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## Editorial

Dear reader, by the time you read this text, its words will have been transferred to smooth, clean white pages. Your eyes will glide over them, and finally, you will turn the pages almost soundlessly, thanks to the wonders of modern-day digital printing.

And yet I cannot keep myself from offering you a small anecdote on the genesis of this text. No, I am not going to bother you about how I alternated between biting pencils or downing my eleventh cup of coffee of the day, chasing the deadline of this new issue of blank. I mean to briefly introduce you to a new friend of mine.

It is a splendidly unpractical, sometimes stubborn 8-kilogram apparatus. When in use, it emits a loud clacking sound, which, as you press its bottle-green keys ever so quickly to meet said deadline is eerily akin to distant machine-gun fire, which I am sure will drive the neighbors crazy sooner than later.

I am talking, of course, about a typewriter I recently got and that has been produced even before either of my parents were born. The Adler Royal Diana. Use this instead of a plain computer keyboard and let it work its timeless magic on you. You will be able to watch, see, and even feel the letters become words and the words become sentences and the sentences become paragraphs. It is a unique, richly satisfying experience that feels like a personal act of rebellion in the face of the relentless digitalization

processes all around us.

Offering me a whole new way of putting ink on paper, the typewriter made me ponder several issues concerning texts and their production. First of all, the obvious comes to mind, a practice that is very dear to us at blank and that we work hard to continue: For the past 10 years, blank has been published in paper form and been brought to its readers in physical, palpable form, to be touched, felt, shared, or maybe occasionally dropped into the bathtub. And there is a second point that I would like to make and that makes me at least as proud. Blank is not only its printed end product, not a mere collection of texts written by different authors. The composition of the texts you will encounter in this issue has taken place under different circumstances, out of different motivations. They are, themselves, the result of a multitude of big and small steps, of decisions and revisions (“which a minute will reverse”, as wisely noted by T.S. Eliot), of conflict and clarity, and much more. They are pièces de résistance against busy schedules and against the discouraging voices that occasionally try to convince their creators that after all, all stories have already been told – so why even bother? And essentially, they are, as Tom Hanks put it in his recently published collection of short stories, “meditations of our hearts”.

The act of writing is one of bravery, sometimes underestimated and overlooked; its results come from continuous, honest commitment.

*to whom it may concern*

The same goes for the artwork and layout featured in our issues. This is why we at blank are all the more proud of our productive contributors and grateful for the generous support from our sponsors. It is this fruitful collaboration that made it possible to first launch and then keep alive blank magazine for a seemingly infinite span of ten years, which makes it the longest-running magazine of its kind in Germany. A big round of applause therefore goes out to those no longer on board who helped create and shape this special project, notably Don Lowman, Peter Carqueville, Pieter Coetzee, and longtime layout artist Rhea Eschstruth.

On the following pages you will encounter new voices along with familiar ones. Heartache next to hilarity. Dreamy poetry next to sober prose. The mysterious next to the familiar. We invite you, as our readers, to participate in the worlds created in our poetry, fiction and nonfiction, to interact with the types and characters offered in them. Sit back and enjoy the new issue of blank. Just maybe don't drop it in the bathtub.

Happy reading and all the best,  
Denise

## Interview with Kai Woolen-Lewis Jan 10, 2018

*by Tamara Schmitt*

Kai Woolen-Lewis was born and raised in Bridgend, the infamous Welsh youth suicide capital. He spent a year in Kassel as an exchange student – and never really warmed to it. Since then, he has acquired quite a bit of fame with his “screamy emotional punk band”, Goodtime Boys, miraculously turned himself into a German teacher, called on Jeremy Corbyn to rescue his country, and then decided it was time to emigrate to Germany for good. To this day, he has cultivated a unique ability of selling himself short, while relying on his charm to undermine his words – in combination with his nonchalant use of Latin and Welsh.

**When you first came to Kassel – it must have been 2010, if I remember correctly – you weren't too impressed, right?**

Goodness, I'm having to cast my mind back. I don't think so – I lived right out near Vellmar, presumably because the flat was cheap, and while it wasn't a horrible city or anything, it just didn't have the charm of Konstanz, Berlin, Passau, or Wiesbaden, where I knew lots of my other friends had been sent. My flatmate Alex from Jena described it as “wo die Vögel zum kacken nach Göttingen fliegen.” Herkules and the Schlosspark were really quite enchanting, but also the exact opposite end of town, so I didn't get much chance to visit.

**What did you think about the university's efforts to create a welcoming environment for exchange students?**

I remember feeling like Josef K, being sent from building to building trying to get all the bureaucratic stuff done (Ausweis, Einschreibung, Anmeldung, etc.). I went to a few events arranged by the uni, but didn't really make friends through the university – much more through the community of people at the Wohnblock I lived in – we had a sort of fellowship of people who had sacrificed vibrant city living for the sake of a cheap flat.

**When we first met in Cardiff in 2011, you were a promising student who, nevertheless, didn't show up for half of the courses.**

I must stress here that the only seminar we had together (on Brecht) was at 9am, every Tuesday and Thursday – I'm sure if you were a classmate at the 1pm lecture you would have seen me at every lecture. [Note from the author: I sincerely doubt that]

**Why did you decide to study German?**

It was a cop out! My Omi is German and I was brought up with a decent amount of German – we visited her family in Bad Salzungen most summers. I'd play with my little cousins, who'd all try to speak English with me, but it was basically just saying bits from films (“Ice to meet you” “Keep ze change you filsy annymul” and “somebody stop me” are all things that spring to mind). From there, it was an easy class in school, then an easy GCSE [General Certificate of Secondary Education] and relatively easy A-level: I was clearly capable and adored my teachers, who I still speak to and thank all the time.

**Why did you come?**

In the UK, if you study languages, the third year of your course will generally be studying abroad at one of the university's partner universities in the relevant country – it was randomly assigned and the tombola randomly assigned me Kassel.

**Was there anything you liked about the city?**

Yes! Toward the end of my visit, some friends passed through and played at Das Haus, a cool little reclaimed derelict building, and thereafter I started turning up for lots of their shows and met some really nice, welcoming punks!

**You were one of the few Welsh students among a lot of English students I met at Cardiff university.**

Cardiff is a great university and a wonderful city to be a student in. I had lots of friends in Cardiff and my parents were a half-hour train journey away. The entrance requirements are high, but if you're a Welsh student, the Welsh Assembly Government pays 2/3 of your fees, or at least did in 2008 before austerity happened and when tuition fees weren't crippling expensive. There are a noticeable amount of private school toffs and grammar school pupils from England at Cardiff, so to be a comprehensive-school-educated Welsh boy felt really quite wholesome. When I showed up, that is.

**What was it like, growing up in South Wales?**

I won't slag it off. Bridgend was great – I had a group of friends from all sorts of class backgrounds and we had a bustling, vibrant town to go and spend our time in. We'd get up on Saturday mornings, skateboard into town and see all our friends, shop in any of the three or four record shops and watch the local skateboarders and buskers, who were both like low-key celebrities in those days. Ten years ago, it was full of cool music venues, clubs and, most importantly, revellers. Town would be packed every Thursday, Friday and Saturday night. It's much different now, a massive out of town shopping centre has killed the town centre, which is now largely boarded up buildings, pound shops and gentrified wine-bars, and everyone goes to Cardiff for a night out. I get a strong sense of *hiraeth* [Welsh word without direct English translation, linked to “homesickness tinged with grief or sadness”<sup>1</sup>] every time I go into town. Growing up in South Wales was OK, but I suppose I don't have anything to compare it to.

**Growing up in Wales is also a frequent topic in your songs, I'd say it influences the mood of your music, would you agree?**

Yes, definitely in a couple. Lots of it's got to do with the loss of prosperity and industry from the South Wales valleys and the astonishing levels of unemployment it's brought to these same valleys. I have a few friends, and I'd say anyone from Bridgend would know at least someone who's gone the way of the full drug-induced mind erosion and are now fully *non compus mentis* [Latin: of unsound mind]. I think when prosperity leaves, it takes people's prospects with it and people have little to turn to but patterns of destructive behaviour, particularly self-destructive behaviour.

**When I first met you, you were the guitarist of Goodtime Boys. They were quite successful and popular, also in Germany. I remember that one guy recognising your band logo tattoo when we stood in front of the main station in Kassel.**

Yes, I was – we toured Europe a bunch of times and the US a couple of times, too. It was a fun time. As for the dude recognising my tattoo, I was as shocked by that as you were. I managed to play it cool though so you probably thought it happened all the time.

**For how long did you stick with Goodtime Boys?**

A few years – I left to become a German teacher around the middle of 2013. So maybe 2-3 years?

**When I'm asked, I rather clumsily describe your music as belonging “somewhere within the post-core genre”. Would you agree?**

I'm just shocked that you're ever asked. By who? Goodtime Boys were a sort of screamy emotional punk band.

**Who is your influence? Particularly on your current band, Rope?**

Goodness, I think we sound somewhat like bands like Shellac, Self Defense Family and Lungfish in terms of long, drawn out, repetitive songs but the people who keep me playing music are all people whose output I could never ever hope to replicate in a million years, both in terms of originality and sheer craft. People like Paul Simon, Nick Cave, Scott Walker, John Cale, Leonard Cohen, as well as lots of 70's German experimental bands like Neu!, Can, Harmonia and Kluster who no German I ever gush over them to have ever heard of are huge inspirations. Oh and Kraftwerk of course. Right at this very moment, I'm listening to Wrong Way Up by John Cale and Brian Eno. Take this as a recommendation. It's a great album.

**Are you writing all of the songs and the lyrics yourself?**

I am. It's just easier that way.

**You're touring Germany, Austria, Belgium and the Netherlands quite frequently. What draws you back?**

Playing in Europe makes a band feel special. You're such wonderful hosts. We get fed, watered, appreciated artistically and bought from. Don't ever stop.

<sup>1</sup> Geiriadur Welsh-English / English-Welsh  
On-line Dictionary. University of Wales  
Trinity Saint David.

**Some of your lyrics are heavily influenced by German poets and philosophers. Where does that fascination come from?**

It's not just German – there's lots of poetry and literature in our lyrics. It's a half-and-half mixture of wanting to sound clever and of them having some really huge and interesting stuff to say that sort of props up the far less huge and interesting things I have to say.

**Despite not turning up to a lot of classes at university, or maybe exactly because of that, you became a pretty popular German teacher. How come?**

Oh, this is hard. I don't know how popular a German teacher can ever be in the UK's current climate, but I do think that being young and passionate about your subject is a wonderful place to start when it comes to being a popular teacher. I was at a girl's school too and the only male teacher under about 40, so I don't kid myself that my popularity was always related to German or even my teaching.

**What impression do you have of the German job market in comparison to the British one?**

A lot more appreciative of language skills.

**These days, you're working towards emigrating to Germany. Is that Brexit-related?**

I was always going to. Even my year in Kassel didn't put me off. Every time I visit, I get this enormous pang of “THIS IS WHERE YOU SHOULD LIVE THE REST OF YOUR LIFE.” Perhaps not Brexit-related, but certainly Brexit accelerated.

**Like many left-wing oriented young people, you got pretty excited by Jeremy Corbyn's candidacy for Labour leadership in 2015. Why was that?**

Since I discovered what politics was, I've been at various points on the left and while I'm a Marxist and genuinely feel that an alternative to the current political shit-show has to be found, Corbyn has been one of the key representatives of the left in British parliamentary democracy for a decade, having been active on the picket-lines during the miner's strikes in 1984, outspoken against the wars in the Middle East after 9/11 and bringing into political debate the idea that maybe some of the £50bn a year we spend on defence would be better spent on the NHS, public services or education than on the pursuit of illegal foreign wars. Particularly in this age of austerity, I think young people are stimulated by the new compassionate and fair politics Corbyn offers.

**In the 2017 general election, Labour increased their share of the popular vote to 40%, that's a 9,6% increase in vote share for the party. Doesn't that call for an optimistic view for the future, despite Brexit?**

The battle is not yet won! They've won the Labour Party back from the Blairites, now we need to take the country back from the Tories.

**When you come to live in Germany, what will become of your band projects?**

We'll probably tour in a much more focused way – a few weeks here and there. But in terms of writing, arranging, etc, everything will be in the same place.

**Do you consider coming back to Kassel, living and working here?**

Yes! If you'll put in a good word for me at the university and/or marry me for my Staatsangehörigkeit like you promised!

**Where would you rather live when, one day, you're retired – Germany or Britain?**

Germany, of course.

**By then, will you be the world's oldest post-core musician?**

I'll be a musician, probably – I wouldn't like to presume I'll still have my eyesight, hearing or use of my fingers, but yeah.

# The inexplicable beauty of getting what you ordered or why we lie when we go out to dinner

by Inga Zekl

When was the last time you lied? You do not know? You are either a hypocrite or a very truthful person – in this case I stick with Dr. House, the cynical TV doctor in the homonymous series whose credo is “Everybody lies!” – or it has been a while since you went out to have dinner in a restaurant.

To help you jog your memory, I truly believe that I am stating the obvious by saying: when we go out to dinner, we tend to lie.

Shall we remember why we go to fancy restaurants? It is laziness, romance, the *ambiance*, an escape from everyday life and most important of all, the fact that we are going to have a wonderful meal. Then the meal appears and you are sometimes most surprised by what you get. The old saying, “what you see is what you get” is applicable, but not the more important version, “what you had in mind while reading the menu is what you get.” Ok, to be fair, there are a number of restaurants – and not only the incredibly pricey ones where a meal can be tasty. However, all of us remember the last time we ordered something and the cook’s interpretation did not quite corroborate our interpretation of the same meal?

For example, when I was in Dresden in October, the city that was so utterly destroyed by the British and

American Allied Forces, I went out to have dinner one evening and breakfast the next morning. Dinner was OK. The drink was fantastic – something with a slight amount of good Gin and frozen raspberries. Delicious. The vegetables had successfully earned their swimming badge – in olive oil. Do not misunderstand me, I like olive oil a lot and this was of a good quality, not excellent but really good. However, from my humble point of view, it is sufficient to grill the vegetables in the oil. Obviously, it turns out neither necessary nor beneficial for the flavour to serve them swimming in oil. And in this situation, I did something I found was quite liberating. The waitress came to relieve us of our dishes and when asked this inevitable question, “Was everything to your liking?” I answered not politely, but honestly. Ok, my honesty was polite, but my politeness was not untruthful. My feedback was that the drink had been and still was wonderful and I would like a second one. Concerning the vegetables, I would serve them with less oil. For reasons of taste and to be able to eat them without getting any oil on my clothes. The waitress reacted very positively and openly and thanked me for my criticism. That was all news to me! I honestly do not know what I would have done had the chef come out and told me where I could put my criticism.

So, to breakfast the next morning. We chose a small café – not wanting to support a big restaurant chain – in a side street, intending to have a nice quick and not too costly breakfast. Boy, were we mistaken! First of all, the breakfast I would have liked to order was not available due to shortages in the kitchen. So, we ordered another, pricier one. A breakfast where you had to order everything separately. Your beverages, every slice of cheese, every single roll, and your eggs. So, we ordered a long list and waited. And waited. And waited. After 15 minutes we politely asked and received a not so polite answer: “Everything is freshly prepared in our kitchen and that takes time.” Freshly prepared? My eye! The espresso – when it finally arrived – was cold. The egg hard boiled and guess what? Yes, cold too. Imagine my plate: I could perceive my scrambled eggs and the cheese, yet there was a variety of vegetables I had neither ordered and nor did I want them. Some sort of lettuce in a bizarre sauce and at least three different kinds of sprouts. Do not misunderstand me, creativity in preparing a meal is a very useful and professionally beneficent, but when it is morning and you have waited nearly half an hour for your breakfast in a rather underpopulated café and then you discover you waited because the cook had to arrange the sprouts correctly? Who would take that positively? Well,

we had breakfast, paid and parted from that place. And we have learned something: when you order breakfast, do not hesitate to tell the waiter to skip the ornamentals on your plate and this whole lettuce issue. It is breakfast, not brunch.

Back to the question of honesty and feedback when eating in a restaurant. From my point of view, when people ask you a question, they deserve an answer, an honest one. Politeness for politeness’s sake is something I abhor. Why is it so damn difficult to tell the truth? Remember that we are still in a restaurant, not in a court of law. The waiter and the cook, the whole restaurant; they deserve our honest feedback. Everything we did not like about their food – they can think about changing it. Everything we liked gives them information on what to keep on the menu.

And who knows, if I had honestly told the waiter that they should rework their concept, perhaps the next grumpy customer might be happier or I would have been forced to leave quite hastily.

# Black and white

*by Kristina Weissbecker*

Black and Black

White and White

Groom and Groom

Bride and Bride

No matter who you are

Thus, freedom of love

No matter what you like

is freedom of life.

Love is love

This is our goal,

Love is life.

after what we all strive.

Come in as a friend,

you're welcome each time,

a loving heart

Black and Black

is always sublime.

White and White

An honest face

will accept and embrace

that love is love is life.

# They don't hide in hell

*by Kristina Weissbecker*

This stupid moment when you  
want to slap yourself and cry

So bad when neither heart nor  
brain can simply tell you why

The feeling, which you wish to  
stop, but just won't go away

It's nagging its way through your  
soul and leaves its roots to stay.

So now, what now? What shall  
we do? How can we ease the pain?

No words will help, no hug can  
cure. All of this is vain.

This moment when you almost  
hear the cogs up there at work.

It hurts and yet to stop it is im-  
possible, it lurks

in every corner, every nook. It's  
there if you search well,

The darkness and the desperati-  
on, they don't hide in hell.

They're here, they're strong, they  
want to feed. So brace yourself, no  
fear!

Cause in the end you'll have the  
power, you'll conquer them, my dear.

You'll conquer them, my dear.

## Birds

*by Lukas Mooshage*

you are gone  
time went on  
the feelings all wrong  
it still hurts but I'm numb

all birds fly south  
except these two crows  
sitting quietly  
where we once belonged

it is good how it is  
pretend not to care or forgive  
life goes on and I live  
free of failure

dancing memories happen to fit  
the mood that I am currently in  
dance  
dance  
never stop  
little coincidental swing

white infinity  
stretched over black fields  
distant divinity  
far but still in reach  
missing energy  
caused by this fat leech  
thoughts  
wondering  
how bad does this feel  
to you

## Ruin Expectations

*by Loomchild Threadbare*

Your fingertip  
I opened my eyes  
The first thing  
Ripped the safety wide open  
An analogy  
A bead of harmony  
In the puddle of uncertainty  
In the sea  
Of  
Wrath  
Keeps me from wondering  
Some days  
You played with my innocence  
Mastered me  
Until guilt and shame were  
Everything I was  
Calculated  
Deleted me  
Absorbed every happy piece of me  
Turned it into ashes  
Too infertile to rot  
And still you see  
The beast in me  
Completely unable to understand  
Blaming you  
Scared  
I gave him my hand  
The child you are  
The trust  
Unreal  
You made me  
Believe

## Collected Haikus

*by Brian C. Koch*

### **Familiar Stranger**

Morose expression, full of thoughts  
undreamt depth, unknown beauty  
pass me by.

### **City Symphony**

Crowded streets, engines pounding  
Concrete jungle, melodic noise,  
same old.

### **Hope and Despair**

Two sides of the same emotion,  
one constantly causing the other.

### **Uniform of Youth**

Survival of the hippest  
individual, interchangeable.

### **The Scavenger Highway**

The everyday nightmare, nine to five  
Just because in this road we trust.

### **Digital Disorder**

Worlds at our fingertips,  
decadence to ignorance to arrogance.

## In Light of a New Year

*by Saguaro Duda*

Glide your eyes through each and every  
shimmering city light on the horizon,  
from here to the dark of night.

Feel time trickling and inching to  
the inevitable second that'll pop the tension  
and let that colossal centimeter pass.

Before you know it: fires  
of primary colors have lit up the sky.

Loud noise letting go of old time,  
leaving a silence to make room  
for the noise of the year to come.

In the small hours of the next day  
lie the used fireworks, the trampled corks  
The dew of dawn, our spit, this song.

## Songs

by Christian Weiß

Illustration by Julia Ohse

### This Town Is Haunted By the Chance of Your Encounter

C                    Am                    G                    F                    C  
 As the sun went down behind the guards, everybody got what they sought.  
 C                    Am                    G                    F                    C  
 I found the roses of your heart but never thought they grew so far apart.  
 F                    C                    G  
 One by one they withered in my hand,  
 F                    C                    G  
 As I plucked them out of the deep quicksand,  
 F                    C                    G                    Am  
 And only one of them turned to me, bent its head and said,  
 F                    Em G C  
 Said that you don't live here anymore.

Oh, through the drunken haze of quiet faces, I can see the song of love.  
 I saw strangers in the streets become equals in the proximity under sheets.  
 One by one they vanished in the scene,  
 As I dissolved into the absinthe green,  
 There I met one, he spoke to me, picked his nose and said,  
 Said that you don't live here anymore.

I asked him once, I asked him twice, all I got was the same old reply.  
 "If you love something, you've got to give it all away."  
 "Well, funny that you think so," I said,  
 "How does it feel then to lie next to her in bed,  
 And run your fingers through her curly hair,  
 And talk of people who just can't be there,"  
 I said "maybe you should mind your own prayer,  
 So you don't start to cry when they come and tell you later,  
 That she doesn't live here anymore."



## Eye Reality

G Am  
How long will the pastness of your lies  
C F C Dm7 G  
overshadow the lively brilliance of your eyes?

How long will you burn the candles down,  
anticipate each flicker with a sympathizing frown?

How long will you walk along that road,  
trading all your discontent for a single pack of smokes?

How long will you eye reality,  
and scrutinize each fraction for its rentability?

How long can you reinvent your hopes,  
running through the corridors of mind until you start to choke?

How far do you think you get away  
from the point you last agreed that you would really stay?

And how close can you get to happiness,  
if you throw away all the keys that open up your chest?

## Don't Turn Around

[Verse 1]  
C Am  
She said wait, don't go  
C Am  
I know it's not always been easy with me,  
C Am  
But if we try real hard, we'll find something more,  
C Am Dm  
So that we both can be free.

[Verse 2]  
Oh, the wind went wild  
And blew her summer dress all about  
She stood waiting in the doorway, looking like a child,  
Not knowing what to gain, if she let it out.  
Dm Dm7 G7 F C  
(And the picture of another me standing at her side)

[Verse 3]  
Oh, I turned, I shouldn't have turned.  
I looked her in the eye, all petrified.  
Behind her many tears I saw that she smiled.  
And when I looked around again she started to sing.

Dm Am  
How can I find you, how can I even try?  
Dm Am G  
Tell me, tell me, please, cause I really don't know.  
C E Am G G7  
When everything that I do seems to take me one more  
C Am E  
step away from you.  
C E Am G  
And all the things that I do not do, well, they don't really  
F C  
get me closer, too.

[Verse 4]  
So I walked, I walked on ahead.  
I came to the station and I got on the train.  
Falling back into my seat I returned to her bed.  
Then I cursed my mind and listened to the rain,  
falling gently on the window pane.



Denke in den kalten  
Tagen an Deine Liebsten

Vergesse aber auch  
nicht Deine Nächsten

Und mache allen  
eine kleine Freude

Jeder braucht etwas Wärme in der kältesten Zeit des Jahres



Deswegen macht  
Meyerbeer Coffee  
mit bei



Suspended Coffee Germany  
...einer für Dich und einer für mich!

Bestelle eine Kaffeekreation für Dich  
und für jemanden, der  
sie sich nicht leisten kann!

Auch Du kannst heute noch etwas Gutes tun!

Wir freuen uns auf Deinen Besuch!  
Dein Meyerbeer Team



## Family Matters

by *Maike Baumgärtner*

For some people, pedicures are the only socially acceptable form of therapy. They walk past the tiny, ridiculous fountain that makes me want to pee all day, plunge down in a comfy seat and hand over their feet as well as their troubles.

I guess it makes sense to feel all too familiar with us pedicurists. Touching somebody's feet has something very intimate to it. Also, we wear white scrubs – the doctor is in, tell me all about that disgusting rash or what your ex liked in the sack. Entertained, and sometimes burdened, with all those secrets, we tend to feel all-knowing when it comes to gossip. Of course, this is an illusion, even in a small, out-of-the-way town.

As a general rule, my boss Pat always says, we are Switzerland. In a tiny place such as Grand Cache, one negative comment turns into a storm of gossip and all of a sudden, the fact that you forgot to say *Good Morning* to a costumer turns into a story about how the salon's basement is used for human trafficking. That's the kind of Chinese whispers we play in an out-of-the-way town that relies on only one big business as an employer.

The business here is a condom – excuse me, family planning products – factory, owned by Bruce Wood (not an alias, although his name delights the local teenagers) and soon to be passed on to his daughter Stephanie. Everyone in Grand Cache knows her. She grew up as not only the town's richest daughter, but also the only child of old Bruce Wood. Stephanie preferred pale shades of nail polish, tipped well and was one of my regulars.

Stephanie also preferred her feet to be treated with as much privacy as possible. The reason for this was her

unfortunate birth defect (her words, not mine) which refers to the hardly noticeable fact that two of her toes are grown together. After her first appointment with me, I googled the condition and apparently, it's a genetic trait that comes with no health issues. Well, good for her. even better for me, since I get to pocket a serious tip for my discretion.

At least this was the status quo a fortnight ago, because this story is about how her tiny secret came out and the massive impact it made in our small community. Now, two weeks later, everyone knows about her toes, stubby as they are. But on that day, she called to cancel her appointment with me.

"Ms. Wood's not coming in today. Betty, you hear me?" Pat yelled over the whale song we play on loop in the salon.

"That's new," I grumbled because I knew the other customers would leave the minimum tip in my pocket that day. I was surprised because Stephanie usually made a point of keeping all her appointments and being there on the dot as well. Pat tiptoed over to where I was folding towels, trying to look serious, but I could see very well that she had some exciting gossip that was just about to burst out of her.

"Well, Ms. Wood has a very good reason to cancel today," she said, savouring every moment before the big reveal.

"Oh?" I tried to seem disinterested, and was promptly awarded with Pat picking up the speed.

"There was a death in the family."

"Who died?" I asked, all ears now.

If it was a member of the famous Wood clan, I was

sure to know the deceased. "Bruce Wood is dead."

We stood there for a moment, blinking at each other stupidly. The towel I had been folding lay forgotten on the floor.

I knew that his death would have consequences for more than just the Wood family. Nearly everyone's employer was gone, meaning that until the funeral was over and Stephanie took the reigns, the whole town would hold their breath. As the news spread through Grand Cache, we were alerted several times of Wood's death by every single busybody in town who "just wanted to let everyone know" so they could "pay their respects".

The other reason the phone did not stop ringing for the next few days was that most of town indeed wanted to come to the funeral. Somehow, at least the women in this town seemed to feel that a pedicure was in order to look their best at the funeral. After all, it was late August and if there is any excuse to wear black, high heeled sandals, the ladies of Grand Cache were not going to let it pass by, be it for a summer wedding or a summer funeral. Also, I strongly suspected, they knew there was no place to gossip like the Paradise salon. The next morning was booked solid, mostly with packs of women who ignored me while I worked on their feet and they worked on their conspiracy theories.

"I know old Wood had a weak heart, but still –"

"I know, he wasn't that old and Stephanie really wanted to inherit from him. About time, too, she waited for forty years to step out of Daddy's shadow."

"Poor thing never started a family, always on call if her father needed help at work."

I tuned out, listening to my own thoughts while I massaged Ms. Abbots feet with coconut lotion. Next to her, Nancy had already applied cherry red polish to Ms. Stein's bony toes. Nancy had the same glazed over look in her eyes I must have shown. As soon as something happened in Grand Cache, which was next to never, there was no stopping gossip. By the end of the pedicure, Ms. Abbot and Ms. Stein would have come up with plenty of imaginative scenarios surrounding Bruce Wood's death and his daughter's inheritance. It never occurred to them that Wood had died of natural causes, then passed on his company to Stephanie, end of story. Of course, that alone would not make for good gossip, so I finished the pedicure on autopilot, politely walked out my customer and

went to the back to have my first cup of coffee that day.

Thank goodness for caffeine, I thought, when Pat stepped next to me. She looked sheepish, so I decided to let her off the hook.

"What's wrong?"

"Ms. Wood called and asked about an appointment with you. I wanted to fit her in at four, but the salon will be busy later and she insisted on the private pedicure she usually has."

"And...?"

"I told her she could come in during lunch break. I hope you don't mind. After all, the poor dear has just lost her father. I didn't want to tell her no. Nancy will do my feet during the break and you will do Ms. Wood's. I'll buy us lunch as soon as she leaves."

I agreed that there was no turning down Stephanie, not just before the funeral and especially not when Pat was going to buy lunch. You could say what you will about her, but she was not cheap.

As soon as Stephanie walked in, I felt bad for being so flippant about her situation. She looked reserved and so frail that I was worried she might not make it to the chair. I settled her in, got her a glass of water and went to work. She leaned back with her eyes closed, so I let her be while I put her feet into the foot bath. Next to us, Pat and Nancy came in. With a worried look at Stephanie, Pat sat down quietly and quickly put her feet into the water to soak. Nancy did her best to be quiet about her preparations, but none of us really thought Stephanie could catch a wink of sleep here. After a while, I decided to end this uncomfortable silence. I picked up a towel and said:

"Ms. Wood? If you're ready –"

"Oh, of course –"

She lost her trail of thought. I followed her gaze to Nancy's hands, wondering what had caught Stephanie's attention. She was in the process of rubbing Pat's feet with lotion and I briefly suspected that Stephanie was offended by the flowery scent. Then I saw it. Pat's third and fourth toes were firmly grown together, even more noticeable than with Stephanie's toes. Then I noticed Pat's gaze on Stephanie's feet. At this moment, I did not think of the consequences for either woman. I was simply amused about the two, sitting next to each other, staring at each other's feet.

"Is this a common trait in your family?" asked Stephanie, growing paler by the second.

"I'm the only one."

Pat sat frozen in her seat, dumbstruck.

Stephanie stared for a moment longer, then looked up to Pat's face. It only occurred to me then that their similarities in looks were not only due to their closeness in age. Both had a determined chin, dark brown eyes and were tougher than you would give any short person credit for.

"I got it from my father," Stephanie revealed with a dead voice.

They grew quiet once again, then Stephanie remembered an urgent appointment. Very likely, I thought. She is probably lawyering up while Nancy, completely unaware of the impact of this lunch break, selected a plum color for Pat's toe nails.

I left her to her thoughts and went about my business. As I cleaned my instruments, put towels in the wash and worked on three increasingly ugly pairs of feet, the day slowly went by. All the while, I kept sneaking peeks at Pat. She kept working, trooper that she was, but it was no surprise to me that she was distracted that afternoon.

The next day, she came back looking determined, so I dragged her to the back. "I talked to my mother," she announced. "Apparently, Bruce was the love of her life."

Her voice dripped sarcasm as she said it.

"They were both already married back then and decided not to cause a scandal by dissolving their marriages."

It took me a moment, then I gasped.

"He knew about you."

"That's right. Lovely family, isn't it?"

She grew angrier by the second.

"What are you going to do now?"

"Obviously, Bruce owes me big time. I called my lawyer about my legal part of the inheritance. I'm supposed to show up for the reading of his will and after that, it will be determined how much I am legally owed."

"It's a big business. You might inherit a lot," I said, trying to remind her of the bright side.

When the day of the funeral came, I swung by Pat's house to give her a ride. I had convinced her the day before that she was too stressed out to get behind the wheel. Pat still looked angry when she got into the passenger seat. I tried to give her one of those awkward, seat-belted hugs but she only patted my arm absently. Quiet it is then, I thought, and drove towards the local graveyard.

When we pulled up, we were met with lots of curious glances. It seemed that local gossip had run its due course. Well, I sighed inwardly, at least there were no explanations necessary when Pat elbowed through the crowd to end up uncomfortably next to Stephanie. I followed her for a while, but preferred to stay back discreetly but within earshot. The sisters nodded at each other awkwardly and through the sea of black, I could just about spot the pastor. Thank goodness there was no time left for uncomfortable conversation. The pastor opened his bible with a meaningful look.

"Paul said in Romans 5:12 that 'through one man, sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men...'"

I noticed that the crowd's attention was neither on the pastor nor on the coffin. Everyone kept stealing glances at Stephanie and Pat. Fine, so did I. But at least I tried to do it discreetly.

"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

A time to be born, and a time to die..."

The pastor ended the prayer and the crowd absently murmured their 'amens'.

He moved on to praise Bruce Wood's character and the atmosphere became tense.

"...member of our community...involved in charity work..."

Get to the good stuff, I thought.

"Although he cared deeply for his business and his community, first and foremost he was a family man..."

"Ha!" Pat cried out.

It seemed that no one had let the pastor in on the latest developments. Stephanie stared at her venomously, and every bit of attention the pastor had held went to nil. He cleared his throat and went on:

"After his wife's death, he devoted all his time to his only daughter -"

I could see Pat's shoulders shaking. She looked tense and I could see that she held onto a last bit of countenance.

"...Bruce, who was an honest and decent..."

That was it. I could follow the exact moment in which Pat's limit was met. Every mourner present leant forward to make sure they did not miss a thing. Poor Pat, I thought, how hard it must be to bury a father she had never really known - until I noticed she was not crying.

Her shoulders shook until she could no longer hold back her laughter. Deep *har-hars* burst out of her like a drunken sailor. She laughed so hard that she bent over, hands on knees. Stephanie focused her tear-streaked eyes on her.

"How dare you - how... first you come here and now-"

But there was no stopping Pat's guffaws. Probably to avoid providing more entertainment for the fascinated crowd, she pushed passed them along the wreaths to get back to the car. She stumbled, nearly fell into the piles of wreaths, but was caught by the casket-bearers, whose shocked faces clearly indicated that they were no locals. She nearly lost one of her pumps, and pulled until it came free. Unfortunately, she had not only freed her shoe, but also the wreath's banner it had been tangled in. So she left the cemetery, chin up, still giggling hysterically, dragging a banner behind her that said *My dear* Father.

The days that followed were joyfully filled with town gossip. Though at least when it came to the company, Pat made it very clear that she did not make claims on it. Rather, she and her lawyer had worked on a plan for a financial settlement. On a personal level, things were much more uncomfortable for Pat.

"Patricia Miller and Peggy Hooper told Nancy that they would not come in again. They act all offended, as if I had laughed at *their* dear daddies' funerals. And if what my neighbors tell me is true, Stephanie tells everyone that there should be no money for me at all, being illegitimate."

She put emphasis on the last word, trying to gloss over her hurt.

"And then I run into Stephanie as I'm coming out of my lawyer's office, and she starts yelling at me. I hope this is all the therapy she is going to need, because she really made it count. I can tell you, if I felt bad for disrupting her life, I do not any longer. Tomorrow's the reading of the will and soon after, everything will be sorted."

"Do you want me to come? As moral support?" I asked hopefully.

"That would be great, thanks hon. I could use someone in my corner."

So we went, bright and early the next day and right in front of the office, we bumped into Stephanie. Good timing, I thought, was nothing we could be accused of. Stephanie glared at us.

"So you're here."

"Yup."

By now, Pat was remarkably blasé about the whole affair.

"Well, I hope this time you will keep your temperament in check." Her voice rose dangerously. "I swear, if you cause another scene-"

"Don't worry, Sis," Pat said, and Stephanie cringed, "this time I will honour the family tradition of keeping my mouth shut." We stepped through the door and, to my amazement, were greeted not only by the lawyer, but also by a young man in shorts and sandals.

"Who are you?" Stephanie demanded gruffly.

"May I introduce myself? I'm Bruce's son, George. Also known as the sole beneficiary."

"Impossible!" Stephanie yelled. Pat simply stood and stared.

"Is it?" the young man said, put his sandaled feet on the desk and wriggled his toes.

# The Powers That Be

## I The Moon Is Rising

These three were ordinary teenagers who came together in this snake navel of a town. They weren't outcasts, they weren't prom king and queen, but they were significant. Perhaps even a forerunner of things to come. Of mutually assured destruction and pain that transcends the ramifications of their actions. Yet decades after their deaths, there was no longer a soul that knew how it all began. Why everything changed. These days, there are mere whispers among the elders about the events that ensued during the summer of 1966 in Frankfort, Indiana; back when they found mice in soda bottles and people thought spiders were nesting in a girl's bouffant.

The town's history is especially rotten and sticky compared to the average stretch of land. Murder, deceit and tragedy have wormed their way through it like bacteria in a hunk of swiss cheese.

Our trio, however, managed to get the ball rolling in a whole new direction. One that was considerably more sinister. Before this, in their early teenage years, campfire stories about Dickey Gifford were passed on to following generations. He raped and slaughtered eight nuns in their bed in 1922. After they executed him, he was said to haunt every child's closet, attic or space under the bed in Frankfort.

If you stand on Hamilton Bridge on the third Wednesday of every month and look south toward the woods, you may see flames licking the treetops where an old church once burned down, eighty-six African American slaves trapped inside. Should you listen closely, you

might even hear them howl in pain and bang against the walls of the church. Your nose may even pick up the nauseating and putrid smell of burning human flesh.

May of 1904, a factory building explodes, killing 23 workers. The headlines reached from San Francisco to New York City "IMMENSE PLANT IS COMPLETELY WRECKED – Buildings are Blown Into Fragments and Bodies of the Dead and Maimed Are Strewn Over Great Area". Freak accident, they say. Freddie Maguire, our very own town drunk, still tells anyone who will listen how he and his comrades had to pick up heads, arms and legs and scrape up bits of flesh all over the city.

"It was like a gaaaaaime, really. We was just try'n to cope wif erthing n so we made it a competishn of who found the noggen tha wash furthest away from the works! I tell you, Gordon found his pal's right ouside Mr Reilly's. Is tha convenience store oan the edge of town back in the day, I tell you," he would blabber with one pointer finger swaying up in the air, then usually having to conclude his tale by rushing to the restroom as fast as drunkenly possible to empty the contents of his stomach.

But no matter how much evil was undoubtedly held up there in the years before, these kids sprung something ancient into the world.

Jill, Jeremiah and Jonah are in Miss Dunball's eighth grade class at St. Edward Middle School but she would neither describe the three as her favorite students, nor as her least favorite ones.

"Troubling... troubling young fella," she would say to Mr. Borden, the history teacher, while bending down to the water cooler in the teachers' lounge and filling a tiny paper cone, "especially with his delinquent brother".

by *Elisa Haas*

She whispered that last part as if she herself were afraid of Teddy Kemp, who was known to viciously pick on little Jeremiah. Her hands were shaking while she said it, even though she already had a cigarette pressed between two fingers. She was known to alternate between smoking and coffee every fifteen minutes or so and assured everyone that it 'kept her sane'. Although the other teachers thought she was rather hysterical and always on the verge of crying. Her eyes were always just a little red and slightly bulging out of her skull, as if years ago her sockets had decided to stop growing with the rest of her body, leaving her eyeballs hanging on for dear life.

Mr. Borden glumly leaned against the wall with one hand in his armpit and the other gripping a Frankfort TIGERS coffee mug. He had listened to all of Dunball's outbursts about these three, even though she acted as if she were the only one that knew Jonah Smith got the shit beaten out of him by his father. Don't forget about Jill Nelson, who, by God, can't be right in the head with those goddamn queer mothers of hers, excuse me.

In fact, everyone was used to her telling them the same stories over and over. Even the principal tended to hide under his desk when she entered the teacher's lounge. His office took up one half of the room; separated only by four side by side 3x6ft glass panes. Let's just say he didn't think his tactic all the way through. Borden and the P.E. Teacher had a bet going on when the boss would bash the woman's head in with his bulldog-shaped paperweight. Miss. ADH-Dunball's rants really took the cake.

## II The House Of The Rising Sun

Jill, Jeremiah and Jonah knew nothing of this however. They saw themselves as just as ordinary as their classmates, yet internally they somehow all knew they were bound together by the fallout of their tortured psyche.

Jill's surroundings were tinged in greenish light, the remnants of bold sunbeams that hit the tops of countless, narrow trees which filtered it, baked the leaves and left a musty wet odor wafting from tree trunk to tree trunk.

"Wait up!" Jill cried after the boys, who had already passed the top of the hill they were hiking up through long grass and tall trees. She was tired of running after them, especially in this heat and uphill. Her breath was

quick and loud. Both palms started sweating. Warmth spread through her guts as she realized her friends were out of sight and would keep going without her if she didn't catch up soon. Motivated by panic, she picked up some speed and tore after the boys one more time until she reached them midway down the opposite side of the hill. Jonah was easy enough to spot in his fire-red t-shirt and blonde buzz cut. Even in the dim light that the tree-tops let through. She smacked him hard on the back of his neck.

"Ay, what was that for?" he exclaimed and shoved her away so hard she crashed into Jeremiah, who was hit by surprise and barely managed to catch her. Jill didn't notice in her juvenile rage, but he carefully made sure she ended up in a vertical position. Yet when he propped her up, he only touched her back and did his best to avoid her bosom altogether.

"Hey man, you ran off and now I'm the bad guy? We gotta stick together!"

Jonah only scoffed and looked behind her at Jeremiah with a 'can you believe her nerves' look. Jill looked dumbfounded. Her doe eyes became big and watery. The way she stuck her chest out and put one hand on each side of her narrow hips, she looked almost like an adult to them. Before she could protest any further, Jeremiah walked off in the direction of their favorite forest hiding spot at the foot of the hillside that was facing away from town.

"Whoever gets there last brings the beer for next time." he taunted. This released some of the tension between the pair, and they returned to their childish games again.

"Ay! Cheater!" Jill screamed through her hands, then dashed after him with everything she had. Jonah appeared running next to her not long after. Just when they thought they would both come in last, Jeremiah's foot got caught in some vines on the ground and fell smack down on his nose. Jonah got distracted and stopped to help his friend up, but Jill had to dodge the one or the other obstacle herself. Despite the stinging in her lungs, she kept going. Finally, she spotted their tan-colored tent in between the two pines which stood in a sea of oak. They marked a sort of entrance to a serene clearing living harshly separated from the somberness of the woods.

"Gotcha! Jonah-da-loosa is buying beer. Ha!"

Jonah and Jeremiah caught up less than three seconds later and threw her to the ground with the full

force of their bodies.

“Damn, Jello. Why do I have to supply the drinks? I ain’t your butler!”

“My name’s not Jello! I did it last week and Jer brought it this time alright? He almost got busted so quit your whining!”

Jeremiah only shook his head in disbelief and kept rubbing his elbow. One after the other, they got back on their feet and continued to brush the dirt off their clothes.

They had been coming here since preschool. Before discovering the vices and virtues of alcohol, they had come here to construct a little treehouse on one of the green giants and another little hut that was really only a glorified tent that they reinforced with wooden planks. They only used it in case it had rained before and it was too dangerous to climb the slippery branches to their upstairs hangout. After Jeremiah broke his arm because he fell from the tree, they didn’t attempt to go up there anymore and stuck to the ground base until the tree dried and until his bones mended, of course. As far as they were aware, nobody knew about the clearing and they were grateful for the refuge.

“I don’t think we can go up today. It rained all night.” Jeremiah mumbled.

“Ay Ay captain!” Jonah and Jill agreed and laughed their careless fourteen-year-old child-laughter.

Jeremiah pulled the curtain that acted as a makeshift door for the cozy but spacious hut to the side and let his two companions in before slipping through himself. Inside, you could smell the mold that ate away at the corners of the tent, which were always a little moist.

“Ahhh, good to be back”, said Jonah as he eased into one of three odd chairs. All of their furniture, so to speak, had been collected from the town dump long ago and was on the brink of falling apart.

Jeremiah plopped down next to him and pulled a brown paper bag out of his school bag. He reached into it and produced three Buds, handing one to each of them, then leaning back with his own. The beer was taken from his father, who always kept a couple of six packs in the fridge down in their basement. The old man never noticed how his son snatched a can here and there, hiding them under his bed, but there have been close calls. Especially when his mother cleaned his room particularly thoroughly and came scarily close to discovering the motherload.

Jill opened hers and took a big swig. By now she thought she should be accustomed to the bitterness, but still pulled the same awkward face every time. Deep down she wished that they could bring something tastier or just go back to drinking root beer in the woods.

If Jonah asked her why she was only halfway done with hers while he was on his third, she always insisted that she just liked to drink it slowly and enjoy the taste instead of chugging it ‘like an animal’. All whilst knowingly rolling her eyes and extending the pinky on her beer-holding hand.

“Should I just finish yours, Jello? I’m getting real cold now. It’s pretty dark, I think we should head back soon.” Jonah’s words were heavily slurred, his eyes glazed over.

Jill looked at him, her eyebrows drawn together. “I think you’ve had enough, Jonah-Ponah. Let’s roll,” she answered and chugged the mixture of foam and spit at the bottom of her can, crushed it like she had practiced it and threw it over her shoulder.

This woke Jeremiah out of a drunken stupor and he roared with laughter as he watched their banter. He only shook his head while attempting to peel himself away from the soggy chair. They collected their empty potato chip and pretzel tins along with an assortment of new and old beer cans.

“Guys, why don’t we take the long way home and give you two the chance to sober up?” she said.

They nodded and she decided to lead the way out of the clearing in the direction of the city. However, when they reached the foot of the hill, she turned right and walked around the hill instead. A trickling stream, which reflected the spare moonlight, showed her the way.

Jeremiah and Jonah stumbled after her, arm in arm, singing *This Land Is Our Land*, very much out of tune. After a few minutes, it became clear to Jill that they were utterly lost in the woods after just fifteen minutes. Usually Jonah was sober enough to go first and she never paid attention when they took the long way back. She never had to with him.

“Which way do we have to go now?” she asked.

“Uh... uhm not sure uh, let’s just go this way,” Jeremiah answered.

“Whaddaya meean? We go here all the time...” Jonah burped, “and all of a sudden we get lost. *Impahsibul!*”

“Does it seem darker than it should be to you guys too?” Jill felt a cold rush of panic trickling down her spi-

ne. Her voice was quivering even though she tried to suppress it. The two were of no use in solving their dilemma. Visions of them getting mauled by a bear in the middle of the night flashed before her eyes.

“This can’t be happening”, she thought, ‘not tonight, not ever!’ She and Jeremiah took the way that he suggested, which only led them away from the stream and deeper into the dark. Now they couldn’t turn around and trace their way back to the clearing even if they wanted to. Every tree, every bush looked the same.

“Admit it, Jer, we are lost as heck,” she wailed.

“Yup!” he agreed.

All at once Jonah was alone and he now felt very, very sober. He was drawn by some strange force to follow the stream, not realizing that the others were gone.

Not before too long they started to yell his name and went on a frantic search only to find the boy kneeling beside a pond that, in the dark, looked like it stretched so infinitely far, it could almost be a lake. Both of his arms were plunged in the water, sloshing around as if he were looking for something.

“You okay, man?” Jeremiah asked and put a hand on Jonah’s shoulder who didn’t respond. Jill felt even more uneasy. She stepped around on the spot and suddenly realized she had to pee.

“I’ll be right back, Jer, gotta tinkle.”

He nodded at her impatiently and turned back to Jonah, whose face looked so white he might be about to vomit his insides out into that pond. Chills ran down Jeremiah’s back when he noticed how empty his eyes were.

Jill went far away enough so she could be sure neither one of the boys would be able to hear her and squatted to relieve herself after she had checked for poison ivy and other inconveniences.

After a few minutes she returned, but the boys hadn’t even moved away from the pond yet. Jonah was sitting on his feet rubbing something clean with his shirt, which was brown almost all over rather than the original red it had been. She couldn’t see what it was but she was getting more and more impatient by the second. They were, after all, still lost. Both Jonah and Jeremiah sat in a trance and stared at the object in Jonah’s hands.

“What now?” she asked. Neither one acknowledged her presence for what seemed like minutes. She was afraid to speak again and instead took a few slow steps toward them. What were they up to? Now fuming, she

grabbed the stone out of Jonah’s hands. In an instant, he broke his trance and jumped after her like a hungry lion.

“Hey! Give it back!” he yelled. Jill turned away from the two and examined what the boys were so interested in. It was a smooth, grey-colored oval stone, about the size of her palm. Before she was able to marvel on the peculiar shape of it, Jonah wrestled her to the ground. They were writhing around in the dirt, Jill on her back and Jonah straddling her in an attempt to reclaim the stone. Though her resistance was fierce, Jonah managed to pin her down, leaves and dirt stuck to Jill’s face and clothes. Mud seeped through her pants, as Jonah rolled her over on her stomach and then Jeremiah came in and pried it out of her fingers.

“OW! Hey, you can’t do that with me. What the hell has gotten into you two!”

The boys were already standing up with their backs turned to Jill. By now, it was pitch-black around them and Jill desperately wished for a flashlight.

She walked around Jeremiah’s side and joined them. Now her eyes were glued to it as well. With great effort, she tore them away and shot a panicked look into the faces of her friends, which frightened her to the bones. Their pupils had expanded so much that the iris was barely visible. Jonah had his hand on one side of the stone and Jer had his on the other.

She didn’t know how they were going to get out of here, but she felt that she had to touch it as well. There was no doubt in her mind that it pulled her in slowly but surely. It simply felt right. Her hand developed a life of its own. She could no longer stop the inevitable even if she wanted to. As if she needed it to survive and it needed her protection.

The air was electric and dense around them. Any second now it could turn into Jello and trap them right then and there like flies in amber. The closer her fingers got to it, the more intense the crackling around them got. Jill was filled to the brim with exhilaration at the prospect of reuniting with the force of the stone.

‘Wait’ She thought. ‘Re-uni-’

Before she could finish the thought, her thumb and index held the third and last corner of the stone in a tight grip. Massive weight fell off of her shoulders and instantly the fog around her brain was lifted.

Just as everything went black, she could swear that she was able to hear the thoughts of the others and they

heard hers. However, they weren't in any language she had heard before. It was ancient, sounding more like clicks and rattling than regular human speech.

Then, their memory of the night ended. She didn't see how the stone cracked and split into three ragged pieces. She couldn't remember how they woke up from their trance or how they ended up in Jeremiah's bed, curled up next to each other, but they somehow did.

She was the first to wake up. Disoriented, wet, dirty, her piece of the stone in one hand and her other hand touching Jonah's fingers. Slowly she grew conscious of the fact that her parents must be worried sick since she hadn't come home last night. As far as she could tell by the light that flooded the room, it was already the next morning.

Jonah and Jer woke up a few minutes later, after Jill had given up on shaking them awake. Jonah opened his eyes only to see he was holding hands with Jill. He scrunched up his face as if he had smelled spoiled milk and quickly pulled away.

"Ugh. I feel like my head is stuck between two bricks!" he cried, rubbing his temples.

"That's what you get for hogging all the booze, idiot," Jeremiah replied.

"Never mind that. How did we get here?" Jill demanded.

"No clue," Jeremiah groaned, now cupping his own forehead with one palm.

"Who cares!" Jonah jumped up and straightened his clothes. "We're still in one piece and I'm leaving." He started towards the door a little too quickly. Black spots danced in front of his eyes and he was disoriented for a few seconds.

"Yeah... *we're* in one piece." Jeremiah said and held up his piece of the stone.

"Whatever happened, it's got to have something to do with this thing."

"We'll brainstorm later, alright?" Jonah regained his sight as well as his balance and stormed out of the door, without awaiting a response.

That left the two alone on the bed and at this realization, Jill's cheeks flushed. She ran after Jonah without another word.

### III You Really Got Me

Jeremiah found himself alone in his room. He looked down and examined his part of the ominous stone. It lay in his palm, seemingly still, but Jeremiah could feel faint vibrations coming from within. The longer he stared at it, the more he could swear that it was trying to move away in one direction and another one the next moment.

"The hell is this thing?" he murmured.

"Jeremiah! Jer-eh-mi-ahh!" his mother screamed from the kitchen. He threw the rock under his bed and stormed downstairs to find his mother in front of the stove, stirring eggs in a frying pan. His father was sitting in his television chair, reading the Sunday paper. "Mad sniper kills 15, wounds 31 – 80-minute terror at Texas U," the headline read.

"Why didn't you tell me that you were having overnight guests? They stormed through here when I was still in my robe!"

"Uhm...", he hesitated, "I'm sorry, Ma."

"Right," she growled.

Jeremiah didn't pay her much attention. Instead he grabbed a plate and a glass of milk for his breakfast. He was glad that at least his brother wasn't here to torture him.

His dad dropped the paper a few inches and shot a glaring look that assured a nasty ass-whooping later today for bringing 'that filthy slut Jill Nelson into his good Christian home'. Jeremiah had trouble tearing his eyes away from his father for fear of messing with his temper. Even Mary Kemp sensed how palpable the tension was between the two, yet no word was spoken. Jeremiah sat down at the table, careful not to turn his back to his father.

"Just...eat now," she whispered with a shaky voice, then put down the pan in front of him and plopped a generous helping of eggs onto his plate.

"Jesus, Mary, the boy will turn into a turkey the way you're stuffing him all the time," Gary Kemp huffed angrily.

She nodded and scraped a few pieces back into the pan. "I oughta get downstairs and tend to the laundry." Her voice was no louder than a whisper. She stripped the apron off and placed it over one of the stools. Before Jeremiah could properly thank her for the food, she disappe-

ared into the basement, leaving him alone with his father.

He began to shovel his breakfast and hadn't noticed how his father had gotten up and walked over to him until a heavy hand fell on his right shoulder. He felt as if the chair might give way from the pressure and break underneath him.

"Slow down, son, we don't want anything to fly down the wrong pipe, right?" he grunted into Jeremiah's ear. A rotten smell mixed with coffee emanated from the man's mouth. He looked down to see that his father had rolled his precious paper up. In those bulky fists it looked more like a baseball bat. For all the boy knew, if Gary brought it down strong enough, he might split the top of his skull. As soon as the bear's paw lifted from his shoulder and Gary stomped into his study, the boy could breathe again and scoffed down the rest of his breakfast.

In fear of waking Teddy up, he tip-toed back into his room and reached for the key in his door, intending to lock it. Before he got remotely close to it, however, the key was pulled out of its slot with an ear-piercing metal *clank* and shot into his palm. Stunned, he fell back and landed on his buttocks, key still stuck to him. Even when he extended all five fingers and tried to shake it off, it would not budge until he pried it away. Then it wouldn't come off his left either and he was forced to succumb to this strange sensation of panic and curiosity.

"Get off!" he screamed, "Off! Off!" and it fell to the floor. He heard a loud *clonk* from downstairs, meaning his father had set down his drink and was ready to come up here to investigate if there was one more disturbance. The boy bit down on his tongue to stifle any more screams. He listened for heavy steps that announced his father's arrival, but there weren't any. The old man must have returned his attention to regular adult business.

Glad to be rid of the key, he got up and reached under his bed to retrieve the rock, only to find out that it was gone.

### IV Matchbox

Jill reached her house on Main Street just in time to meet her Ma coming downstairs in her pink fuzzy bathrobe, yawning.

"Where have you been?" she asked her daughter.

Jill was prepared for this and slyly pulled out the

morning paper from behind her back. "Just went out to pick this up," she panted. "Paperboy threw it right into Momma's peonies."

"Jeez, you look like you ran a marathon," her Ma, Sharon, responded and drew the wet rag out of Jill's hand. "Ugh, the kid has to aim at puddles of rainwater every single time, doesn't he," she scoffed and continued to lurch into the kitchen where her partner, Gertrud, was preparing herself lunch. She worked at the county library. "Morning, Gerty." Sharon gave her a tired peck on the freckled cheek, then proceeded to pour coffee into a clean mug, sat down on a barstool next to the kitchen isle and attempted to peel apart individual pages of her morning paper with mediocre success. Jill had slipped into the house without being seen by Gertrud and took on the stairs to her room. If she had been seen, she thought momma wouldn't be fooled by Jill's weak excuse.

Irritated grunts came from Sharon every time a corner ripped off or half of a column was missing, no doubt stuck to the peonies outside. Jill couldn't care at all about her Ma's struggle. As soon as she caught her breath, her focus was only on her piece of the mysterious stone which rested in the palm of her left hand. She never took her gaze off it, too afraid to blink. The longer she stared at it, the more she could swear that it was trying to roll over in her palm. All by itself, but kept on its one side by wobbling back and forth in opposite directions, as if it couldn't decide which way to roll. A minute passed and her eyes started to dry out and burn, but she persisted. For as long as she fixed her gaze upon it, the stone with its one smooth and two ragged sides did not budge more than half an inch. However, Jill noticed it changing colors. From a pale grey to a muted red, then orange. A sharp pain in her hand broke her focus and she closed her eyes. She dropped the culprit on the floor before it cooked her flesh any more. It must have been a stupid mistake. Trick of her mind. The stone was grey and always had to be. Stones did not turn fire hot by just being stared at. Yet, when she stole a glance at her throbbing hand, blisters began to grow on her pale skin.

"Fuck, that hurts!" she exclaimed sharply.

The telltale creak of Gertrud standing on the third step up from downstairs reached Jill's ears and she bit down on her tongue to trap any further profanity.

"Are you alright, Jelly?" Gertrud yelled, "I'm leaving for work now!"

“Yes, ugh” -*goddammit*- “I’m fine, see you later, Momma.”

There was no follow-up to that, just a second creak as she went back down, then the sound of the screen door slapping the frame after she had left the house. Jill touched the blisters carefully and thought she should probably run them under cold water. One paw holding the other, she left her room, left the stone, and proceeded down the hallway to the main bathroom of the house. With a soft click, she closed the door behind her and leaned with her back against it, sighing, relieved that nobody else had come to investigate her strange behavior. As soon as she was sure Sharon would not come but was most certainly still busy with her ball of paper pulp, Jill walked over to the sink on tippy toes and ran cold water over her wounds until they felt numb.

By the time she went back to her room, she half expected the stone to have burned a hole through the floor of her bedroom. But what she found baffled her infinitely more. The stone had disappeared alright, yet there was no smoldering black hole in the carpet next to her bed. Instead, a few of the fibers in the place where it landed appeared slightly charred and there was a faint black line drawn in the carpet. It pointed at her window, which was wide open. One of her mothers must have come in and opened it to air the place out. She hesitated but still ended up approaching it. She came upon a black smudge on the left side of the white frame. The last trace she saw of the thing.

### V Whiskey Man

Jonah had run the entire way home, praying that his father hadn’t come downstairs to check on him yet. Finally, he reached the house and slid headfirst through the basement window into his room, trying to be quiet as a mouse. His right leg got caught on a nail which stuck out of the wooden sill and ripped a good chunk of his pants out along with some skin. Sharp burning pain shot through his entire leg. It distracted him, meaning his landing was more of a 3/10 instead of the usual 10/10. By a few inches, he missed his bed and crashed on the hardwood floor, his head banging on the bedpost.

For a good minute he was certain that he would pass out. His vision was blurry and all he could hear was a

single high-pitched ringing inside his head. The sound was bouncing around from side to side, magnifying, maddening. Black spots danced to it.

Upstairs, someone pushed a chair back and Jonah heard dull stomping noises. Someone, probably his father since they were the only two people who lived here, was about to come down here any minute. Jonah quickly pulled his mud and blood drenched clothes off, threw them across the room in the general vicinity of the hamper, then jumped into bed. A beam of light flooded the staircase and softly illuminated the otherwise murky room. It was followed by loud creaks which announced the big boss coming down the wooden cellar stairs. He was huffing and groaning as he did so, seemingly doing a very laborious task. Each wooden plank gave a tired sigh when first a brown loafer and then the weight of three black bears descended on them. They were used to a lanky fourteen-year-old rushing down there so fast he might as well jump from top to bottom.

Jonah closed his eyes, pretended to be asleep and waited for his father to ask him what all this ruckus was. But the old man said something rather odd instead.

“Your mother is worried sick.” The words were so quietly spoken that Jonah had to think for two, three heartbeats before he understood that his father did in fact just say them. First, one of his eyes flung open, then, lagging behind, the other one followed.

“What?” he asked, laughing and shivering at the same time.

“Yer mother, she stayed up all night to wait for you. Had to talk her down from calling the sheriff,” he answered matter-of-factly.

“Dad... what are you talking about. Mom is... She...” he didn’t dare finish.

“Why are you covered in dirt? If she sees this she is going to explode. Don’t you think you’re already enough work for the both of us, boy?”

Jonah sat up. His jaw dropped, unable to comprehend the meaning of his father’s words and at the same time, a profound sensation of sadness infected every cell of his little body.

“Dad,” he began, his eyes becoming distant and grey, “Mom’s dead. The cigarettes gave her cancer, remember Dad?” He swung his legs off the side of the bed and stood up. Carefully, as not to startle his father who stood across the room, and swaying slightly but otherwise motionless.

The giant man’s uncombed blond hair made him look more like a toddler. The teenager slowly approached the toddler who didn’t seem to hear any of the words that Jonah had just said.

“Did you spend the night with that fag friend of yours? You did, didn’t you?” his voice grew louder with every syllable until the last ones sounded more like a rabid dog’s barking.

Jonah had one arm extended to reach out to his father’s in an attempt to wake him from this odd trance, as if the man was simply sleepwalking and needed to be brought back into reality. But his father’s crude accusation made him stop in his tracks. His arm fell back to his side and his head hung low, chin almost touching his chest. A deep wave of shame and guilt washed over him as if he were a small child that had been caught stealing from the cookie jar. It didn’t make much sense to him though, why his father hated his friend this much. She had two mothers; odd, sure, but how was that her fault? The old man had forbidden him to see her and Jonah was careful not to bring her up. Therefore, he could not think of a good excuse for his whereabouts to save his ass. His mouth opened and then closed again. What was the point in arguing if he was going to be punished one way or another.

“Yer grounded!” Ed Smith bellowed, still swaying back and forth. He reminded Jonah of how drunk he was yesterday after chugging three beers - Ed called this an appetizer while Jonah couldn’t see straight anymore. He looked up at the ceiling as if he were afraid that his father could read his mind and would know about the hideout, the drinking, the stone.

“Yessir,” Jonah mumbled.

“Stop back talking, son,” he added, raising his giant pear paw.

“I’m not, I’m really not,” Jonah pleaded, he blinked tears away before they could spill over his cheeks and lead to an even worse beating.

“If I tell yer mom about this, she’ll be fumin’. I tell you, if I’d known that I get sucha rotten bastard...” His ranting broke off and the bear’s paw crashed down hard on Jonah’s jaw, his teeth racketing around. He backed away from his father and crossed both arms in front of his face to shield it. Ed charged at him fast, grabbed the poor boy by the shoulders and shook him in the air so that both feet swung back and forth, his head whipping

around uncontrollably.

“If it weren’t for you little shit, I swear to God!” he screamed and for a brief moment, Jonah was sure he saw steam coming out of his father’s nostrils. The bear had turned into a bull and he was the red rag that swayed in the air. He clammed up and retreated into the backs of his consciousness, praying for the neighbors to hear the screams even though he knew they never did. ‘Just let it be over’, he thought to himself. And all of a sudden, it was.

The glum desperation in his mind was replaced by hot rage and conviction. He was still gripped by the shoulders, right in front of the bull’s snout. Even though he saw its lips moving and spit flying, there was only silence for him.

Jonah put his head back then swung it forward with double the strength of a boxing champion. Still, he barely felt any pain when his forehead connected with his father’s nose. There was solely the sound of cartilage being crushed, followed by a fountain of blood, which sprayed into the boy’s face. However, the rage inside of him didn’t subside immediately. He feared that he may never come down from the rush it gave him. With sudden clarity, he knew that he could end it right then and there. That he could scare the bull into a catatonic state, or worse.

The sound of Ed’s screams reached Jonah’s ears after all. In order to catch the avalanche of blood from his face, he had to let go of Jonah’s shoulders. The boy fell to the ground and bit by bit regained some sort of agency over his emotions.

“If you ever... touch me again, I swear to God, Daddy.” He paused to catch his breath. “I’ll kill you. I know I can do it.”

Ed didn’t say anything. He wasn’t even certain if he’d heard right but the look in his son’s eyes left no more doubt. Like a wolf that lost his place as pack leader in a fight, he merely retreated back upstairs, his eyes locked with Jonah’s. As soon as the door closed, Jonah crouched together on the floor and wept until his head rang and his nose was so congested he thought he might die if he kept going.

“Man up,” He murmured to himself.

As the physical pain his father had inflicted on him subsided a little, he remembered how he brought up his mother. She had died years ago. The tumors ate her up,

just ate her right up, spit her into the ground and left her to rot in Park Cemetery. Jonah's heart felt heavy from grief once again and he thought he was going to lose his mind right here on the ground, where he had mourned three years ago. He took a deep breath, glad that at least all of his bones were still intact and looked around at his room. Everything was in order, just as he had left it yesterday, when the world still felt okay. Only a few worn clothes were strewn about here and there, some clutter on the little children's desk.

Next to the bed laid the stone. It must have fallen out of his pocket when he had taken off his clothes. There was something strangely foreign and out of place about it, like a hotdog in a lamp instead of a lightbulb. As if the stone itself didn't want to be there. Jonah reached for it and half expected his hand to pass right through. A mirage, so to speak. Out of nowhere, it had seemingly grown wings and flew right at his face. Jonah ducked just before it took one of his eyes out.

*Crash.* He swung around and stared at the tiny, circular hole in the window which was now the only real testament that something had been there at all. The edges were nearly smooth, but cracks led away from the center to form a sort of spider web shape. It was gone, just... gone! He jumped up a bit too fast and his sight went black for two or three seconds. At last, his injuries caught up with him and he passed out.

*To be continued...*

## The Very Hungry Caterpillar

*by Sophie Bachmann*

“Are you sure this is a good idea?”  
“No one forced you to be here, Cronch. How could this be a bad idea? It's just vegetables. Like any other vegetables.”

“But we're not supposed to come here. Why would we be forbidden to come here?”

“So the big ones can have all of those tomatoes to themselves, duh. That's fucking why.”

Cronch followed his friend with careful steps, half expecting to set off some kind of trap as they climbed the fence.

Before them lay a vegetable garden, small by human standards. A couple of square metres behind the garden shed, surrounded by beans and raspberries clinging to the wire mesh. In front of them, a narrow path of large, flat stones surrounded a bed of herbs, pumpkins and – the last tomatoes of the year. The fruit reflected the pale morning light. Some of them had burst from a shower the previous evening, but they still looked juicy and inviting and exuded the sweetest smell.

Munch inhaled deeply. “They're all ours. We don't have to share them with anyone.”

His friend shivered with excitement and almost stumbled over his own feet. Between birds, insecticides and their congeners, they rarely got their fill of greens.

“Be careful with the raspberries,” warned Munch, “they have thorns.”

For two caterpillars, the way across the garden resembled a small odyssey. Up the fence, down the bushes, across the path, one little stubby leg in front of the others, always looking out for birds. Meanwhile, the sun was climbing south, but the days had long since begun

to grow shorter, and the shallow, golden rays of sunlight created the perpetual impression that sunset was about to paint the sky red any minute. Most insects have no concept of a calendar, but they could feel that about half of the period during which the days were closing in had passed. Very soon it would be time for Munch and Cronch to find a cozy hole in the earth and pupate.

They had to make sure they were well-fed.

When they finally reached the thin little plants, supported by wooden sticks, Cronch was trembling with excitement. The small, jagged leaves looked just as delicious as the red and yellow fruit. No other insect seemed to have touched them, but then again, the humans took measures against such intrusions. “The humans might have poisoned them,” he said slowly. “Are you sure they are safe to eat?”

“Don't be silly,” Munch replied, rather indignantly. “Humans grow tomatoes to eat them. They wouldn't poison themselves, would they?”

That made sense, and Cronch really did want to gnaw through the fruits' skin and bury himself deep in their sweet pulp. But he could not shake the feeling that the warnings they had received from the other caterpillars were not only meant to keep them away from the best food. Munch, however, obviously did not share his concerns. He was climbing up the stem, taking a bite out of every other leaf on the way up. Had he been human, he might have recalled the biblical land where milk and honey flows. But alas, he was a caterpillar.

Cronch, on the other hand, only made his way up the plant with great hesitation and slowly began to nibble on a ripe tomato. Munch was right, the fruit tasted

delicious. And because his little insect brain could not accommodate those very different feelings – unease and hunger – one replaced the other. A few seconds later half of his body had vanished inside the tomato.

Consequently, he did not see his companion stop his gluttony rather abruptly. A strange expression occupied his face. His tiny brown eyes grew big and glossy. “Cronch,” he said quietly, “there’s not enough food.” He received no reply. “Cronch, I’m starving,” he insisted. Still, no reply. He turned his head, but Cronch was nowhere to be seen – all he saw was food. So much food! Everything appeared in delicious hues of green to him; fresh, luscious leaves wherever Munch turned his gaze. With so much fare he would not have to worry about making it through the winter. He would grow big and strong, the most zestful among his fellow brown-eyes.

*However, a voice inside his tiny head warned him, you need to hurry. Winter is going to be here soon, and the feast mother nature has prepared for you will go to waste.*

Munch, who still felt that he was starving, could not bear the thought. He had to eat as much as he possibly could before the lush plants in front of him would wither and become unpalatable. He dashed forward and tore a chunk out of the leaf in front of him. While he was still chewing, he whirled around and thrust his beak-like jaws into the stem of the tomato. Next was a fruit which had only just begun to redden and was unlikely to ripen in the few sunny days to come. Munch did not care. The colours did not make a great difference to him as a caterpillar. Munch could digest about anything that came between his jaws. *Hurry! Hurry!* The tomato plants rustled mischievously.

While these things happened inside Munch’s little head, Cronch had been nibbling away on his leaf much more slowly and in a more civilized way. Perhaps this is why he did not feel the same anguish as his companion. He was so focused on his meal that he paid no attention to Munch’s burble. That is until his lack of attention came back to bite him

“Ouch!”

Munch briefly wondered why his food spoke, but quickly dismissed the question as irrelevant. After all, he, a caterpillar, spoke as well. Instead he used his front legs to hold down the struggling morsel in front of him.

“Let me go,” Cronch wailed, “I’m not a plant! What the hell is wrong with you – there’s so much food!”

“So much food,” Munch agreed, and took another bite of his friend. His jaws crunched away mercilessly. So much, but he could make it before the temperature would begin to drop and all the food would be spoiled. And when spring came he would be a majestic moth. Cronch’s resistance grew weaker by the minute. Soon, he lost consciousness and lay lifeless at the maw of his congener.

The caterpillar Munch suddenly felt very full. There was a lot of food left in the small garden, but he was about to burst. His little panic attack, he realized, had been very irrational. It seemed there were some days left until winter. And since so many treats had remained uneaten, perhaps he could come back tomorrow for lunch – he should definitely let some of his friends know.

Caterpillars turn into cannibals and eat each other when plants deploy defensive chemicals to make their foliage less appetising, research has revealed. [...] [R]esearchers say that a chemical commonly leaked from plants when damaged can trigger other plants to defend themselves by producing similarly unappealing substances, and that prompts the pests to turn on each other.

*The Guardian, When very hungry caterpillars turn into cannibals (10.7.2017)*

## The Political Sleep

by Saguaro Duda

We waited at sundown for the crowd to assemble, so that the counter-protest could begin. The neo-Nazi rally, which we were going to protest, was supposed to congregate now and come our way. Both demos were organized with the help of the internet, and notifications would continue via it as well, so people kept checking their smartphones as they stood there on the street. I wasn’t one to take part in demonstrations, usually, but felt that lately I was neglecting my political responsibility—indeed, my duty as a second-generation immigrant—too much, and thus I found myself here.

I saw my presence simply as a formal confirmation of my stance on the right-wing movement. It is the only reasonable position one could have in relation to political ideas that should have died out long ago in the last century. However, those who give these hardly justifiable ideologies a new name and propagate them continue to make waves. Just a week earlier, there was news of an anti-fascist teenager who had been brutally beaten up by a group of neo-Nazis and later died in hospital from internal bleeding. Two days ago, the police arrested one of the offenders. The name of the dead girl could be seen on some of the handwritten signs and posters around us. Before the demo began, my friends and I bought some water to stay hydrated. We were standing in front of the beverage store, getting ready. All around us, the number of demonstrators, with their smartphones in their hands, was slowly but steadily increasing.

I heard someone exclaim something. At the same time, I noticed the distant, but ever more audible, rhythmic marching. I looked in the direction to which the other people were anxiously turning. Just around the corner of a building, you could see the arriving lot of radical right-wing demonstrators in the distance, coming towards us. The neo-Nazi rally was in full swing already, and the people around us scrambled to gather, to face the oncoming demonstration in protest. One of the demonstrators on our side was using a megaphone. Her voice reverberated from the walls of the buildings around us,

and the fluttering echoes made it difficult to understand her rallying cries.

Everything was happening at once, and before I knew it, I was standing in front of my now uniformly assembled group of demonstrators. I almost looked like I was their leader. I lost sight of my friends in the mass of people. Some were holding up their smartphones to capture the unfolding scene on video or maybe to send out tweets. I returned my gaze to the advancing march of boots on concrete. The xenophobic rallying cries mixed with our antifascist ones in a loudly dissonant nocturne. They were carrying burning torches, so you could make out the radical right-wing slogans on their signs in the dusk. It seemed to me that I could not step back and seek refuge in my group anymore, without making it look like I was taking flight, intimidated by the sight of the arriving Nazi demonstration. It would not be a good look for our side. So I stood my ground—the agitated drove of my people behind me, and the torches, fists, and boots of inflamed fascists in front of me, as the tensions were rising and physical violence threatened to break out at any second—and I zipped up my jacket.

I awoke from my troubled sleep, from the dream of this demonstration, and lay in my bed in the dark. It was three a.m., and the street lantern in front of the house barely offered any light for the room. Then, all of a sudden, I heard the familiar hum of my booting computer gently permeating the nightly silence. Confused, as I lived in the apartment all by myself, I looked to my desk, and with a creeping dread I realized that an amorphous figure was sitting in my chair, in front of the computer. The screen was moments away from turning on, and I was still hoping to be mistaken due to my drowsiness, all the while being too scared to budge a muscle. It was as though I had awoken into a nightmare. The screen flickered on and threw its sudden garish light on the motionless figure in my desk chair. It was me, whom I saw slumped down in the sickly light of the computer screen, and, with eyes wide open, I was dead.

# Hotbed

by Victoria Koberstein

*"Adults are just obsolete children and the hell with them."*

-Dr. Seuss

“Dude, last drag ‘cause I’m stoned as fuck already,” she says in between deep, throaty coughs. The car is filled with smoke to its very last crack. She can’t see further than three inches, can’t see who’s sitting next to her. Hot box.

A hand passes a bottle of *Glen Moray* into her limited field of view. She sips.

He coughs. “Alright, let’s go in.”

A cloud exits the car as the doors swing open.

“Smells like a good time,” a voice from two rows down the parking lot chants.

“Hell, yeah,” he answers, his enlarged pupils incapable of focusing, mouth dry as cotton.

They slowly approach the building. “Let’s nurture capitalism, babe,” he whispers while leaning into the massive double-doors.

“What’s that smell, darling?” she asks, sliding the back door of their van open and unbuckling a blue-eyed, fluffy-haired two-year-old dressed in pink. “Is it coming from the restaurant?”

“I’m sure it isn’t,” he replies wittily.

“Smells funny.”

“Smells like weed to me.”

“What?” She lets her eyes wander across the parking lot, gripping on to her baby girl. “You said this place was in a safe neighborhood.”

“It is. I guess people smoke in safe neighborhoods,

too, darling.”

She lifts her eyebrows and keeps them there before slamming the van’s door. “Let’s go inside.”

“Carl! I’m still in the car,” a muffled voice sounds from behind the window. “Stop locking it before I even get a chance to get out!”

“Sorry,” he mumbles. “Forgot that you’re elderly.”

The car’s headlights flash twice, he opens the passenger’s door and stretches his hand out for hers.

“What did you say?”

“I sometimes forget that you’re a lady.”

“I don’t need your silly hand, I’m not a dotard,” she grumbles, “and I’m sure you said something else.”

“I’m taking you out for a nice meal, so you better behave today, Lynda.”

“Stop patronizing me, grandpa!”

She straightens her wool cardigan, lights a cigarette and reaches for his hand as they limp toward the restaurant side by side.

“You think we’ll still hold hands like those two in fifty years?” he asks, pointing out the window front.

“Can we not fool ourselves? We met on Tinder, one of us will fuck around sooner or later, or we’ll both die of lung cancer and liver failure within the next, let’s say, seven years. Nothing romantic about this,” she says, drawing a circle in the air between the two of them.

“Pessimistic as fuck. Love it.”

The Asian waitress is dressed all in black as she approaches their table.

“Two pints, please,” he says, before she gets a chance to ask for their order, “and the buffet, obviously.”

“Sure, thank you.” And she’s gone. They get up, squeeze past the young family being placed in the booth next to theirs and head for twenty-six feet of greasy Chinese delicacies.

They both hold two plates, one for each hand, when they pass a cyan dragon sculpture made of a billion glass crystals on their way back to the table. “This place is insane,” she notices, “I hope they put as much effort in the food as they put in their redundant interior design.”

The elderly couple is taking a seat in the last free booth to their left. The restaurant’s decibel level is at its maximum now.

“It’s 2 p.m. on a Tuesday, shouldn’t all these people be at work?” he asks.

“Shouldn’t we be at work?”

“We should be eating four pounds of Asian food each. I want these forty quid to be fucking worth it.”

She nods, pushes a giant piece of deep fried broccoli through a puddle of sweet-and-sour sauce and shoves it into her mouth.

The waitress comes with two pints. He takes them off her hands before she can place them on the table, then pushes the palms of his hands against each other and nods his head.

“I don’t think that’s *thank you* in Chinese, Harry,” she says, “that’s *hello and goodbye*.”

“I was born in Britain,” the waitress says and leaves.

“So these are spring rolls, these are wontons, and do you want some of this chow mein, sweetheart?” she asks the overwhelmed daughter she’s carrying on her hip, bending over the buffet.

“She has no clue what that means, Rachel, just give her some veggies and fries. People are queuing behind us,” her husband says.

“I didn’t take her out here for her birthday to eat the same things she can have anywhere else. I want her to get to know different flavours.”

“Fine, I’m going back to the table.”

He forces his body through a group of people surrounding the buffet the way bees seize their hive and ma-

kes his way back, puts his plate down and rolls a cigarette.

Outside, the girl from the booth next to his is exhaling a cloud of smoke.

“Hey, how’ve you been?”

She turns her head and takes some time to examine his face. “Haven’t seen you in a while, you look older.”

“Sleep deprivation, I guess.”

“Who’d have known that that’s what happens when you have a baby, right?”

He lights his cigarette. “Who are you here with?”

“My boyfriend.”

He nods and drags. “How are things?”

“Pretty good.”

They stand in silence for a bit.

“Are you expecting me to ask how things are with you?” she asks.

“No.”

“Cause I couldn’t care less.” She pointedly throws her cigarette to the ground and steps on it. “Enjoy your meal, Harry.”

As she opens the door the waitress steps outside and points at her cigarette butt. “You know we have ashtrays for these, right?”

“Who were you talking to out there?” Rachel asks her husband while he’s taking a seat.

“I used to teach her back in sixth form a couple of years ago. And you should consider lowering your voice ‘cause she’s sitting right behind you,” Harry whispers and points his finger inconspicuously.

“She won’t hear me, it’s way too loud in here.”

She covers her daughter’s ears with her hands and whispers. “Not sure if I like this place, actually.”

“And *that’s* what you need to whisper for?”

“I want Grace to have a nice birthday. And by the way, you smell of smoke, I told you to stop that when we’re spending time as a family.” She lets go of her daughter’s head, back on baby mode. “Right, sweetheart? Isn’t this a great second birthday? Wait till you get your surprise!”

Meanwhile, the elderly couple is eating in silence. Plates, mouths and minds half full. Lynda takes a sip of tonic water to flush some unchewed scraps of food off her denture and points her finger. “Look, Carl! That little girl over there looks just like Ava.”

He turns his head. "Where?"

"Two rows down."

"No, she doesn't."

"What?"

"She doesn't. That baby's blonde, Ava's hair was ginger."

"I don't mean her hair, more like her face. Look! Facial features just like little Ava."

He turns his head again. "Nothing like her."

"Oh, you're just too bitter to see it."

"And you're too senile to distinguish our grandchild from other people's kids."

She smiles. "Just go and get yourself another round. Maybe you're easier to deal with, then."

"I was just about to go anyway."

"And bring me some of that pudding, that caramel thing."

"I don't even know what caramel looks like."

"Stop it, Carl. Just bring me some and get your grump under control."

"I've been having my grump under control since '68."

The stoner is on his way to get seconds while his girlfriend pees in a restroom that's trying to imitate a Far Eastern rain forest. The sound of rain, for some reason mixed with bird's twittering, drowns the burbling of her urine hitting the toilet's water surface.

She opens the bamboo door of her stall and wanders past a colorful photographic wallpaper to a row of golden sinks. What a place to be high in. Psychedelic.

As she looks up she notices the mother from the booth next to hers trying to wash her little girl's hands.

She stops and stares. Focuses on the baby's tiny fingers for a while.

"Is there anything wrong?" the mother asks sternly.

A burp crawls up her oesophagus and she lets it out. "Nope." And the wooden doors swing close behind her.

"Excuse me, Miss!" Carl struggles. "Could you help me out here one second, young lady?"

"I don't work here," she says, passing him at the desert buffet on her way back from the restroom.

"Well, no one seems to work here."

She stops. "What do you need help with?"

"Which one of these is caramel?" he asks, pointing at four different beige-ish colored puddings. "My wife

wants the caramel one."

She bends over the counter to read the illegible labels. "So we've got peach, hazelnut, pear - and caramel right here."

"Thank you very much, Miss."

"This place is ridiculous, right?" She hands him a little bowl of pudding.

"A hotbed of sin."

"Exactly." She smiles at him.

He smiles back. "You probably don't care, but you look a lot like my granddaughter, she's got that beautiful red hair, too."

"Well, thank you, Sir."

They smile at each other for another awkwardly long while before she decides to give him a friendly nod and head for seconds.

"Oh my goodness, Grace! Look what they're bringing for you," the mother squeaks as she points at a huge pink-colored cake two waitresses are carrying toward their table singing *Happy Birthday*. A few people sitting nearby join in. The cake's singing itself, a battery-powered, flat voice. Little Grace smiles, cheeks red as velvet. Her mother strokes her head. "Isn't that amazing, angel?"

The waitresses put the tray down and shake the child's tiny hands before going their ways again.

"Look at that!"

Baby Grace pokes into the cake's soft surface with her index finger and licks it. "Daddy try!"

"Oh, I would love to but I'm really full from all I've eaten, sweetie."

His wife glares at him, eyes wide open. Her eyeballs wander to the cake, to their daughter and then back to him.

He glares back at her. "I'm stuffed to my jaw, darling," he whispers and turns to Grace. "You know what? I'll have a piece later, I can't let that chance slip away. Never had a pink cake before."

Grace holds her spit-wet finger in front of her father's face and pouts her lips.

The cake's still singing.

"So it's her fucking birthday now, wow," she mumbles under her breath. "My point is..."

"I'm sorry but I need to stop you right there 'cause I'm way too shitfaced to have followed your chain of ar-

guments so far, especially since you're bitchin' about the people sitting next to us in between breaths. So all I wonder now is how we got into this topic so fucking deep. I thought we came here to chill, not to talk politics."

The waitress passes by and reaches for a half empty plate on their table.

"I'm still eating this," she says and continues the conversation, "My point is - and I'm going to make it anyway, hear me or not - that, no matter how hard we try to deny it, men were created to survive by fighting while women were created to survive by enduring. There's a fundamental difference. It seems superficial, it seems too easy, it's biology, in fact." She turns her head. "This cake is annoying the shit out of me."

A different waitress walks past and attempts to take her plate. "I'm not done yet, thank you, though!" She pulls it closer to herself and continues. "These differences have evolved, of course, still they're undeniable and should be embraced. Different approach, same value. Equal. All people should strive to be equalists, actually, but what they're striving for is to be feminists. I'm about to take that cake's batteries out."

He starts laughing. She ignores it. "Now, it is always wrong to call yourself a feminist, no matter what perspective. You're either the one who's not in the position to take the word into your mouth or you're the one who's expected to do so and still there's multiple choices, all of them cannot forbear -"

"Jeez, can you just come to the fucking point."

"I would already be at the *fucking point* if these waitresses were taking care of the sweet confused grandpas at the buffet instead of craving for my damn leftovers." Waitress nears. "I'm still eating this! You can tell your coworkers, too." Waitress nods and leaves. "So here's the choices: I'm free to become a housewife or I'm free to become a men-hating, career-chasing, heartless, independent fucking woman or I'm free to let my pubic hair grow and do that third wave shit. No in between the stereotypes. 'Cause unfortunately feminism hasn't evolved from being a stereotype. Not yet." Another waitress is about to walk past her. "I'm still eating, for fucks sake," she yells in her direction.

"I'm pretty sure you can't just say that," he says.

"Yes, I can. Because I'm one independent fucking woman, and that's my point."

"Fuck-ing," little Grace utters while playing with her cake's sugar coating. Her dad starts laughing. Her mother chokes on her piece, coughs a couple of times and turns around to face the young couple behind them.

"Hey, excuse me!" Louder than appropriate. "What's wrong with you cursing all the time? There's children in this place - ever think about that?" Her eyeballs are about to fall out. She's raging.

"What's wrong with you not cursing," she replies, same volume. "I would if I were you."

Rachel turns back and faces her husband. "Say something!" He freezes.

The younger woman looks at him, too. "Yeah, say something, Harry."

"How does she know your first name?" Jaw tensed, ready to chew him up.

He's unmoved, the shift of focus hit him unexpectedly.

"Excuse me, ladies." Carl turns up next to them. "I don't mean to be impolite but it seems like you're in a bit of an argument here and got people staring at you. If you like, my wife and I are offering our booth," he says, looking at the younger couple, "if that solves any existing problem. We don't mind anyone using curse words and we don't mind noisy cakes, so how about we sit in between?"

She needs a smoke desperately, her fingers shake around the lighter as she steps outside. She gazes across the parking lot, inhales and enjoys the silence.

Lynda follows her and does the same.

"Thanks for offering your seat, Ma'am."

Lynda smiles. "No problem," she says as the door opens once more, "What's your name, young lady?"

She exhales a cloud. "Ava."

Lynda stares at her. Her eyes wander from left to right as she examines Ava's face.

"What's your last name?"

Ava narrows her eyes and doesn't respond.

"Hughes," Harry says. Lynda turns to him. He snaps his lighter. "Hughes is her last name."

Lynda drops her cigarette and goes inside. All eyes follow her.

Ava shakes her head.

Silence once more.

"I'm sorry," Harry says after a while, "About everything."

Ava sighs. “Save the apology for your wife.”

“We need to leave,” Lynda says to her husband.

“We haven’t even paid, yet.”

“Now, Carl! We really need to go.” She grabs her coat and pulls his sleeve. “We can pay at the door.” He gets up, looks around and follows her into the fray.

They hold hands as they cross the parking lot about three minutes later.

*I loved her so much when she was little. I cuddled and tickled and carried her around for hours. Sang her songs, read her stories. Tucked her in. Helped her blow the snot out of her nose. And look at her now. Probably sniffing snot up her nose on a daily. Behaves and looks like a younger version of me and I manage to sit right next to her for about two hours without noticing. Thinking a random two-year-old looked like her.*

*I made it look like an accident back then. With the ashtray and all that. Truth is, I meant to set the place on fire. I always said I didn’t, but I meant to. And everyone knew that I meant to. I don’t know what came over me. The devil, probably. “Your soul is a hotbed of sin,” Carl used to say. Maybe I dropped the cigarette and watched it burn its way through the carpet because I needed him to shut up for once in five decades of marriage. I thought I’d get used to it, come time. I always did. All women do, I thought. They don’t hear their husbands’ voices anymore, their ears are blunted. Meanwhile, mine started bleeding every time I pretended not to hear his vocal cords swing.*

*And now he’s all I have left. It was a weak moment - I think that’s what people call it nowadays when they fuck up big time.*

*If he’d died back then, or at least decided to leave when I burned our house down, I would be the loneliest person on earth and I used to like that thought a lot.*

*Don’t know if it was worth it after all - turns out I never got to experience loneliness.*

*It’s funny actually, how I broke down and in the hope of getting rid of my husband in what admittedly was my weakest moment (there’s a bit of truth to every saying, isn’t there), and all I got rid of was my whole family, except my husband, and guess what. I broke down even more. They called me a murderer, called me bipolar and mentally disordered and all that. Said that I’m a danger to my granddaughter. That they won’t bring Ava over anymore. That I won’t see her again.*

*He didn’t leave. He stayed with me. My nightmare - and a declaration of love the world hadn’t seen before. He does love me. More than anyone has ever loved anybody, I guess. And maybe that’s my purpose. Not to cherish, but to be cherished.*

*I seem like the most egocentric storyteller while actually what I’m telling you is a love story. And love tends to be confusing sometimes.*

Two shots of whiskey wait for her at the table. Ava necks hers while sitting down.

She takes a look around. “This place is fucked up.”

He nods his head. “Or we are.”

A hotbed of sin.

A waitress approaches. “Two more,” Ava says, pointing at the empty shot glasses.

The waitress stops next to her and bends down. “Actually, I need to ask you to leave. A couple of people are offended by the noise and tone at your table and feel uncomfortable. That includes me.”

“You gotta be kidding,” Ava says.

The waitress looks at her insistently.

“Alright.”

The couple gets up. He throws a bank note on the table and they empty the bottle of Glen Moray in the car about three minutes later.

*It’s not that I hadn’t thought of the moral rightness of sleeping with a married man whose pregnant wife was waiting for him at home.*

*I had it in my mind at all times, I doubted and questioned - and did it anyway.*

*It wasn’t just a biological need, though, for either one of us, or at least that’s what I guessed. Not the urge to reproduce. Not for physical satisfaction. There was tension, high voltage, chemistry, all this worn-out terminology between us.*

*In my diary I wrote that it would be right to avoid sending out signals, to avoid creating a platform for the wrongest of all things. Well, the next day I wrote that I didn’t feel like any of that was my responsibility. It was his. He was the one with a wife and child growing inside her. Not me. He was the one who had something to lose. Not me. It was his obligation to prevent. Not mine. That’s what I told myself at the time and it’s what I keep telling myself now.*

*It’s easy for people to transfer their responsibility*

*onto someone else. The easiest way out. And there’s hardly anything I love more than the easiest way out. Like my grandma. Husband pisses you off? Life itself pisses you off? Why not set the house on fire?*

*I would like her if I met her now. And she would like me, I guess.*

*Back to topic. Nothing bad happened. Two and a half years later Harry’s a happy, loving father with a wife who’s got a stick up her arse but I guess that’s what usually happens when a stereotypical woman becomes a mother. Baby comes out, stick gets in.*

*Weird ideas occur like building a play set for the little baby doll that would do for five children, or celebrating said baby’s second birthday in a massive Chinese fucking restaurant. And why not, you know? Might turn out to be a real nice person, this little baby, powdered and cared for and saved from all bad things in the world.*

*Now, people might think I’m judgmental. And I am. Maybe a leftover from our female rivalry. Maybe I don’t like mothers. Or kids. Or their pretentious fathers, whom I used to like a lot. Maybe I’m just a misogynist dressed in a feminist’s costume claiming to be an equalist. Maybe I’m still angry he didn’t impregnate me back then.*

*What I’m trying to say is that I’m happy about the way everything turned out.*

*I seem like the most unreliable storyteller while actually I’m being nothing but honest. And honesty tends to be confusing sometimes.*

Little Grace is all wrapped up when Harry gets back to the table.

“Are we leaving?”

His wife reaches for her handbag and steps close to him, her face right in front of his.

“I hope you told that girl out there what a little brat she is - and if you didn’t, I want to know what on earth is going on.”

“Nothing. Can we all please calm down and enjoy ourselves?”

“Grace is tired.”

“No, she’s not,” he says, pointing at his daughter peacefully playing with his shoelace.

“Then I’m tired. We’re going home now.”

She slams the door of their van in the parking lot about three minutes later.

*When I was a boy, I decided to never make a woman cry. Ever.*

*I knew that I would cry, though, and I did shed a few tears for the ones I thought were “The One” and turned out not to be. I wasn’t the cheating kind, I had loyalty in my every pore. At least I was convinced I had, when I was beyond naive back in the day.*

*Well, sometimes life teaches you lessons you didn’t ever want to learn. Sometimes life forces you to choose between the devil and the deep blue sea. And sometimes life turns your brain into a hotbed of sin. Somebody gets hurt eventually.*

*I didn’t choose between Rachel and Ava, although that’s what it sounds like. Only a fool thinks he can choose a woman. They choose us long before we have a clue.*

*What I had to decide for was a lifestyle. And I chose the one that made sense, I chose appropriateness, reality. And every now and then I think I backed the wrong horse.*

*Not every girlfriend makes a wife, just like not every wife makes a girlfriend. And the latter was exactly what I was afraid of when she got pregnant. How could a woman not change after feeling the pain of twenty-seven bone fractures as she presses a child’s head through one of her body’s orifices, getting her skin ripped apart at full consciousness. Would be shit if you weren’t a different person after that. Thing is, I don’t know if I like the person she became, though I love her dearly. Sometimes love and sympathy you feel for a person are miles apart. At least they are now.*

*It was the other way around with Ava. There was a mass of sympathy but a lack of love, and I made her cry when I said it to her face. Younger Harry would’ve hated myself.*

*I hated myself seeing her sit there with the same stubborn, irresponsible, scandalizing head she’s been carrying on her shoulders all these years, thinking about what my life would look like if I took a different turn back in the day. If I chose levity over responsibility. I could’ve fallen in love. Not with her but the way of life, the lightheartedness she stands for.*

*I seem like the most repentant storyteller while actually all I do is fantasize about a potential life I decided not to live. And fantasy tends to be confusing - at all times.*

# 10,000 Days on Earth

by Daniel Krooß

Illustrations by Melanie Mendetzki

On April 25th, 2014, Matthew J. Smith, aged 27.4, celebrated his 10,000th day on earth. He did so in solitude on his couch in a small cramped-up place with a six-pack of beers, his trembling fingers failing miserably to light a cigarette. Matthew had just lost another job, his fourth in two years. As his anxiety seemed to draw dangerously close to his throat, he tried to comfort himself by calculating complex numbers in his head, a technique he had acquired when he was eighteen, a time when the anxiety attacks seemed to rule his life rather than to just accompany it. His gloomy eyes stared blankly at the phone on the table. 2 a.m. Drowsily he scrolled through the contacts of his cell phone, 555-632-1983, Charly. As he finally managed to light his cigarette, he pressed *call*.

Charly put the vacuum cleaner back in the storage-room and looked tiredly through the messy apartment. He shrugged.

"Who cares?" he thought. He went to the balcony, lit a cigarette and threw the mountain of cigarette stumps over-flooding the ashtray into the small garbage can under the table. The St. Edmund's bells informed him of the hour. Matthew would be here any minute now.

Beer in the fridge? Check.

Pile of dirty clothes hidden thoroughly under the bed? Check.

Ready to face an old friend in need? Always.

They had known each other for over fifteen years now. The memory of their first encounter had long faded away and been replaced by the notion that Matthew had pretty much always been a part of his life.

Charly smiled as he felt the arms of his friend around his waist.

"I didn't even hear you come in," he said.

"I always was as silent as a ninja," Matthew said.

"You always were, weren't you?"

"I was the best..."

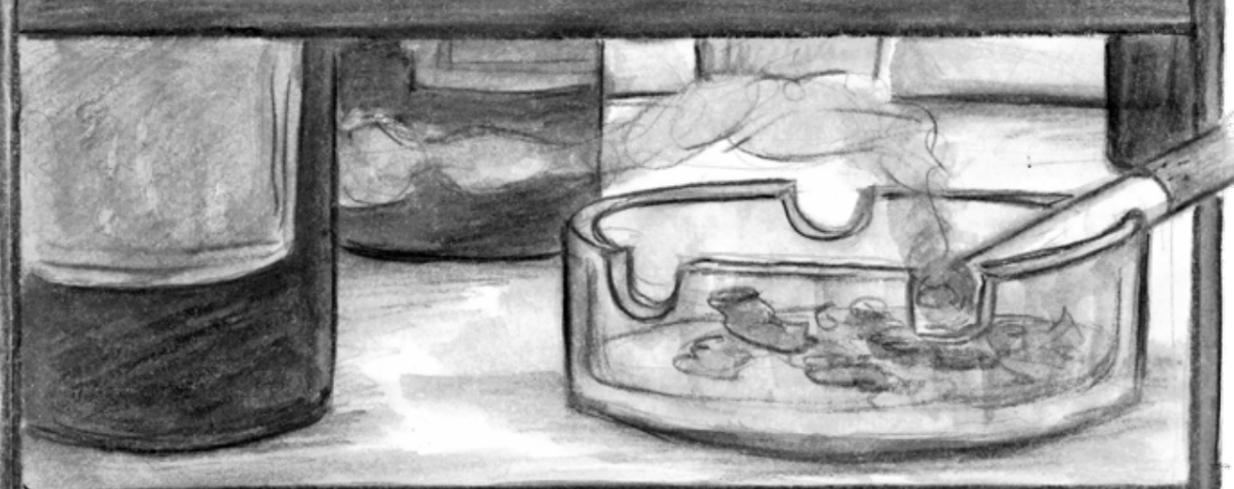
Charly nodded.

That might in fact be one of the oldest memories I have of you. I don't really remember what day it was nor the year or the season. It's a faint memory of the things that we did, 'cos we felt that we had to in order to make it through our days. The older I get the more perplexed I become of just how gruesome kids can be, especially in high school, and we were pretty much at the end of the food chain. So it was either us playing our part or paying the price of not belonging. Worth it one might think, but it really wasn't.

It was a simple routine. There was a mob and there were snatchers. We were the latter, but you were the best. I guess that the timid souls of our victims never really noticed our part in it. After all, we were pretty much just like them.

I can still see you sneaking up behind that new kid as the crowd of angry teens approached him. He was rich, everyone knew it and we saw it to. He owned things that none of us were able to afford. They asked for his lunch bag, or well, demanded it, really. When the boy refused he had already taken a first hit, pumping into us, waiting to make a move.

As the teachers stopped the fight we were already long gone. I got nothing, but you had a wallet and cell-phone in your hands, one of those small ones with a clamshell. That thing was worth at least \$500. But we just did what we always did and handed the stuff to the bullies. If we came in empty-handed, we got a beating; if we didn't, we were spared. It was a simple as that. I remember that day so well, because you gave me that wallet so I wouldn't have to endure it.



“Of course I did,” Matthew said. “You would have done the same for me.”

Charly said nothing as he opened the beers.

“Do you still think often about that stuff?” Matthew asked.

Charly shrugged.

“I don’t know. Sometimes, I guess. The memories have become a bit blurred over the years.”

Matthew nodded.

“Of course,” he said. “But do you still remember that feeling?”

“The shame?”

“No... well, that too, perhaps. But I mean that thrill that you got while doing it. That fear of getting caught. I mean, I’m not trying to defend our actions, but it made me feel so alive! Just those five minutes of thrill in a terrible monotony.”

Charly took a sip of his beer.

“I guess I know what you mean. But what does it say about ourselves when that fear of getting caught was really the highlight of our days? I mean, we were always afraid. But that was different, wasn’t it?”

Matthew thought about that for a moment as he lit a cigarette.

“Perhaps it was, I’m not really sure. At end of the day, isn’t fear just really fear? I guess it was different for you.”

“How so?”

“Well you know what I mean... When I got home, I had a few hours of rest. But it didn’t stop there for you.”

Charly didn’t reply.

.....

It would take me years to figure out what was going on at your place. And I feel shitty to even say so, but who could blame me? A new bruise or black eye never seemed to be anything out of the ordinary. That shit could easily just have happened in school or on your way home. It never even occurred to me to ask.... It was much later, when I first met that shitbag of a man that you had to call your father, that I realized just how bad you had it in for.

.....

“It wasn’t his fault,” Charly interrupted his friend. “He was drinking, he didn’t mean to.”

“Don’t even say that! I told you years ago, don’t excuse people that did nothing but fuck you up. They don’t deserve your forgiveness.”

Charly shook his head.

“Can we not do this? Please?”

Matthew remained silent for a moment, then nodded.

“Sure,” he said. “I’m sorry. I didn’t want to bring it up.”

Charly took a deep sip from his beer.

“It’s alright,” he said. “And I mean, what you said about not asking, I don’t think there is anything you could have done there. I really don’t believe I would have talked to you about that stuff. To be honest, I never actually felt like there was anything wrong with what I went through.”

“How can you say that?!”

“Well... don’t get me wrong! I think I had a pretty good idea about my father being an asshole! But violence was such a big part of my life that I just didn’t know anything else.”

Matthew sighed.

“The stuff that you go through, it kind of changes the way you look at the world, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah it does. And also, no one ever really teaches you to talk about that stuff! And I really think, many people never learn how to do so. So how could you expect a teenager to figure out how to speak of these things to anyone? No one ever seems to take you seriously to begin with, no matter what is going through your head. So you just keep those thoughts, that agony to yourself.”

Matthew nodded.

“I really wish things could have been different for you...”

Charly put out his cigarette.

“Yeah... You, too!”

Matthew chuckled.

“So what’s for dinner?”

They moved to the kitchen. Charly put on his cooking mixtape and Leonard Cohen’s *Hey that’s no way to say goodbye* took over the room. Matthew snickered as he put an arm around his old friend.

“Still into that stuff?” he said.

Charly handed him a knife and a chopping board.

“Shut up and cut the onions.”

Cooking had become somewhat of a passion to the both of them over the years. An activity as cleansing as a good meditation, something to calm the soul which could both be shared and done alone when there was no one around to talk to. Charly put two big bowls of hot curry on the table and the two ate in silence, watching an episode of *Friends*. It was a moment of magic shared many times between the both of them, which did not need many words. As they stepped back outside, two cigarettes lit and two beers opened, Charly finally dared to ask.

“So how bad is it?”

Matthew shook his head.

“Not yet,” he said.

Charly nodded.

“Okay...”

Matthew rubbed his eyes.

“Talking about all that high school stuff really made me think about that day where it all went downhill for me. Not to say that it ever really went uphill but, well, you know?”

“I do...” Charly began.

.....

I still remember that day vividly, like yesterday. I had just turned sixteen and you had just met my father. He was an asshole, I’ll give you that. But I had never seen you this angry. Never thought that you could be, to be honest. You were furious for days and I felt lost trying to calm you down. We were into our regular routine but you were different that day. I can still see you standing there on the school ground, trembling with every muscle. As the mob began to work, you simply couldn’t take it any more.

“No more!” you yelled and punched the nearest guy in the face. You gave it all you had.

But the guy didn’t even flinch. Before I understood what was happening they had already beaten you to the ground. I was paralyzed, peed my pants in fear. When the teachers broke it off, you were covered in blood.

.....

“They got me good that day...” Matthew said as he took a large sip from his beer.

Charly gulped.

“I still beat myself up every time I think of it. I really wish I wasn’t such a coward. I really wish I could have done something to prevent it from happening.”

Matthew shook his head.

“Don’t do that. There is nothing you could have done other than receive a beating, too.”

.....

They suspended the guys for two weeks as if nothing had happened, all the while you had to stay in the hospital for six weeks with a broken cheekbone and two fractured ribs. I felt so alone at school that autumn, so afraid wherever I went. I missed you so badly and I tried to visit you in the hospital as often as I could, even if it meant coming home late and having to deal with my father’s moods. We never talked about anything when I was there. I brought you comics and sweets, read stories from *The Silmarillion* to you, but we never really talked. Still, I always felt that you were grateful that I was there.

.....

“Of course I was,” Matthew said. “You were my best friend! You were the only person that I wanted to see! It was just too much... I was so ashamed about that beating. You know, that was the first time that I ever really felt a complete loss of power. I mean, I had always been afraid of things, but never like this. At that moment, I really thought they would kill me and there was nothing that I could do to stop them. I had panic attacks every single night in that hospital room, and when I finally slept, I was haunted by nightmares. I never talked much when you were there because I was so goddamn tired! And I just didn’t know how to explain it to you, because I didn’t understand it myself.”

They stood in silence for a while, smoking with eyes fixated on their beers like they withheld some revelations that would guide them through their conversation.

Matthew sighed.

“Things never were the same after that, you know. That anxiety... It would always be there...”

.....

When I came back to school I could feel their eyes watching me all day. Needless to say that I still looked pretty roughed up. But that wasn’t it. I knew something was up. When the principal came in with the policemen, I knew right away that they were not quite done with me yet. They would find two pounds of cocaine and a knife in my bag that day. And all hope to one day just leave all that shit behind, those plans we had made to go to college together and make a better life for ourselves – they were shattered within instants!

.....

Charly buried his face in his hands and rubbed his eyes.

“God!” he yelled out. “It’s so absurd! I mean, can you believe how organized these kids were? Innocence of youth, my ass!”

Matthew chuckled, shaking his head.

“Absurd, indeed. But you know what? It was some way out after all. I mean, it wasn’t for the better, but it was a way to get rid of them. To be honest, I’m a bit jealous that I simply wasn’t clever enough to play those guys that way myself.”

Charly smiled as he helped himself to another beer.

“We were a different kind of clever, weren’t we?”

Matthew shrugged.

“How would I know? I’d never get a chance to find out.”

.....

They sentenced me to two years of boredom at a Christian Disciplinary Boarding School for Troubled Teenagers. You'd think that you'd find the worst of students at a school like this but it wasn't like that. No one ever talked at all in that place. These were students that came from the worst of places, how could the fear of God possibly be something to break their spirits? Whatever they did, it worked. I don't really know what happened in all those rooms once the light was shut, but whoever arrived at that school would soon be left numb and voiceless.

Nothing really happened to me while I was there, no need to break a boy who was broken to begin with. But that almost tangible fear that lay upon everyone of us does something to an impressionable youth.

We wrote each other at least twice a week and a newly received letter would always be the highlight of my day. It was hard on you. Your father drove himself to death only four weeks after I left. Drunk, of course. What a perfect ending to a horrible man! But the relief never came, did it? Your thoughts became darker with every letter. I was so worried about you! And then one day, you just stopped writing.

.....

"She wouldn't allow it," Charly said, shaking his head. Matthew nodded.

"I know..." He put out the cigarette and emptied the ashtray.

"Matthew?"

"Yeah..?"

"Why are we still not talking about you?"

Matthew shrugged his shoulders.

"We did, didn't we?"

"You know what I mean!" Charly said.

"So what's the plan for tonight?" Matthew tried changing the topic.

Charly shook his head.

"You really have to ask?"

They stepped back inside.

"I'm guessing we start at the pub and see where it goes from there?" Matthew asked.

"Never change a winning formula!" Charly proclaimed.

"One more for the road?" he asked standing at the fridge while Matthew put on his coat.

"You really have to ask?"

Charly smiled.

They entered the small familiar place. It was as crow-

ded as it always was and the smoke immediately burned their eyes. They took a seat at the bar, ordered two pints and silently watched the musician play the classics - *Wish You Were Here*, *500 Miles*, *Ring of Fire* - you knew exactly what you were getting once you entered these rooms.

Matthew lit a cigarette and lay his head upon his friend's shoulder.

"It's the same place that you took me the day that I first saw you after I got home."

Charly smiled.

"I know. That was a weird night..."

"Weird but wonderful..." Matthew said.

.....

It was an odd night indeed. It was so strange coming back home and finding out that you had already left for college. When I rang you and came to visit you that week I really didn't know what to expect. I hadn't heard from you in over a year. I guess, I was really just glad that you were still alive. I mean, I didn't know where your thoughts could have brought you. But the moment I saw you I knew that you had changed. You looked so pale and tired of life and everything. We were already three beers in when you finally started to talk.

"I'm sorry," you said, shaking. I didn't know what to say. So I just lay an arm upon your shoulder and let you talk. You told me about that girl you started dating soon after your father's death. How much hope you had projected upon that relationship, that things could change for you. But it just isn't that easy for guys like us, is it? Because how do you find the strength to change a pattern when you just don't know anything else?

"She hit me, Matthew. And not in a playful way. That woman was physically strong and not one to argue with."

The rounds kept coming and your story kept unfolding. I had heard it all before except the antagonist had been someone else. You'd been stuck in yet another abusive relationship for two years which, all in all, makes a lifetime full of shit that no one should ever have to deal with.

"I'm in therapy now," you said. "Thought the help could do me good trying to figure out how to speak up for myself. But we keep talking about all that other stuff that has happened and I'm just really starting to lose patience, you know? I want things to change, I mean, I have wanted things to change all my life! But I'm starting to wonder whether the life I've received is exactly the life I deserve..." That's when I finally lost it.

"Don't you dare say that!" For a moment everyone

around us seemed to stop what they were doing and I saw that you, too, were shocked about the tone of my voice. So I leaned closer and whispered:

"Don't ever say that again, Charly. You deserve so much more than this and none of this is your fault."

.....

Charly finished his beer and ordered another round. He shook his head.

"I remember that night like it was yesterday. Things kind of turned around for me there. I think that was the first time we ever really talked honestly. I mean, the alcohol kind of did the job for us. You told me everything after I opened up. About those panic attacks you were having and that fear of losing it. About that darkness that you carried within you, that made everyday activities so unbearably difficult for you."

Matthew smiled benignly.

"Yeah, that was a milestone for us, wasn't it?" Matthew gave a thankful nod to the bartender as he put down the two beers in front of them.

"It certainly made things easier knowing that you actually have someone you can talk to about this stuff," Charly said. "But to be honest, most of the time I'm still pretty overwhelmed by all of this."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, how do we ever really deal with the aftermath? I mean, it took me years, many more than I'd like to admit, to figure out that I was actually living in abusive relationships. And it took much longer for me to realize that this is indeed not normal."

Matthew shook his head.

"It makes me so sad that you say that..." But Charly just went on.

"Same about the drinking... I mean when did we start? We were about fourteen, I guess? It started off pretty innocently, but it quickly became quite an acceptable substance to just deaden that fear and those feelings of resentment that ruled my life."

"I cannot imagine my life without it to be honest. But I still don't think it's a problem for me..."

"Well, that's the point, no one ever does! I think my father did it for the same reasons that I do. Sure I don't drink every day, but when I do, I don't know how to stop. I mean, how many drinks did we have today alone?"

"What does it matter? You're meeting a good friend, you're allowed to have a drink!"

Charly lit a cigarette and took a sip from his beer.

"I just fear that we're lying to ourselves here, you know? That we're doing it for the wrong kinds of reasons." They sat in silence for while, the pub slowly emptying as the musician started his last set.

"Don't let drinks drag you down tonight," Matthew said. "You've got to stop being so hard on yourself all the time."

"Perhaps..." Charly mumbled. "I don't know."

He shook his head.

"Why are we still not talking about you, Matthew?"

Matthew ordered yet another round.

"You know I can't do that," he said. "That's not why I'm here."

As they stepped back onto the street, hours later and wallets empty, a cold breeze blew into their faces. They wandered cheerfully down the streets, singing old songs they hadn't sung in years.

"What time is it?" Matthew asked.

Charly clumsily drew the cellphone from his pocket. "3 a.m.?"

"Wow!" Matthew said. "We're getting old."

Charly chuckled.

"I really don't know where all these years went..."

.....

When I started at college, I really thought I would leave this all behind me and I guess I did to some extent. I mean, I made new friends, made some life for me here. But still I struggle to actually get anything done! I just don't know how... Every future I can imagine just doesn't quite seem right, you know? Like it's lacking a greater meaning of things. But who am I to say this? You never really stood a chance at those college applications with that history of yours. You tried community college, but that wasn't for you. So you did what you had to do and tried to make the best of things. Job after job, but nothing quite fulfilled you, did it?

.....

"How could it?" Matthew said. "I mean, you just said it yourself! You try so hard to find the greater meaning in what you do, but sometimes I really wonder whether that really exists, you know?"

"I guess, I have to believe it does. I mean, why else go on?"

"Exactly!" Matthew said.

Charly gulped.

"You know, I really cherish these evenings. I know it's only every now and then, but I really need this."

Matthew smiled.

Not that easy to keep up a good friendship when you're faced with the demands of an adult life. But I really think we always made it work. I tried to come see you at least every two months or so, but even those times where we didn't see each other for half a year, it never took us long until it all felt so wonderfully familiar! I don't think I could have kept on going for so long without you...

Joyfully intoxicated they strolled along.

"-this is just a tribute!" Charly sang from the top of his voice.

Matthew laughed as he bumped into his friend.

"You know, despite all that shit that happened to us over the years we have still always managed to make some good memories for ourselves together. And you know what?"

"What?"

"No one can ever take that away from us!" he yelled.

"Shut up! People are trying to sleep here!" A voice shouted from above.

"Oh shit," Matthew said, trying to run away but crashing into the nearest street light and falling to the ground.

Laughing while trying to lift his friend up, Charly fell right next to him.

"Oops..." he said. They snickered.

"You're absolutely right, my friend!" he mumbled.

"Fuck those ghosts of the past. They can never take this away from us."

He lit a cigarette and took a large mouthful of his flat beer and handed the bottle to Matthew.

"Never..." he said.

Arms around their shoulders and still singing through the hallway, they stumbled back into Charly's apartment.

"God, I need to take a piss!" Matthew said.

Charly laughed.

"Another round?"

"Of course!" Matthew proclaimed as he relieved himself with the toilet door still opened.

Charly fetched another round of beers from the fridge and stepped back onto the balcony. He lit his cigarette

and took a deep drag. Then he opened his beer and sat down. As he felt the presence of his friend beside him, he started to cry.

"I will really miss this," he said.

Matthew nodded but didn't reply.

"Why did you do it, Matthew?" He tried to dry the tears in his eyes.

"You never thought about just letting it all go? You never thought about just giving up?"

"Of course I did!" Charly yelled. "I think about it all the time! But you know what? I guess I just always thought we would somehow make it through it, you know? Together."

Matthew sighed.

"I'm sorry..." he said. "I just couldn't do it anymore. I felt so trapped! Everyday felt exactly the same. That fear, that cold layer of anxiety and pain that took me so much effort to shake off every god damn day just to make it through the next one. It was too much..."

Charly took a large sip from his beer and finally gave way to the sadness that he had carried along all this time.

"I could have helped you..."

"No!"

"We could have made it through this as we always have. The both of us, strong enough to fight it."

"There is nothing you could have done to prevent it, Charly. It was my choice and my choice alone. You have enough on your plate to begin with. You can only help yourself."

"But I really wish that..."

"I know you do."

"Wish that you were still here with me."

"I know, Charly. I do."

"I could have done something..." Charly trembled in the cold wind.

"Why am I still here, Charly? Why do you do that to yourself?"

Charly shook his head, then shrugged his shoulders.

"Please... For the both of us! Let me go!"

"I can't," he said.

With another large sip Charly finished his beer and immediately opened another one.

Sitting down and lighting another cigarette, he buried his face deeply into the palm of his head.

"Hey that's no way to say goodbye," he hummed.



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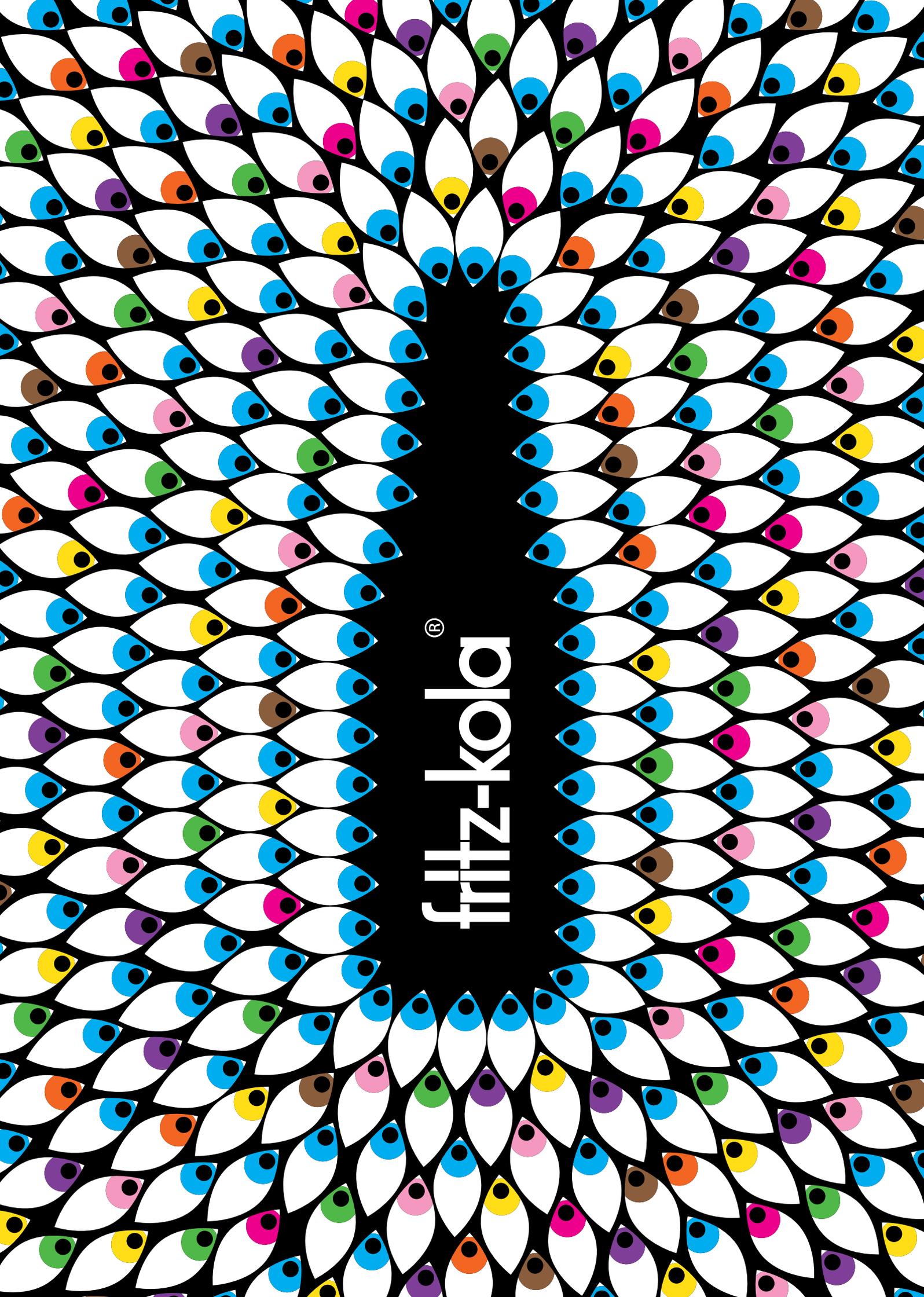
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