth lifted into a smile. “Well, I remember his ass.” He let out a wolf-whistle, spitting a crumb of bagel in Dylan’s direction.

Dylan rolled his eyes and clicked the home button on his phone. Still no message from his date two nights ago. She had promised to text him when she got home.

She didn’t.

It hadn’t gone *that* terribly. He had made sure not to cross any lines or make her feel uncomfortable—though she had looked absolutely delicious in that purple v-neck top and her tulip skirt. Women were more skittish on dates, generally, so he’d been more reserved than usual. But maybe he’d scared her off somehow with his non-assertive attitude. “I just thought I’d hear from her.”

“Yeah, yeah, you were the perfect gentleman and she still ghosted you,” said Owen, looking for the remote between the stacks of mail on the table. “It’s a girl thing.”

“It’s *not*,” insisted Dylan.

“Then it’s a *you* thing. Is that better?”

He pressed the button on his phone again. No message. “No,” he said sadly. Owen pulled the chair beside him out and sat next upon it. He clapped a hand on his friend’s shoulder before pressing the button on the remote.

Dylan tried not to let the disappointment crush him.

#

Lorna’s vision eventually cleared and she felt well enough to move. She winced as she pulled her head up from where it slumped against her shoulder. Her forehead still smarted. Lorna rubbed a hand across it, as if touch would heal the bruise. She blinked and looked around. She was pressed up against a door—with a hot draft wafting in underneath, hitting the inch of exposed skin on her back—and splayed out on a wooden floor. She lifted an ankle, gently, hoping she had imagined the cut. She did not. She could see a thinly dried stain of brown-black-red from where her shredded achilles had sat on the floor. She lowered her leg back down.

A slow, slinking panic made its way to her throat.

Someone had taken her.

Someone had taken her and left her in a kitchen. At least, it had all the makings of a kitchen—granite countertops against the wall and shaped into an island, a corner fridge, a grimy stove hood above an equally rusted stovetop—but the room was startlingly devoid of food and kitchen utensils. The countertops were bare. She suspected if she opened the fridge, it'd be empty. The only working fixture was an overhead light in the center of the room, but it flickered statically, threatening to dim out any second.

And then, almost invisible in the shadows, stood a figure. A woman. Surprise flooded Lorna. She'd assumed her kidnapper would be a man. The figure moved closer and yes, she was a woman, but she was smaller than Lorna and looked too delicate to kidnap anyone. She sauntered into the light at an unrushed pace. She had dried blood on the sleeves of her gray knit sweater. That was all the confirmation Lorna needed.

Lorna put her feet flat on the floor and tried to stand. Her weight was too much for her ruined ankles. She fell immediately, landing promptly on her ass with a small groan. She looked at the back of her legs and there was a fresher red to the slices. The woman had stopped moving to watch her, but now positioned herself in front of the island. Facing Lorna. She leaned back, relaxing against the counter. "Sorry," she said, in a grating voice.

"What?"

“Sorry,” the woman said again. “About your ankles.” She gestured at Lorna’s legs. “I hate ruining such perfection.” Her voice was unaccented, but she spoke as if she wasn’t certain of the words. Like the language didn’t fit inside her mouth.

Lorna said nothing. She was trying not to cower, to curl in and make herself small. The woman’s eyes trailed over her body, not quite hungrily, but with a distinct pleasure hinted by the glimmer in her eyes. Hours ago, Lorna had longed for someone to notice the way her chest was accentuated in this shirt. Now, she was getting the attention she wanted, but it was making her queasy. There was something a little too . . . excited in the woman’s gaze. She had been noticed by other beautiful women before and she’d enjoyed the attention, even returned the favor with a wink and a smile. This was different.

“Why am I here?” Lorna said, finally.

“You were easy to take,” the woman said. She focused her attention on her own nails, clicking them together. “And you’re pretty.”

“I don’t have any money.”

“I know.”

Lorna stared at her. “Someone will come looking for me.”

“No, they won’t,” said the woman. She turned her gaze back to Lorna. “You live alone. Your family is in a different state. You have no partner. Your friends live hours away. You don’t work for several days.” She shrugged. “You’ll be long gone by then.” She went back to clicking her nails. *Click. Click.*

“How—”

“It’s my job,” the woman answered. She took a step towards Lorna. Maybe it was the lighting, but her features appeared to tighten against her face, making her look both older and less human in the same instance. Stretched, like canvas on too small a frame. “Ones like you keep her full.”

“Like me?” Lorna asked.

“Yes. Lonely.”

“I’m not lonely,” she said indignantly. The woman’s stare bore into her, her eyes wide and unusually dark. She lifted her chin, holding the unsettling gaze as well as she could. Something about the other’s eyes made her stomach sink. She eventually looked away, and her stomach untwisted immediately. “I’m not lonely,” she repeated to the rusted kitchenware. She wasn’t. She went on dates. She went to happy hour with her coworkers

every Friday. She called her family when she remembered to. She wasn't lonely, not in any sense of the word.

"Alone," the woman amended. "You were alone."

Lorna couldn't argue with that. In a different world, maybe she had gone home with her date and would have woken up *peacefully* in a different room she didn't recognize. But she had driven herself home, at 2am, and had parked behind her complex, in the lot where there were no cameras. She had left herself vulnerable.

No. That wasn't fair. She couldn't have expected her own kidnapping.

"Someone will notice," she tried again.

"It will be too late," the woman said, not missing a beat. "You'll be given to her tonight."

"Who?" Lorna's voice was much quieter now. She was losing her nerve.

The woman pointed behind Lorna, to the door she was propped up against. "She thinks you were a good choice."

"Why?"

“Little pretty ones taste the best to her,” the woman said, almost tiredly, as if she was bored of the conversation. Maybe she was. This wasn’t life and death to her; this was just another Thursday night. Was it actually Thursday? Lorna couldn’t be certain how much time she’d lost while unconscious. “But,” the woman added, giving Lorna another once-over. “I hate wasting a pretty girl.”

“You could let me go,” Lorna said. “You don’t have to give me to her.” She tried to smile, tried to dazzle her way out of certain death.

A rumble shook the kitchen, vibrating against the floor. The light swung sideways. Lorna shook with the house, although she wasn’t sure if it was the force of the tremor or her own nerves. “I do,” said the other woman, unaffected. Her eyes flitted down to Lorna’s ankles. “She’s tasted you already.”

Lorna’s throat burned. “You could keep me...for yourself...” she tried again. Would that truly be better? She felt her hope dissolving by the second. What other options did she have? There was nothing within reach for her to throw at the woman. She couldn’t walk. She had no idea what had happened to her purse, her phone. Maybe she could use this woman’s hungry stare to her benefit. She leaned herself forward slightly, accentuating the cut of her shirt.

The woman's lips curled for a moment. Her eyes glossed over Lorna again, as if considering. The blackness of her eyes was unreadable. "I cannot," she said finally. She didn't offer an explanation. She just stared at Lorna with a half-smile. After a moment, she tilted her head, narrowing her eyes. "I forget your name."

"What?"

"Your name. I knew it for your taking. I've forgotten it now."

Lorna felt her eyes water. "You don't remember my name?" It was silly, childish even, to be so hurt by her kidnapper forgetting her name. Something about it stung. Like she didn't matter at all. She was forgettable. Unimportant.

"We don't care for human names," said the other woman, her voice suddenly filling the room, though she hadn't raised it. "They are worth nothing to us." She crept forward, crouching down so she was at Lorna's eye level. Lorna pulled her legs back. No, this thing in front of her couldn't be a woman. There was something wrong with her face. Something too cloudy and too sharp at the same time. Her features moved in stillness. Behind her, a structure rose from the back of her head, but it was shaped from shadows, indistinguishable in the flickering light.

“What’s *your* name?” Lorna said, trying not to flinch back from the thing in front of her. The woman-thing responded too quickly, her answer garbled by her own voice. It sounded like *Abby-Dawn*, but that wasn’t right. It didn’t fit.

She didn’t want to ask again.

“And yours?”

“Lorna,” she whispered. “My name is Lorna.”

“Lorna,” repeated the woman-thing. “I’m very sorry, Lorna.” In a quick movement, she reached above Lorna’s head and turned the knob on the door behind her, opening it outward. She gave Lorna a little push and Lorna fell backwards, her body weightless as she was swallowed by the dark basement. She felt herself keep falling, unburdened by the ledges of a staircase, just pulled down by a gravity she couldn’t reach. It was like she had fallen into an endless pit.

But this pit *did* eventually have an end and Lorna found it with her back. She laid on the floor. It was warmer down here than upstairs, much too warm. She could no longer see the door she’d fallen into. She could no longer see *anything*, since the basement was too dark for her to make out a single shape. In the warmth of the pitch-blackness, she heard something else breathing loudly, getting louder and closer and warmer as she stayed flat

on the floor. She slowly pulled herself backwards, trying to find a space in the dark for her to hide from whatever that was. As she moved, it moved with her, a low hum vibrating around her, making her ears ring and her stomach tighten. Something behind her stopped her escape, thick and solid like another wall, though she couldn't be sure. It didn't matter. She was stuck. A wet piece of flesh slid across her open ankle. She shivered in spite of the heat. Weight sank onto her chest, her ribcage straining under the heft of it, though she couldn't see anything but the dark.

Her last gasp of air was soured by the heat of something else's mouth.

#

The TV came to life, a snippet of some reality drama immediately alighting the screen and the kitchen. Owen pulled another barstool up, placing his feet on it, as he looked for something suitable to watch. Dylan clicked and unclicked the home button on his phone. Another day gone with no message from his date. Maybe she hadn't liked him so much after all.

Owen paused his channel surfing on the local news as he looked around for his morning juice. "...missing since Wednesday night..." the newscaster was saying.

Owen threw a glance in the direction of the TV. “Another missing person? Jesus.” Dylan nodded in agreement, not entirely listening to him or the news. He was still staring at the phone, willing a text to come through.

“...over 280,000 women missing so far in 2023, with now seven of our local ladies adding to the tally within the last month.” Dylan glanced up and saw Lorna’s face staring back at him from the screen. His mouth fell open in wordless shock. “...Lorna Poole. Last seen leaving her apartment at 8:00 pm on Wednesday night, her car was found in the parking lot of her apartment complex but it has now been seventy-two hours since anyone saw her. If anyone has any information, please—”

“That’s her,” Dylan said, turning to Owen. Owen looked up from his food. He glanced at the tv, then back at Dylan, his brows furrowed in confusion. “That’s Lorna. My Lorna.” Owen’s face remained impassive. “The girl I went out with. Lorna.”

Owen stared at him. “What?”

“She’s missing,” Dylan said, his voice distant. “The girl. She’s actually missing.”

Owen’s mouth fell open, a chunk of bagel falling from his lips. “I guess we know why she hasn’t answered you,” he said slowly. He shook his head. “Damn.”

Dylan's gaze drifted back to the tv. The regular newscasters were commenting on the limited chances of a missing person being found alive after seventy-two hours. The last six hadn't been found yet; everyone in the county assumed the worst. All pretty women, all living alone, all mysteriously vanished. No one had heard from them since they disappeared.

No one ever would.

Georgia Riordan (she/they) is a writer and professor. Though typically described as a poet, their work is influenced by aspects of both horror and hybridity and often explores the boundaries between the familiar and the uncanny. Their publications have found homes in places like Cosmic Horror Monthly, Star 82 Review, Lumina Journal, and more. The entirety of their published writing can be found on their website: georgiariordan.com.

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BOY TOYS

Cindy Rosmus



Somehow, you always pissed him off.

Back then, your nickname for him, “Boy Toy Davey,” was pushing it. During sex, he’d pull your hair, but not in a fun way. Payback for teasing him in front of *her*. That fortyish, blonde bitch that kept him. Marlene, Darlene, whatever the fuck her name was.

“She can’t know,” he said, “About me and you.”

If she knew how hot your sex was, he’d be out on his ass. How ten seconds in your mouth got him rock-hard. How he could fuck you forever, staring at you with those intense, almost-black eyes. How, after pounding you, he’d pull out and finish up in your mouth. A nice, gooey mess you both loved.

Hey, you loved *him*.

Not as a boy toy. You were the same age. Hours of straight talk, real communication. Moments of unexpected sweetness. He liked that you wanted to be a writer. Once he even sang you to sleep. He might’ve loved you, too.

But he never said it.

Shit happens. Over the years, you lost touch. Lots of toxic guys, draining jobs. Therapy that did jack shit. Then more toxic, younger guys. Sometimes real young. Trouble, you barely got out of. But you wrote your way through all of it. That much, you had. It’s hard living without love.

What would happen, you always wondered, if you saw Davey again? Would things be different? Had he grown up?

You didn't.

"I'm like Clarence," you joked, "From *It's a Wonderful Life*, 'cept female." Picking up your drink, you added, "And no angel."

Then, suddenly, there he was.

In a bar like Nick's, from that same movie, so you pictured Jimmy Stewart slumped over on a stool. But, at the register, his back to you, the bartender wasn't ringing the bell and giving out wings. He was watching you in the mirror.

Your heart lurched. "Davey!"

He stiffened. "David." Already he was pissed off. Then, "Angie?" real sarcastic, 'cos you preferred Angelina. "What're you drinking?"

An hour later, you were trashed. Almost up-to-date on him, 'cos he talked more.

"I own this place," he loved telling you. "Just working 'cos the girl's sick." In that ripped wifebeater, he looked happy. Like he was born to wear it. Still lean, and muscular. Even twenty years later.

“What’s she got?” you asked. “Nothing bad.”

“Nah.” He touched his glass to yours. “You know, girl stuff.”

When your eyes met, you knew you’d fuck that night.

A zillion bucks, he had now. Or wanted you to think. A closer look at him screamed “Botox!” Maybe plastic, too. A ragged copy of his “Boy Toy” self. Hair still black, but not as long. Once you were hopelessly lost in it.

Maybe you were smarter now.

But as he got closer, your heart raced. Almost snuggling you, he said, “I own other places, too. But nicer than this.” His lips inched closer.

As the back door buzzed open, he grabbed your glass and rushed to replace your drink.

You had to look twice. Was that . . . it couldn’t be!

Marlene-Darlene would’ve been like 65 by now. This gorgeous blonde was around yours and his age. Mid-forties. When she looked your way, the temperature might’ve dropped 20 degrees.

His wife.

Who he'd excluded from the "update."

Who wore money like fancy-ass perfume. Clearly the real owner of both this and the "nicer" places.

He set down your fresh drink, then started to refill the beer nuts. "What about you?" he said. "Angie, right?" Like he hadn't almost kissed you. "Where do you work?"

"At Liberty State, part-time. Teaching." You were so mad, you wanted to scream. "Creative writing."

I'm a writer now, asshole. Remember? What I wanted to be?

His smile said he wasn't even listening.

But *she* was. "Our son goes there." The clicking of high heels as she came over was unnerving. "He's a writer. Maybe in your class." Now she was next to you, smelling stronger of money. "Daniel Soppeck?"

"Maybe."

Why hadn't you known that? How many Soppecks were out there?

She reached across you for the beer nuts.

"Oh, yeah. Daniel." You stared into your drink. "I'll reach out to him."

David froze.

"She can't know," he said, hours later, at your place. "About us."

Like you're stupid. You, who had finagled that teaching gig, almost from out of nowhere. As a writer, you knew your shit. But still. . . .

The sex was still great. Hair-pulling again, but harder now. Did he pull Wifey's golden fucking tresses? And he pounded you like he hated you. When he came in your throat, he hoped to choke you. He was that pissed.

Maybe . . . as great as he looked now, with that slightly ravaged face . . . as good as he still smelled, and tasted, he knew . . .

Boy Toy Davey was who you loved.

Daniel Soppeck, you thought. *Who was he?* In bed with his dad, your face lost in his chest, why wrack your brain over this now?

“Don’t do it.”

Where did he sit? you wondered. *Was he a good writer? Or the kid always late handing in assignments?*

“Huh?” you said.

“Reach out.” It sounded so dirty. “To my kid.” That brought you back. You sat up and looked at him.

“Why not?” was the wrong thing to say.

Handfuls of your hair, he grabbed, and twisted, till your neck ached. A homemade noose, he could’ve been making. “OK!” you said.

Before he released your hair, he kissed you. “Because you love me . . .”

You waited, but that was all he said.

That's him, you realized, at the next class. Sitting up front, instead of in back, with the cool kids. Hot, young guys. All your type, 'cos at this age you were insatiable. The whole world knew that.

Daniel Soppeck. Eighteen, with curly, sandy hair. As long as his dad's used to be. Dark eyes too big for his long face. His mom's only bad feature. He was lean, muscular, like Dad.

On Day One you had told the class: "You need to write from your heart . . . and your ass." A few girls gasped. Now you remember Daniel smiled.

"Today," you said now, "Is Creative Nonfiction Day." You let that sink in for a few seconds. "In just two hundred words, describe something you did that made you grow up fast." They just looked at you. "You've got an hour."

Suddenly, wheels turned in heads. You felt these kids' energy as fingers pounded their keyboards. Only Daniel sat there, thinking, for a long time. When he finally started typing, you looked over at the door.

Before the hour was up, the door opened.

When *he* walked in, only Daniel looked up, surprised. The other kids were busy with their stories.

At the back of the class David stood, arms folded, like the Angel of Death in a cancer ward. He looked older, more pissed off than a few nights ago. Like he hadn't been sprawled in your bed, wanting more sex. After he almost choked you.

"Time's up," you said. Daniel looked anxious. "OK, two more minutes."

The first to read aloud was Elvira Robles, the class kiss-ass. But a good writer. Two hundred gut-wrenching words about her mom's prescription drug OD. Bull shit, you thought. It was probably heroin. But, just as tragic. Some kids gasped at the details, the vibrant imagery.

On the sneak, Daniel was still writing his own story.

His dad stayed in the back, waiting.

In Mark Cassidy's story, he saved a special-needs kid from bullies. More and more kids read. So much pain in their lives, you could've cried.

You thought about your own pain. How lovelessness twisted you into what you were. Like how David twisted your hair into a lethal weapon.

You waited till Daniel sat back, relaxed. With a sweet smile he got from neither his mom nor his dad.

Then you said, “Danny? Let’s hear it.”

Eagerly, he began reading.

You cringed. It was bad, flowery. Like a lovesick chick might write. And, of all things, it was about a kiss . . .

You resisted looking over at his dad.

. . . From an older woman.

Some people grow up faster than others.

“It’s not true,” you said, before you could stop yourself. “It never happened.”

The other kids mumbled, fidgeted. Daniel looked embarrassed.

“Why,” you said, “Write about something that you obviously . . . never experienced?”

A few kids looked around the room nervously. One started packing up his laptop.

In the back of the class, David looked intrigued. He never expected anything like this. That instead of “reaching out” to his son, you would humiliate him.

“That’s hard to believe.” You moved closer to Daniel, who was actually tearing up. “So, Danny, a good-looking guy like you, with a body like yours, has never been grabbed, and kissed, by an older woman?”

“No,” he said. “I’m sorry I messed up,”

No matter what, it would all be over for you. Fired, for sure. And dumped, once again, by the look on David’s face.

So you made it worse.

You pulled Daniel close. The kiss you gave him might’ve made him cum right then. You almost did, yourself. He kissed you back just as hard. Like he’d waited all his life for this. He should be proud of himself. The most grown-up guy in the room . . .

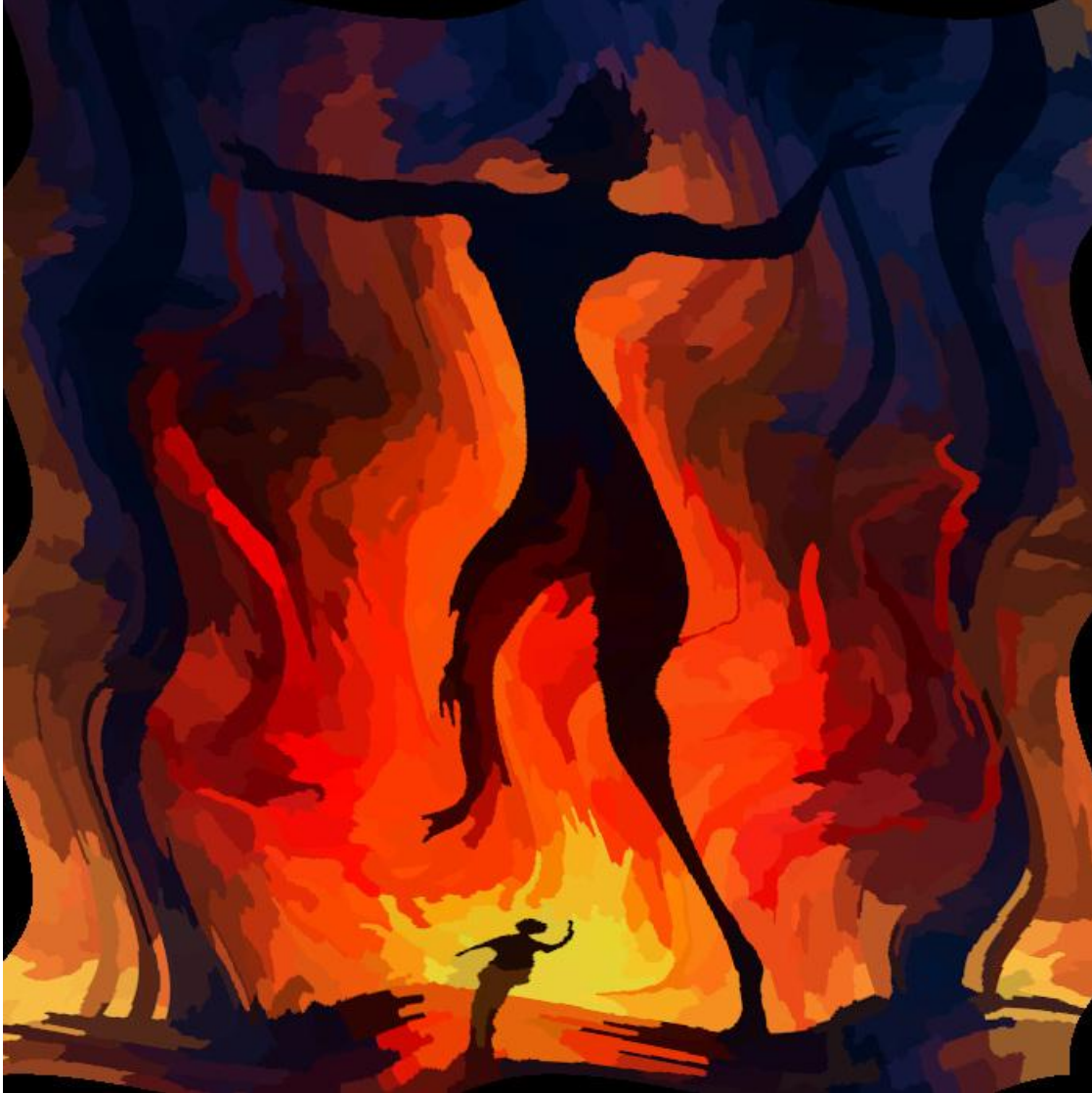
Boy Toy Danny.

Cindy Rosmus originally hails from the Ironbound section of Newark, NJ, once voted the “unfriendliest city on the planet.” She talks like Anybodys from West Side Story and everybody from Saturday Night Fever. Her noir/horror/bizarro stories have been published in places like Shotgun Honey, Punk Noir, The Yard, Danse Macabre, The Rye Whiskey Review, Under the Bleachers, and Rock and a Hard Place. She is the editor/art director of Yellow Mama and has published seven collections of short stories. Cindy is a Gemini, a Christian, and an animal rights advocate.

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FOUNDLING

Billy Ramone



Praying to the porcelain god. I lean forward and vomit again into the commode. My knees hurt as badly as my stomach. I lay my arms on the toilet's rim and press down to take some weight off my knees. *Driving the porcelain bus* flashes through my mind, and I laugh so

helplessly that half the next wave—sharp and acidic and redolent of last night’s dinner—erupts from my nose.

I sing the rotavirus electric for another ten minutes, then the diarrhea hits. It’s going to be a long night. But what the heck, it’s not like I’m going anywhere.

I’m what Jackie calls the stay-put. Oh, I do other stuff, too. Sometimes I help case targets. I drive. But mostly anymore I sit on the goods for however long Jackie decides. Sometimes he says sit a few days. Sometimes it’s a couple weeks. Once, when things got dicey out Sioux City way, it was almost two months. It doesn’t bother me. Sometimes I feel like Jackie just adds extra time to see if it will, but I doubt he really does. He’s like a father to me, Jackie is. He took me in when no one else would. He’s given me a life, discipline, direction.

My watch shows two-forty a.m. Yesterday was busy, and I’m exhausted. I nod in and out while I sit on the john. After a while my body seems, mercifully, to have emptied out. I step out of my night gown and straight into the shower. The lukewarm blast stings my skin, as though it were sunburnt and tender. I rinse my mouth with water. It tastes metallic and sour—some horrid country-ass well water. I fill my hands with soap and gently lather my neck and shoulders. My breasts feel unnaturally heavy, and my guts gurgle feebly as I soap my belly. I turn the temperature of the water down, but the drops still hurt my skin. Then I am hit by a fit of shuddering so violent that I can barely stand. I turn off the water and pull a

towel from the rack. The water feels hot and oily on my skin. I lean against the wall for support and blot the moisture off me as quickly as I can. My tongue is thick and sore. My stomach clenches and I lean toward the toilet again.

It's after three by the time I stumble out of the bathroom and collapse into bed. In the dark, I can make out the two suitcases I brought in last evening. As long as the bags are there, everything's fine. Everything else will pass.

Strangely, I don't feel feverish at all, just weak and achy. Restless wakefulness stutters into restless sleep. The eastern sky has gone from black to indigo by the time I slip away completely. Weird, feverish dreams crowd around me: great gouts of fire shooting upward into black, star-dappled skies; distorted voices shrieking and singing, their words lost in the dark and the distance; the gestures of huge shadows flickering in half-light.

When my eyes open again it's ten and the room is awash in summer luster. My tongue is pasted to the roof of my dry mouth. My throat feels as though it's been hosting drag races. I stand in front of the bathroom mirror. My bloodshot eyes stare out at me from dark, puffy clouds. What is more alarming, though, are the red welts covering my face and shoulders. A quick once-over confirms I have them everywhere, arms and legs and torso. Only my palms and soles seem exempt. I rub my cheek. The marks are slightly raised and tender. Some of them weep. My first thought is measles, but I know I've had those before. Chicken

pox, too. Some other bug, then, or a nasty allergic reaction. Normally, I'd be calling the doctor, but I'm on the job.

I turn on the water in the sink. When my hands touch the stream, searing pain erupts in them. It's as though I've thrust my hands in boiling acid. I am still screaming when the pain drops me to my knees.

I'm down for a minute or two. On the third attempt, I pull myself to my feet and, very carefully, shut off the tap. I retreat from the bathroom and sit on the side of the bed. My hands are raw and bloody. Everything starts to connect: the strange taste of the water I drank last night, the vomiting, the sting of the shower, and the welts on my body. One thing is obvious: I don't have a virus. There's something wrong with the water in this place, and it's getting worse. When I arrived last night I could drink it. Now, my hands are raw and bloody from its touch.

The prospect of a week-long sit without water isn't exactly cheerful. Jackie needs to do more homework on these places he lines up. Now here I am in this house in the boonies and fuck-all only knows how I'm supposed to survive without drinking water. I trip over the big suitcases in search of my duffle bag. The canvas cloth rips at my injured hands like sandpaper. Cursing, I find the first aid kit and fumble out a roll of gauze. As I wrap my hands, I realize that the dressing will need to be changed later and there's not enough gauze.

A quick search of the house reveals that the landlord has not supplied a first aid kit for tenants, only a chirpy note on the refrigerator thanking me for renting and offering to help with “anything I require.” There’s no way I can call and complain about the water without triggering a visit from the landlord and god-only-knows who else. The last thing I need is people wandering why a single woman who doesn’t hunt or fish, who doesn’t even go outside, has rented a hunting retreat. I could show them my .45, but I doubt that would put an end to their questions.

Unfortunately, there aren’t any old bottles of water in the bottom of the fridge. I pour myself a bit of orange juice instead. It smells funny and it burns my sore throat, but it stays down.

No matter how much I respect Jackie—and I do—this is one job when the stay-put isn’t going to. A three-ring binder on the coffee table gives me the skinny. I really am nowhere. The nearest medical facility, if it comes to that, is about seventy miles away in Chilicothe. Even the closest town, Tafton, is a good twenty miles away along a series of twisty back roads. From the description, it isn’t much, but I’m sure I can bag some bottled water, pepto, and gauze.

The biggest question is what to do with the suitcases while I’m gone. Jackie says I should never leave the merchandise, but the bags are heavy and toting them out to the car just to drag them back inside when my shopping trip is over seems like a waste. Carting things

around like that can call attention to them—not that there is anyone here to notice—and bouncing potentially-fragile pre-Columbian artifacts around in my trunk doesn't sound smart. Leaving the goodies unattended is, of course, the worst thing a stay-put can do. Jackie would shit. But desperate times, you know. All I need to do is find a good hiding place for them and make sure I get back as soon as possible.

I drag the suitcases to the bedroom closet and lay them flat on the floor in back, then pull blankets off the closet shelf and cover them. I arrange a big quilt on top and step back. I decide that at a casual glance the whole thing could pass for a stack of bedding. It's not much, but better than anything else I'm likely to find. I don't imagine anyone will be looking, anyway.

A wave of nausea washes over me as I leave the bedroom and walk past the bathroom door. I look in and see scattered drops of water along the edge of the vanity. The sight of them makes me hold my breath. What's wrong with the water? What has it done to my body? The contents of my stomach rise in my throat, and I realize there's no way I am going to rush to the toilet to vomit. I don't want to go near that bathroom—near that dreadful water—again. I swallow hard and pull the door shut.

The roads to Tafton are more civilized than I'd feared, but it still feels like a long trip. I'm jumpy and nervous, even though there's no reason to expect trouble. I want to get what I need quickly and get back. It takes about half an hour to drive to Max's Mart, which is the

town's only grocery. It doesn't take long to find what I need. The bored-looking teen behind the counter stares at me the entire time from behind his curtain of greasy bangs. It costs twice as much as it should, but I'm not complaining. In ten minutes I'm back on the road, eyeing the grey clouds above. The idea of getting caught in a storm on these unfamiliar back roads fills me with anxiety. I picture myself sliding off the road and into a water-filled ditch, and I shudder.

The storm hasn't broken by the time I pull into the weedy parking patch next to the cabin. I grab a case of water and the rest of my purchases and charge inside. I leave everything on the kitchen table and check the closet first. The suitcases are right where I left them. Everything is under control. With what I bought I should be able to stay for a week easy. Hygiene may be an issue, but I won't dry up and blow away.

I have to pee, but I find I can't go into the bathroom. I stand for a long time staring at the closed door. I tell myself I'm being silly, that even if the water is poisoned no harm will come to me from using the toilet. I'm being irrational, but the idea of opening the door makes my hands shake. Finally, I reach forward and push the door. It swings slowly inward. The smell of the room hits me: damp and dank, with a lingering hint of last night's vomit. I stare into the room, letting my mind adjust to the idea of it the same way I would let my eyes adjust to a lamp just turned on in a darkened room. After a moment, it feels less threatening. I hold my nose and walk in, determined to take care of business, but the sight of the water in the bowl hits me in the gut. I start to wretch. I swallow hard and squat over

the seat—the idea of actually touching it makes my skin crawl—and release my bladder. It takes forever to empty, which seems incredible given the amount of fluids I lost last night. My urine is a deep orange color. I have no idea what that means. I reach for the handle to flush, but I lose my nerve and scamper away like a frightened animal.

I drop to a chair at the kitchen table. I'm panting like a dog and my heart is hammering. The illness brought on by the bad water has left me weaker and more jittery than I realized. I'm badly dehydrated. I pull a bottle of water from the case and twist off the cap. Before I take a swig, I lift the bottle to my nose and take a sniff. The scent is putrid, the breath of decay. I gag and drop the bottle. As it collides with the floor, some of its contents splash across my sandaled feet, eating redly into my skin. A scream bursts from my lips, and I stumble away from the thing like it's a coiled rattlesnake. From some distant hovel in the back of my brain, my sense of logic is screaming about how this makes no sense, but I don't care. I watch with growing panic as a stinking puddle grows, then trip backwards over my chair as I stagger away. I bang into the front of the refrigerator and cling to it to keep from falling. The stench from the water is thick and suffocating, rot mixed with a harsh, chemical edge. I hold my nose, but it is already in my head and I'm choking, strangling. I can't breathe. I grab a chair from the other side of the table and use it as a walker as I try to move away, but it's too late. Instead of away, I'm moving down, collapsing into the chair and then rolling to the floor.

I'm somewhere hot and dark, pitch black. Smoke tickles my nostrils. The crisp scent of burning is a welcome relief after the polluted smell of the water. At first I hear nothing, but then a faint drone begins in the distance, floating on the furthest edge of my awareness. The sound draws nearer, a swelling hum that breaks and separates into a series of pulses before becoming a rhythmic pounding. Many drums, all big bellied and deep, talk to each other. Then a single shaft of flame bursts across my vision and, as if in response, the voices begin chanting.

I am in unseen hands, rough and dry, that grip and raise me up, impossibly high into a black sky. Tethered by those sandpaper hands, I hear the voices grow louder and louder. I rise and soar upward. I am stretching, unfolding like a mighty kite, spreading outward into the night. Then all goes silent and I am falling, spinning free down for what seems like an eternity out of darkness above into darkness below. I start to burn from the outside in and the inside out. At first, it's searing agony. I try to scream but find I have no mouth. It goes on and on, and finally there is no pain, only the heat that burns clean through me. I am blossoming anew in the dark. I am a flower, a scent, a star . . .

I open my eyes and I'm staring between the legs of the kitchen table at the reeking puddle on the floor as it seeps across the linoleum toward me. I manage, somehow, to grip the chair and haul myself up. I launch myself like a long jumper across the water and out of the kitchen. In the living room, the air is clearer. I suck it greedily into my lungs and drop to the couch. There are open sores dabbled across the top of my feet where I was splashed. I'm

trembling. None of this makes any sense. I'm terrified, but I don't know what to do. I look at my phone. *No calls*. Another of Jackie's rules. The hell with that. He's the one who rented this damn house. I dial.

He doesn't answer. If he saw the call come in, he probably cursed me and shut off the phone. His voice mail picks up. It's silly, but the familiarity of that tinny, electronic recording floods me with relief. It's enough to steady me, and I hang up without speaking. Then the reality hits me. He'll see the missed call. Within an hour he'll erase any trace of ever having known me. He cares about me, but he's not sentimental when it comes to business.

Maybe I should just go. Leave. There's something wrong with this place, something that sours water and thickens thought and queers dreams. It doesn't feel safe. The job doesn't matter any longer. I could leave the artifacts behind and split. But it isn't so easy. I sit for a long time on the corner of the sofa, thinking. After all, there's the question of where to go. I can't go back to Cleveland if I skip on Jackie, even if I make sure he gets the merchandise back. It means starting all over again in a new town. Sure, it's a wide world with a lot of towns. I've lived in a few of them. The thing is, most of them are the same: big and cold. Especially if you're a not-quite-pretty girl with little education and even less experience—at least, not the kind you can put on a job application. Especially if the only person who ever thought you were worth a damn isn't there for you anymore.

The only other option is to play it straight and do exactly what's needed. The current house is not habitable, so I need to find a new house or a hotel and stay-put there. Jackie will know how to find me when the time is right. He's always liked my practicality and horse-sense. If I do this right, maybe he'll overlook the phone call. He can be generous sometimes.

It's not much of a plan, but it's the best I'm going to come up with. I check online and find a motel on route fifty, about 25 miles northwest of Tafton. A quick call sets me up with a room for the next five nights. I grab my duffle and toss my few scattered belongings into it. My toothbrush is in the bathroom. It's going to stay there. I drag the luggage out of the closet. As I roll the big suitcase out into the living room, an odd warmth flows through me. I'm filled with a sudden desire to look at the artifacts. I shrug off the idea and pull the second case out to the living room. A quick trot around the house confirms that I'm not leaving anything. In the kitchen, I'm careful to avoid the wet towels on the floor while I grab my pepto and gauze.

I'm ready. I peel the rental key off my keyring and place it on the coffee table. Gripping the big suitcase, I pull the door open. The thunderstorm that threatened earlier has blown by. In its wake, a light mist fills the grey October air. Moisture beads the storm door's window. My hand shakes as I nudge the door open an inch. The damp air that rushes in sucks the oxygen right out of my lungs. Determined, I gulp and push the door open further. A huge

flash, like a burst of lightening, fills the air as the storm door crashes shut and I tumble backwards. I land on top of the suitcases. My head collides violently with the floor.

I am surrounded by a landscape of fire rimmed by walls of stone. Flames tower around me in the midst of the darkest night I have ever seen, their brightness mirrored by the myriad stars shining down from above. The heat is almost unbearable. A low chanting fills the air. Dark silhouettes and shadows flash and dance around me. I spin like a top, the world a frenzy of orange flashes. I dance breathlessly until my eyes catch on a figure striding through the conflagration toward me and I freeze, transfixed.

She is tall and dark and moves on long, straight legs like ebony stilts. She is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen, all dark angles and regal grace and proud, boiling energy. Her eyes burn into my breast like a branding iron, and I know I am already and always hers. She comes to the edge of the fire and spreads her arms in a gesture of welcome. I leap toward her, but in a white flash she is suddenly, horribly gone.

I hear a voice—excited, terrified—shrieking *alraba! alraba!* It is a moment before I realize that the voice is mine. I am on the floor in the living room. I stand and pace like a caged lion, cursing the rain under my breath. My curses come in unknown words that swirl into my consciousness from the darkness that is starting to engulf my own mind, a strange otherness growing within me.

That is when I get it, I understand. It's not the house that's weird. It's not the water that's changed. It's me.

I open my mouth and scream, and dozens of other voices scream with me, ringing out from the ceiling or the walls, or maybe from the air itself. The sound is deafening, and I slap my palms over my ears. I stop screaming, and the screams of the others gradually fade. The voices instead begin to chant, and I chant with them. The words, the rhythm, flow from me as though I've known them forever. Somewhere, a small piece of me is asking what has happened, why this is, how. But there are no answers. The questions do not even trouble me. They drop forgotten at my shuffling feet as I spiral and sway within in web of sound around me. For once, I feel beautiful and strong. For once, I feel right.

An impulse grips me and I tug the larger suitcase open. Inside, it is stuffed with a multitude of cloth-wrapped bundles. Some are no larger than my fist, others bigger than my head. I clutch the largest and pull it free from the pile. It is wrapped in soft blue cotton tied together with a nylon cord. I loosen the knots and unwrap a deep stone bowl, its sides worn smooth by centuries. Its silky surface feels warm, almost alive, in my grasp. The chanting swells around me. I set the bowl gently on the floor and find another, smaller bundle. This one yields a small stone knife with a handle cut in the shape of a plunging bird. I remember thinking it was strange when I took it from a storage case in the museum last night. Now, it feels like an old friend.

I place the knife on the floor next to the bowl and close my eyes and smile. It is time. She is coming.

I peel off my clothes and let the growing warmth of the air wash through me. I know what to do without asking. I squat over the bowl and, chanting, push the remaining fluids from my body. A terrible tide flows from within me. The bowl fills and overflows with the dark, coppery waters. Strange words, mingled with laughter, flow from my lips as I am released from the pollution. As the flood ends, I grasp the stone knife, ululate, and slit my throat. As I am freed from the last few red drops, a song of celebration erupts from my lips.

I am ready. The way is nearly clear. Only one thing remains. I run outside into the gathering dusk. It is still raining, but it no longer matters. I am beyond harm now. I am new and strong. I rip the door off the shed and find what I knew was there. Back inside, I splash its glory on the suitcases and throughout the house. The scent is crisp and pure and I am suddenly, horridly thirsty. I fall to the floor and lap at a puddle. It is so good, so right, that I take the can and drink the rest down, sucking it into my desiccated depths. Then I pull a long match from the box on the hearth. The chanting comes to an end and I strike the match. The world bursts with warmth and light and welcome, and the air snaps to life with a song of greeting. I stretch upward, straining through the heat for a glimpse of her. At first I see only the brightness and the dancing shadows, but then I see her soaring through the flames to gather me in. My heart swells with joy.

Jackie's been like a father to me. But I've never had a mother.

In addition to old punk rock and cheap horror movies, Billy Ramone enjoys crimer and horror stories. He has written and published dozens of stories over the years. He has more work coming out soon at Close to the Bone and Yellow Mama. Billy is currently the warden of this asylum.

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