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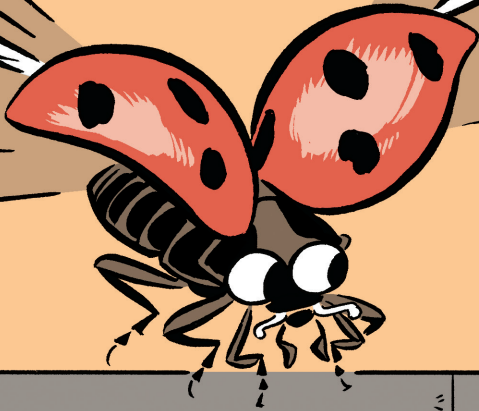
# TADDLE CREEK



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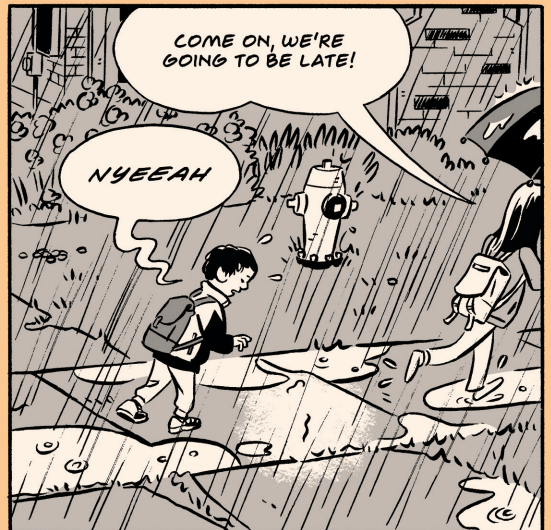


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# TADDLE CREEK



No. 43

SUMMER, 2019

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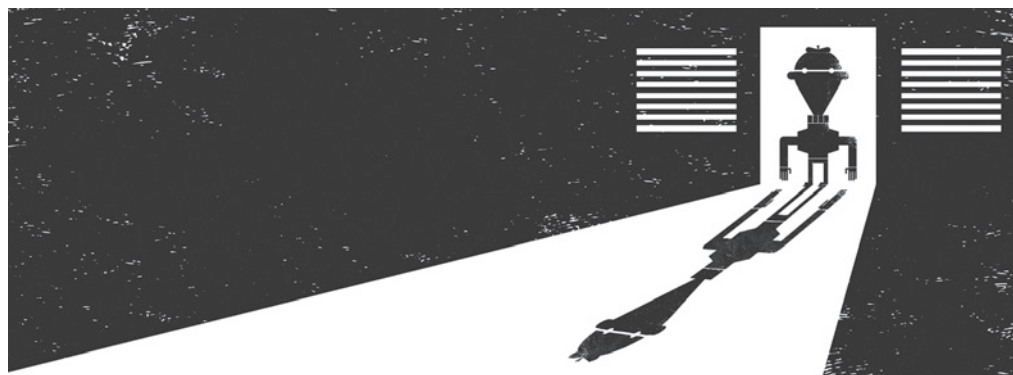
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## THE CONTRIBUTORS

**Maureen Jennings**—the author of three series of crime-fiction novels, including one whose lead character, Detective William Murdoch, is the basis for the successful television drama *Murdoch Mysteries*—sat right down and wrote “Heat Wave” (p. 23) when *Taddle Creek* asked her to contribute to its pulp issue: “I came across a story about the record-breaking heat wave that hit Toronto in 1936, and it intrigued me. At the same time, I read about the plight of Canadian P.O.W.s during the First World War. I’ve wanted to go back and write from a female point of view for a while, so Charlotte Frayne was born. I enjoyed writing about her and her setting so much that I expanded it into a book, *Heat Wave: A Paradise Café Mystery*.”

**Tony Burgess** spent his youthful summers exploring Kolfage Island, off Ontario’s Bruce Peninsula. Of his story “The Gama-yun’s Predicament” (p. 39), he says cryptically, “One day my father lit fire to our old wooden boat and set it out from shore with stuffed flaming dummies. Soon the sirens came up and police intervened. That specific place on certain windy summer days always evokes, for me, a harrowing, almost meaningless event.”

**Roseanne Carrara** calls her story “Finder” (p. 62) a female-forward homage to *The Big Sleep*: “For a while I’ve been sensitive to passing remarks about how baby boomers have thrown a spanner in the works for the next several generations, and I wanted to explore my own relationship with that debate. Also, there have never been enough female detectives for my taste, so I came up with Keene, a hard-boiled ‘finder’ who’s constantly comparing her own tragic materialism to that of the world around her.”

The idea for *Cascade*, the novel-in-progress by **Gil Adamson** excerpted in this issue (p. 88), was sparked by a book club discussion of her first novel, *The Outlander*: “Someone said, in reference to the two main characters, a murdering widow and a man called the Ridgerunner, ‘I wonder what they’ll be like as parents?’ She seemed worried, because one worries about flawed people about to become parents, even if they’re fictional. What fascinated me was what their kid might be like. The story is set during the First World War, in the woods just outside of Banff—a time and place that required an obnoxious amount of research, ensuring I’ll never write another piece of historical fiction again.”





## THE EPHEMERA

This number's low-grade paper stock and lack of colour are not signs of destitution. *Taddle Creek's* present format is, rather, a one-time celebration of the largely defunct pulp magazine. During the first half of the twentieth century, pulps such as *Argosy*, *Amazing Stories*, *The Shadow*, and *Feature Detective Cases* offered lurid tales of crime, sex, and . . . railroading, and were so popular that surprisingly little shame was attached to reading them.

Pulps took their name from the inexpensive paper on which they were printed, but even that became prohibitively expensive during the Second World War—one of the factors, along with comic books, television, and paperbacks, that lead to the genre's decline. This left writers of short fiction few places to peddle their wares but poorly circulated literary magazines like this one—a tradition that continues to this day.

Pulps are best remembered for their iconic covers, and this issue's cover artist, Ryan Heshka, Canada's modern-day pulp master, does not disappoint. (Interior illustrations are courtesy of George Pfromm, America's modern-day George Pfromm—possibly an even more exclusive title.) Pulps also are remembered for the questionable quality of their content, and

that, lucky reader, is where the comparisons to *Taddle Creek's* pulp spectacular thankfully end. So grab a moist towelette to wipe the ink off your hands and enjoy.

With this issue, Suzanne Alyssa Andrew steps down as *Taddle Creek's* associate editor. Suzanne first became involved with the magazine as a writer, in 2006, later guesting in the associate spot for one issue before filling the position permanently, as of No. 36. Suzanne recently left Toronto to return to her hometown of Vancouver, where, among other things, she is hard at work on her second novel. The magazine offers Suzanne its thanks for her boosterism and rugged work ethic these past four years. *Taddle Creek* hates to say goodbye—and apparently so does Suzanne, because she's agreed to stay on as a contributing editor, keeping the magazine abreast of West Coast happenings. And so, *Taddle Creek* wishes Suzanne both a fond farewell, and a hearty hello.

Next issue: *Taddle Creek* returns to its regular format for a three-dimensional extravaganza sure to make you ask, "Wait, are my tax dollars paying for this?" Don't miss it!

—TADDLE CREEK

# STARSEED

BY PETER DARBYSHIRE

*Or, The Strange Transformation of Archimedes Death.*

**T**O WHOM IT MAY CONCERN—AND IT SHOULD CONCERN EVERY LIVING SOUL LEFT ON THE PLANET:

By now you will have read the news of the Battle of the Somme and the tens of thousands of poor souls that died there, gunned down in the killing fields and trenches turned graves.

I am writing to tell you that news is a lie.

The good soldiers are indeed dead, I am sorry to say. But they were not killed by the enemy, or at least not the enemy from the newspaper accounts.

I know this because I was there.

I know this because I was the one who killed them all.

I will spare you the details of that carnage, for they are more horrific than you can imagine, given what I have become.

I swear to you I had no choice, though. We are in a war.

But it is not the war you think we are fighting. It is a secret, far more insidious war. And I am not your enemy, despite all those loved ones of yours I was forced to slaughter.

I am fighting to save humanity and even the world itself.

The real enemy is already among us, and it is not me.

Now that I have your attention, dear reader, allow me to introduce myself. I am the scientist once known as Archimedes Smith. I am afraid I am no longer Archimedes Smith and have not been since my death. But more on that later.

You have, I trust, heard of me—thanks to

the newspaper reports of my passing, if not my work on genetics. My scientific career was what would politely be called unremarkable, but my death was decidedly spectacular.

Let me assure you, however, that those tabloid stories are exactly that: stories. They bear no more similarity to the truth than the tales invented to cover up what really happened at the Somme. I most certainly did not die in a bumbling act of espionage, carrying a top-secret weapon to the Hun headquarters, in Berlin, as some of the reports of the day had it.

Such tales are as fraudulent as the accusations that the League of Knowledge, which I was head of at the time of its demise, was some sort of gang of super-villainous scientists. I can say with the utmost conviction that the league was nothing of the sort. It was merely an organization dedicated to the advancement of the sciences—an organization famed writer H. G. Wells once called the only hope left for the future. In light of recent events, I fear he was being overly optimistic about our prospects.

But the accusations against the league and myself were delivered by none other than Alphaman, and there is not a newspaper editor alive that would dare question him.

I am not a newspaper editor, nor am I still alive in the conventional sense, so consider this my letter of correction.

I will admit the news accounts were accurate in one regard. I was indeed killed because of a secret technology, but I was nowhere near Berlin, or the trenches of any front for that matter. No, I did not die on that Prussian

ILLUSTRATION BY GEORGE PFROMM





train when the “secret weapon” exploded. I suspect there was nothing secret at all about whatever blew up that carriage and whoever was inside. It would not surprise me to learn it was little more than dynamite, and the victims probably just poor travellers, perhaps even sedated prisoners.

Instead, I died deep in the forests of the Siberian wilderness, in an area so remote few humans had ever set foot there. And I died alone and unnoticed, except for Alphaman and one other being.

I know what you are thinking: how am I able to speak to you now if I am dead? The short answer is because of that second entity present at my death—a mysterious and mechanical creature from another world. The longer answer will require a great deal of explanation. I will undertake to do the best job I can of clarifying events, but you must forgive me if some of the details are less than clear. My mind is not what it once was.

I travelled to Siberia not on a mission of treason, but on a quest to save us all. I went in search of starseed. And I found the greatest cache of the alien substance ever discovered. It was a discovery worth millions of dollars, but it was not wealth I pursued to the end of the world. It was knowledge.

I admit I kept my mission a secret, but I had valid reasons for doing so. I dared not tell my superiors in the government what I planned, for I knew they would quickly put an end to such a venture. Or they would send their own men to secure the starseed and hide it away where it couldn't harm Alphaman.

As you know, Alphaman is our nation's best weapon in the battle against the Hun. He has demonstrated himself to be not just a hero but a superhero, immune to the enemy's bullets, capable of burning a hole through the metal armour of the Hun's new tank weapons with his heat vision, or flying far above the battlefield and dropping bombs to terrorize the

enemy in their trenches. He is like a character from the comic books come to life, and his superpower is death itself.

I knew the generals would never allow the starseed, the one thing that could harm him, to fall into non-military hands. I also knew they would never accept any challenges to Alphaman's story that he was the last of an alien species, come to save us from the mistakes that had doomed his own race. Just as I knew the public would not accept a rebuttal of the growing belief that Alphaman was something more than an alien, a belief that had caused many to rechristen him the Alpha and the Omega.

But my expedition called into question everything we knew about Alphaman. It was a mission of science and reason. And a mission of investigation. As it turned out, I discovered far more than I had ever anticipated.

I was not the only one who questioned the stories of Alphaman's origins, of course. There were others in the scientific community who were suspicious from the moment he fell burning from the sky and crashed into that neighbourhood in Detroit, then rose from the wreckage and flames like a phoenix.

The famed aeronautical engineer Winston Finch, for instance, who apprenticed with the Wright brothers and then helped develop the military's air fleet. At the league conference in Washington shortly before the war broke out, he told me in confidence that he believed the story of Alphaman's origins to be suspect.

I trust you all know the official mythology: that Alphaman was on his way to help and enlighten us when his spacecraft, the *Starseed*, suffered a mechanical defect and broke up while entering our atmosphere, scattering fragments for thousands of miles across the globe. Every treasure seeker in the world sought out that debris for the sums of money governments—all governments, not just ours—were willing to pay.



But Finch told me the story was just that: mythology. I remember the day clearly, for it was such a revelation. We were smoking cigars and enjoying a snifter of brandy on the hotel patio. Finch looked up at the heavens and said the dispersal of starseed—the remnants of Alphaman’s spacecraft—did not match such a claim. He told me the various elements of the debris field would have followed a more or less predictable trajectory. “Like a cloud on the wind,” he said, and blew cigar smoke up at the stars. It should have been relatively easy to find the mass of it once the first individual pieces had been found. But the starseed was scattered all over the globe, in every direction, as all the treasure seekers knew. It could be found anywhere, so there was no pattern. The starseed finds to date resembled more the debris field of a massive explosion, where fragments of the originating craft had been sent flying every which way with great force. Thus Alphaman’s story had to be a lie, Finch said with another long exhale.

“But why would Alphaman lie about how he had come to our world?” I wondered aloud. For surely the rest of his story had to be true—he was an alien, that was clear no matter how much he resembled us. Yet we saw no sign of others of his species. He truly did seem alone.

I remember clearly what Finch said next, for it chilled me to the bone.

“I am certain we do not want to know the truth about Alphaman,” he said.

But I was a scientist. Truth is what I had sought all my life. The search for truth had led me to become head of the league. And it was the search for truth that killed me.

And perhaps killed Finch, for not long after our conversation his ship sank on a voyage to London, where he was to meet with British military officers about the expansion of the fledgling British air force. The official

account of the event held that the *Lusitania* was sent to the bottom of the ocean by a torpedo from one of the Hun’s new submarine fleet. But what of the rumours that the vessel’s telegraph officer reported the ship was under attack by men erupting from the water? Of course, people get confused in such trying circumstances. Perhaps it wasn’t men. Perhaps it was just a single man. Or not even a man at all.

At any rate, when I heard the news I wondered who else Finch had told his theories over brandy.

There were others who believed Alphaman was hiding something. Part of my duties as head of the league meant meeting scientists and researchers of all kinds, and I often travelled to their laboratories or facilities to glean an understanding of their work. So it was I found myself in Miss Ellen Saint-West’s starseed research compound, in New Mexico, which was surrounded by barbed wire and trenches full of soldiers. It was an odd contrast to the starseed itself, which came from what Alphaman said was little more than an interstellar life raft that carried no weapons. The craft’s only danger was it had been made of elements from his home planet, which offset the superpowers our yellow sun gave him and made him merely human again. Alphaman offered no convincing explanation for why he wore a band of smooth starseed on his left wrist, other than to say it reminded him of home and wasn’t large enough to affect his powers.

But Miss Saint-West told me that day her team in the research facility had, in fact, studied starseed fragments that seemed to have potential to be weapon parts. While most pieces of starseed treasure seekers turned in to the government were simple scraps of the strange black metal or those indestructible glass wires, others appeared to be functioning devices. Miss Saint-West showed me an artifact

that looked to be no more than a smooth, polished cube of starseed. But when she dropped it to the floor of the laboratory, I suddenly felt weak, as if I could barely stand. Miss Saint-West had to lean against a table to support herself. I thought I might faint before she finally picked it up and shook it in a way that made the effects cease.

I remember very well the words she spoke then, for they were the last she spoke to me.

"It appears to be some sort of containment field that incapacitates whoever is in it," she said, staring down at the artifact in her hands. "But why would the last survivor of his race, adrift alone in an interstellar life raft, need such a thing?"

Miss Saint-West was called away then by a subordinate to inspect a new shipment of starseed that had just been delivered by army convoy. It was the last time I saw her, as the military ordered the facility sealed off from public access after my visit. I never heard from Miss Saint-West again.

And then there was the matter of starseed pieces that sometimes blew up and killed the treasure seekers who had unearthed them in their hiding spots around the globe. Perhaps they exploded out of mere molecular instability, as Alphaman claimed. Or perhaps they truly were weapons and the treasure seekers had handled them in the wrong way.

The rumours that there was more to Alphaman than met the eye even extended to the public at times. Some of you may remember the reporter from the *Chicago Tribune* who wrote the story about the parties at the mansion the government had thrown for Alphaman, and the allegations he had fathered more than one child with various society ladies around the city. The detail that the relationships with those society ladies may have been less than consensual was buried in the story, little more than a footnote. You may recall the reporter promised to track down

the mysterious children to determine if they were human or alien. But who tracked down the reporter when he disappeared? Perhaps one day we will find out what happened to him. Perhaps.

Mostly, though, people overlooked the questionable aspects of Alphaman. War had long been brewing, and now it had finally come after the assassination of Bismarck on a visit to Madrid, not long after Alphaman had stopped a similar assassination attempt against Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo. As is always the case in dark times, we needed a hero. Alphaman gave us a superhero.

And when we held the reception in his honour after the Battle of Ypres, who were we to judge when the generals talked of the hell of the trenches and Alphaman responded drunkenly that we knew nothing of hell, that he was the only one on the planet who had seen true hell? Even superheroes must be offered some leeway.

I finally felt I had to act when I heard whispers of the Detroit Project at various conferences. It was difficult to determine what exactly it was, other than it involved the nation's top physicists. Everyone was sworn to secrecy, backed by threats of execution. But some mumbled into their drinks that they were building a device to neutralize the starseed, so Alphaman would be forever safe from it. And someone slipped an anonymous note under my hotel room door in New York one night stating that the project involved developing a top-secret bomb designed by Alphaman himself, one intended to split the very fabric of reality. The note said if we allowed it to continue, we might destroy the world and even the universe itself.

I had to act. But I had little to act upon. Until I attended an astrophysics conference in Geneva, which was neutral ground during the war. A Russian named Yuri Kopolev gave a presentation about a strange occurrence in



Siberia—a massive explosion that had levelled tens of thousands of trees in an area called Tunguska. He said the authorities had suspected an enemy attack of some sort, because the paranoid regime always suspected enemy action. But why attack a forest in Siberia?

Even more interesting, Kopolev said a survey of the area suggested the explosion had happened in the air rather than on the ground. He said evidence pointed to a meteor that had succumbed to rising internal pressures from its entry into the atmosphere, but Kopolev admitted that was simply a theory to explain an event no one truly understood.

I bought him a Scotch after the talk and asked him when the Tunguska event had happened. He mumbled into his drink that it was hard to determine the exact date, as word had only filtered back to Moscow a few months earlier. But he gave me a range based on what he had read of the accounts and the photos he had seen.

The earliest date was the same year Alpha-man had fallen from the sky and destroyed part of Detroit.

I have no qualms mentioning Kopolev now. Those of you who follow scientific news know he was found dead shortly after the newspaper accounts of my own death were published. A heart attack, the official reports claim, even though neighbours said he was pulled from his burning apartment with a hole melted through his chest where his heart should have been.

So I set off to Siberia to see the Tunguska event for myself. It was an arduous journey, and not just because of the daunting landscape. It was also most challenging because of the war. The trenches of the battlefields were thousands of miles away, of course, as was Alphaman, who was single-handedly driving the Hun out of those trenches. But fear and paranoia travel far. I journeyed first to Moscow under the guise of attending a research

conference, then rode trains into the interior of the great Russian empire. My fellow passengers stared at each other with suspicion and hostile gazes. Part of that was just the Russian nature. But part of it was because of the war. Who knew which fellow passenger was an infiltrator and saboteur? No doubt it was only the fact I speak flawless Russian as one of my languages that saved me. Although making it through the trip to my destination ultimately condemned me.

It was in many ways a relief when I reached areas where I could no longer travel by train or even road, for it meant I was alone and away from suspicious eyes.

I bought a horse from a local man at the end of the rail line, and a rifle for bears and other Russian threats. I rode the horse where the terrain was forgiving enough and walked with it when the ground wasn't. The animal complained regardless of my charity. I carried my equipment on my back like a beast of burden, which I was. I carried the burden of science and progress, which is a heavy weight indeed.

At least it was the warm season in that region, if you can say Russia is ever warm. I was able to set up camp in the woods instead of digging snow caves for shelter.

The farther east I went, the more general the maps were. Tunguska became a loose direction rather than a specific site. Again, my grasp of the Russian language saved me. I encountered hunters and trappers from time to time, and I inquired of them directions to where the forest had been knocked down. They pointed me in the right way with a minimum of wasted words, perhaps because I had adopted the guise of a Russian government official looking to inspect the damage to state property. No doubt they deemed it best not to attract too much attention to their own illicit wanderings through that land.

After a time of travel not worth describing

here, I found the location of the Tunguska event. I stepped over a hilltop and then there was nothing but fallen trees for as far as I could see. All of them knocked down by some great force that flattened the land. A shock wave, I knew instantly, but a shock wave the likes of which the world had likely never seen. For a time, all I could do was stare at it. Even the horse I led knew something was strange about this, and for the first time since I'd acquired the beast, it stopped complaining and simply stood there quietly.

There was nothing to do but walk down the other side of that hill and descend into the ruins of the forest.

By now you are likely wondering what I found there in Tunguska.

I found the truth about Alphaman.

I found the remains of his craft, the *Starseed*.

And because of that, I found my death.

I discovered the secret of Alphaman's origins hidden away there among the fallen trees and charred patches where fires had raged before going out. My eye caught a glint of light on metal from beneath some fallen timber, and I cleared away the branches to discover a long panel of starseed embedded in the earth. This was not a fragment. It was connected to something larger hidden away in the ground.

It took me three days to excavate enough of it that I understood what I had found; three days to understand I had found something that would change the world forever. Something that would perhaps even change the universe forever.

I knew it was the *Starseed* itself from the moment I uncovered the first porthole, on the morning of the second day. By that time I had dug several yards down into the ground. The ship had buried itself deep, but the soil was loose enough from the impact I could still work it free.

The portholes were covered with metal

screens on the inside, so I couldn't ascertain the contents of the craft. If I'd been able to, perhaps I would have halted the excavation. Perhaps, but likely not.

By the evening of the second day, I had uncovered what I assumed to be the middle section of the vessel, judging from the thin, broken-off platforms that jutted out from the main body. The remains of wings if I had ever seen any in my soon to be short life. They were similar in style to what I'd seen on the aircraft of the day, if not similar in substance.

On the third day, I uncovered the enormous rift in the side of the *Starseed*. The edges were curled away in a manner metal shouldn't curl, and scorched a deeper black than charred firewood. The source of the explosion, I assumed. I dug cautiously now, unearthing just enough that I could survey the interior of the craft. And so sealed my fate.

How to describe what I saw inside? The interior of that starship was indescribable by the likes of me. Perhaps Gernsback and his fellow science fictioneers could manage it, but it is beyond me. I will do the best I can, however. You will have to supply your own sense of drama at man's first encounter with an alien vessel.

It was as dark as a cave inside, but as I peered in, panels of flashing lights suddenly lit up the walls. By their glow I could make out the interior of the craft. It had indeed been ravaged by some sort of explosion.

There was no apparent living space, just a number of chairs that seemed to flow out of the deck of the *Starseed* itself. The chairs held straps like those I had seen in the cockpits of aircraft, but they were made of a material I had never before encountered. They looked like a jelly form of the starseed material.

There was more jelly on the floor of the craft. It appeared to have oozed out of the broken tanks along one wall. They were vertical chambers spaced evenly along the wall,



a dozen or so of them. There were more flashing lights in between them, and strange white panels that pulsed softly with light. The chambers looked as if they were meant to be sealed off from the rest of the craft with glass walls, but the glass had been shattered in all of them, and the jelly they'd contained had leaked out.

But jelly was not all they contained. There were also human remains in the chambers. Or rather, alien remains. For while they looked human, I felt sure they were just as alien as Alphaman himself. Eight of them: five men and three women. Their bodies were remarkably preserved, perhaps as a result of being sealed underneath the earth in this tomb, perhaps by something in the jelly, but they were dead nevertheless, as was clear from the signs of the explosion upon them.

Eight of them, and four empty chambers.

Alphaman was not the only one of his kind, I realized as I peered into the downed spacecraft. So why would he claim such a thing?

The wrecked chambers were not the only ruin inside the *Starseed*. The instrumentation panels of the ship lit up more twisted metal throughout the interior, and there was another rift in the other side of the craft, through which a great deal of earth had spilled in. A spider's web of silken wires hung from tears in the ceiling, and there were deep gouges in the floor. I knew it was almost impossible to damage the starseed material, so I wondered what sort of force could have wreaked such havoc in the spacecraft. Had it been felled by some sort of enemy instead of the mechanical malfunction Alphaman claimed? If so, where was that enemy now?

I could not dwell on such thoughts for long, however, because it was then that the mechanical spider made its appearance.

Yes, you have read my words correctly. As strange and wondrous as the craft had been so far, there were more marvels still to be discovered.

It came out from behind a shattered chair and ran at me, like I was prey caught in its trap. It was not an enormous creature—no larger than a retriever hound—but it was frightening nonetheless, not only because it was a giant spider, complete with eight quickly moving limbs, metal tentacles for mandibles, and red, glowing eyes, but because it was made of starseed itself.

And because it spoke in Russian.

"What is your command?" it asked me, and then it stopped, a few feet away. But no doubt still within striking range.

I had no thought of fighting the creature. My rifle was still in the tent, and I didn't believe it would have been of any use against such a monstrosity as this anyway. Nor did I entertain any thoughts of fleeing. How could I flee such a discovery?

"You speak," I said. I was so stunned I dropped my disguise of a Russian agent and lapsed into my native tongue.

"I have a number of languages available for use," the spider said, switching to perfect English. "Do you have a preference?" It spoke with an accent that would have made an Etonian proud.

"You are intelligent," I said when speech finally returned to me.

"I am autonomous," the spider said. I wasn't sure if it was correcting me or not. "I exist to serve," it added.

"How is it that you can speak my language?" I asked.

It was a good question for many reasons. When I studied the spider, I saw no mouth, just those strange mandibles. The sound seemed to come from a black grid on its back instead. I must confess this observation did not make me feel any safer.

"I have recorded all the broadcasts capable of reaching this area and extracted the language patterns," the spider said. "A simple enough procedure, even in power-saving mode."

“What are you?” I asked. I admit I dreamed in that moment that it was some sort of alien scientist, one I could bring home to the league headquarters. An emissary of a more enlightened race. A beacon of hope in a dark age. But my hope was quickly snuffed out.

“I am an assistant warden,” the spider said.

“A warden of what?” I asked.

The creature hesitated a moment, as if thinking.

“Perhaps that is the wrong word,” the spider said. “The more appropriate choice may be ‘jailor.’”

Another chill ran along my spine then, one deeper than when I had first set eyes on the spider itself. I looked at the bodies in the chambers, and at the empty chambers.

“A jailor of what?” I asked.

“Me,” said a voice from behind us.

I turned to find Alphaman drifting down out of the Siberian sky, like a feather falling to the earth. His skin was smoking and his uniform tattered, the red white and blue mainly crimson and black now. He’d come straight here from the Western front. But how had he found me?

“You don’t know how long I’ve been searching for this ship,” he said, touching down upon the ground. The land shook with the impact. He smiled, but there was no joy in it.

I had never personally been in the presence of Alphaman before. I didn’t know what to say. Especially given my mission here to discover the truth about him.

“I’ve had the warden controller for years,” he went on, perhaps to fill the silence, perhaps to toy with me. He tapped the band of starseed around his wrist. “Found by a miner in Alaska. I’ve been monitoring for signals ever since, but there’s been nothing. I’d thought maybe the *Starseed* had actually been destroyed, along with all its passengers. But then you were kind enough to uncover it and wake the wardens from sleep. I suppose I should thank you.”

The spider spoke before I could. “Submit yourself to apprehension, fugitive,” it said in a surprisingly commanding voice. Its grasp of our languages was quite remarkable. It scurried toward Alphaman, and I hastily stepped to the side, into the *Starseed*.

Alphaman, however, showed no fear. He ran his hand along the band on his wrist in a quick pattern I didn’t understand, and the spider stopped in its tracks, as if paralyzed, then backed up several feet.

“I don’t think so,” Alphaman told it. “I haven’t figured out how to deactivate you yet, if there is a way, but I have learned how to keep you away. That will do until I learn all the wardens’ secrets.”

He walked the length of my excavation, studying the remains of the *Starseed* as the spider ran at him again several times, stopping and backing up each time it got too close. He paid it no attention at all now. The ground shook with each step he took. I marvelled at how the Hun stood against him at all. I thought about fleeing, but where would I flee to that I could actually escape Alphaman? I looked around the interior of the craft again, but saw nothing that could aid me. Now that I was inside, I saw the front of the ship was also ruptured and split from the explosion, with streams of dirt fallen in through the cracks.

“I see no other wardens,” Alphaman said. “Are you the only one left then?” The spider, which had given up on its efforts to attack, didn’t answer until Alphaman ran his hand along the band again.

“The others were destroyed or fatally crippled in the explosion,” the spider said from its place near the entrance I had taken into the *Starseed*. “I have salvaged their parts to ensure my continuing operations.”

Alphaman smiled that cold smile again. It made me retreat farther into the ship.

“And the crew?” he said.

"All biological wardens were ejected from the ship after the explosion caused pressure differentials," the spider said. "Along with you and three other prisoners. Their status is unknown."

Alphaman nodded. "Well, I imagine if they'd survived the blast and the fall, we would have heard of them by now," he said. "It was a near enough thing for me, and I was expecting it."

"So you're an escaped prisoner, not an emissary of good will," I cried out. I could not help myself.

Alphaman peered into the ship at me.

"You don't really look like a treasure seeker," he said.

"I'm a scientist, not some scavenger," I said. "I seek enlightenment, not material wealth."

"Consider yourself enlightened then," Alphaman said. "Too bad for you. If it were only money you were after, you might have made it out of here alive."

So, I had found out Alphaman's secret. But the world would never hear it from me.

"Is any of what you told us true?" I asked.

Alphaman shrugged. "There was a planet that was destroyed," he said.

"A crime for which you were imprisoned," the spider said.

"Indeed," Alphaman said, his voice softening now. "But not even that crime deserved the punishment of the hell you and your comrades put me through."

"There are jail stations for rehabilitation and there are jail stations for punishment," the spider said. "You no longer qualified for the former."

"You and your kind try to dream up the torments of hell," Alphaman said, looking at me. His smile was gone now. "But you cannot imagine the torments I endured in those jails."

"How did you come here then?" I asked, my voice little more than a whisper.

"A simple transfer between jails after I be-

came too much for one station," he said. "But it takes more than a warden ship to imprison me." He looked back at the spider. "As I think I've demonstrated. Your masters were so easy to trick. A simple bribe from my hidden accounts to an engineer to create a navigation malfunction while near a habitable solar system. An explosion when the ship entered the atmosphere to set down for repairs, courtesy of a bomb hidden in another prisoner transferred on board at the last minute to escape scans. I didn't need super powers to make my escape. Although they have been agreeable."

"You're a monster," I breathed.

"Your kind slaughters each other by the tens of thousands over small patches of land or imaginary gods and you call me a monster?" Alphaman shrugged. "Perhaps I am just trying to fit in here." He gazed up at the sun far overhead. He didn't squint or shield his eyes, just stared directly into it. "I feel very at home," he added. "I don't think I'll ever leave."

"Won't the others of your kind have dispatched a rescue mission when this craft failed to arrive at its destination?" I said.

Alphaman spread his arms to take in the desolate crash site in which we stood.

"I think if they thought there was anyone to rescue, they would have been here by now," he said. "No one will come for me. And no one will come to save you."

When he looked back down from the sun, his eyes were glowing. I knew what that meant. His heat-ray vision. I only had seconds to live. In those seconds, I remembered the first words of the spider.

"What is your command?"

"Save us!" I cried.

The spider sprang into motion. It leapt back into the ship in a single bound. At the same time, the lights inside the *Starseed* flashed in different patterns, and the craft began to hum. The floor shifted under my



feet. Somehow, the spider was communicating with the ship. Perhaps by some form of electronic telepathy or radio signals or some such thing. It was a marvel to behold despite my preoccupation with survival.

Alphaman's eyes flashed, but before his heat vision could strike, a wave of jelly flowed out of recesses in the ceiling and down the walls, covering the rifts in the sides of the craft. It was solid enough to form more walls, but a spot began to boil where Alphaman's gaze lit upon it. We had some time, but not much.

"You may wish to secure yourself to avoid injury," the spider said, tapping at some of the lights with a tentacle. Now other panels in the walls lit up, displaying moving pictures. Moving pictures of the outside world, as hard as that may be to believe. I watched Alphaman burning a hole into the ship through the jelly. The panels were some sort of camera device. Truly remarkable. "The damage to the craft prevents us from achieving maximum velocity or even stable flight for more than a few minutes," the spider went on. "But we may still reach speeds dangerous to your frail skeletal structure."

I quickly hurried to one of the chairs at the mention of flight. I had never flown before, although I had long dreamed of it. Of course, none of those dreams had ever included a wrathful Alphaman.

"I am going to destroy you!" the so-called superhero cried from outside the *Starseed*. "And then I'm going to destroy every molecule of this ship, so there will be nothing left that can ever hurt me again."

I had to escape to get word of Alphaman out to the world. But how?

The spaceship surged under my feet before I could untangle the purposes of all the chair's straps. I flew through the air myself, and I landed in one of the chambers still coated with the jelly.

"I have initiated evasive manoeuvres," the

spider said, "but I must warn you that the chance of escape is minimal."

"Just keep me alive!" I cried, but I feared my words lost in the sudden wind that came through the ruptures at the front of the craft. I tried to extricate myself from the jelly, but something kept me pressed down into it. A weight on my entire body I had never felt before.

Then a hole burned through the jelly and Alphaman was there, glaring at us, his eyes smouldering. The ruins of the Tunguska forest were visible over his shoulder, and it was only then that I understood we were flying high above the ground.

"You may have learned to fly the ship, but that won't save you from me," Alphaman said. "Not when I can fly faster."

"Have we no weapons?" I cried.

"Firing weapons," the mechanical spider said. There was a blast of light outside the ship that temporarily blinded me, and for a few seconds I thought Alphaman was vaporizing us with his heat vision. When my vision returned, Alphaman was gone from the hole.

But I knew he'd be back. The moving pictures on the walls showed him falling through the sky, a ragged burn mark scored across his body. It would have been interesting to learn how those moving pictures worked, but I feared I would never have the opportunity to do so.

Then Alphaman righted himself in the air and disappeared from the pictures. I knew he was coming for us.

"Whatever you do, don't let him catch us," I yelled to the spider.

"The probability of my success is low," the spider said.

And then Alphaman was back at the hole in the ship's side again.

"I'll burn you to your hell," he said, "and you will have a taste of what I have endured." And

then his eyes glowed once more.

The spider must have taken some sort of evasive manoeuvres then, for the *Starseed* bucked like a horse. Alphaman half fell out of the hole, and his gaze flew wildly about the interior of the craft for a second. Explosions went off along the walls where his heat vision touched, and the air filled with smoke. I am not ashamed to admit I screamed, but not loudly enough to drown out the spider's next words.

"Probability of impact is one hundred per cent," it said. "Likelihood of survival for biological passenger is too low to estimate."

The trees I could see through the hole in the ship were closer now. We were descending. Wind howled through the ship, joining my screams.

"Fools!" Alphaman cried. "You can't—"

But then he was gone as another blast of the *Starseed's* weapons system blew him away from the hole.

Not that it saved me. The ship smashed through the tops of the trees, branches whipping past the open doorway. We'd flown far enough that we had reached the forest at the edge of the Tunguska blast zone. The trip that had taken days by horse took only seconds in the air. It should have been a marvellous thing to experience.

"Prepare for impact," the spider said, but there was no time to prepare.

I awoke some time later, although waking is the wrong word for it. But I do not yet have a word to convey the real experience. Perhaps "resurrection," but that would not be entirely accurate either. It was something in between the two. Or perhaps far removed from either.

*You are alive*, said the spider, but this time its voice was in my head.

When I opened my eyes, I saw I was no longer in the *Starseed*. Instead, I was in a cave

of some sort. That is, it was a cave, but it was a cave that had been transformed into something else. A panel of blinking lights from the starship hung from a rock outcropping, as did a moving picture. The picture showed a patch of forest, but the trees were upright and healthy. This was not Tunguska.

There was no sign of the horse, but the rifle I'd bought was leaning against one wall. Beside it was another, strange rifle. It was made of starseed and had some sort of tubular eyepiece fixed to the top. One of the chairs from the ship sat on the ground nearby, amid some other scraps of metal. On the opposite wall hung the carcass of a skinned, smoked deer. There was no sign of the spider.

I looked down at myself. I was suspended in a pool of the jelly from the ship. But that was not all. There were pieces of starseed in my arm and stomach, fused with my flesh like armour. Shards making me whole where there were obvious pieces of me missing. And something felt different about my legs, hidden out of sight in the depths of the jelly.

"Where are you, warden?" I asked, grabbing on to a rocky outcropping of the cave floor and pulling myself out of the jelly. I moved quicker and more easily than I had anticipated.

*I am with you*, the spider said from somewhere I couldn't place. *We are one*.

I looked down at my legs and screamed at what I saw there. I admit I screamed for some time. I imagine you would have screamed too, if you underwent a similar metamorphosis.

My legs were gone. My lower body was gone. From the waist down, I was a mechanical spider. My trunk was fused to the back of the spider with a melted ring of starseed. I took a step back in horror, trying to get away from the spider body, and the legs moved backward in thrall to my mind.

*You are experiencing a standard emotional response to the transformation*, the spider said

in my mind. *This will pass. But I must warn you, the sounds of alarm we are emitting may compromise the secrecy of our refuge.*

“What have you done to me?” I cried, not heeding the creature’s warning.

*I was unable to save your previous body, the spider told me. However, I was able to retrieve enough parts to prevent your death. If I had a proper medical facility, I could perhaps have grown new parts and restored you. The only way to follow your command and maintain your existence was to integrate our bodies. Your experience in genetics and biology proved most useful in that, as I was able to access your memories once I established an interface with your brain. I am constantly monitoring and adjusting your physical networks to keep you alive. We have salvaged some parts of the ship while Alphaman has been away, but our mobility has been limited because of your precarious state.*

“Alphaman,” I breathed. I looked around the cave but saw no sign of him.

*You are safe for the moment, the spider told me. He has returned to the western front to battle the German military forces there. But before he left he transported in a specialist unit from your country to secure the crash site. They are disassembling the ship with some technology Alphaman has shared with them and are preparing it for travel.*

“Travel to where?” I asked.

*A facility called Los Alamos, the spider said in my mind. It is to play a role in something called the Detroit Project, but it is unclear what exactly they intend to do with it.*

“It’s a weapon,” I said. “The Detroit Project is a weapon.”

*Either Alphaman intends to use the weapon to destroy the Starseed and the last remnants of evidence that can reveal his true nature, or he plans to use its technology in the weapon itself, the spider said. Whichever scenario is more accurate, we must find a way to apprehend and imprison him again.*

“How could we possibly stop him?” I said.

*Admittedly, it will be difficult, the spider said. Especially given we cannot get close to him while he possesses the warden control. We need to find as many pieces of the ship that remain undiscovered as we can. There may be something we can use as a weapon, or that may help us develop a weapon capable of affecting Alphaman. We must find them before someone else does.*

“You should have let me die,” I said.

*Think of what you will learn from me, the spider said. Think of what you can teach humanity, the scientific advancements you can usher in. All we need to do is stop Alphaman.*

I did indeed think of that. “What else are you capable of?” I asked.

*I am an all-purpose assistant warden, it said. I have various neutralization devices, but unfortunately I cannot use those when Alphaman has the warden control. And I am not certain if they would be effective given his enhanced powers. However, I do provide a wide range of other services. I am capable of navigating most terrain, and I can build tools and shelters for every imaginable scenario. I can monitor every frequency and spectrum to gather information. I can serve as a vehicle and as a weapon platform for improvised weaponry you can operate. After all, you are not bound to the warden control like I am.*

“Could you create another starship?” I asked.

*Of course, given the proper materials. I also have the capability of producing land vehicles and submersibles.*

“And more spiders?” I asked.

*I can replicate myself indefinitely, given a large enough supply of the material you call starseed.*

“We can’t stop Alphaman,” I said. “Not in this state. But we can warn the world of him while we search for more starseed.”

*It will be difficult to sway public opinion. He has already identified you as a traitor and saboteur. Your reputation is destroyed, and your league of scientists has been disbanded.*



The spider explained how it had scanned the broadcasts as it put me back together and discovered the stories Alphaman had fed to the newspapers about me on the train.

*You are a villain in the eyes of the world now,* the spider said.

I used my new spider legs to walk over to the panel of blinking lights on the wall. There was a shard of glass beside it that functioned well enough as a mirror. I looked at my face and saw the starseed plates in my skull and cheeks for the first time, the one eye that was mine but the other that was some sort of metal and glass construct. I looked horrific, but I was a marvel of science.

“Very well, it’s up to us then,” I said to the spider.

*What do you wish to do?* the spider asked.

“We are at war,” I said. “So we need an army.”

That is what led us to the Somme. The warden had located a large cache of starseed scattered throughout the area. A soldier had found a fragment while digging a trench and showed it around before his superiors could quiet him and spirit the substance away. Other soldiers began digging their own trenches and found more of the starseed. The warden had ways of monitoring communications unknown to me. That is how he learned of this. So we travelled across the land, mostly at night, until we reached the Somme and started our own excavations. I will spare you the details, for I must still keep some secrets.

But Alphaman had his own secrets and somehow found out where I was. This time he didn’t come for me himself, though. Instead, he sent the army to finish the nightmarish job he had started.

But I had become a nightmare even he couldn’t conceive of, as the Huns in their trenches learned. Once I had disposed of them and collected up their treasure of starseed, the warden showed me how to use

it to create more spiders to dig for more of the space metal. When the Allied soldiers came looking for an enemy, they found one, but it was not the Hun troops they were expecting in the trenches. It was my army of minions.

Believe me when I say I would have preferred to scuttle off into the darkness again and not spill their blood. But the excavations were not yet complete. I needed all of the starseed I could find. And so those troops had to die, along with all the others Alphaman ordered to attack us. I do not know why he did not come for us himself. Perhaps he was afraid of the power of an army of minions. Perhaps there was some other reason. The world may never know.

Now I have the starseed that I came for and the battle of the Somme is over. I have retreated into the shadows once more.

I am dead, as are so many others. I am still Archimedes, and I am so much more. Now I am Archimedes Death.

You will search for me, but you will not find me.

Perhaps you will discover the cave where I was born. Perhaps you will search the wilderness around it. Perhaps you will search the entire world. But you will not find me anywhere. I have escaped to the stars, in a new spacecraft, the *Venom*, I have built using the starseed from the Somme and the spider’s scientific library and skills.

This letter is my warning I will not remain among the stars, far from the Earth that made me.

I cannot defeat Alphaman alone, not even with the help of my spider army that is now hidden around the world.

I need allies.

When I find them, I will return.

And I will bring hell with me.

I remain,  
ARCHIMEDES DEATH ♡



## 360

BY MARGUERITE PIGEON

**T**heir packed lunches had been left in crisp brown bags outside the suite door by campus hospitality, an exact list of the organic ingredients stapled to the top fold.

“This is how they soften you up, right?” said Andrea, shoving the bags into the worn-out backpack she’d brought from Vancouver. “Flashing that tech cash.”

Lily ignored the comment as she tied her

hiking boots, but Richard, sitting on the couch across from her, guffawed—too loudly for Lily.

“Wait till you see my pedicure,” he said, pulling off his wool sock and wiggling his toes until Andrea slapped his foot down. “You’re a cheap date, Dad.”

A light knock on the door gave Lily an excuse to distance herself from their easy intimacy.

ILLUSTRATION BY GEORGE PFROMM

“Chaperone’s here,” deadpanned Andrea behind her, and Richard chortled.

Lily had been the lukewarm audience to their buddy routine for a lifetime. Tense, she opened the door expecting a company representative who would escort them off-site. But it was her own Junior, Kevin, standing there.

“Good morning, Lily,” he said, stumbling. “They had someone else but she’s sick, and Teresa figured I know you and—”

“No need to explain,” said Lily. “It’s fine.” She did not think it was fine. She would write the Senior, Teresa, later. Kevin, all blond eyelashes, reddish beard, and tattooed biceps, oversaw Lily’s capture. His job was to replace Lily’s old C.G.I. dots, rearrange her props, and ask the questions someone else wrote for him as prompts. Lily did not want to see this person on her day off. Besides, Kevin had been getting under Lily’s skin, too often asking if she was eager to achieve 360, whether she was bored. All the Juniors probed. They watched for cracks. But Kevin added a sense of personal mission to his snooping. Lily now suspected his presence was Teresa’s way of letting her and Richard know the company was uneasy about Andrea’s visit.

For his part, Richard was not thinking through the angles. He was a child awaiting summer camp. He rose and grabbed Kevin’s hand, shaking it hard.

“You’ve been at Lily’s station—what is it? A few weeks now?”

“Reassignment’s in ten days, sir,” said Kevin.

“Ten days,” repeated Richard, looking meaningfully at Lily. She sighed, but knew he was right: soon Kevin would be a distant memory. HoloPro was always switching out Juniors, a strategy for keeping Capture fresh and for stifling any budding feelings between Models and these pretty young assistants. Lily approved. Richard had been tempted in far less intense circumstances.

“I know the trails well,” said Kevin, still compensating for his unwanted presence.

When Lily reacted with cool silence, Richard looked at her, this time beseechingly, his eyes asking if she was really going to ruin this, his hard-won time with Andrea. The outing that could make him reconsider. Lily was forced to smile and nod, to let it go. She noticed it was easy. Getting to 290 degrees had fortified her. She had learned to “be herself,” and “be natural,” as HoloPro encouraged the Models to be—which meant inhabiting a distilled version of herself. Lily had never fought her tendency to take charge, but the program had allowed her to internalize and amplify her public persona. She could easily envision a conference room somewhere across the world, sometime in the future, in which strangers would take notes as the hologram named Lily pressed a lecture point using this very smile. Richard, for one, was buying it. He perked up.

“Then we’re ready to rock!” he said, leaping toward the door in the most enthusiastic display Lily had seen from her husband in nine weeks.

Kevin laughed. “Rad,” he said, glancing at Andrea. Andrea just averted her gaze. This was for Lily’s benefit. It said Andrea wanted nothing to do with the company or its proxies. Then again, Andrea always found reasons to reject any man besides Richard. A response, perhaps, to having had foolishly young parents. At times, Richard played not just father but best friend and idol to Andrea, especially when Lily’s work made her Bad Mom. Lily foresaw Andrea’s likely future: no marriage, no money, a think-tank job producing ideas doomed to hover on the margins. The money from Lily and Richard’s 360s was going to be Andrea’s salvation—if Richard could stick it out.

Kevin took them in a company S.U.V. from the campus to a trailhead about fifteen



kilometres away, and they hiked at a comfortable pace for about an hour, along an easy upward incline through thick woods. Amid the dappled greenery, Lily relaxed in a way she hadn't realized she'd been missing. She had been so consumed with 360, every day the same: the slow degrees of Capture, incrementally adding to the data pool everything she knew, everything she was, punctuated by the campus luxuries that soothed away the weirdness. Mostly, Lily and Richard had been satisfied to join the on-site yoga class or use the pool, followed by a massage. But every day, upon entering the vast hangar where they were filmed carrying out the minutia of their work, speech patterns, habits, movements, and ideas, Lily had seen these mountains framed by an enormous wall of windows. She always felt a pang—a touch of the sublime—as she caught sight of the peaks probing at the sky. Maybe this had been an explicit architectural choice by the company: to inspire awe tinged with fear. For Richard, Lily knew, the peaks loomed too large, another symbol of the freedom he felt increasingly robbed of. Never mind that it had been his idea to sign up to become a Model for 360, or that it was his poor investments that had convinced Lily they needed the money.

Now, crisp air, the feel of rough land beneath her boots, the sounds of songbirds, and a light breeze shaking the bright, early leaves loosened something deep inside Lily. She had been lucky in her health. She had not had to take any advice about managing chronic disease. She would never need her own 360. Only headaches, brought on, she told herself, by overwork, were a problem. Nothing half a bottle of wine and warm eye compress couldn't fix. Richard was another story. He seemed to have a physical correlate for every bad feeling—reactive skin, a weak stomach, trembling hands. All worsening by the day on the HoloPro campus.

It had been nearly two weeks since he'd announced over dinner at one of the elegant campus eateries that he wanted to abandon the program.

"They'll keep us in court forever."

"I don't care," said Richard. "I'll go mad."

He was handsome. Had been since Grade 10 homeroom. Now the sprinkling of grey stubble gave him a rugged look Lily loved. But listening to his over-dramatizations, Lily thought for the first time that her husband, on the cusp of forty, looked old.

They'd agreed that Richard would book a last-ditch meeting with Teresa. Lily liked their Senior Teresa was energetic, exuding boundless faith in technology. Teresa had nodded, listening intently as Richard recounted his discomfort with the program, his revulsion at being corrected when failing to act enough like himself. Teresa had not mentioned HoloPro's iron-clad contract, or the unassailable accommodations. Instead, she'd leaned toward Richard with extreme solicitude and asked, "What could we do to make the next month more joyous?"

Lily, who'd been sitting quietly by Richard's side, nearly choked. Joy? In her husband? The writer? But Richard had not blinked.

"It would be great to see our daughter—Andrea."

Now, here they were. Good had come from bad. Lily reveled in her health and the freshness of the air. As her breath quickened with the effort of the hike, she really tried to imagine the version of herself that would eventually be marketed to nursing schools and educational institutions far away. Hair and makeup perfect. Outfit on point. Facial expression both variable and consistently "her." Yet Lily might not like that person. *This* Lily was a realist. Her research focused on efficiencies in nursing care. Lily honestly believed the public health system was swollen, bleeding money. But how would her research program

sound coming out of the mouth of *that* Lily? Callous? Cold? Did HoloPro care if it did? They could always create another Model to sell along with hers. Some social scientist who would make the case for more health-care spending. Customers could bundle the two—Lily and her opposite—to market the whole spectrum of ideas. But it would still be Lily’s face out there. Lily’s words, voice, and gestures.

“Mom,” said Andrea, grabbing her arm. “Careful.”

Lily was about to put down her foot on something dark and round.

“Bear scat,” said Kevin.

Lily sidestepped and looked nervously at her daughter.

“They live around here,” said Kevin, shrugging. “That’s why I have this.” He held up an aerosol can. “Stops them cold. The new kind is easier on them. Ethical.”

He slid the can back into his pack and walked on.

**A**bout twenty minutes later, the group stopped on a rocky outcrop, where Kevin pointed out the HoloPro campus below them to the east.

“From here it looks so insignificant,” said Richard. Lily could see that he needed this—to be above 360 for the day, away from the repetition that underpinned data collection for a 3-D “whole self” hologram. Richard wanted a role change. Today he was “model father,” not “model writer.”

“Just think, Dad,” said Andrea. “Right now, down there, on some server, you’re gestating. Richard 2.0.”

Kevin smiled tightly.

“Sorry,” said Andrea, running an invisible zipper across her lips. “No shop talk.”

**L**ily remembered the day, nearly a year ago, when she and Richard had signed their contract. They’d both had doubts about the

confidentiality clause. Lily knew it would be painful for Richard to be apart from Andrea for so long, and to be prohibited from sharing with her nearly anything about this strange project of turning his likeness and knowledge into marketable software. The company representatives had reiterated that their proprietary capture process had already been compromised once by hackers. They had to ensure that the institutions that bought these holographic packages had exclusive rights. They reminded Lily and Richard that these customers were mostly in the developing world, that every 360 was a vital teaching resource for thousands of people—young people who would otherwise be denied access to leaders in a given field of study. Lily’s 360 would forward the health policy agenda in far-flung countries. Richard would be a perpetual visiting scholar contributing to cultural development globally. Confidentiality was essential to achieving these goals and a key reason payment to Models was so high. Richard had been the first to sign.

**A**bout forty minutes later a set of cracking sounds made the group stop—Kevin ahead, in the lead, followed by Richard, then Lily and Andrea. Mother and daughter had dropped back and were just starting to warm up, the way they always needed time to do. Andrea was talking about her job. Lily encouraged her, not for the first time, to consider a Ph.D., but Andrea bristled, making clear she opposed specialization and credentialization, which she felt contributed to inequality. Lily was about to reply that her own credentials were the only thing that had ever got her out of nursing shoes and away from dirty bedpans. That’s when the cracking began.

Lily wanted to think it was two trees rubbing together. But she worried that it could be more—the bear she’d feared earlier. Or a moose or elk. She glanced over at Richard. He

had crouched to examine something on the ground—an insect, maybe, or an unusual plant. In all but the realm of money, Richard was a details person. In nature, in books, in bed, he paid attention. It's why Lily had assumed Richard would love 360. At some point in the past few weeks though, they'd switched. Lily had found her inner spokesperson and was getting into the nitty-gritty of her. Richard had seen his distilled self and, maybe, didn't like him. He was turning away, wanted the freedom to "be himself"—whoever that was.

Then a flash of honey-coloured fur streaked into Lily's field of vision. An animal was on Richard. He staggered, then fell hard on his right side. It was a cougar—lithe, muscular, its thick forelegs raised in attack.

"Dad!" cried Andrea.

Lily tried to grab her daughter's arm, but Andrea was gone, headed straight for her father and the animal. Kevin, on the other side of Richard, had his hands at his face, clearly panicked. Lily registered that Kevin would be useless, that the company had sent him to protect their investment, but Kevin was not capable of protecting even himself. Yet, Lily was no better. She was frozen. She saw that anonymous conference room again, her 360 locking up during a presentation, smile cemented in place: Lily was not responding.

The cougar locked its jaws on Richard's head. Andrea was kicking the cat in a fearful, uncommitted way that made Lily flash to her daughter's childhood tantrums, that heart-rending impotent rage she had always directed at her mother. The pang of this snapped Lily from her locked state. She ran, grabbed Andrea, and pulled her back. Her daughter's left arm had been swiped. Blood poured from four precise gashes.

Richard was left rolling back and forth under the force of the cougar's movements. Lily sought out Richard's his face and caught

a glimpse of his eyelids pressed closed, a queasy fold under his hair. The animal began to drag Richard away, and Richard, moving his arms less now, allowed his head to bounce against some stones.

"Richard," Lily said, her voice ragged, willing her feet closer to the man with whom she had shared a long and bumpy marriage, swinging her backpack at the cougar, smacking it hard along its back.

Someone ran up. Not Kevin, but another man, a stranger, the kind of person Lily had not seen since arriving at HoloPro. Cheap clothes. Hairy legs. Old boots. He howled wildly as he ran to the cougar. In his hand was a short knife, which he plunged deep into the animal's fur. The cat screeched and whirled on him, but the man had already pulled the knife out and was sticking it in again. This time the cat turned away, releasing Richard's head from its jaws. Sensing weakness, the man methodically stabbed the wild cat.

That's when Kevin came to his senses. As the animal was dying. As Andrea bled. As Lily encircled her husband's mangled shoulder with her arm. As the stranger, his massive frame heaving with fatigue, got to his knees. Kevin stepped in and emptied his can of ethical bear spray onto them all.

Lily could not see. She groped at the dirt for Richard, for Andrea. She had a strong urge to murder Kevin. She clearly heard the can drop and his heavy footsteps rush quickly across loose stones. She could almost laugh at the image of him at the high-security campus gate, explaining that he'd lost two Models: one, on the mountain, bleeding profusely, having found the cruelest loophole to his contract; another, in desperate need of her 360—Lily 2.0, the three-dimensional, projectable version with all the answers, with money and stamina to last beyond mortal life, convinced by her own words that any problem, however complex, can be solved. ■





# HEAT WAVE

BY MAUREEN JENNINGS

*A Charlotte Frayne Adventure.*

**T**he city was sweltering in the hottest July in recorded memory. For five days in a row, temperatures had reached above ninety degrees Fahrenheit, and the nights weren't much cooler. The newspapers reported two hundred deaths across the country, all attributed to the heat. Rumour had it that a man had cooked an egg on the sidewalk in Winnipeg. I didn't believe it. Nobody would waste a perfectly good egg on such a

stunt. Not these days. In Toronto, a milkman's horse had dropped dead on his rounds. That one I believed.

Monday, I went in to work even earlier than usual to take advantage of the slightly lower morning temperature. My boss, Mr. Gilmore, rents two rooms on the second level of the Yonge Street Arcade. I had the front, he had the back, neither had windows. It was artificial light, winter and summer. The rooms

ILLUSTRATION BY GEORGE PFROMM

tended to be a touch cooler in summer, with no sun to beat in, but today, I'd hardly been there half an hour before I was sweating. I discreetly unbuttoned the neck of my blouse. I'd already slipped off my stockings, but nobody could see my bare feet underneath the desk. Mr. Gilmore wasn't due until ten o'clock, and I expected on a day like this he might come in later. The hall was, shall we say, under-carpeted, and I could always hear him clumping down the hall, so there would be plenty of time to make myself presentable. "We have to create an immediate impression of decorum and good breeding, Miss Frayne. Our clients see a polite and pleasant young woman as well dressed as any of Mr. Eaton's salesladies. They will feel at ease, knowing they can expect to be treated with the utmost decorum." "Decorum" was one of Mr. Gilmore's favourite words.

I'd picked up copies of the morning newspapers on my way over and I was about to skim through them. My job was to take note of particular items that might bring us business. Lost and Found, of course. You'd be amazed how easy it was to link people together. Those who had lost and those who had found. Sort of like being a matchmaker. I kept a file on all the missing dogs, purses and bits of jewellery. By now I had developed quite a circle of acquaintances who kept an eye out for me. Kidnapped dogs were easy to identify. We were usually able to get in before the kidnapper contacted the owner. Joyous reunions resulted. Generous rewards were always shared.

However, I'd say the obituary column was the most lucrative. I would track down the address of the people mentioned as "left," and send them a note. Our letterhead said, "T. GILMORE AND ASSOCIATES. PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS. UTTER DISCRETION. REASONABLE RATES GUARANTEED." In fact, I was the only associate and also acted as general odds body and secretary.

One of my jobs was to write a short note to the grieving widow or, occasionally, widower. "Please accept our most sincere condolences. We are here if you need us." Unscrupulous people were known to keep track of the death notices in the newspapers and send a letter to the bereaved one, claiming dubious connections with the dear departed. Blackmail really. You'd be surprised how common this was. Getting to the bottom of such false claims was how we earned our bread and butter.

I swatted a reckless fly who had decided to explore my desk. This morning's *Star* was as leaden and dispirited as the weather itself. Europe in an upheaval as usual. I was about to switch to the *Globe* when a terse notice caught my eye:

The body of a man was washed up on Cherry Beach late last night. According to police he was probably in his mid-twenties, blond haired, medium height. He was clothed only in his swimming trunks. The cause of death was drowning. The police believe he must have gone into the water to escape the heat and got into difficulties. Given the condition of the body, they estimate he had been in the lake for a couple of days. To date, the body has not been identified, although the police did conduct a search of the beach and discovered a neat pile of clothing near the shore. No wallet was present.

If there had been, it would have been a miracle indeed. Dozens of people jammed into broiling squalid houses were spending nights on the beach. An unguarded bundle of clothes would have been too tempting to resist.

I heard somebody coming down the hall and quickly buttoned my collar and slipped my feet into my shoes.

There was a knock on the door. You can tell a lot by the way prospective clients knock. There's the timid, uncertain sort of knock from those who would rather not be consulting a private detective but feel they must: always a woman, usually in search of her dog, most often afraid of risking the disapproval

of her husband, who had to pay the bill. A sharp and prolonged rat-a-tat was, ninety per cent of the time, an aggrieved man who suspects his spouse is cheating on him.

This current knock was somewhere in between. Firm and confident but not aggressive. Male, I guessed.

“Come in.”

He did, and I met Julian Cross. My life was never the same after that.

Let me backtrack a little. I had just stepped over to the other side of thirty and I’m not spoken for. I had a couple of tries that didn’t go anywhere, so I suppose you’d say I was on the verge of giving up hope. I’d lived with my grandparents since my mother ran off with a roadie when I was three. Gran died last year and there’s just Gramps and me now. She was always telling me I’m too picky. “No such thing as the perfect man.” I know that, of course I do, but somehow or other, for a variety of reasons, no relationship had worked out so far.

The man who had just walked into the office was tall. I was surprised to see he was leaning on a cane, which reduced his height somewhat. He was elegantly dressed in a tan-coloured linen suit. When he removed his Panama, he revealed crisp, dark hair, cut short. He had brown eyes and a smile that would light up your life.

“Can I help you?” I asked. To my own ears I sounded breathless.

“I can see you’re not Mr. Gilmore. You therefore must be Miss Charlotte Frayne.”

He nodded in the direction of the nameplate on my desk.

I returned his smile. Who wouldn’t?

“Correct on all counts. I am expecting Mr. Gilmore later this morning.”

“That’s fine. I’d just as soon talk to you.”

“Please have a seat.”

I indicated the wooden chair just to one side of the desk, and he limped over to it. He groaned slightly as he sat down, and I could

see his leg was stuck straight out in front of him. No mobility at the knee from the look of it. I glanced at his hand. I wished men would wear wedding rings the way we women did so everybody could know what was what. He had long fingers, tanned and slim, bare of jewellery.

“My name is Cross. Julian Cross. I heard about you from a neighbour, Mrs. Harley,” he said. “She was most impressed with your ability.”

I remembered the case well. Luring Mrs. Harley’s cat from the roof with an open can of sardines didn’t exactly require much skill, but Boots had certainly impressed himself on me. The scratch marks had only just started to fade.

“Thank you,” I murmured. “How can I help you, Mr. Cross?”

“I would like to find my brother. My mother is gravely ill and it would bring her much comfort if she could see Stephen before she passes on.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“He disappeared about two years ago. We have not had a word since.”

“Did you report this to the police?”

“Eventually we did. Stephen left home more than once when he was a teenager, so at first we didn’t think much of it. He was always back within the week, hungry and dirty. This time two weeks went by, then a month. I went to the police and filed a missing persons report.”

He paused and his eyes drifted away. An unhappy memory, I thought.

He came back to earth, gave me a little grin.

“Sorry. I got distracted. The police could find no trace of him whatsoever. After a year they closed the case. As one officer said to me, ‘Kids leave home every day of the week. He’ll show up when he’s ready.’”

“Was he a kid?” I asked.

“He’d just turned eighteen. Not exactly a kid, but I suppose not an adult either.”

“Was there a reason he might have run away? Trouble in the family for instance?”

Cross began to rub his knee. It was an unconscious gesture I'm sure he wasn't aware of.

"He didn't get along with our father. Ever since I remember, Steve was rebellious. 'Mouthy' my father called him. They were always arguing."

Again, his thoughts drifted away. I called him back.

"What about you? Did you have the same kind of relationship with your father?"

"Oddly enough I didn't. I'd say he was rather strict, but he wasn't around much when I was growing up so I was left to my mother's ministrations."

He held up his hand to halt my comment, although I hadn't been about to make one.

"I know what you're thinking. That I was spoiled rotten." He smiled that light-up-your-life smile. "I confess, I was. My mother was a lot younger than my father, and she was full of fun."

I got the picture.

"Come the war, I joined up as soon as I could, and Father liked that. Made him proud. Unfortunately, I didn't last long. Ypres did for me. . . ."

His voice tailed off.

Since the war had ended I'd had occasion to talk to several returning soldiers and, without fail, they seemed to run out of words very quickly. They'd get a strange expression on their faces as if the physical pain and the heart pain were indistinguishable. Julian Cross wore just such a look.

He began to fish in his pocket.

"Do you mind if I smoke?"

I minded, but he was a prospective client so I simply shrugged. He tapped a cigarette out of his silver case, lit it, and drew in the smoke as if it was keeping him alive. A lot of ex-soldiers consumed cigarettes in this way. While he was doing all that, I inserted a fresh sheet of paper into the typewriter and moved my chair into position.

"You don't mind if I take this down do you?"

"Not at all."

"You said your brother disappeared two years ago, when he was eighteen."

"That's right. October 30, 1934. It was a few days after his birthday."

"And you say your mother is gravely ill?"

"Yes, unfortunately she is. The doctor has given her three months at the most."

"And your father?"

"He died last year."

"Did he want to find your brother?"

Julian drew deeply on his cigarette.

"I'd say no. Not at all. He was only too glad to be rid of him."

"So other than informing the police, this is the first time you have independently tried to discover his whereabouts?"

"Yes."

Another drag on the cigarette. The tiny office was rapidly filling up with smoke. I suppressed my cough.

"Actually, I am here at my mother's request," said Cross. "She knows her life is coming to an end and she hopes to get some information about Stephen that is conclusive one way or the other."

"That is understandable. Otherwise one finds oneself in a perpetual state of waiting."

He flashed me a look of surprise.

"Exactly. Mother won't give up hope."

Out of the corner of my eye I could see the newspaper notice.

"Have you tried advertising yourself?"

"Frankly, no. We are a fairly wealthy family and I was afraid we'd have to deal with too many fraudulent responses. My mother cannot take it. She is dreadfully frail at the moment. If we do find him alive I will make sure she sees him."

"And if he's dead?"

"I will have to tell her. She is insisting on setting up a trust fund in his name in case he does deign to return."

"I see."

I'd meant to keep my voice neutral but some-



thing must have seeped through. He flushed.

"Perhaps you think that's crass of me to even care, but it seems a waste to tie up money for a ghost. Don't get me wrong, Miss Frayne, I loved my little brother. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to see him again, but he has caused my mother much grief. Why should he saunter back, say, in three or four years' time and simply pick up a hefty sum of money that he hasn't ever earned?"

He couldn't keep the bitterness out of his voice. So much for his claim to being spoiled. It seemed like Mom had been asking for a payback.

I reached for the newspaper and handed it to him.

"Did you happen to see this notice about a missing man?"

"No. I make a point of not reading the paper. Too depressing. Sometimes I wonder what we fought a war for. I don't know if it changed much."

A lot of veterans felt the same way and I sympathized with them.

I gave him a moment to read the notice.

"Could it be your brother?"

He shrugged.

"Possibly, but it's a very general description."

He stubbed out his cigarette in a little metal pillbox which he took from his pocket. Another holdover from being in the army.

He sighed.

"I'll need to actually see the body before I can be sure. Do you know how I should go about doing that?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. Let me make a phone call."

He continued to stare at the newspaper as if it might suddenly speak up and give him answers. I dialed the morgue.

"Operator, will you put me through to Mr. Craig. It's Charlotte Frayne calling."

Within a minute, Joe Craig came on the phone.

"Lottie! Where've you been? You owe me a lunch as I recall."

I'd known Joe Craig for a couple of years and liked him a lot. He was the head mortician at the city morgue and knowing him had proved useful on more than one occasion. Our relationship might have gone further than friendship, but even standing on tip-toe, Joe couldn't make five feet five inches. He swore it didn't matter to him, but it did to me, so we had never progressed past the flirtation stage.

"Mr. Craig, I'm calling on behalf of a client. He thinks the body that was taken from the lake yesterday might be his brother."

"He's within earshot I gather?"

"Quite so. We were wondering if you could give us any more specific details. Save an unnecessary visit to the morgue."

"Sure. You won't want to come here if you don't have to. The fish and the water have had a go at the corpse's face. It's a mess. We did all the usual X-ray checks, but there were no traces of previous injuries or diseases that we could see. The body was thinner than it should be, but otherwise normal. Early twenties probably. Blond hair. Blue eyes." He chuckled. "Do you want to do the usual test?"

"Yes, please."

Julian Cross was now watching me intently. I didn't really like what I was about to do, but it was a good way to sift out the truth.

"Here goes," said Joe. "Ask him if his brother had a small crescent shaped scar above his left ankle."

"Does he?"

"Nope, smooth as a baby's you know what."

It's surprising how many people try to claim bodies that don't really belong to them. Sometimes, through sheer longing, sometimes in the hope of recompense. Joe and I had devised a little trap to catch the liars and cheats.

"Thank you, Mr. Craig. I will pass this along."

"All righty. How about lunch on Friday?"

"Thank you. Much appreciated."

"Is that a yes?"

"Quite so. Goodbye."

I hung up and faced Julian Cross.

"Did Stephen have a crescent shaped scar on his left ankle?"

He started.

"Good Lord. He did. He fell off a swing when he was a kid. Gave himself quite a bang. Oh my. Don't tell me I've found my brother at last."

"The best thing to do is go to the morgue and make a personal identification. Do you feel up to doing that?"

He slumped in the chair.

"I suppose there's no help for it. We must get this settled. Were there any other marks on the body?"

"Nothing really significant. Apparently the young man was rather emaciated."

Cross shook his head.

"Stephen was always a skinny runt."

He reached into his jacket and took out a chequebook.

"How much do I owe you?"

"Good heavens, Mr. Cross. I haven't done anything. You could have seen that notice yourself."

"But I didn't, and you did. Please! If you don't tell me how much, I shall be compelled to improvise and that probably isn't a good idea."

He was right about that. I named our usual consultation fee, which he promptly doubled. Finally, he struggled to his feet and limped off.

I waited until I knew he had left the floor and I rang Joe. He answered immediately.

"Well?"

"He's on his way."

"What's up?"

"He's looking for a body. He'll take whatever fits the general description of missing sibling."

"Why?"

"His mother says she's going to leave a trust

fund for the missing brother unless he's proven dead. Take a big chunk out of Julian's inheritance, most likely."

"Got it."

"I'm guessing he'll ask for a prompt cremation to save his mother the pain of having to see the corpse of her son."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Make it really difficult for him. Lots of red tape to go through. Nothing can proceed until the mother sees the body."

"O.K."

"And by the way, Joe. You'll notice that sometimes Mr. Cross will limp and sometimes he won't."

"Playing for sympathy, is he?"

"Something like that. I heard him coming down the hall and he wasn't using a cane then but when he came into the office, he acted like a crippled war veteran."

"Is he tall and good looking?"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Nothing. It's just that you've got a certain tone in your voice."

"That's ridiculous. I do not."

"Yes, you do."

"Joe. Get out of here!"

"O.K. See you Friday?"

"All right."

"We can pick up sandwiches and bring them here."

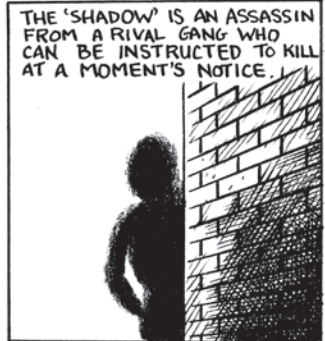
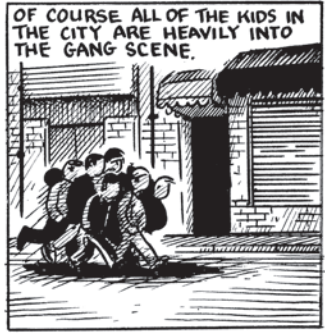
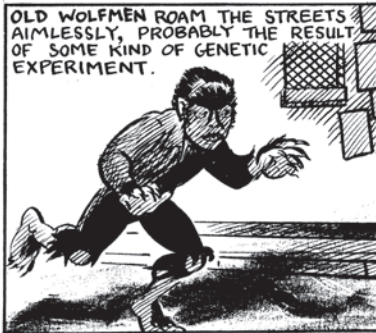
"What? To the morgue?"

"Probably the coolest place in the city."

I knew what he meant but it's not just the weather that determines the temperature of the human heart.

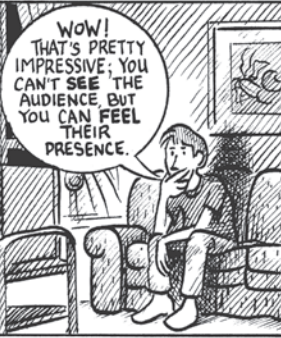
Oh, I mentioned earlier that after encountering Julian Cross my life changed. What happened was that Mr. Gilmore, on hearing the story (and seeing the cheque), said he would promote me to acting partner. He said he was very pleased with my work.

And Joe and I did have lunch in the morgue. It was indeed wonderfully cool. ¶





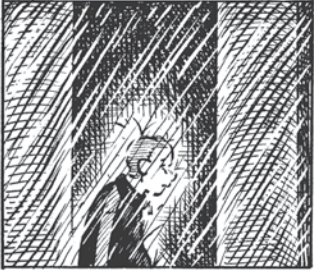
THE PROTAGONIST OF THE MOVIE IS A YOUNG GANG MEMBER IN TROUBLE WITH THE LAW.



THE CHIEF OF POLICE HAS BROUGHT DAMNING EVIDENCE AGAINST THE BOY.



THE COURTHOUSE HAS NO ROOF AND SHEETS OF RAIN POUR IN UNHINDERED.



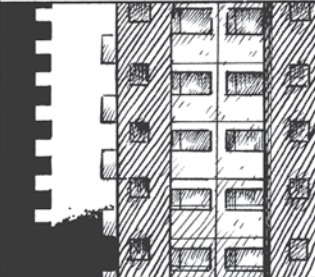
AS THE SCENE PROGRESSES IT BECOMES OBVIOUS THAT THE CHIEF IS SLIGHTLY SYMPATHETIC TO THE BOYS SITUATION.



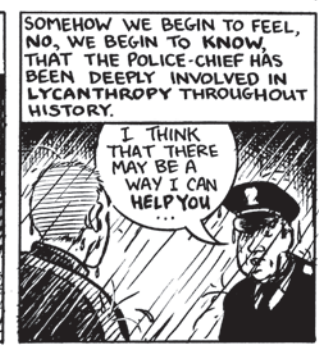
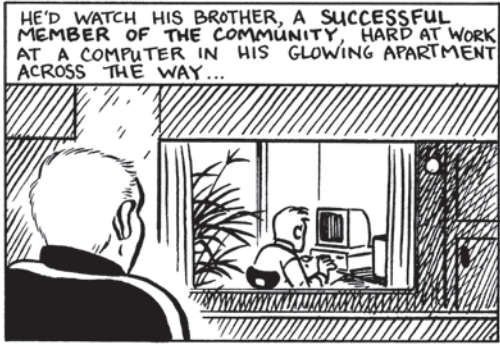
FROM AN EARLY AGE THE BOY HAD AVOIDED SPENDING ANY TIME AT ALL IN HIS HOME

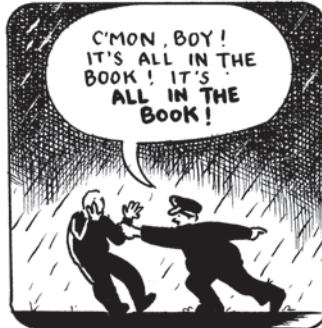


AND WHENEVER WE DO FLASHBACK TO HIM THERE IT BECOMES OBVIOUS...













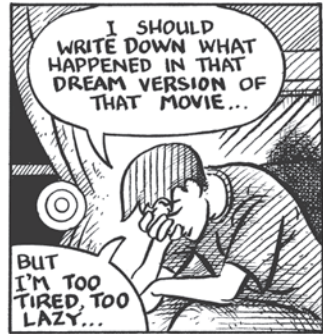
LIKE AN ANIMAL CAUGHT IN A TRAP WILL CHEW OFF ITS OWN LIMBS TO ESCAPE...



SOME THINGS JUST HAVE TO BE DONE.



AS THE CAMERA PANS UP AND AWAY INTO THE SWIRLING RAIN-FILLED SKY WE FEEL A SURGE OF AWED EMOTION.



HEY! LOOK! HERE COMES THE SCRIPT-WRITER HIMSELF!



I'LL MAKE A COPY OF THE SCRIPT AND GIVE IT TO YOU TOMORROW.



AWW! WHAT A NICE GUY! SAVING ME ALL OF THAT HARD WORK!



DREAMT A LONG TIME AGO.



# OTHER PEOPLE'S HOUSES

BY ADRIENNE WEISS

**SUNDAY, AUGUST 21, 1977**

The tips of her sneakers drag across the grass, rip at the longest blades, and bring up soil as she brakes. The swing creaks and shakes at the sudden stop, both feet holding themselves tight to the ground like a Roman statue. It is the only sound this Sunday morning. Her house the only house that breathes. It is as if it is the lone survivor of a catastrophic epidemic that swept through the neighbourhood overnight. An alien invasion.

The silence had kept her awake long after her parents ushered the police out, crushed their cigarette butts in the only empty crystal ashtray, and gently told the girls it was time for bed. She had ignored the lull of sleep, stared out the window to the house across the street

that still glowed like it was radioactive. That still crawled with police. That still beckoned to her with the simple pulse of a flashlight. This had always been the signal. Certain well-timed pulses of light. She would put her hand up against glass and spread her fingers, so he could see the outline of her hand, a wave. So he knew she was there. This time had been no different, except when the pulses shifted downstairs, then moved across his front lawn to the road. The pulses had come so close, she could smell the heat of the light. Pulse. Pulse. Pulse.

That pulse is now in her ears. She turns in circles, twisting the chains once, twice, three times, till the knot of metal comes up against her chest. Till she is trapped. All she has to do is let go, and she will spiral in the other direction. Come undone. Be free.

ILLUSTRATION BY GEORGE PFROMM



Free. He had said something about that last week. Something about getting out. Being his own man. Whatever that meant. "But you're just a boy," she had said, immediately regretting it, immediately understanding that such words made her sound like his mother, her mother, every mother on Laurel Drive. But he had smiled and said, "And you're just a girl." As if that had meant they were even.

The morning sun revolves around her as she lifts her legs, holds them out straight like a porcelain doll, and spins. Already the heat pinches her skin, and she longs for the coolness of 62 Laurel Drive's pool, but it had been covered. Someone had made sure of that. She had seen so herself. Because after the pulses of light had died, and the car had slunk out of the driveway like a common thief, she had grown fearful. Something new was wrong. So she had gone downstairs, aware of her mother still up and pacing, but certain she could get past her, certain she could, like the best of ghosts, slip through Angie's room and out the back door.

The air had been surprisingly cool, and she was struck by how strange it was to be out so early, while the world slept, how thrilling this aberration in routine. She had cursed herself for not taking a cardigan with her as she crossed over the neighbour's back lawn and kept close to the side of his house, where her mother's stare could not possibly reach. The goosebumps on her skin came sudden, like sharp pinpricks, like when her mother had her tested for allergies and dots of blood had made a grid on her arm where the doctor had repeatedly pushed the tip of a needle in. She scratched at the memory, at the lingering sting in her arm, as she peeked out to survey the street, up and down, north and south, before darting across and weaving her way through the dark to the Brocks' fence.

It had been an easy climb, but an awkward landing as she fell hard on her knees. The dew

was heavy, and there was upturned soil, so she would have to be careful to wash her skin off later. She got up and inspected the yard, remembered the purple dress, and found it there, still rolled up like a dog's ball. She held it close, shaking her head at Rob's foolishness. He had said he'd come back for it. How could he forget? What if the police had found it? *Oh God. The police.* She had pictured the faces of her parents in shock as the police explained how they found this dress in the backyard, and Rob's explanation for it being there, of her part in the crime. The disappointment. The confusion. The revulsion. She had shaken the image free, reminded herself that she had the dress now. That no one knew anything.

She had walked over to the deck, which was empty. All the loungers were gone. Why were all the loungers gone? It did not make sense. She had pressed herself up against the sliding doors, tried to see inside, but it was pitch black. She had wondered if maybe the loungers had been stacked just beyond the glass. She also wanted another look at that marvellous kitchen where she never got to bake. Her fingers tried to slide the door open, but it was locked. So, she had slipped back to her own house, but not before checking both mailboxes, because sometimes he left her things there. A crushed flower or blank postcard.

She is spinning again. And as she spins, she sees a figure walking along the grass. The figure evolves in her imagination with every revolution she takes, every flash of flesh her eye can grasp. This is how she sees people now. In pieces.

"Hey, Liv."

Another drag of her toe and the spinning ceases. Liv looks up. In front of her stands Laura Hearst, hands deep in her pockets, her eyes puffy as if she has been crying.

"Is Angie around?"

Liv shrugs, annoyed at the interruption, and twists the chains again, turning and turning, till

the metal structure groans under the pressure.

"Somewhere," she says, ignoring Laura's eyes as they survey her like a strict teacher might oversee a final examination. "The door's probably open." Liv longs to get rid of her. "Go in if you want."

But Laura does not move.

And now Liv is trapped, stuck inside her self-imposed prison and the neediness of some silly girl for her friend. She wants to let go, feel the rush when she hangs her head back and points her toes out in a glorious ballerina twirl that will propel her beyond the stratosphere. But she does not like Laura here with her puffy eyes and downcast face, ruining every potential thrill. So she stays inside the knot of chain. Waits.

"Liv?" Her name sounds different in Laura's mouth, as if the front teeth rest too long on the bottom lip and the V gets drawn out like a vibration. Laura is now seated in the other swing, holding onto the chains with both hands, turned slightly to the left.

Liv does not care to respond, and instead takes a deep breath and inhales the metal's rusty odour. She casts her eyes to the sky, lifts her feet, then lets go.

"What!" she yells as the chains come apart.

Laura moves back to give Liv room should she flail or propel her legs to the side.

"Friday night. Do you remember? When I saw you?"

There is the sound of water gushing. Or is that blood rushing to her head? She has a momentary sense of panic, of her blood pouring out her ears or out of that grid still visible on her arm, and falling to the grass, making large puddles for jumping in. Liv cannot bear to look at Laura, so she drags herself to a stop and jumps out of the swing.

She prances over to the picnic table where she has left her favourite book, and says, "Yeah, at the party." She picks up the book and smooths out the cover and its picture of

a woman with prickly tree branches for arms and twigs for fingers.

Laura also gets up, drops the swing. She wipes her hands on the back of her jeans and follows Liv's path to the table while the chain clangs against the metal frame.

"Look, Liv . . ."

But Liv is clutching her book to her chest and kicking at an imaginary spot on the ground.

"Didn't I say you could go inside?" she says, finally looking up to stare into the pale face in front of her.

Now Laura has to look down, as if afraid.

"Well, yeah, but, I just want to ask you something." She digs deep again in her pockets for something unseen. Then she says, "How did you *know* before everyone else?"

*Such wide eyes.* Liv looks into them. *Wide enough to contain things.* She remembers, of course. The shock as it buzzed through her heart. The cold smell of Mike's agony. Rob in his father's oversized clothes. The gun positioned so neatly. Laura in the street. And now Laura has remembered, knows a thing she should not know. Liv stares beyond Laura to the basement door, wishing it would open and Angie would come out to save her. But it is her mother, yelling through the kitchen window, who is the unlikely heroine.

"Liv! We're leaving in ten minutes already!"

All Liv can do now is shrug Laura off. "I have to go," she says and skips away, but not before turning, mid-skip, to call out, in a sing-song voice, "See ya later," as if there had been nothing to this moment. Nothing worth talking about or bringing up ever, ever again.

Laura watches Liv turn the corner and disappear. Everything is disappearing, including this summer, her grip on it, on herself. She walks to the swing and kicks it, hard, considers knocking on Angie's door, desperate to talk to someone other than her father, a man who does not know how to talk. But then Angie, it seems, does not know how to talk

anymore, either. So what is the point if there is no one to listen? She does not knock on the door. Instead, she turns to the cold loneliness of her house, unaware that Judy is still at the window, watching the swing rock violently.

**G**oldie is the first out of the car. She runs to the front door and hangs off the doorknob, yelling, "I have to go!" to the twilight.

Dov slams the car door and yells back, "For God's sake, Goldie, calm down!"

He walks up the pathway, jingling the keys, as Angie and Liv amble out of the back seat, arguing over whatever it is two teenage girls crammed together in the back of a station wagon argue over during a long hot drive back from the city after a long hot afternoon in their bubbe and zeda's apartment.

Judy is pulling out a sleeping Tiny from the front middle seat. The twinge in her back starts to flare like a growth spurt as she adjusts Tiny on her hip and Goldie yells again, "I have to peeccc!" And just before turning her glare to the retreating backs of her other two daughters, now slapping each other across the arm, she looks across the street at number sixty-two and its darkened windows. A new knot ties itself tight in her stomach. Will it always feel that way, every time she steps outside her front door? Like she is being confronted by darkness?

Inside the house, the walls reverberate with the fury of the girls' fight, which has moved into the kitchen, and has awakened Tiny. As he cries, Goldie, fresh out of the bathroom, whines for everybody to be quiet. That it is too loud. How can anyone *think*?

Dov bounds down the stairs, two at a time, ready to unleash a tidal wave of frustration, all of which has been building since the terrible event of early Saturday morning. And just as he is about to enter the kitchen like an enormous, fear-mongering wave, Judy passes Tiny to him, and nods with her eyes, as if to say,

"I've got this." The wave recedes, and Dov pats Tiny's head and coos, "It's all right, it's all right," as he turns and goes back up the stairs.

Judy, meanwhile, stands in the kitchen doorway, arms crossed, eyes on the two sullen faces moving through the small space, each looking for a temporary salve. Liv finds it in a can of soda she pulls out from the fridge, and Angie finds it in an open bag of chocolate chips. She pours a handful of chips out into her palm, then shoves them all into her mouth.

Liv glowers and says, "Those are for *baking*."

Angie opens her mouth, and dark brown spittle drips off her lips onto her chin. Some of the spittle flies out and hits Liv in the nose. "So?" she says, trying not to laugh.

"You are such a *pig*," Liv mutters, turning to the doorway and finding it blocked.

"That's it, both of you," Judy says. "Stop it, *now*."

Angie swallows the mass of chocolate, then says, in a muffled voice, "It's *her* fault. She always starts it with her bad attitude." She attempts to pour another handful of chocolate into her palm, but Liv suddenly moves back and slaps her hand. The bag falls to the ground, and chocolate chips fly in all directions, scattering the floor like it was a massive tray of raw cookie dough.

"Look what you did, jerk," Angie says, throwing the now empty bag at her.

"What I did? You're the one who ruins everything with your fat mouth!" Liv is screaming now, and Judy takes a step forward into the kitchen, her arms out ready to contain Liv within them, to control whatever wrath has overtaken her.

"Liv, Angie, that's *it*. Enough is enough. Clean this mess up right now."

There is a momentary silence. Liv is breathing heavily, the soda can still in her hand, unopened. Angie sighs, gets down on her knees, and starts corralling all the tiny chips into a pile. Judy takes another step, places one hand

on Liv's shoulder and says, "Help your sister. It's your mess too."

But Liv shakes off her mother's touch.

"Don't touch me," she says through clenched teeth.

The echo of her words floods the room, turns Angie's face tomato red. This fight has gone too far. "Liv is in for it if she keeps talking like that," Angie thinks, her fingers working quickly. The sooner this is done, the sooner she can escape. Who knows what might come next.

Judy leans against the counter, blinking angry tears away. Something inside this beautiful creature, some trembling, evolving thing, threatens to consume her, Judy fears, forever. "What has gotten into you?" Judy whispers, remembering how she found Liv cowering in the chair in the basement after the ambulance had arrived, after Rob had finally calmed Mike's screaming to mere sobs. She remembers the way Liv had talked to the police, in a clipped robotic tone, as they stationed themselves at her kitchen table, taking notes: "I was with Rob. The whole time. At the party." And she remembers this morning. In a much louder voice, she asks the question that has been on her mind all day. That is, perhaps, the real reason behind this argument between sisters.

"I saw you talking to Laura this morning outside. She looked upset after you left. She even kicked the swing. What were the two of you talking about that could've gotten her so upset?"

Liv is on her knees, delicately picking up every chocolate chip she can find and placing it in her palm like it is the tiniest scrap of diamond. "It's none of your goddamn business," she hisses.

And Liv's voice, the way she hurls "goddamn" into the air, runs up and down Judy's spine like an overzealous electric current operated by a just-appointed executioner. But before the first jolt can reach her heart, Dov

is on the floor, grabbing Liv by the chin, squeezing her cheeks together, and sticking his finger in her face. "Don't ever talk to your mother like that again, *you hear me?*"

Angie has fallen back on her heels, eyes full of blame. Goldie hides behind a chair, afraid to move, afraid to get too close to anyone should they throw words at her, should such words strike her down.

When Liv does not respond, he squeezes her cheeks harder till tears slide down and strike his knuckles like a pounding rain.

"I said, 'Do you hear me?'"

Liv nods, says a muffled, "Yes," and goes limp. Dov lets her face go, finally, and says, "Both of you clean this up, now. If I hear one more word, out of either you, out of any of you"—he momentarily glowers at Goldie—"you will all be grounded for the rest of your bloody lives. Got it?"

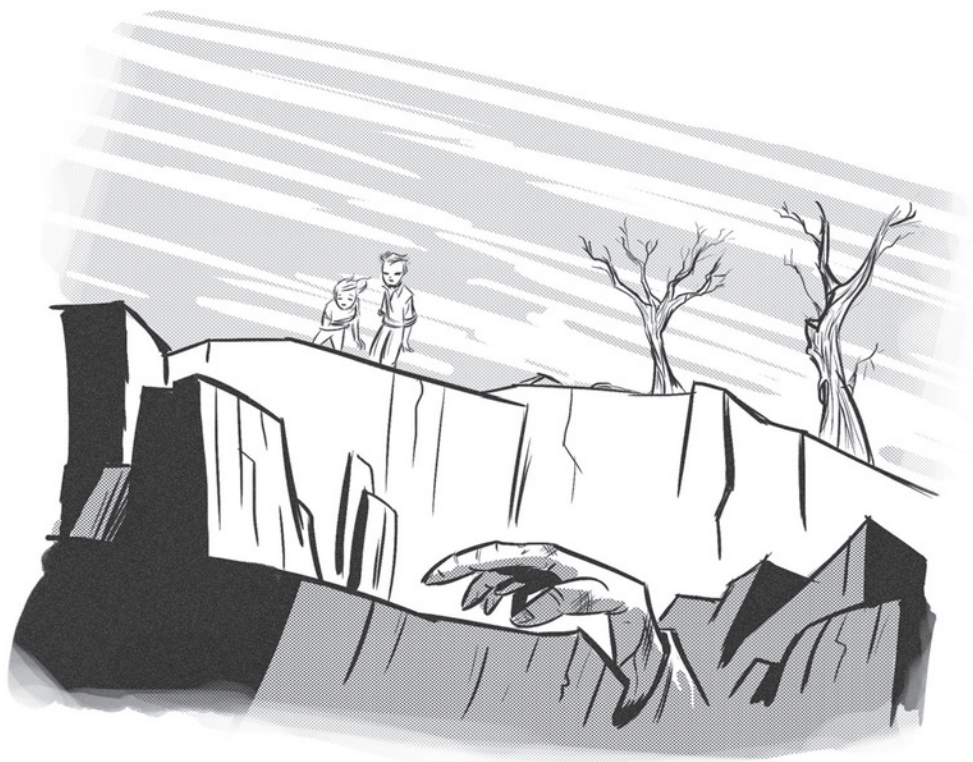
As if hit by shrapnel, Goldie runs out, her footsteps pounding the stairs, faltering only when the door to her bedroom shuts.

Dov sits down, and his face, a cold, sneering mask, looks up at Judy still leaning on the counter, her hand to her mouth, her eyes fixed on the back of Liv's head. No one says a word as the chocolate chips are cleaned up, one by one, and thrown away.

The two then walk quietly out of the kitchen, the glare of both parents hanging over their heads like storm clouds, their father's final words to them for the evening—"Not. One. Word."—dropping like thunderclaps in their ears, the terrible roar vibrating long after each girl retreats to her room. Angie, relieved for the darkness, falls to her bed, headphones on, Zeppelin blaring, her eyes cursing Liv up and down for every perceived slight, while, minutes later, inside her own darkness, Liv stares out through the blurry glass at number sixty-two longingly, a key pressed against the sweaty skin of her palm.

"Home," she whispers. 🏠





# THE GAMAYUN'S PREDICAMENT

BY TONY BURGESS

## PART 1

**W**hen you tell the story you note that her boat is in terrible condition. It is twelve feet long, propelled by a five-horsepower Honda, and its sides have been crumpled by tons of ice the preceding winter. It is dangerous for her. The swells on the lake are relentless, pale yellow tops thinning to foam and sickening wells that draw down so deep they create walls and corridors and spires. Unreal water. Her boat will sink: it is pulled down sideways and her hand leaves the throttle as she looks for something to grab to keep from falling. Over the yellow top

she is facing a new direction, then another, and again. She loses control in the drop, landing on her hip, then pushing up all fours. The next drive upward makes her body slap, then stick for a moment. You notice the wound and mention it in the story. Ragged aluminum teeth where the side is crushed has cut and caught the skin just below her armpit. The skin is open and muscle has been cross-cut in long strikes. The red white of a rib visible in a deeper quarter-sized recess. She reaches under her arm through blood to check the wound. No pain. The boat swoops and she can sense that it will not come back up this time.

ILLUSTRATION BY GEORGE PFROMM

The boat is filled instantly by a single gulp, then it's gone. Your story conveys the terror the woman feels, and the reader feels it, too. You have shown the contents of the boat collected at the surface in a strip of foam. The woman is rolling under a large wave to save herself from being thrown by it. When she surfaces to breathe, it is her feet that stick up. Below the surface she fights panic and decides it's best to wait for the water to right her. She has no way of doing this herself against such unpredictable forces. Punched sideways, her head is up and she takes in air. The water being drawn upward around her is pink with blood. She seals her mouth and tries to relax into the next sequence. She notices the waves are changing. The waves are white now. The yellow is green. Her foot brushes rock. She catches a glimpse of single pale grey tree, then is slammed headfirst into stone.

The way you tell this story she has washed up into a narrow channel on a small island. She is not dead but might die. The small stones in the channel are round and smooth and they roll beneath her as waves putt her further up into the shallows hidden below cedar boughs. She looks up at water running over rock. The forest is over her. A spare struggling forest. So here, below and looking up through it, there is more blue than green, more grey than brown. The branches aren't looking for sun, the sun here is an ordeal. The branches are fighting the winds, the roots are holding on by skinned hooks gripping rock, seeking out uncommitted earth. Your story makes it seem like she is reflecting on the forest and it is possible even for a second, but the truth of it is she has a concussion. Her brow is violently lopsided. Her side wound is severe. She will never recall getting here. She turns on her side to rise and the pain weighs from her head into her fingers, into her feet. She is stopped by hurt.

It takes her an hour to climb up to the forest floor. Her home is five kilometres away, a

lakefront property on a new road in a neighbourhood of four cottages and hers. Whiskey Harbour. From prohibition days. You tell of her standing, the terrible wounds, now speckled with twigs and dirt, and her thinking. In your story we hear her thoughts and feel anxiety about her memory.

*Well shit. Goddammit, Helen. How the hell did you get out here? Where's the fuckin' boat? What the shit happened to my head? My side? Where's the fuckin' boat?*

Helen calls for help and doubles over. Even breathing feels impossible. Balance is affected. The pain is caused by a fracture in her skull. Hairline from the brow under into the socket.

*Well shit. Goddammit, Helen. How the hell did you get out here? Where's the fuckin' boat? What the shit happened to my head? My side? Where's the fuckin' boat?*

You explain that these aren't repeated lines of text in the story but another glimpse of her thoughts moments later. Helen is forgetting instantly what she has just said to herself. She remembers her name, the morning, all the details of her life outside of the past several hours. She doesn't know what possessed her to leave shore in a tiny damaged fishing boat in water swelling sixteen feet. The injuries she only can guess at. But will have to make the same guess moments later. Then again moments later after that. You notice out of interest, but don't put it in your story, that her guesses have small variants, mostly in the pictures she fabricates. The bow cut into a wave. The boat capsized, rolling off the face of a blue cliff. She reached out for the life vest too late. She reached out and snatched the life vest. It saved her. She lost consciousness. The details don't matter. She makes them up. Her mind tries to calm her with invention. She looks to the shore, unsteady and shivering.

Helen decides to walk the island. There could be a cache for strandeers. Her nose drips blood. The drops hit her feet, slash open

rocks. She ignores this. She notices trees cut back to stumps. At the back of the clearing, a tall orange triangle. A navigational thingy. She reaches a plateau of flat rock that extends out to reef then around the entire back of the island. The forest isn't much of a forest, more like a large tumbleweed, about an acre in size. It looks temporary. Helen spots a picnic table on a raised shelf against the trees. In the telling you quietly change the word "forest" to simply "trees." Helen has her shoes in her hand now as she walks barefoot on the flat rock toward the table.

*Well shit. Goddammit, Helen. How the hell did you get out here? Where's the fuckin' boat? What the shit happened to my head? My side? Where's the fuckin' boat?*

The picnic table feels good to look at. Maybe the people who made it will come back. Maybe they are still here somewhere. Helen sits and rests her arms on the bleached wood. She feels overcome. Sadness. Even depression. Or weakness. These terrible wounds may be fatal. She feels numb. Ignoring her own thoughts that she now recognizes are useless. Crying. The sun will disappear soon on the other side of the island. The clouds will soon be raked, inflated, matted, and coated with raw colour. Helen, still crying, has excluded her own thoughts from any plan she might have. She ponders this, a shock rattles her, and she wonders if she might use something other than thought to figure out what to do.

First thing is to clean and dress these wounds somehow. Well, easy enough to clean them. Helen stands and assesses where is the safest spot to enter the water. A small inlet in the rock provides a pool. She steps down in and lowers herself carefully. The cool water bites her side and she gasps. You say that there are tears, large ones that seem to bounce from her eyes, and then you take it back. Not entirely sure why you do, but it has something to do with showing weakness while she is showing strength. She holds her face above the surface, then lowers it.

The back of her neck is horse-hard. The pain is for a moment confined to the injury, then it rains down again through her arms, and into her feet. She lightly brushes her hand back and forth across the grotesque protrusion. Getting out, she vomits on herself and returns to the bath to rinse it off.

You have something to report about her thoughts. To you it is more urgent than what she sees or does at this point. The context pushes back on this a bit. She has returned to the picnic table and has sat for five minutes. And now you speak her thoughts:

*Where the fuck did all these cuts and bangs and shit come from? Why am I here? Is Gail here with me? Why am I sitting at the picnic table?*

It appears her memory loss refreshes itself after any notable event. It is likely she remembers nothing now but stepping carefully over the rocks to the picnic table. The memory of the boat is gone. She sits and waits for her friend Gail. Gail had come up from the city and is currently staying at her cottage.

A blue heron is flying toward the island. It has immense slow-moving wings. It makes her feel that the island is prehistoric. The pteranodon reaches the smooth outlying rock and swoops up over her. As it folds itself, to let wind past so it can land, she notice its mate, standing tall as a child, in a frightening nest of wrist-thick branches. She scans the other trees, spindly and near dead, and spots others. Other nests, each with there own ghoulish pteranodons. Something nudges her to look down out over the rocks. All those bones. Fish bones and hip bones and beaks. Carp washed up, or dragged up into a pteranodon graveyard. Eyes poked out first. The beak attacking anuses, pulling, then popping the bladder. Devoured shred by shred under a sky of shrieking seagulls raining turds across the stone. She saw all this as she walked. It made these pictures. Now she stares at the bones and thinks:

*Where the fuck did all these cuts and bangs and shit come from? Why am I here? Is Gail here with me? Why am I sitting at the picnic table?*

Helen adjusts her herself, her posture, collar.  
“Gail! Gail!”

The effort to yell makes her stop suddenly. The sound of her voice scares her. It means she’s here and can’t remember. It means that Gail is probably not here. It means that she is alone and for some reason is seated at a picnic table on an island. She sorts through her thoughts:

*Where the fuck did all these cuts and bangs and shit come from? Why am I here? Is Gail here with me? Why am I sitting at the picnic table?*

Helen touches the overhang above her eye. It is so insistent. So big. It seems an inconceivable consequence. There is nothing she can make normal, no action she can take that will bring things back. She feels that everything around her is going to suffocate her. The wind will pull the breath from her. The sun will take her life. And when the night falls, she will lose all the heat from her body. It will come out sealed off like a balloon and float into a tree where it is snagged and made to end. In your story she is crying and that now feels like a satisfying observation.

She remembers her life though. Who she is she knows. She can draw from that.

Helen wipes tears and stands. She is resolved to act. Without acting, she feels, nothing will keep happening. She steps away from the table and walks out far enough onto the promontory to see the shore where her cottage is. She can see the sun flashing on her white roof. She looks back on the trees.

“Gail! Gail!”

The pain again, different now she is standing. From eye into brain. She barks out a short laugh. She is laughing at the pain the way you would laugh at a walking tree or a floating man. The world is broken. She holds her face,

her eye in her palm. Pass. Pass. Pass. Pass. Pass. It does and she has vertigo from not breathing. She waits and this too passes. She thinks.

*What the fuck happened to my eye? Gail. Gail. Gail. I need help. I just need some fuckin’ help. How did I get on this shittin’ island?*

Gail must be on the other side of the island with the boat. But who would take a boat out when the waves are so big and wind so strong? Gail has an eighteen-foot jet boat that can handle pretty rough conditions. Still, why bother? Why come here? There is nothing here. Snappable trees and pteranodon. Wind and awful sun. Shoes in hand, she walks back the way she came, which, of course, is determined by the terrain and not by her recollection.

On the far side of the island there is no Gail. No jet boat. Just the wind and sun. Worse here facing west. Helen calls back up into the trees for Gail. She sees the silhouettes of blue herons drawn up like puppets, in nests, tall as children. They do this in unison. They are all looking at her and this stops her cold. These are killers. Bladder poppers. This is their island. She steps backward and screams. The birds are goons to her, and you use that word in your story. Goons that run things. They kill everything here. There are no snakes or frogs or mice. Everything has been stabbed and ripped and swallowed. Nothing is left. Even the fish that slide into to the shallows are stabbed and pulled to pieces. For the first time, as she crawls out of the waves, Helen believes she will die here. This belief is not, however, revealed in her thoughts:

*Where the fuck did all these cuts and bangs and shit come from? Why am I here? Is Gail here with me?*

Helen decides to sit up on the rock and wait for Gail. The goons retract, one at a time, like an amusement park game resetting, into the their nests. She has vertigo again from not breathing.

“Gail! Gail!”



Helen sees an orange dot in the water. Far out. It appears and disappears with waves. It is too far away to identify beyond it being a flickering orange spot. She stares at it hard. Focusing, trying to draw it out. It is a life jacket. It must be Gail. She jumps and waves her arms.

*Why don't I know anything? What happened to me, Gail? Where did these fuckin' injuries come from?*

The goons in their nests rise again, quickly, like the undead from graves. Helen ignores them. Birds. Birds are birds. She realizes Gail is far off and that it may take hours for her to get here. If she knows to get here, even. She returns to her spot behind the rock to wait.

At first Helen studies the orange spot. Looking for arms or a head. Trying to judge how far, and if it is in fact Gail and she is heading here. This contemplation hurts. Her left eye is closed and the socket filled with fluid and inflamed tissue. The optic nerve is being crushed. Helen feels tingling under her armpit. She scratches it. Tingling on her ankle. She looks. Six or seven maggots on her foot. She screams. She slaps at her foot. Lifts her arm and feels a pain, like fish hooks yanked through her side. She thinks. She looks. Maggots are eating the perimeter of an orange-red crater across her ribs. She leaps to her feet and springs into the water.

Helen submerges herself and can feel her own voice reach her ears through water. She snatches at the wound. Dragging her fingernails through her skinned flesh. She turns her hand to the side and scrapes over and over again. Eventually she slows, the panic turns to nausea, and as she rises, reaching for rock, the water is iridescent with vomit and blood.

If you are primordial and your wound is primordial, you ask questions that are no longer asked. You don't ask other people things, you ask maggots. And you ask them, How long have I been on this island? How long

does it take a fly to lay eggs then those eggs to bring maggots and those maggots to start eating me? Not hours. A day? Days? How long have I been here? Her thoughts, which you reveal to remind us of Helen's predicament, are not these questions exactly:

*Why don't I know anything? What happened to me, Gail? Where did these fuckin' injuries come from?*

The incident with the maggots has erased the orange spot. Helen is now shivering, wet. Her side wound is much worse. Her fingernails left deep raking and pulled yellow fat out in dripping streamers. She is preoccupied with helping herself but has no idea how to do it. The image of the maggots twirling into her will not leave her thoughts. The banging in her brow keeps asking what happened. Her thoughts beyond these nightmare pictures are frail placeholders:

*Why don't I know anything? What happened to me, Gail? Where did these fuckin' injuries come from?*

In your story you take the time to express your regret that you cannot help her. It feels disingenuous to your reader, seeing as, unless this a true story, all of this is your responsibility. What it means is not the least of your responsibility. You may be trying to change the pace of the action with your remorse. It could be required that you inject some sanguine aside or broader editorial comment, but now, to be honest, it is best to be quiet and see what she does. And sure enough, there she is, on her side on the cold rock, the sun low and taking its heat elsewhere, she is dying. Is that your regret? Is that why you felt the need to be in your story? You knew there was no time left, you had to say something. Probably you are dying too, then.

The herons are used to her. She is not a threat to them. They know that now. They watch her curl up and they wait to make sure she will no longer move. They drop down into

their fearsome nests to warm their moon-sized eggs as light and heat return to the black lake.

## PART 2

A man sits on a large orange boulder, just inside the trees. There is a small fire. Helen lies facing it. The body of a woman—Gail—is in the shallows, rolling back and forth on the round stones. She is missing an arm and a foot. The dinosaurs stand at full attention in their nests trying to co-ordinate a response.

Helen pulls a hand from her hip and lays it flat. The man notices and straightens. The pain awakens in her and she puts a hand to her face. The man lays an oval of bone-dry driftwood into the fire.

“Those are bad. I was worried.”

Helen can't breathe deeply. Her upper body is bound.

“Oh, I made a bandage out of my sleeves. That needed covering up. Hope that's O.K. Too tight?”

Helen feels the cloth, the knot against her shoulder blade. She feels restriction as she works her elbow under to lift herself.

“Look, we're safe here at least.”

Helen listens but can't comprehend. Safe here. We are safe here. At least. The words seem sectioned. What they mean is not in them anymore.

“Frank?”

Frank nods, a faint smile.

“Why aren't we safe?”

Frank is checking things he's lain around the fire to dry. Wallet, socks.

“I think we *are* safe. Here. On the island. I hope so.”

You almost don't bother to include what Helen is thinking:

*Why don't I know anything? What happened to me, Gail? Where did these fuckin' injuries come from?*

Importantly, there is some separation between what she says and what she thinks. Her memory of yesterday's events aren't coming back, nor will they ever. But now, at least, she can speak past her thoughts.

“Gail. I think Gail is here somewhere.”

Frank chews his lips and rubs his feet. There is something he doesn't want to say.

“We need to build something for shelter.”

Helen is trying to sit up.

“Shelter? Shouldn't we be trying to get back?”

Frank fusses over her moving.

“Back? Go back? You almost died getting here. Me too. Gail.”

“Can you help me look for her? I was with her yesterday. At a picnic table.”

Frank goes silent. Helen is now sitting.

“She's here somewhere.”

Frank reaches back and pulls a life jacket from the branches. He feels it, then tosses it back up.

“Let's get to work on that shelter. What do ya say?”

Helen is frustrated, the holes in her thoughts make her snap.

“What do I say? I say, What the fuck happened? How am I here? What happened to me? What are you swimming out to this damn island for? Where is Gail? Why did th—”

“Hold on. Hold on. You don't remember?”

Helen blinks. Thought and speaking just worked together.

Frank frowns.

“Nothing? You don't remember?”

“All I know is Gail and I are on this island and I somehow got the shit beat out of me and she's somewhere here. Not a lot of places to hide. That's it. There's no boat. There's no reason to be here. So what the fuck, Frank?”

You start to describe who Frank is—a neighbour—but the story cuts you off.

“O.K., Helen. There's a lot . . . a lot to say. And it's not really . . . not really something . . .”

"Oh, come on, Frank. What the fuck is happening?"

Frank assesses her. He has something to say and he's worried that, in her condition, it may be too much for her.

"O.K.. Can you walk?"

Helen tries to stand but is weakened by loss of blood, exposure, and pain. Frank helps her and turns her toward the lake. He supports her as they silently reach the shore.

Frank points. Gail's body is now half ashore. Her right shoulder is raw beef; the end of her left leg is a pink taper. Her skin is transparent, spotted; her eyes, open.

Helen's knees release her weight and she goes down. Frank reaches under her arms and suspends her above the rock. She makes a noise. A long-keening note, like a whale singing. Frank pulls her up. She has lost consciousness.

Helen lies still, warmer in the early morning sun. Frank is in the trees snapping branches. The blue herons watch over, patient as snipers. Gail's body has been removed. The lake is much calmer and a light breeze crosses the island. The blue herons have left their nests and in your part they have abandoned them. Carp by the dozen line up along the reef and they move slowly toward the island then back out. They are beautiful beyond words.

Frank returns and adds sticks to the fire. He gently lays a heron's egg at the edge of the coals.

Helen opens her eyes, remains still on her side.

"Morning. Try this, eh? Heron egg."

Helen doesn't move. Her face is streaked with vivid colour, black and green.

"Where's Gail?"

The question annoys Frank, and Helen notices.

"You've had a bad, really bad, concussion, I think."

Helen slowly rises to sit. The pain is crippling.

"How did that happen?" Where did all these fucking injuries come from?"

Frank is dragging coals into a semicircle against the egg.

"I don't know exactly how you got them. My guess is you hit rock when you swam in yesterday. That on your side I really don't know. Unless that happened earlier. That's totally possible."

Helen stares at the egg. Pale blue as if water-coloured. Small circles and imperfections like an oily painting of the moon.

"That doesn't make sense to me."

Frank shrugs.

"I can only guess. What's important is that we keep those clean and covered. And you just rest."

Helen feels dismissed. As you tell it, this conversation was confrontational. We include that now.

"What happened yesterday? I don't remember."

"Well, after all hell broke loose, you must have got away in that boat, which I assume sank. And somehow you made it here. I swam. Five hours it took. The life vest saved me, but sure didn't help with swimming."

"Where's Gail?"

Frank snaps.

"Look. Let's just deal with what we're doing, O.K.? Gail isn't here. It's me and you."

Helen frowns, hurting her face. She takes in a sharp breath and holds it.

"I wish you'd answer my questions, Frank."

Frank tosses a stick into the fire, sending embers up and over Helen.

"Shit, Frank. Fuck. What are you doin'?"

Frank jumps up and kicks the embers back into the fire.

"Look, I've answered all your questions but I can't keep answering the same questions over and over again."

"Where's Gail?"

"Gail . . . Gail is . . . I don't know."

"Liar."

“She’s not here. Christ, Helen. We got enough to—”

“Where’s Gail?”

Frank licks his fingers and rotates the egg.

“Where’s Gail, Frank?”

Frank cranks the stick over his knee. He hurts his thumb.

“Shit! Shit! Fuck!”

Helen watches as he holds his thumb waiting for the pain to pass.

“If I answer all your fuckin’ questions again, I’ll just have to answer them again later.”

“That’s not fair, Frank. I can think. I can remember.”

Frank ignores her.

Helen sighs, touching the heavy mass that closes her eye.

“Why are we here, Frank? Why are we on this island?”

Frank ignores her.

“I’m going to go around the other side, see what’s there.”

“Simple question. Why aren’t we . . . why are we staying here? Shouldn’t we be trying to get back?”

Frank has found a long white stick, a walking stick.

“I’ll be back. You rest.”

Helen feels anger slip to fear. He is not telling her something. Something big. Something bad.

“Watch the egg. I don’t know how long it takes to cook a heron egg. But it’s huge so . . .”

Helen looks up, scowling. The colors on her face make her look violent.

“O.K.?”

She glares.

“O.K., for fuck’s sakes. I’ll be back. Don’t do anything stupid.”

This last remark bites at her. Unnecessary. Do anything stupid? Stupid? Really?

“Where’s Gail, Frank?”

Frank flashes a brief insincere smile, turns away.

Moments later he is out on the rock table to the south. Helen watches, waiting for him to disappear from view. Helen leans forward against her knees. She pushes with her hands and stands. Her knees threaten to give out but she steadies them. The pain in her eye is severe. It is an injury that telegraphs its progress. The eye is going to die in the socket. The optic nerve is nearly destroyed. The profound swelling has distorted the eye’s shape. She touches it. It feels like something has been added to her face.

In the trees Helen finds there are areas in here that are relatively open. She can make her way through. The floor is dry and tough. Little soil, mostly caught in pockets in the rock. The trees are growing out of nothing. Potted mostly, in handfuls of dirt. Complete skeletons of carp, of herons, lie in startling white piles. It is strange, she almost thinks, to see these bones undisturbed. Little discrete piles, all perfectly clean. Helen avoids them, stepping over or around. The trees and the bones are almost the same colour, the same thin sticks. She tries to avoid snapping branches. No one, maybe no one ever, has walked up through here. She whisper calls:

“Gail! Gail!”

She sees a line of red rust on the ground. Something metal. Something left behind. She pries up a rebar from under roots. She handles it. A metre long and heavy. Not a walking stick. She holds it in two hands and goes further in.

“Gail! Gail!”

The woods are empty. You would like to mention the life that could be here—other birds, snakes, frogs. It feels like a diorama in a museum. Dead trees and moulded plastic rock. Nothing living. Merely presented.

She freezes. Something is covered up. Sticks and handfuls of dirt. A small intrusion of activity in an inactive world. She sees a hand, pink and curled up, sticking out between sticks, halfway down the form.



She straightens to yell, to call for help, but stops. Covering her mouth she cries into her hand. She doesn't have to look at the body. She knows it is Gail. Gail is the only other person on this island. It is Gail. You want her thoughts, and we defer willingly.

*You fucker! You killed her! You shit cock fucker! You killed her!*

You are confident that memory will return, but it will not. You reserve the right to say her thoughts again soon as proof. She is sobbing, supported by the rebar, she pushes downward with both hands.

*You fucker! You killed her! You shit cock fucker! You killed her!*

She somehow feels it is important that she act now, while the impetus is there. You want this too, her to act, even though nothing is known. You are responding to some readers' desire and it feels dangerous to the story. Helen hears the clack of rock hitting rock. She ducks and looks through the thin trees. There are no leaves at this level so she can see far. Frank. Moving just beyond the tree, by the picnic table. She wonders why there is a picnic table on the island and thinks:

*You fucker! You killed her! You shit cock fucker! You killed her!*

Helen crouches down, the rebar held like spear, low and pointing ahead from her side. She navigates her way forward, silently. Little shells and bones are softly crushed underfoot, cutting in. She is almost to the trees' edge on the west side of the island. She adjusts her grip, two hands at the base.

*You fucker! You killed her! You shit cock fucker! You killed her!*

Frank is at the fire pit. Helen is breathing hard. Adrenalin has killed all the pain in her body. She experiences this as strength and doesn't want it to fade. She needs it now. She turns back into the trees. Her feet are bleeding. Filled with splinter bones. She glances up at the monster nests in the trees. From below

they looks like futuristic structures, saucer shaped and carefully designed to appear dangerously heavy. Helen sees Frank. He is standing by the fire.

*You fucker! You killed her! You shit cock fucker! You killed her!*

Helen quickens her pace, trying to ignite the adrenalin. A low branch bends against her upper arm and loudly cracks. Frank turns. Helen knows that it has to happen now. Right now. The rebar comes down and Frank sees the whole thing. You decide your tale needs to slow here. The way you tell it, we see Helen in detail. She is spectacular so, again, we defer. The rebar is in full swing and, at this moment, it stands upward like a killing pike. Her face is a mask of encased blood, streaks of orange and bursting blacks. Her one eye is snatched inside a chain glove and her other eye is mad. The bindings are tight around her chest, a blood drenched pattern of skulls and hearts. Her feet have left the ground, one forward in full charge, the other back and up, as if the ground stood in the air beneath her. Beads of blood leave the soles of her feet. Her open shirt, marked ferociously with her own blood, curls and folds up behind her, held like this, all subtle and dynamic. She is vengeance.

The bar comes down and splits Frank's skull. His divided brain fires pointlessly. His shoulders fall first, making him appear to slump before he drops. Frank is dead. Helen has tumbled past him, has rolled through the fire and hangs off the edge of the shelf by the lake.

*You fucker! You killed her! You shit cock fucker! You killed her!*

Helen sits at the picnic table. Behind and above her herons are stepping down in their nests. A large empty shell lies broken in the rocks. The sun is below the tops of the trees, but still visible as an orange ball. Its light comes through and creates hot panels around her. She looks anxiously at the rebar, then abruptly to the trees.

"Gail! Gail!" 🗿



# DESTRUCTION IN PARADISE

BY DIANNE SCOTT

*An excerpt.*

1968

**P**olicewoman Christine Marsh woke up with a start. She was lying on her side, on something hard. Was she in her bed? Her eyes were open, but it was still dark. She blinked. Her eyelashes brushed against something—a cloth was covering her eyes. She tried to speak, to call out, but couldn't open her mouth. It was taped shut.

Fear spiked through her. She jerked upright, her head spinning with the movement, then immediately fell back down with a thump. Her wrists were tied together in front of her, her ankles bound. When she stretched out, she discovered her ankles were tied to her wrists by a short cord, further limiting her movement. Trussed like a pig going to market.

She breathed quickly through her nose, nauseated, panicking.

Calm down. She had to stay calm. If she threw up, she'd choke on her vomit. That thought frightened her even more.

Stop it. Breathe. Christine made herself breathe in and out through her nose slowly five times, loudly, trying to hear her exhales over the pounding rush of her heart.

She was a cop. She needed to figure out what was going on.

She swallowed again. The air was cool, a bit breezy; it must still be nighttime. Her last memory was of patrolling Hanlan's Point, rattling the doors of the Island School to make sure they were locked.

She listened intently to the call of the birds, the loud chirping of the crickets, the buzz of a horsefly. She couldn't say for sure, but she felt she was still on Toronto Island—she caught the swampy, sulphur smell of marshy water. Near Trout Pond? Long Pond? A lagoon?

She shifted her bound arms, feeling the sharp edge of stones underneath her limbs. The back of her arms, legs, and back felt wet, and sore, like they had been burnt or scraped.

Wait.

What was she wearing? *Where were her*

ILLUSTRATION BY GEORGE PFROMM

*clothes?* She panicked, wiggling knees into her stomach so that she had enough rope slack to push herself upright by pressing her knuckles into the ground. Her forearms rested against the bare skin of her legs. Where was her uniform skirt? She cinched in her arms, elbows touching her bare stomach. Her eyes blinked with tears underneath the binding. What had happened to her? What was happening?

Thank God. She felt the cotton of her underwear, then the nylon of her bra. At least she wasn't naked. She concentrated on her body. Did he hurt her? *Had she been raped?*

No. She was O.K. Her head was killing her, pounding, like the headaches she'd had after being hit by that brick during the house demolition. The skin on her back, legs, and arms stung, but otherwise, she was O.K., nothing broken. She could move a bit under her bindings, but not a lot. When she lifted her hands, it pulled on her roped feet, jack-knifing her knees.

Someone had knocked her out, removed her police uniform, tied her up, and taped her eyes and mouth shut. Why? And where had he put her? She wriggled her body over the stones, ignoring the chafing sting from her legs, until she was abruptly halted, her wrists and feet pulled into the air. She was tied to something. The cord was pulled taut. She wriggled the other way to give the cord slack, and felt something hard poke into her back. It was a step or ledge, made out of stone, its edge unfinished. She grabbed the cord tying her hands together and pulled herself up on the step. Her hip butted against something hard. She leaned her shoulder in, and her head whacked against something with a dull thud that sounded like wood. A door? Was she at someone's house? The water filtration plant? The Island School? She banged her head against the wood several times, although each rap sent a dizzying flush through her head. She mustn't pass out.

She listened for a response, a movement in the building. Her bangs had echoed, like no one was home, like the building was empty, unfurnished.

Christine had to get the tape off her mouth so she could call for help. But she could only do that if her hands were free. Inching back to the step, she leaned awkwardly against it so that the cord linking her hands and feet draped over the edge of the stone. She moved her arms back and forth, using the rough lip as a saw against the binding. It was hard work, and she couldn't tell if she was making progress, but she continued through her dizziness, trying to bite down on panic and focus on the fraying spot on the rope.

After five minutes, she paused, exhausted, her breath heaving in and out through her nostrils. This was going to take all night. She counted ten breaths and started sawing again. A mosquito buzzed around her ear; she swung her head away and nausea rolled through her.

Fillingham! She paused her work. Her partner, Geoffrey Fillingham, would look for her when she didn't show up at two o'clock at the station as scheduled. He might call her first over the radio, but if there was no response, certainly he would come looking. And if she was roped to a building door, a parks and recreation shed, the school, or a house, certainly someone else, if not Fillingham, would find her.

Unless *he* came back.

She froze. What if her attacker had dumped her here temporarily, but intended to come back. To rape or kidnap her, or something worse. Fear flooded her and she frantically rubbed the rope against the step, eyes tearing as she sawed back and forth.

*Please don't come back. Please don't touch me. Don't kill me. I've got my little brother and sister to think about. My mom to take care of. They need me.*

She tried to slow down, be methodical, but

she couldn't help wondering if he was watching her, waiting, enjoying her frenzy, her attempt at escape.

A crunch of stones sounded nearby—she stopped sawing the rope. It wasn't the police utility vehicle—no sound of a car engine. Someone was coming. Walking? Riding a bike? Was it her attacker? She swallowed a whimper. She didn't want to die. Her mind scrambled, trying to form a plan. Maybe if she faked she was dead, he would leave her alone. If he approached to check if she was still unconscious, she could head-butt him, knock him out.

She scooted over to the place where she had woken up, lying down in the same curled fetal position on her side, facing outward from the door. Trying to control her trembling, she purposefully relaxed her limbs, her shoulders, her neck, to imitate the slack pose of unconsciousness. She was listening so hard it hurt her head.

Bang! Then the crunch of stones, which sounded loud, close by, a pattern of left foot, right foot. Faster, the person was running toward her. Her heart was beating in her throat. She closed her eyes, trying to keep her breathing shallow and even, although she felt like screaming in terror.

*No. This can't be it. It can't end like this. Donna, Wayne, Mom. I love you.*

She smelled him as he paused in front of her, a spicy clean odour she recognized from sitting beside him in the police car. Fillingham!

"Marsh!" he said.

She lifted her head up at the same time his fingers felt for the carotid artery on her neck.

"Thank God!" he said. "You're alive! Christine. It's me—Fillingham. I'm going to sit you up, lean you against the step. Can you do that?"

She nodded, swallowing her tears, trying to check the sobs of relief that were building in her chest. He gently pulled her up by the shoulders.

"I'm going to take the tape off your eyes. It's

going to hurt a bit." Christine grunted as the tape pulled away some of her skin, then blinked rapidly in the yellow light, squinting as she spied the school to her right. She quickly looked over her shoulder. She was sitting on the step of the Gibraltar Point Lighthouse, tied to a metal ring on the arched wooden doorway, in a sepia circle of light.

She frantically looked around, scanning for her attacker, worried that he would get Fillingham when her partner's back was turned and she was still tied up.

He touched her bare shoulder gently for a second, then let go.

"You're safe now. Hold on. I'm going to take the tape off your mouth."

He pulled it off quickly, like you would a bandage. Her face stung.

He pulled his police knife out of its sheath, carefully cutting away the rope binding her hands. She shook them out, rotating her wrists as Fillingham squatted at her feet, sawing away at her ankle bindings. Looking along the length of her body, he saw she had no hat, no uniform, no nylons, no shoes. Her police purse, utility belt, and radio were gone.

Her ankles pulled away from each other as the rope severed. Fillingham sheathed his knife and pulled his radio out. "I'll call you an ambulance."

"No!" she yelled, her voice a loud croak.

The radio paused halfway to his mouth.

"You're hurt."

Fillingham's eyes travelled over the length of her body.

Christine looked down at her underwear and bra, acutely aware of her near nakedness, and crossed her arms.

"Do you need, I mean, did he . . . ?" he stuttered.

Christine knew what he was trying to ask. She had posed the same questions to dozens of women who had been assaulted when she worked at the Women's Bureau.



She shook her head. "I'm O.K. I mean he didn't do anything."

She touched her head.

"He knocked me out somehow, covered my face so I didn't see him. I guess he dragged me to the lighthouse when I was unconscious."

"Let me check you out."

Fillingham pulled a flashlight off his belt and knelt beside her.

"Can you move your arms and legs?"

"Yes, it's just my head and some scratches along my limbs and back."

He stood up and gently touched her hair, sectioning off parts, his fingers touching the front, side, then back of her scalp.

"The stitches from the brick are here at the hairline, right?" he asked.

"Yes."

She was trying not to nod, because that increased the pounding in her head.

"O.K., I can't see any cut or swelling or bruising. Did he hit you with something?"

"I don't know. One minute I'm walking by the pond, then everything went black."

His light beam moved over her limbs, finding the long vertical scratches down her calf, and the back of her thighs, the scrape on her back she could feel but not see. After he examined the abrasions on her arms, the light settled on the smeared blood on her knuckles from sawing the rope against the step.

"Here."

Fillingham unbuttoned his long-sleeve blue police shirt.

"Put this on."

It was too small, given she was six feet tall, several inches taller than her partner, but she put it on anyway, holding it together in front as she sat on the step, knees together, grateful for the coverage.

He squatted in front of her in his white undershirt.

"Some of those abrasions are deep. And you've had some sort of head injury. You really

do need medical attention."

Fillingham pulled his radio out from the belt holster. Christine punched it out of his hand, sending it tumbling onto the stones.

"What the hell!" he said.

He started to get up to retrieve it; she clutched his left wrist with both hands, pinning him in a squat.

"You can't call it in!" she said.

"What are you talking about?"

She swallowed, trying to talk, to formulate the words that would stop him.

"You were assaulted," he said. "The marine police will take you to the mainland and a waiting ambulance."

"No!"

It was an anguished scream.

"Marsh. You're not making any sense."

He kneeled in front of her.

"You're in shock. You need help. And we got to call for backup, so we can put a search out for whoever did this to you."

She held onto his wrist tightly. "Nobody can know about this."

"I don't understand. Why?"

She eased up on the pressure from her fingers, but still held on. "I'll get fired."

He pulled back, his expression quizzical.

"Why would they fire you?"

"Deputy Darlow came to my apartment."

"What? When?" he asked.

"After the demolition. He wanted to discuss the photo published in the *Telegram*—the one with blood all over me taken after I got hit with the brick."

Fillingham waited.

"He said that if I got hurt again, then it's obvious that the job is too much for me. That I'm not cut out for policing."

Fillingham shook his head.

"The brass wouldn't fire you for getting beat up. You saved someone from drowning that day, did they forget that? This is not your fault. I'll tell them that."

He pulled away from her loosened grasp, stood up and took a step toward the radio.

She launched herself at his back, flattening him on the stone pathway, stars exploding in front of her from the sudden movement.

He grunted as she landed on him like a crab, splaying him underneath her.

"Are you crazy?" he said, trying to get a knee under himself to push her off.

"I can't let you call it in," Christine said, a sob breaking her voice. "I can't lose my job. I have to pay back my mom's bookie."

Fillingham stopped scrabbling and angled his head to look up at her.

She tried to control her voice.

"If I don't get our regular payment in, I'm afraid they'll take it out on my mom."

She released his shoulders and he turned to look at her.

"What are you talking about?"

"My mom owes money to a bookie named George Ray. Big money."

"How much?"

"Five thousand four hundred and twelve."

"What?"

"I've paid off almost two thousand dollars with overtime and savings over the years, but there's still a lot to go. The interest keeps accumulating."

She slid off him, aware that she was in her underwear, and clutched at the shirt to cover herself.

Fillingham turned over onto his backside, and leaned against the stone step.

"How did she get so in debt?" he asked.

Christine sat on the step beside him.

"She and my stepfather used to drink, bet on the races. They got into debt, couldn't pay the bookie. They bet some more to try to win everything back, but their debt just skyrocketed with the interest. Then my stepfather took off, leaving my mom on the hook for it all."

"Can't you get a loan from the credit union to cover it?"

"What would I say it was for? And what collateral do I have?"

Christine swiped a tear away from her face.

"I've been paying the bookie back every week, almost all my paycheck. He knows I'm good for it."

Fillingham looked away, shaking his head.

"There's something going on here. Your attack doesn't feel random. It doesn't feel like the perp jumped the nearest women for kicks or a dare. It feels planned, like he's sending a message. We just don't know what it is. I don't know if we should cover it up."

"Please," Christine whispered, a tear leaking out of the corner of her eye. Her job, her life, her family's life, was in Fillingham's hands.

"If I don't call it in," he said, "I'm complicit. I'm withholding information, interfering with an investigation."

She remained silent. He was right. The Police Act demanded that all officers perform ethically in their role to serve and protect society. He could be disciplined. Or even lose his job.

"Why did the attacker choose you?" he asked, changing the subject.

Christine exhaled with relief.

"I don't know."

"What were you doing?"

She cleared her throat, getting her volume back.

"I had secured the school and was heading to Hanlan's Point Beach. I stopped and got off my bike and walked toward Trout Pond."

"Why?"

"I was looking for a spot where I could take my younger brother night fishing. I'd heard Trout Pond was good. I had just walked a couple of steps into the shrubbery on the northwest side of the pond, when everything went dark."

"What could you see from where you were standing before you blacked out?"

She shook her head. "Not much. It was dark and I hadn't reached the water. The shrubs blocked my view front and back."

"You got hit?" he asked.

She pondered this. "It was like a black curtain went up in front of my face. I smelled something sweet, but acetone, like nail polish remover. Then I woke up here, my wrists and ankles bound, blindfolded, my mouth taped."

Fillingham put his hand under his chin.

"Why did he attack you? And why drag you here to the lighthouse? For that matter, why did he take off your clothes? He didn't rape or kill you. What was his point?"

Christine had no answer. She was so glad to be alive her attacker's motivation for hauling her to the lighthouse and leaving her here untouched wasn't important. She just wanted to get cleaned up, go home, hug her family, and climb into bed with the cover over her head.

"You're not just any woman out at night, you're a policewoman on patrol. Your uniform was removed. You were tied to a historical building. He wanted you to be found. He wanted your humiliation public. Who would do that?"

"Lampry," they both said at the same time. Christine could see Kevin Lampry, a self-confessed agitator, enemy of the government, enjoying her degradation, getting excited by her fear. Was he watching them now? Would he look for the story in the morning news?

"O.K., one suspect noted," he said. "Anyone else have a beef with you?"

"The police investigators," she said, attempting a joke. Fillingham raised an eyebrow. Christine thought of Investigator Fenwick, and paused, a lump in her throat. If the investigators had discovered that she and Fillingham were looking into Ginny Rogers' murder, butting in on their case, was this their message to back off? She remembered Fenwick's pressure on her wrist when she had gotten too inquisitive about the case, the magenta bruising that blossomed on her hand. She shivered.

"You're shaking," Fillingham said. "Enough

talking. Let's get you back to the station. Where's your bike?"

She blinked, trying to remember where she had left it, but she was so overwhelmed with the realization that he wasn't going to call dispatch, she found it hard to think.

"Your bike?" he asked again.

"I left it on the grass, near the pond," she said, pointing north.

He looked over his shoulder, then back at her. "I don't want to leave you here to look for it, or go back to the station and get the police car. Do you think you can ride my bike? I could hold on and steady you."

She nodded.

Fillingham jogged over to get his bike. He helped her to a standing position and held the handlebars as she mounted. She was wobbly at first, like a child learning how to ride, and the abrasions on her leg made her grimace in pain as her legs pumped up and down. Fillingham held onto the handlebars and seat to steady her. After she got the hang of it, he jogged beside her.

As she turned the corner on Lakeshore Avenue, she looked back at the school. Who had done this to her? Kevin Lampry? The investigators? Someone who disliked women cops?

"There may be a silver lining," Fillingham said as he ran beside her, his breath even.

The bike wobbled.

"To my attack?" she asked incredulously.

He grabbed her handlebars to stabilize her. "It could be *him*."

"Who?"

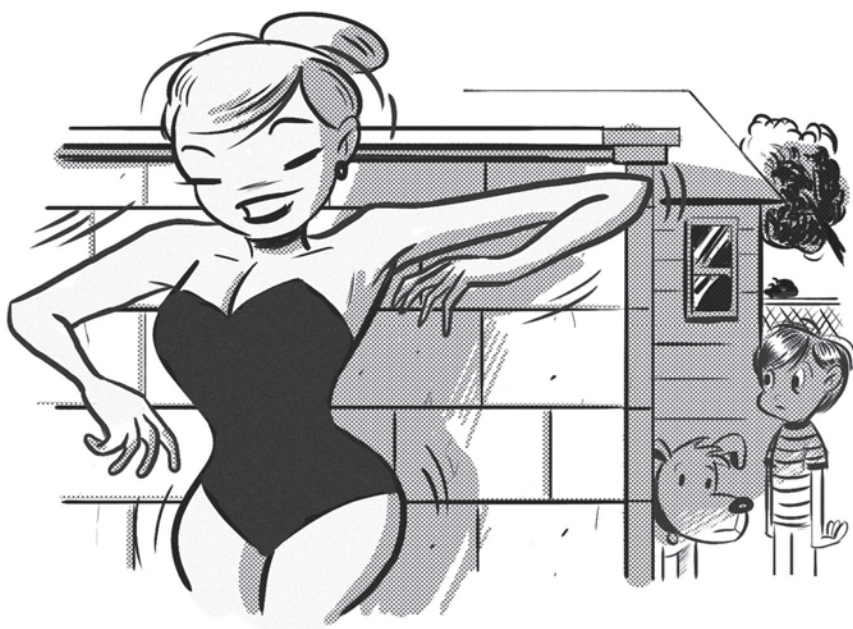
"Ginny Rogers' killer."

She stopped pedalling and stared at him.

"He knows we've been asking questions," Fillingham said. "We must be getting close. He's worried. This is his signal to back off. He's trying to scare us. He's trying to shut down our investigation."

"If that's true," Christine said, "then he's after you too." ♣





# HIGHFIELD STREET

BY LEANNA McLENNAN

It was three o'clock in the afternoon, mid-August, 1973, and a torrential rain poured down. I was wearing a bathing suit emblazoned with a golden sunset. Two lovers held hands on the yellow beach that encircled my ten-year-old torso. I tossed a stick into the water that rushed through the culvert, and I ran alongside it while it bobbed up and down, swept away by the current.

My mother stood on the veranda watching me. Her new red bathing suit, which was dotted with tiny white daisies, had stiff pads sewn into the chest that transformed her breasts into small torpedoes. Her hair was styled in an updo with so much hairspray it held its shape even while she slept. Loosened by the rain, a few stray strands fell around her heart-shaped face. She was slim and pretty, with a girlish laugh, everything the first

weather girl in Canada ought to be.

On the veranda, on other side of the divider that separated our half of the duplex from the neighbour's side, the boy watched me intently. Pierre was an awkward teenager, with a brush cut like his father. With his legs apart in a military stance and his arms folded in front of his chest, I saw him for the menace that he was, as threatening as his German shepherd, which had canines the size of lobster claws.

Something in the way Pierre looked at my mother as she pranced across the front lawn to join me brought to mind the look on my father's face when my mother gleefully announced she had been hired as the ATV weather girl.

"Women are taking over the world," he had said.

ILLUSTRATION BY GEORGE PFROMM

“It’s about time,” my mother said, barely looking up from her tattered copy of *The Female Eunuch*.

“I hope you’re not going to become one of those bra-burning feminists.”

My father’s absences grew more pronounced after that. Most nights, he returned only for dinner. Twice a week, he brought home a lobster procured from a local fisherman, who sold the sad creatures for next to nothing. Even though it was poor people’s food, or so a boy at school had taunted, my mouth watered every time I recalled the succulent claws drenched in butter.

Each night after dinner, my father disappeared once again. Where he went, I did not know. But I was determined to find out.

Pierre called the German shepherd, and the matted mutt padded over, lazy and distracted by some canine thought—of a bone perhaps—and sat by his master’s side, looking even more menacing now, poised to attack.

My mother, oblivious to the ominous figure and his hell hound on the other side of the house, danced freely, like she, too, was ten years old, or wished that she could be. Even I could see the freedom in that.

A peal of thunder crashed through the sky. Pierre jumped, betraying a fracture in his manly facade. After all, he was not yet a man, but rather a boy trying on masculinity like an ill-fitting suit.

When lightening flashed through the sky, my mother guided me into the house. She peeled the plastic bread bag from my cast somewhat guiltily, I thought. I shivered at the memory of the struggle between us the morning after my father had gotten angry about her new job. I had refused to go to school. She had grown exasperated and had pushed me into the couch, with my arm twisted behind me. She had rushed me to the hospital, full of apologies. It was instinctive, the desire to protect my family at all costs, and I had lied for

her. I looked down at the soggy cast, covered in the signatures of my fellow Grade 5 students, some of whom I did not particularly like but couldn’t refuse, so eager were they with their trembling pens.

I wondered if my mother had injured me because she suspected my motivations. I had wanted to stay home to sift through my father’s belongings, to search for clues about where he went, and who he was. I suspected he wasn’t going back to the sign shop every night.

Still dripping wet from the rain, my mother discarded the sopping bread bag. I quickly got dressed and snuck up to the attic, imagining I was Nancy Drew, on the verge of solving a great mystery.

For the past few weeks, I had been sifting through the wartime trunk in the attic, examining old sweaters and shoeboxes filled with photographs: my father before he met my mother, in high school, got her pregnant, and proposed. In some ways, he was an honorable man. I wasn’t supposed to know any of this. What I learned about our family, I learned from reading my mother’s diaries. She had been happy, it seemed, to be pregnant. It meant she could move away from my grandfather and his drinking.

In those photographs, I saw in my father’s eyes something of that fractured look I saw in Pierre. It made me curious about the neighbour’s secrets. Perhaps they were related to ours. I approached the back of the attic and found a gap in the shared wall, and I discovered that I could squeeze my small body through that jagged opening.

I imagined they would have photographs there, like ours, or secret diaries with stories about the child who had died. But there were just Christmas ornaments and old baby clothes.

When the rain stopped, I went out onto the veranda to check on the caterpillars in my bug keeper. Pierre leaned around the dividing wall, watching me again.

“Hi, Marijuana Kid,” he said.

I turned my back on him and talked to the caterpillars in a soothing voice.

“Want to get stoned, Marijuana Kid?” he asked.

After he left, I went to the kitchen, where my mother sat at the table drinking tea and smoking.

“What’s marijuana?” I asked.

“Why?”

“Pierre called me ‘Marijuana Kid.’”

“It’s a cigarette that some people think isn’t good for you.”

“Why?”

“Because it alters your mind.”

“Why is he calling me that?”

“Your father had some marijuana.”

“Why?”

“Because it helps him relax.”

“Why?”

“Because grown-ups need to relax sometimes and think about their lives.”

“Why?”

“Because they do.”

After my mother tucked me into bed that night, I took the extra blanket from my room and the flashlight from the junk drawer in the kitchen and snuck out the front door to stake out the house. I wanted to see what time my father came home, and assess his state of mind when he did. So as not to be alone, I brought my plastic bug keeper: Sally had small yellow ovals on the centre of her back, and blue rectangles flanked by yellow lines on her sides; Oscar looked almost the same, but his lines were orange.

I stealthily crossed the street to set up in the babysitter’s yard. I draped my pink blanket over the branches of a small shrub next to the house and reassured my partners that we would be safe enough there. On the tree beside us, some free caterpillars had built beautiful gauzy tents, ghost houses.

There was nothing to do but listen to the

occasional car drive past. To pass the time, I sang softly. I hoped Sally and Oscar wouldn’t grow tired of hearing “Octopus’s Garden,” my favourite song.

Startled awake by deep breathing, I saw a large shadow looming over the tent. I must have drifted off. The only sound in the cool night air was that deep, controlled breathing.

“Katie? What do you think you’re doing out here? It’s not safe. You need to come home. Right now,” my mother said.

I slowly emerged from my tent, with my hands in the air.

My mother laughed.

“This isn’t funny. Something very shady is going on around here,” I said, almost to myself.

My mother carefully gathered my blanket and reached out for my hand. I held up my cast, shrugged, and put down my arm. She placed her hand in the dead centre of my back and accompanied me to my room. She closed the door and told me to stay inside.

Unfazed by her attempt to sabotage my stakeout, I sat bolt upright with my back against the door, determined to stay awake, listening for the imminent sounds of my father’s return. I must have drifted off, because I woke up to a crashing sound, like a herd of cattle clamouring through our kitchen. I crept down the stairs, holding my breath, as if that could stop them from creaking under my bare feet.

From my vantage point on the stairs, I could see a sliver of the kitchen. My father leaned against the counter, swaying slightly. The other voice clearly belonged to my mother, only there was a barbed edge to it, with none of the girlish laughter that landed her the job as the local weather girl.

“I earned five hundred dollars tonight. Do you think we have a house like this because of that sign shop?”

“Katie set up a tent across the street to watch you,” my mother said.



My father laughed.

“It’s not funny. What are you going to say when your daughter finds out you’re a drug dealer?”

“I’ll ask her to join the family business. After all, the family that tokes together, jokes together.”

My father laughed.

“Pierre called her the Marijuana Kid. I’m telling you, the neighbours know. I don’t know how much more of this I can take.”

“Times are changing,” my father said.

Footsteps approached the staircase, and I backed away, slowly. Carefully, I closed my door. I quickly drew the covers around me, closed my eyes, and pretended to sleep.

The door opened. A slice of light cut through the room. My father kissed my forehead and left.

When things settled down and the house grew quiet, I grabbed my flashlight and walked down the long hallway. My parents’ door was open a crack. I turned off the light and looked in. A lone figure was huddled on the bed, with her back to me. The door to the spare room was closed. I peered through the keyhole, but could see nothing. My father’s snoring startled me, and I slowly backed down the hallway.

The next morning, my father was gone. The bed in the spare room was neatly made, all traces of him erased.

My mother told me that he had gone away on a business trip, but something in how she averted my gaze cast a pall on the conversation. I studied her for any obvious signs of deception. Her lips left traces of pink lipstick on the coffee mug, still she looked perfect, almost too perfect.

I didn’t want to go to school. She forced me out the door. I considered threatening to tell the principal that she’d broken my arm, but I thought better of it. I didn’t need two broken arms. How would I get to the bottom of my

father’s disappearance then?

Instead of turning right when I walked out the front door, I dashed to the left and up the stairs, to Pierre’s house. He had information. I knew it. And I was determined to get it. I rang the doorbell, pressing hard.

Pierre stumbled to the door, his T-shirt rumpled and his hair flattened on one side. I looked behind him for the dastardly dog. Fortunately, it was nowhere in sight.

I gave Pierre a cold hard stare.

“What do you want, Marijuana Kid?” he asked.

“I ask the questions around here. What do you know about my father? He has disappeared, and I’m concerned for his safety.”

Pierre laughed.

I stared him down.

He must have seen I meant business, because his demeanor changed. He opened his eyes wider and regarded me with a deep curiosity.

“What do you know?” I demanded.

“Wait there.”

Pierre walked toward the kitchen.

How strange it was to see a house exactly like mine, but in reverse, like my entire world was turned inside out.

Pierre returned with a newspaper, and thrust it in my direction.

“DRUG DEALER ARRESTED IN NEON SHOP.” Underneath the headline was a photograph of my father posing in front of his sign shop.

Suddenly, it all made sense. Pierre had set up my father.

“You bastard,” I shouted. “How could you?”

I knew the truth. I had won. But instead of cowering, the boy stood strong.

“What the hell is going on out there?” his father shouted from inside the house.

Pierre’s facade crumbled then. His shoulders sank, and he reached for me and hugged me, awkwardly at first. Then he held me gently, like a father would, and stroked my hair.

“Everything will be all right,” he said. ❧



# TOYS THAT DON'T CARE

BY DEREK McCORMACK

*An excerpt from the book Rue du Doo.*

"Welcome to the show," Marshmallarmé says.

"Show?" I stare into the camera.

"*Rue du Doo*. The show you're in. The show we're in. It's playing on Channel 12. It's 7:30 P.M.

"Do you know *Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer*?" he says.

I nod, or someone makes me nod.

"*Rudolph* was also a stop-motion TV special. Rankin/Bass, the puppeteers, made it.

"*Rudolph* had a misfit reindeer; *Rue du Doo* has a misfit boy—you! You're a TV star. It's *Rudolph on the Rue du Doo*. It's *Rue-du-doo-dolph*."

"*Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer* was the

ILLUSTRATION BY GEORGE PFROMM

first successful stop-motion TV special," he says. "*Rue du Doo* follows its formula."

I blink. It makes a blinking sound.

"Rankin/Bass made the *Rudolph* puppets by hand, then animated them in Japan. Johnny Marks wrote Christmas songs for them to sing.

"*Rue du Doo* is more rank than Rankin, more ass than Bass. The songs are about poop. Rip Taylor is the voice of Antoine. Phyllis Diller is the voice of Choclette. Jonathan Winters is Cocoa Chanel. Paul Lynde plays Ploppy, a poo."

"Who does my voice?" I say.

"A girl," he says.

"*Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer* was a Christmas special; it was an ad for the idea of Christmas.

"*Rue du Doo's* an ad for Halloween—and faggotry.

"*Rudolph* premiered on the *Fantasy Hour*. It was sponsored by General Electric. It was good advertising for G.E., and for all the gadgets they sold as Christmas gifts: a steam iron, a can opener, an electric knife. *Rue du Doo's* sponsored by Count Choc-o-log, of course. Shit, sponsored by sugar!"

"I don't know a thing about acting!" I say.

"Acting?" he says.

"You're here to sell cereal; you're here to sell toys.

"You're here to sell the Count figurine, the Boo-Brownie figurine, the Franken-Fudge figurine—yours for five box tops and a money order.

"You're here to sell the Haunted Dressing Room playset, with shattering mirror. The mirror's foiled. The Count's foiled by it! You're here to sell the Haunted Hair Salon, the Haunted Cosmetics Counter, the Haunted

Haute Couture Atelier—yours for twenty-five box tops and a money order, sets sold separately.

"Then there's this."

He holds up a dollhouse.

"It's Barbie's Dreamhouse, but built for Barbey D'Aurevilly!"

It's plastic. It's plastic art nouveau.

"The Le Mal Marché dollhouse, yours for fifty box tops and a money order, figurines sold separately, some assembly required."

I peer into it. I see me: a figurine of me in the Haunted Dressing Room. The figurine's peering into the doll-sized dollhouse that a figurine of Marshmallarmé has in his hands.

"It doesn't belong on a table." Marshmallarmé holds it upside down. "It's not a centerpiece. It's made to be mounted upside down under a table. Cereal boxes and bowls sit on tables. The dollhouse belongs to the world beneath the bowls and boxes; the dark underworld where the cereal in the boxes and bowls is made, made, and made into *merde*. Mouths may gobble up Count Choc-o-log, but this is where the goblins go—below, below, below."

*Rue du Doo* will be right back.

All alone in the dressing room, I sing:

Somewhere beyond the box tops, brown bats fly,  
Bats that poop puppet poop on Paris and on  
Versailles.

Somewhere beyond the box tops, brown bats soar,  
Bats that poop in a monster puppet department store.  
Somewhere beyond the box tops, bats brought me,  
And I'm trapped in a world of stop-motion puppetry.  
Someday I'll wake up with a scream, someday I'll  
wake from this bad dream called Paree.

I'll eat fresh fruit and Wheaties, too, not cereal made  
of bat poo and dingleberry!

Somewhere beyond the box tops, bats fly free,

I sing, tears falling at twenty-four frames a

second, “bats fly beyond the box tops, but what of, what of me?”

Applause.

A puppet stands at the dressing room door, applauding. “What a lovely song,” he says.

“Really?” I say, sniffing.

“No! It was so faggy! You’re fagging up the whole store!” He grins. Giggles. Guffaws. He’s my age, but gorgeous. Big brown eyes in a big round head. And his bum—it’s as if another puppet head’s been stuffed down the back of his pants.

He winks, then he’s gone.

I have a hard-on. It’s plastic wood. It took ten puppeteers ten minutes to animate it. Why?

Wipe to—

“Somewhere beyond the box tops,” I sing, “I dream of a beautiful boy—is it puppy or puppet love?”

“A saccharine sentiment.”

I didn’t see Marshmallarmé come in.

“Who is this wonderful boy who’s inspired you to sing?” he says.

“I don’t know his name,” I say. “He dropped by the dressing room. He was really cute. Really, really cute. Really, really, really cute!”

“*Merde*,” he mutters to himself.

“The mirror,” he says. “If you want to live, you must make the magic mirror and make it immediately!” He hands me a book, a big book. “You are no longer Jon-D; you are John Dee.”

“Wizard!” the Count says, strutting into the scene with Boo-Brownie and Franken-Fudge. “Where’s my magic mirror? Is this crackpot poet preventing you from completing it?”

“Count,” Marshmallarmé says, “I’m here in my capacity as a reporter. I’m planning on

profiling the wizard in an upcoming edition of *La dernière mode*.”

“*La derrière mode*,” the Count sneers.

“The wizard was showing me the book he wrote—weren’t you, wizard?” Marshmallarmé nudges me and I nod. “It includes incantations to conjure the archangel Anael, who governs Venus, the planet, and who oversees the forces of love and hate in this world.”

“Anal,” the Count sneers.

“Anael’s armed with the secrets of reflection, and of foreseeing the future in shiny surfaces—isn’t he, wizard?” Marshmallarmé nudges me and I nod. “It’ll take the wizard some time to summon the archangel and study his secrets so that he can create a magic mirror capable of reflecting a vampire puppet. He’ll need privacy, absolute privacy, so shall we all leave him alone to—Count?”

“Arthur!” the Count says, spinning around. “I smell him!”

The Count sings:

Come out, come out, wherever you are, and meet the wise wizard who fell from a star.

Come out, come out, wherever you be, and meet the wise wizard who’s known as John Dee.

“Come out, come out, wherever thou art, and— Oh, for fuck’s sake,” he says, ditching the good-witch demeanour. “Arthur, you little shit, come out! Come out or so help me God!”

“Arthur?” I say.

“Arthur Rainblo!” the Count says. “He’s a punk! He’s a prankster! He’s a pain in my ass! When I get my hands on him I am going to murder him! But before I murder him, I’m going to fuck the shit out of him!”

“Fist him!” Boo-Brownie says.

“Felch him!” Franken-Fudge says.

“Arthur Rainblo’s a brat, you see; but he’s



also the most succulent creature in tout Paris, the faggot dream of the *fin de Fudgesicle!*” the Count says, silly strings of spittle dangling from his fangs. “He’s a boy made of chocolate—chocolate hair, chocolate eyes, and a big beautiful butt full of brown!

“I would hold it dear,” the Count says. “I’d slobber, slurp and smear his rear, his rear—his rear!”

The Count sings:

Arthur’s ass is a confection,  
That gives me an erection, so let me make it clear,  
I would pig out on a plate of that guy’s gorgeous  
chocolate,  
If I only had his rear.  
The Count dances across the dressing room.  
Arthur’s ass is chocolate candy,  
And chocolate makes me randy and fills me with désir.  
Watch me sink my dent sucrée deep in his dark  
dessert buffet,

If I only had his rear.

The Count dances up the dressing room wall. He dances across the dressing room ceiling. Fred Astaire? Fred Ascare!

Sweet meat! I’d like to eat his plump posterior. I’d eat it a while and then eat it some more. I bet it’s better than a s’more!

If I devoured his *derrière*,  
His seductive *sucrière*, his cheeky chocolatier,  
I could blame my tooth decay on Arthur’s rectal  
*cavité*,  
If I only had his rear.

“Alas, I do not have his rear,” he sings as the music slows, “and I never will, I fear—I shed the sweetest tear. A candy store in a kid is how I’d satisfy my id, if I only had his rear.”

He sheds a tear. It’s Cellophane. It’s a candy wrapper. ✨

## THE SHACK ABOVE THE WHITE PINES

A wisp twisted out the rickety chimney. An old can stood on the gravel and my six-shooters slogged chunks of lead right into it. Every time they spat the old can jumped. The can was Parker brand, I remember the blue paper label was half worn away. On the gate, a blackbird stretched its wings feather by feather. My brother sat cross-legged. He looked down at his hands and said, “There’s a can over yonder.”

## DUST TOWN

When he got shot he was holding a rifle and standing on the roof of the old saloon pointing the thing right at me. With a scream he hurled himself off the edge of the wooden building and landed on his back on the boardwalk below. A hush crept over the noontime street. A cloud of dust rolled right through it.

—MICHAEL E. CASTEELES



# FINDER

BY ROSEANNE CARRARA

It was just after seven o'clock in the morning, mid-November, and the sky was dusty pink. The empty café tables and chairs in the centre of the Distillery District were coated with a thin frost that caught the blush but soon exchanged it for the candy reds and blues of the Ferris wheel being hoisted into the square by a crane.

The iron gates, brick walls, and cobblestone walkways of Gooderham and Worts were spectacle enough, prime background for every organized-crime and holocaust epic filmed in the past thirty years. The Distillery didn't need

any more set dressing. Give it a week, though, and I wouldn't be able to go in and out of my condo without getting stuck behind tourists gazing at the string lights, spilling their mulled wine, and selecting stockings and pine-scented candles from the temporary wooden chalets set up for the Christmas Market.

I didn't like to be mussed, and the things I carried for my clients had to be taken care of properly. I figured I was lucky to be finished with the case before the rush.

That morning, I was a million bucks on the way to making a million more. I'd recently cut

ILLUSTRATION BY GEORGE PFROMM

my hair, shaved the sides, and kept the top kinky, natural—though I'd bleached it again. And I hadn't gone for a run or gotten drunk enough to sleep with anybody to ruin it yet. I'd put on my thick gold hoops, a vintage Missoni sweater dress in waves of wine and orange that clung to my body, making me feel like every curve had a purpose, and a pair of claret-coloured stockings with matching stilettos. Then, over my shoulders, cape-style, I'd draped the gold taffeta coat my mother had custom tailored for her wedding. That coat lasted decades longer than my parents' marriage, not to mention their generation as a whole.

All I needed to complete the look was a driverless Mercedes. Only I preferred to walk. I had a specific routine when it came to wrapping up a case. Most of my investigative work up to that point had been in lost items, nostalgia. I'd been reuniting gen Xers and millennials with objects belonging to their parents or grandparents, respectively, before the cull. I did most of my business via text or chat, rarely meeting my clients until I'd found what they were looking for. When my work was done, though, I liked to arrange for a get-together in my office to return the goods in person, notarize the official documents, and make sure they transferred their final payments to me, then and there, in full.

So, on the day of, if my finds were light enough, I'd pack them in a cardboard box and walk them from my condo, in the Distillery, up to my office, in Cabbagetown. It was only a couple kilometres, tops. But taking the slow, steady incline of Parliament Street, dressed to the nines, while reviewing the case in my head, always felt like a sacred pilgrimage. I needed that kind of ceremony to put me in the mood for conversation.

**T**he trickiest part of the whole routine was usually the start, when I had to navigate the Distillery's cobblestones to get out onto Parliament. I'd just about cleared the square

without breaking a heel when one of the wooden vendor chalets fell face down in front of me and a cool hand gripped my elbow from behind.

"Need a little help, there, ma?"

The kid's voice had not quite dropped.

The problem with millennials, or the children of, was that now their grandparents had been disappeared, people like myself, gen Xers in their late forties and fifties, were the oldest folks they knew. So, despite the fact I looked put together, or maybe because of it, I was bound to inspire one of them to accommodate the only grande dame or matriarch in a ten-kilometre radius by helping her cross the stones. I tried not to take it as an insult. But I had my client's heirlooms to protect.

"Down, boy." I elbowed his chest, holding fast to my cardboard box. "Haven't you been fixed yet?"

"Aw, come on, gran!" Damn kid wouldn't lay off. He brought his hand to my wrist, brushing his greasy fingers on the side of my carton. "Let's see what we've got here in our goody box!"

The little ginger had pencilled wrinkles on his hands and face. He'd even played a game of dot-to-dot, using grey liner to connect the freckles below his squinty blue eyes. Probably a hired Santa practising his shtick. Who else would come out into the open in a red flannel onesie and black Doc Martens? Though, there *were* younger people who dressed old on purpose these days, not unlike goths in the eighties, but with more specific contouring. I'd used a few as pick-pockets myself.

"I swear, if you shit my sleeve with your makeup, I'm gonna take this jacket off and smother you with it. Christmas Market's not till the weekend. Back the fuck off."

The kid let me go immediately, fanning his hands out in front of himself, checking to see if his pencilled wrinkles had smudged or

stained the baggy front of his onesie, where the stuffing was probably supposed to go.

"I'll see you Sunday, then, after church? Say hello to Father for me. Tell him Jasper don't need no confession. Not like ye."

Wrapping his arms around his belly, he tried to chuckle like old St. Nick. Except it came out like a hoarse cough.

**M**y walk north on Parliament should have been refreshing, enlightening even. But, after that send-off, I rushed, working up a sweat and blistering my toes. I was halfway to the office when the wind finally shifted, breaking my stride. I figured a cross-breeze might help cool me off. But the air went rancid fast.

The city must have been fertilizing the public parks and fields again. As usual, no warning. Same goat-shit smell as last time crept into my hair and my good clothes before I could think about hailing a cab. Why bother, then? I raised the carton to cover my mouth and marshalled on. At least I'd sealed the box properly.

Sabing Lee hired me to find three objects, and I'd been lucky with them all. First, serendipity. I'd spotted his grandparents' wedding portrait hanging on an "accent wall" in a *Canadian Condo* magazine I picked up randomly at my dentist's office. It was one of several black-and-white portraits from the nineteen-forties grouped together "for their style and sacred mystery." It only took a stern e-mail to the publisher to have the interior designer send me the original photo in its frame, with her apologies to the grieving family for its ever being purloined, and her feigned enthusiasm for having facilitated a reunion.

Then, there was his father's anniversary Rolex, with the inscription celebrating thirty-five years in the auto industry: "LAST OF THE PENSIONERS." I made my application to the Ontario Families of the Departed Commis-

sion for that. Within a week, I had the watch and a handwritten letter from the resolutions archivist-on-call, who was so tickled to be of use, she slipped a bottle of the Balvenie in for me. "Everyone's so embarrassed to ask the O.F.D.C. for what's rightfully theirs. Do send more!"

Then, there was the singing bowl, which almost got me shot. It was a large brass vessel, hammered smooth on the inside. Its exterior, however, was etched with a dozen mermaids whose long hair spread out behind them in the waves, so you could appreciate their breasts. If you held it in your hands, you'd come away with their impressions—scales, stomachs, nipples, everything—on your palms.

I'd traced the bowl to one of those mausoleums in Rosedale people tend to let out short-term these days, rather than taking residence themselves. They even leave the family valuables inside on display. Except those are usually locked in curios whose glass gets swapped for plexi.

I had my assistant, Felix, make the arrangements online for my two-night stay. But something about the booking must have piqued the host's interest, because I wasn't in the place for more than fifteen minutes before she showed up with a stack of fresh towels with a revolver sandwiched in-between.

"Flatfoot in heels, eh?" Victoria Herjavec had sniffed me out. Though I didn't need her permission to proceed. I had the Lee family's original deed-of-sale for the singing bowl and a signed affidavit from an O.F.D.C. judge confirming I could remove it from the premises. Once I saw that vessel through the plexi, however, I couldn't blame her.

"Gorgeous, isn't it?" With the gun in her shaky pink hand, she entered the PIN code and opened the curio cabinet for herself, looking to cop one last feel. "My parents took possession as collateral, before they were done in, too, by the whole reverse mortgage scheme. I



couldn't let it go without paying my respects.”

Victoria was so enthralled with the mermaids, fondling their tits, she forgot about the revolver in her hand and pulled the trigger accidentally. The bullet buzzed my ear before it sank into the canvas on the wall behind me. The shot was embedded in the bare left buttock of the painter, Kent Monkman, or his alter ego, Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, who was perched on a cliff, looking back at me and Herjavec, mascara running, pissed.

“Ha!” Victoria cackled, handing over the gun and the bowl. “You know the title of that portrait, don't you? *Let He Who Is Without Sin Cast The First Stone!*”

That singing bowl was sin itself, and I hadn't even heard it sound yet. But Sabling still had the original hammer. He promised he'd demonstrate for me when he picked it up. I was looking forward to it. I planned on making a recording.

**F**latfoot in heels, sure thing. And my office looked every bit the finder's agency. I'd taken the second floor of a converted two-story walk-up whose street level had one-third vacancy. Amos's Apothecary had gone out of business decades ago, but his sign still dangled beside the door to my office, on the far left of the building.

The rest of the lower level was occupied by Cabbagetown Eco-Laundry. The cards in the window promised a “STEAM-GREEN DRY-CLEAN PERFORMED ON-SITE.” Though, every night, in the back alley, the Wright sisters piled the clothes and linens into a minivan and shipped them off to be cleaned elsewhere.

“We never found out how it worked before our parents vanished,” Angela, the older one, confessed to me. “Is that something you could investigate for us?”

I told her the next time Felix came around I'd have him contact one of his engineer buddies. Though, that was a lie, naturally. Felix

was only virtual. There was no way I was researching anything to do with making those machines work, for fear my office would turn into a sauna.

I'd barely made it upstairs for our eight-thirty. But it didn't matter. I had a voice mail from Sabling saying he'd been delayed on the Gardiner Expressway. And he had to stop in at his digital-arts firm to sign a contract before he could make it to Cabbagetown. He could transfer me the money, though. And, if I didn't want to stick around, he'd have a courier come for the box.

“No! Final pick-up and pay always in person. Will wait,” I texted him. “Besides, I want to hear it sound!”

In response, he sent me a mermaid, a smiley face, and a hammer.

I wasn't going to wait for Sabling before I ate. I'd ordered a carafe of coffee and a whole whack of *pains au chocolat* and lemon-curd muffins from Seulement Danielle around the corner. I was just cramming the first quarter of a muffin into my mouth when the bell on the street door jingled and a pair of crisp dress brogues tackled the steps.

“That didn't take long at all,” I hollered, trying not to choke on lemon curd.

“Sorry,” a deep bass carried up the stairwell, “I mean, I heard you were good, but I didn't think you'd be expecting me.”

He was right. He wasn't Sabling Lee. That is, he wasn't the forty-something small-boned South Asian man in the profile picture Sabling forwarded with his contact info. He was a tall, coal-skinned man, a good ten years older than me, with an athletic build he couldn't tone down, even by matching his shirt and tie to his dove-grey suit.

“Ms. Simmonds?” He offered me his hand.

“Kathleen,” I shot up, dusting the crumbs off my lap. I couldn't touch him, yet. He was just that beautiful. “But everybody calls me ‘Keene.’ Why don't you take a seat, Mr. . . . ?”

“Massey. Israel Massey.”

“I’m surprised you found my office, Israel. The street address is unlisted. I don’t usually meet with clients until I’ve found what they’re looking for.”

“Oh, I’ve known about you for years. We all have.”

“Who?”

My cheeks flushed. If I was getting this kind of spin, maybe it was time I raised my rates. Although, who’d trust me if I couldn’t blend?

“The people in my circle. You’re the one we all said we’d try if we found hope. And we found hope, my sister and I.”

“Hope for what?” My voice cracked worse than that Santa kid’s.

“Hope our auntie’s still alive.”

I’d taken a sip of coffee to soothe my throat, but I almost spit it back out at him.

“I’m sorry, do you mind if I ask your date of birth?”

“Haven’t you guessed, already?” He passed his palms over the gray waves at his temples. “Aunt Éloïse, however, would be seventy-three this Christmas. She was in one of the younger cohorts, you know, to have been disappeared, at least, according to the commission.”

He handed me a blue form, the kind I’d seen hundreds of times before when sourcing folks’ belongings. It was the death certificate for Éloïse Vancourt-Massey, whose C.O.D. was typed, in lower-case, “the cull.”

“So why, with this, do you think she’s still alive?”

“Well, she was a painter. We thought there was a chance she might have been among those cultural evacuees that got whispered about, a while back.” He cleared his throat. “But that’s not what brought me here. We had a message, the other day, from someone named Ed Kreisler. He’s one of the Alders, you know, one of the boomers they kept around for show . . .”

“We kept,” I butted in. “No matter how

much you and I may have disapproved of an entire generation’s disappearance, or close to it, we’re still responsible.”

“We sure are.”

Israel covered his face with his palms, trying not to let me see his amber eyes well up. And I had to check myself for thinking he was handsome, even then. I had to stop smiling before he looked at me again.

“This man, Kreisler. He said he was a collector of my auntie’s work. And didn’t we want to come and see what else she did?”

“Well, if anyone, even an alder, is in possession of your aunt’s paintings or revenue-stream, I can get the canvases and commissions back for you.”

“No. My sister and I grew up in our auntie’s care. I slept on a cot in Éloïse’s studio from Grade 1 through university. I saw every piece of work she ever did. And, as her executor, I have records of their provenance, to whom they were sold and transferred, before, during, and after the departures. Plus, they’re micro-chipped. No. If this man’s talking about being a collector, he’s talking about work that’s being produced, now.”

Excited, desperate, Israel stood up and started emptying his pockets on my desk, rolls and rolls of elastic-banded twenty-dollar bills. I hadn’t seen actual paper money in a good five or six years. It was hard to look at the face of Queen Elizabeth without thinking of all those people vanishing. Yet, here they were, thousands of late-lamented queens, coming back to life in front of me. I had to turn my head away.

I’m glad I did. You don’t always catch the first snowfall of the season. But, from my office window, I watched flakes falling from a fevered sky, a few of them catching on the glass, even, before they melted into one another and evaporated.

“Well, then, let’s get started,” I whispered, more to the weather than to Israel. “Tell me everything you know.” □



**BEZIMENA**

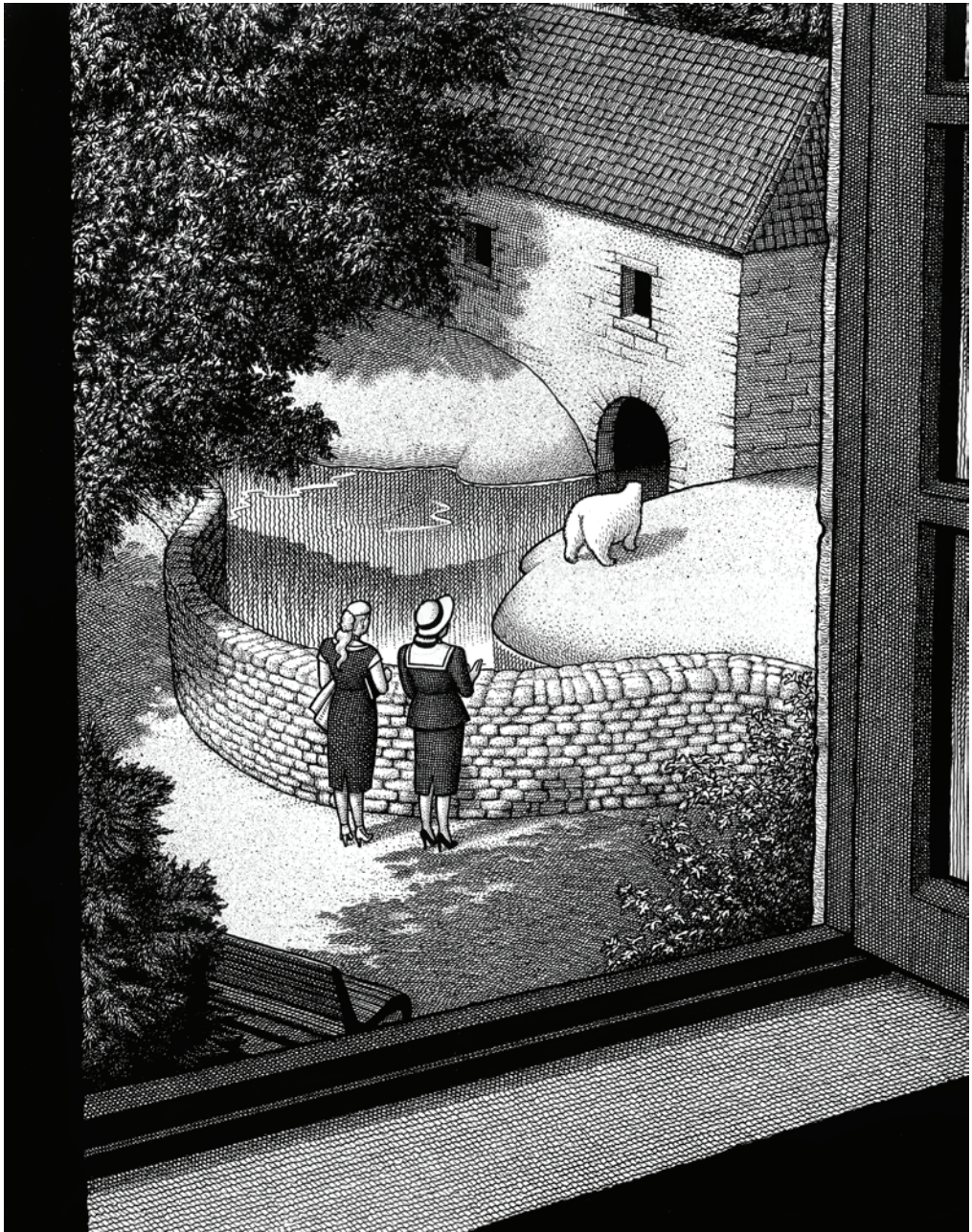
Nina Bunjevac

A Modernized Adaptation of  
the Myth of Artemis and Siproites



*ALTHOUGH MANY  
YEARS HAVE PASSED, HE RECOGNIZED  
HER IMMEDIATELY.*








*HIS HEART  
BEGAN RACING LIKE  
MAD...*

*IT WAS WHITE BECKY!*

*BENNY STARED AT HER,  
MESMERISED, UNABLE TO TURN HIS GAZE  
AWAY. IN THAT MOMENT, HE KNEW THAT  
NO ONE ELSE WOULD EVER DO.*



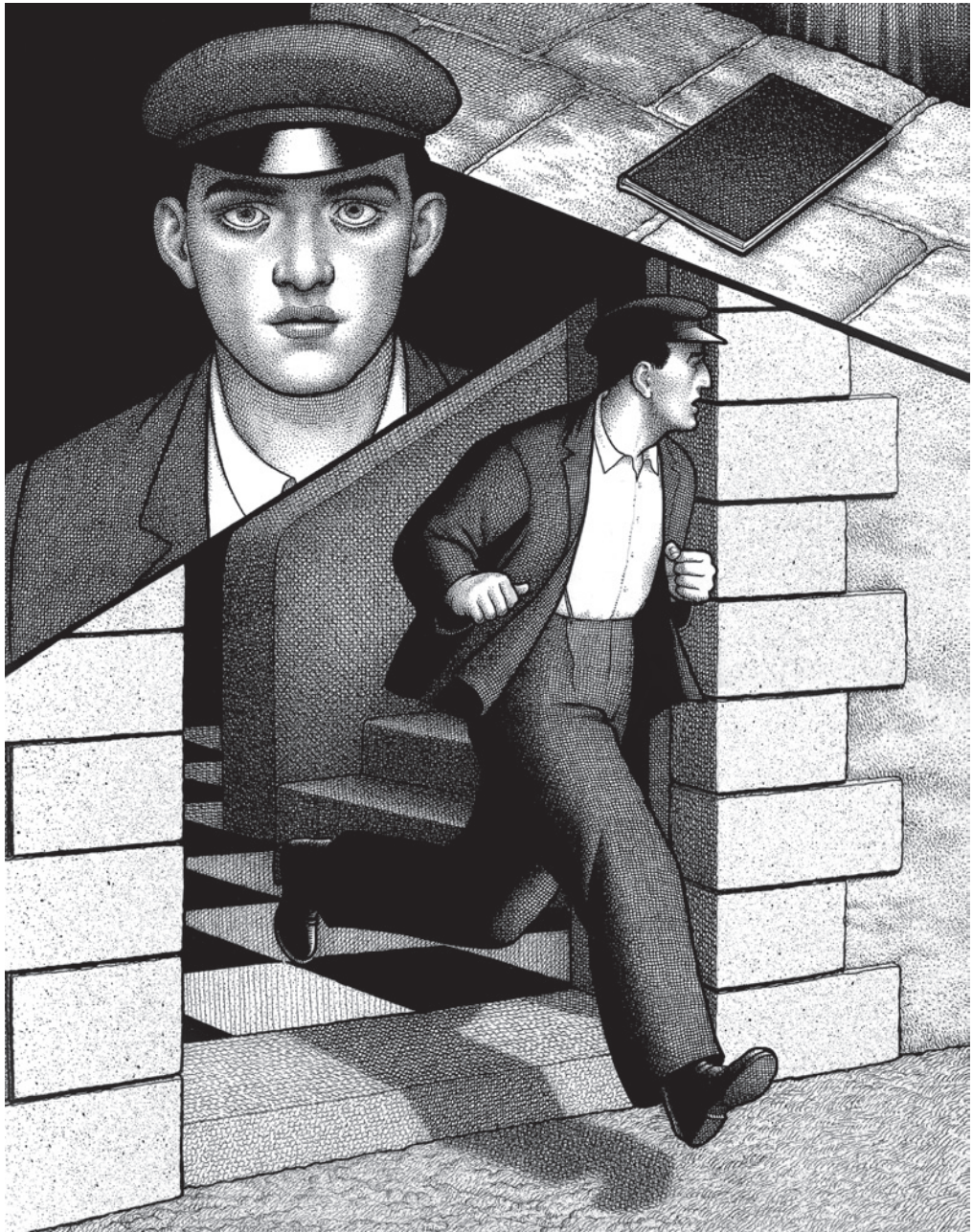




*BECKY STOOD BY THE POLAR BEAR ENCLOSURE FOR A WHILE, SKETCHING AND TALKING TO HER COMPANION. WHEN THEY LEFT THE ZOO, BENNY NOTICED THAT SHE HAD LEFT THE SKETCHBOOK BEHIND.*

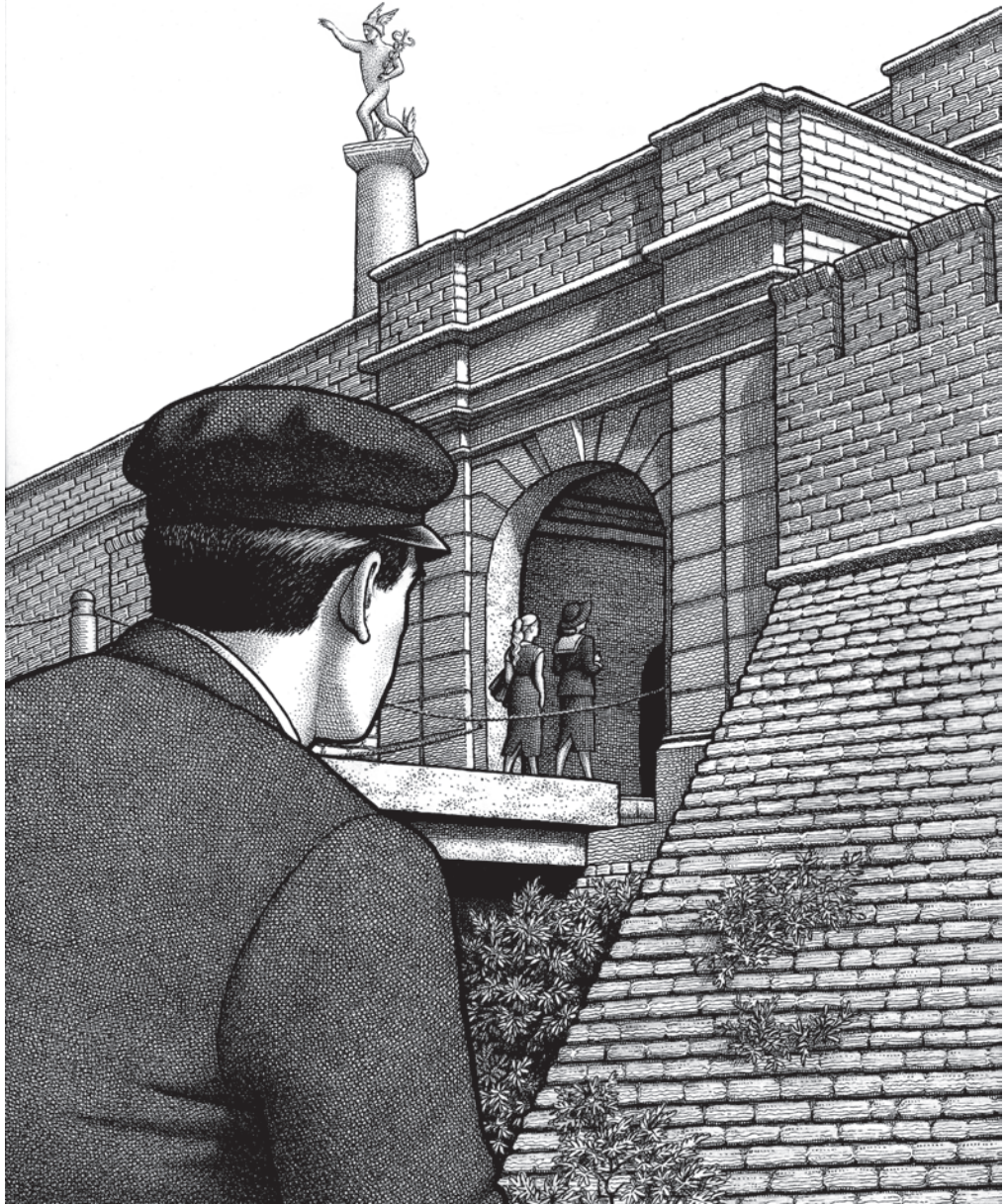
*HE RUSHED OUT OF THE REPTILE BUILDING LIKE A MAD MAN, GRABBED THE BOOK AND HEADED FOR THE EXIT.*













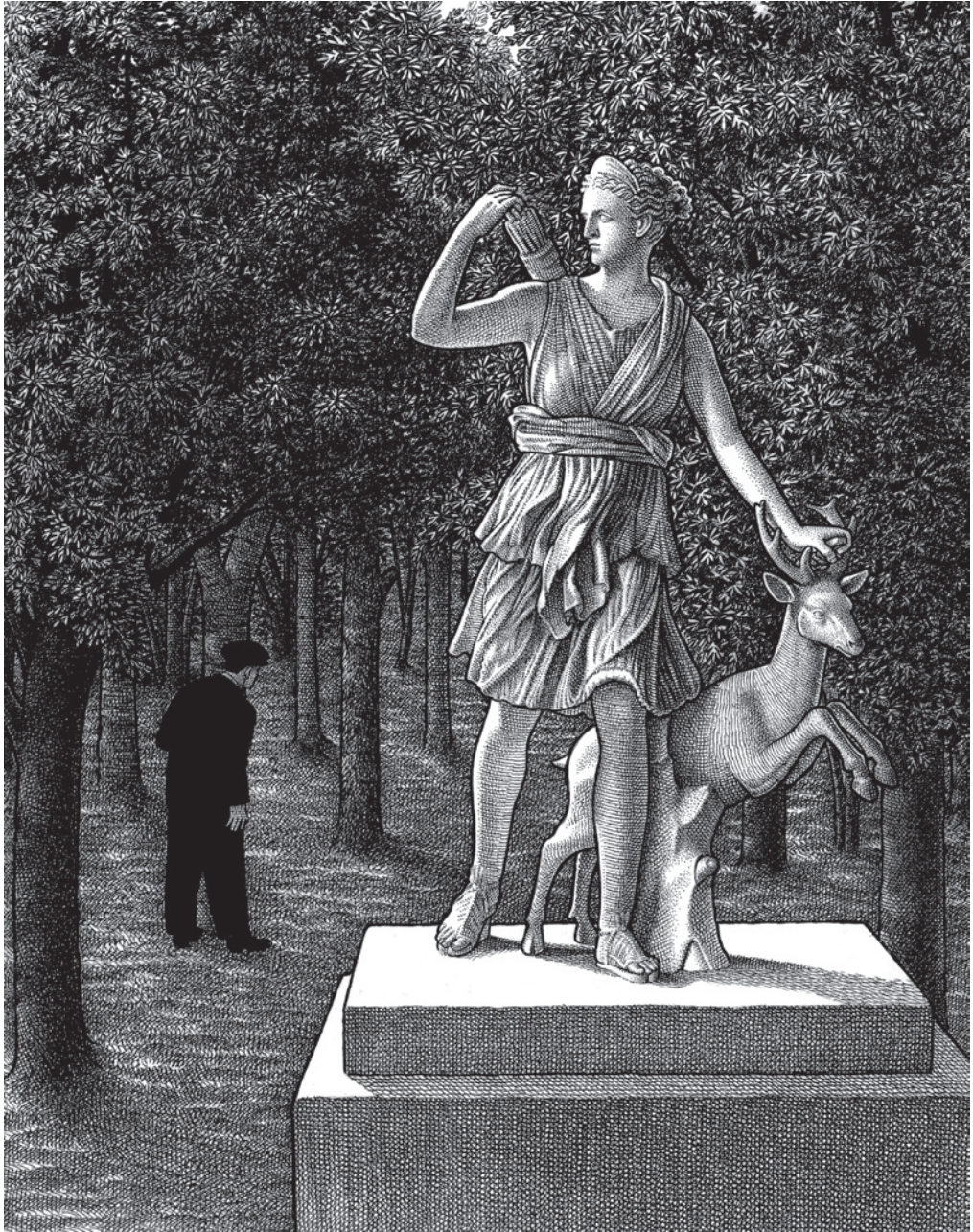
*... AS THEY STROLLED  
THROUGH THE NARROW STREETS OF  
THE GREEK QUARTER ...*










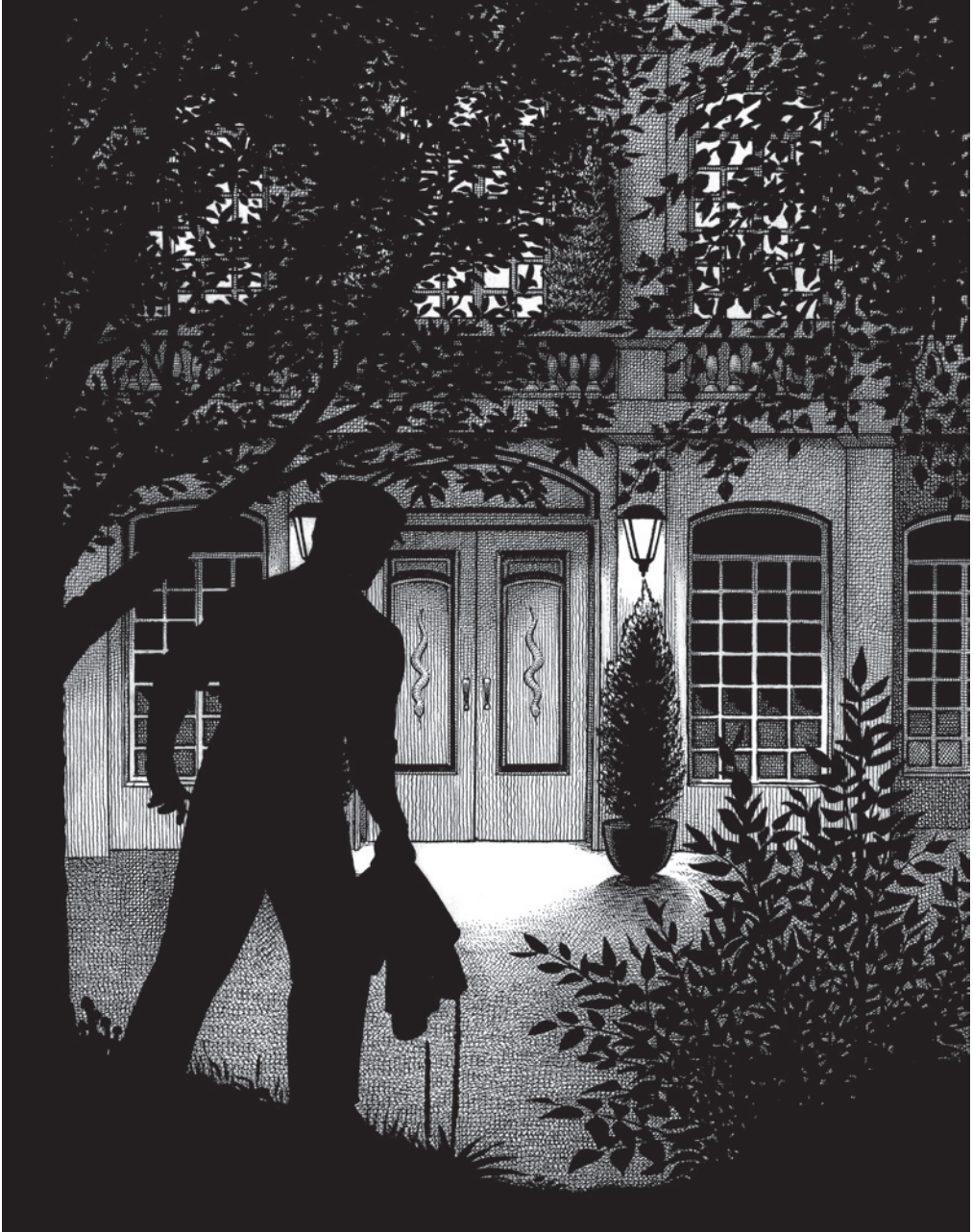




*BENNY WAS PUZZLED WHEN THEY REACHED THEIR DESTINATION, A BIG OLD HOUSE IN THE CLEARING, FOR ALTHOUGH HE KNEW THIS AREA LIKE THE INSIDE OF HIS POCKET, HE HAD NEVER SEEN THIS BUILDING BEFORE, NOR HAD HE EVEN BEEN AWARE OF ITS EXISTENCE.*

*HE STOOD IN THE SHADOW OF THE TREES FOR A WHILE, WAITING FOR THE NIGHTFALL.*








*WHEN THE NIGHT FELL, AND  
THE CRICKETS BEGAN THEIR NIGHT SONG, BENNY  
WALKED OVER TO THE SIDE OF THE HOUSE, TIP-TOEING TO  
THE ONLY ILLUMINATED WINDOW  
OF THE MAIN FLOOR.*

*BECKY STOOD DRAPED  
IN SILK, WHILE HER MAID DREW  
THE BATH.*



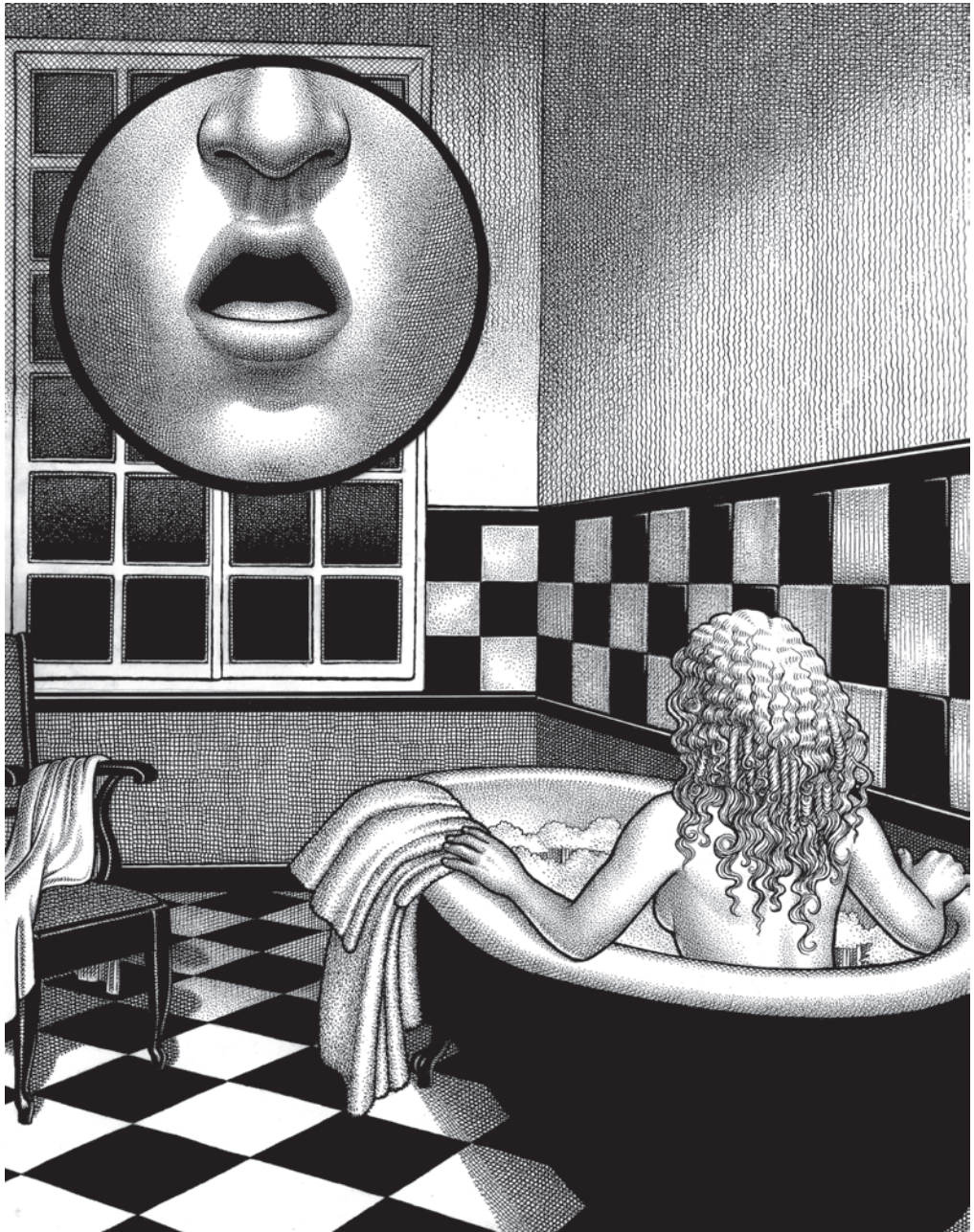



*HER SKIN WAS SMOOTH AND  
FLAWLESS, LIKE ALABASTER. BENNY HAD NEVER SEEN  
ANYTHING AS BEAUTIFUL AS HER. HIS BODY SHIVERED WITH  
DESIRE, THE LIKES OF WHICH HE HAD  
NEVER FELT BEFORE.*

*WHEN SHE DISROBED,  
AND ENTERED THE BATH, BENNY EJACULATED  
IN HIS PANTS, UTTERING A LOUD CRY...*

*STARTLED, BECKY LOOKED IN HIS DIRECTION.*







*HE PANICKED AND RAN OFF, FEELING HIS HEART POUNDING INSIDE HIS ABDOMEN, HIS CHEST, AND HIS THROAT. IT WAS AS IF HIS ENTIRE BODY HAD BECOME A BEATING, ENGORGED AND PULSATING ORGAN, ABOUT TO BURST.*

*HE HAD NEVER FELT SO ALIVE...*



# CASCADE

BY GIL ADAMSON

*An excerpt.*

Sampson paused at the elbow of a switchback to wait for scudding clouds to pass overhead and release the moon. The drowsy horse behind him bumped against his shoulder. The old man was in discussion with himself, and with the horse, and with the unseen trees around them, the subject being how old they both were, and how he was too old to be a father to this orphaned boy, or an uncle to him, or whatever stupid thing he was trying to do here. But what other choice did he have if the kid refused to live with him? Preferred instead to stay in his old cabin, to live alone with a ghost? Thirteen was too young to be a hermit.

The horse hung its head over Sampson's shoulder and he warmed his hands in its breath. Ice shook from the trees above and the crumbs pattered on his hat. Finally the cloud passed and they went on again, descending the mountain, moving in their slow, heavy gait, the horse saddleless and Sampson's capacious backpack stuffed to the flap with food for the kid.

He heard the sound of running water before he saw it. They splashed through a shallow gravelled stream of runoff making its kinked way downhill from the summit and across the switchbacks, the water passing sometimes under delicate panes of ice and swirling there. When they reached lower ground they both walked more easily, the old man nattering away as they entered the first meadow, flushing things out as they went. The whirl of wings above. A young affronted fox exploded from a thicket and loped away through snow, wheeled round to take their

gauge, then turned and slalomed through the bushes until it was gone. They waded through grass after it.

When they got to the perimeter of the meadow, the old man stopped as usual and turned to face his horse.

"Willow," he said, "it's all right." And as usual, the horse scanned the area ahead. Then he took the hackamore and they left the green meadow and entered an area of burnt timber, lifeless poles all askew, the bark silvery as wasp paper. The horse's gait was tight now, uneven.

Ten years previously, when the boy was still a baby and his parents still around, and they and Sampson were the only people for fifty miles, in the waning weeks of a summer of unabated heat and drought, a passing train had thrown a cinder into the parched weeds here. Or at least that was the theory everyone formed after it was all over. Flames crawled along the weeds and moved in smouldering fingers into the nearby meadow. From there, dead grass began to smoke and burn. When it reached the trees, they too went up. Sampson had awoken from an afternoon nap, lying on his bed alone, without a wife, and heard the unaccountable sound of Willow losing her mind in the corral. And then he smelled the smoke.

He had burst from his sweltering cabin into the sweltering air and saw an enormous red S inscribed on the meadow below. It was beautiful and appalling and already too big to do anything about. But it was moving away from him. So he had cornered his maddened horse, bridled it, and dragged it jerking and dancing

ILLUSTRATION BY GEORGE PFROMM





and chewing the bit away from the cabin, going the long way round the far side of the mountain to arrive back-wise at Bill's place, until Sampson was standing there in nothing but his boots and long johns, the horse sore in its mouth and tonguing the bit. Bill's wife was already in a frantic effort to pack up everything useful, and the baby was trailing her like a gosling and getting underfoot.

By 8 P.M., they were packed up, both horses were loaded and standing more or less calmly together in the visibly smoky air. Mary had paced the ground outside the cabin with the baby asleep in her arms, a kerchief covering his face. The fire's progress had slowed, so they watched it, delaying that moment when they would necessarily have to abandon their home, Mary reluctant to even close the cabin door, saying "It's all right, it's all right" to the sleeping boy's ear, to herself, to the soil beneath her black boots. Far down by the river, the figure of the park warden arrived on an exhausted horse and proceeded to pace the riverbank with his hands on his hips. Ten minutes later, four volunteer firemen from town slid up the rail lines on a handcar, trailed on the dirt road by several motorcars full of excited tourists who'd followed the smoke. The warden had sent the tourists packing with as much tact as he would kicking dogs off a veranda. Then he and the firemen sped off northwest to start cutting a firebreak.

Sampson remembered the gentle suck of convecting air, live embers floating in it like infernal fairies. Here and there stood a Thomson or lodgepole pine, its canopy hissing with flame, cones popping in the heat and blowing seeds into the smoldering grass. Sometimes there would be a crack like a rifle shot as a tree split, boiling in its own greenness.

But before dusk the wind changed direction, then changed again, and a cool breeze came up in the west, pushing against the fire just enough to woo it back across its own charred path,

across barren ground. By dark the fire was mostly extinguished and the wind had died.

Sampson and Bill had walked the periphery, with kerchiefs tied across their faces like outlaws, stamping at stubborn ground flares, their leather boot soles smoking. They climbed above the burn area and sat all night together watching, what for they knew not, but vigilance seemed to be in order, and anyway, sleep was impossible. So they sat together, and Bill told jokes Sampson failed to find funny, which, in itself, amused them both. All that night the ground was spangled with embers. They watched the weird illumination of the forest and looked up at a blank night sky, stars erased by smoke. Now and then came a crackling and a long whoosh as a ruined tree swooned against its neighbours and hit the ground, blowing fireworks into the air.

In the days afterward, the two men had laboured to cut a path from one cabin to the other through the fallen timber. Sampson swinging the axe and Bill going after smaller limbs with the saw. They looked about them at the devastation, their faces sooted and owl-ish as coal miners. Without apparent irony, Bill had sighed out, "This is scenic."

They'd both been younger then. Mary was still alive.

First, news of this war, then everything else seemed to fall apart too. Even hermits who only entered town to get supplies knew about the war. They'd all watched the rapid disappearance of young men from the area. Newspaper photographs pasted face out in shop windows. The uniforms, the black arm bands, and soon the almost total lack of men of any age in town. Sampson adjudged himself to be over fifty, Bill was likely the same. Both of them born in the woods, so age was largely a matter of opinion.

Immigrants from newly enemy countries were rounded up and interned. Sampson had seen them at a distance, a gaggle of dun-coloured

figures press-ganged into expanding the grand hotel's golf course, always under guard, or struggling to upgrade the trestle bridge in town. Even here, in the lonely stretch between two distant towns, he'd seen them grading a new highway, following the old road straight through the trackless forest toward the far town of Laggan. The train stopping where no train should, only to disgorge hell onto the rail side. Work gangs. Horses clattering down the gangplank, and crates of tools, and a wagon, and guards with rifles, and dozens of convicts whose job it was to cut an incision through the trees, their work rimmed by smoke and fire and noise. In town there were fewer tourists, fewer guiding jobs for men like Sampson and Bill, so they took to shooting animals they would never have bothered with before, foxes and martin and mink, and they set up looms in their yards and cured the pelts and hides, their hands stinging from the lye in the ash mixture, a stink on the wind even smudge fires could not carry away.

And then last year Bill's wife and child had become sick. Some unknown fever. Sampson had pieced it together later based on the simple fact that the horse could not carry three. So Bill had mounted with their dying son in his arms and ridden the four hours into town first, left the boy at the hospital, and headed back for his wife. But Mary had died alone before he could get to her. Bill had buried her, who knew where, and then he, too, had vanished, headed out into the world to do . . . what? Blow the doors off telegraph offices and steal cash. Use dynamite to raise havoc in mining towns all up and down the Rockies, from Montana to British Columbia. That's what the papers said anyway.

It had taken Sampson some weeks to apprehend that his only neighbours were gone. He was alone on the mountain. He had stood outside their abandoned cabin, calling through the open door, telling the ghost

within that he was there to remove some things for safekeeping. The house was silent. He could see nearby where a kitchen shelf had fallen to the floor and animals had skirmished over the abandoned food.

"*Miyéé,*" he told her ghost. *It's me.*

There was utter silence. A blackened pot lay on the floor. A scattering of dry leaves had wandered the floorboards and faded into the lightless hollow of the cabin. He'd felt something in his throat, a flutter of dread.

It had taken him four tries to step inside, and as he did, Sampson braced himself for her presence, her anger or sorrow, something that might blow over him and cling like sand in his hair. Instead, very clearly, he'd felt nothing. Nothing. He'd pondered this for a moment, lifting a pot from the floor and placing it gently on the stovetop. Had she gone somewhere else? Was she there in the room with him, watching? He'd tidied what he could, collected up anything that might rust or attract animals or that needed fixing, and then he'd left the cabin, looking back once into the sad debris of other people's lives, and closed the door.

To Sampson's mind, it had all seemed like an awful message, a stage play put on for him to witness, proof that the world was grinding toward its own end. He was old, and he often thought about the end.

Sampson realized now that he was standing still, his voice and his progress having faltered. Most mornings he woke without the slightest idea what else to do with his life except visit the boy, check on the boy, feed the boy. Jack ultimately had refused his new life in town, snuck out at night, loaded his horse up, and lit out. Their son had come back. A resourceful kid with his mother's stubborn will, but he was still only thirteen, and for the first time in his life Jack was alone. Which was why, too often, Sampson found himself passing through this burn area, falling helplessly again into a remembrance of fire and the smell of



fire, remembering Bill, as he always did when he made the mistake of coming this way. He wondered how long it would be before he could walk through the grey mess of dead timber and feel nothing. How long before it was just an old forest fire like any other.

Despite what he'd told the boy, he wondered if these awful stories about Bill were true. After all, Bill had worked in mines and in logging camps, and he knew perfectly well how to use dynamite. But none of it made sense in terms of the man himself. Taking money? Doing harm to people? He was still out there, spooking into towns and camps and ranger stations at night to steal things, living exactly the way he used to live, in the days before a family. It made no sense at all. Could a man change that much? But perhaps the kid knew something Sampson didn't; his open, trusting face closed down after any mention of his father.

Sampson took off his hat, turned his face up to the moon, and closed his eyes like a man sunbathing. Perhaps, he thought, we are toughest when we are young and life wears us down; we become increasingly tender with age. Certainly, it felt so to him.

He put on his hat and went on again, the hackamore swinging loose between them, and the old man's face once again in shadow. He was obliged to work his way around the crowds of infant trees that now grew in profusion and came to his shoulder, those blown seeds come to life, an impassible green fuzz congregating in the hollows, and the whole area still streaked with fireweed. The old man began to talk again, about the wisdom of going the long way around next time, his voice droning away to the horse behind him.

**O**f course, the boy was not awake when they arrived. Even the man's ceaseless rambling had failed to rouse him. Sampson put Willow in the corral, still talking. Willow made her way to the kid's horse, a furry Mor-

gan with a pretty face. Sampson was telling the two horses that the child had surely gotten very weary down there, in town, where everyone was depressed and run ragged, but this sleeping-in thing was no good, and a time came in every boy's life to stop lounging around, to wake up and get busy. It was irrelevant to him that it was before 5 A.M. and the sun was still many hours from rising.

He made his way to a chair by the icy fire ring and lowered himself groaning into it. After a moment he rose again and scrounged for dry wood under the eaves. The scrape of logs against the cabin's wall. The sound of kindling snapping under Sampson's boot, the *ching* of his metal lighter, nothing roused the kid. When the fire was crackling merrily and the rocks around it were steaming, he rooted through the rucksack and withdrew smoked venison, oats, ground coffee and sugar, a loaf of hard bread, and a pot to heat water in. The horses smelled dry oats and crowded the fence. They hung their heads over the rungs and blinked at the firelight. It was quiet, and the stars were fading.

Finally Sampson took out his handkerchief and blew his nose in three enormous goose-like honks, and with that, the boy stirred.

**S**ampson had predicted the weather would change, and it did. The mercury withered in the glass overnight and their side of the mountain went white with ice.

When Jack woke that morning it was to the thin whistle of the dog snoring. The boy lay in a fetal ball, the blanket over his head and hands over his ears against the noise. It was God Almighty cold and he was wretched with the need to piss. Sampson had been right.

Jack counted to three and flung back the blanket and immediately felt the tingle of snowflakes settling on his skin. He put his hand to his cheek: wetness on his fingers. The



blanket had glazed during the night with frozen breath, human and animal, with wet wood and the lingering damp of everything inside an old cabin. He shivered his way off the bed. The dog raised its head but otherwise didn't move. The animal was long and leggy and pale, it lay there on the bed inside its thick wolf's coat and nothing moved but its eyes. Jack huffed into his cupped hands, knuckles red with cold. On the table was a lantern and he struck a match and turned the wick until he heard the hiss of the flame, wincing from foot to foot, laying his right toes over his left like Christ, then reversing. Lantern light fell across the tabletop and heeled up the cabin's log wall.

In times past, one of his parents would have risen in the middle of the night to stoke the stove; that was just part of life in a cabin. But Jack himself had never done so, and now he'd woken to a frigid morning. The stove's metal was icy to the touch. In the vain hope of finding some coals he slid the cover aside and poked at the contents—they simply collapsed, and a half-charred log bonged against the metal hull. Dawn showed through the frosted window in a kind of diamond sparkle. The dog was wandering the cabin now, pacing over the muddy boot prints Jack had tracked inside the previous night, before he'd realized his mistake, turned back around, and left those boots outside by the stoop.

Dressing involved a sweater and another sweater and a coat before he stiff-legged his way outside, heading for the crapper. The clearing was bathed in cool morning light and pocked with muddy boot prints and dog tracks, now hardened artifacts.

His chin jabbered, but he'd seen worse cold.

The boots were standing by the front stoop and he snatched at them and stood up. The boots were still on the ground. He reached down again and pulled at them, but they stayed where they were. Last night there had

been a kind of lagoon of mud next to the stoop, now both boots were frozen to the ground. No matter what he did, they would not come loose. He twisted them side to side, hammered at them with his fist, put his feet in and tried to walk them out, laced them up and leaned forward like a ski jumper, but they held fast.

"Goddamn," he said, standing like an idiot in the stocks of his own boots. Never before had he been more tempted to piss in his own yard.

Instead, in socks, he hobbled and winced his way across the jagged ground all the way to the outhouse. It was on his way back—shivering and marvelling at how hot urine seemed on a cold day, and how getting rid of it made you feel less chilled—that his gaze fell upon the Morgan. It was entirely white, standing motionless in the ruined corral, head sagging, eyes half closed. It was a ghost horse, furry with frost.

His first thought was to walk the horse around the wide corral to warm it. But how to do that in socks?

**I**n the shed, he seized everything on the floor and flung it out the door like a fire brigadier throwing buckets. Skeins of wire, shovels and a pick, a roll of tarpaper that unfurled and unfurled and ran away downhill until it bumped up against a tree.

Then he brought the Morgan into the shed and impelled it as far inside as it could go. He brought in two oil lanterns, which he lit, then he dragged the reluctant dog inside, too. The boy lay two blankets over the horse and wrapped a third around himself and finally shut the rickety door, the idea being that three living creatures and two lanterns might warm the small space enough. The dog leapt up onto a side shelf and stood regarding the whole enterprise dubiously. There was room for the boy to stand, but he too hopped up onto the shelf beside the dog and thumped its side.

"There," he said with satisfaction. Jack

fished in his jacket pocket and took out a chunk of chocolate the size of a bar of soap and began to gnaw. The cold had whitened it so the surface looked leprous, but it still was a pretty good breakfast. The horse craned round to beg for some but he pushed its snout away. He drew his knees up to his chest and sighed. Next to him the storm lantern churned heat into the room. He cupped his hands over the chimney until they stung, then pressed his palms to his face. His cheeks felt like cold steaks. Jack could feel wind coming in at the cracks and chinks at his back, and through the ratty shingle roof he saw the colourless glow of the sky. Grains of snow fell down through that roof onto his face. He watched hoarfrost refuse to melt on the Morgan's coat.

Eventually the dog shook itself, hopped down, and scratched at the door.

"Get back here," said the boy from his awkward perch on the shelving. "Come on. This'll work."

The dog stood like a statue, waiting.

"Stop it, dingus," he said.

It gave him one flat glare and went back to staring a hole in the door.

"Get up here," he slapped the shelf beside him, for he was getting chilly without the dog's fur against him. It sat there inside its warm coat and didn't move.

After forty minutes the boy's teeth were chattering, his stockinged feet had stopped screaming but were now numb, and his breath was visible. What was worse, the horse looked dangerously sleepy. At that moment Jack was feeling the absence of his parents keenly, for he didn't really know how much cold a horse could take and there was no one to ask. Sampson was forty minutes away on horseback, and Jack didn't have any boots. He was alone with the problem. Perhaps the Morgan was perfectly fine, warm enough and falling again into a drowse. But what if, instead, it was freezing to death? He ran his hand over the

furry rump and swept away a granular palmful of snow. It ran off like sand. The air wasn't getting any warmer inside the shed, and Jack himself was beginning to suffer. By that time, the dog had already leapt onto the shelving four times to register its grievance by trampling all over the boy before jumping back down to stare at the door. The whole plan was ridiculous.

"All right fine!" said the boy, and he heeled the door open. The dog shot out and soon was a pale blur among the trees. Jack sighed, and then hammered his own thighs and shrieked out in fury, "Fuck *fuck!*"

At that, the Morgan's head jerked up out of what had been a pleasant dream. It blinked. For it was a tough, hairy animal and perfectly suited to this weather, and it had been sleeping peacefully. Like the boy, the horse had seen worse cold.

Inside the cabin, Jack paced and stamped his stinging, thawing feet. The air was muggy with the smell of damp horse. The stove was at the front of the cabin at full heat. The Morgan now stood by the back wall tethered to the ladder that led to the loft, its hooves punishing the floorboards. Jack had removed the blankets from the horse's back and shaken them out in the clearing; he'd blown out the two lanterns and stoked the stove, and now the place was warm and the animal's coat was glistening with meltwater. He whistled a little tune to himself and paced the cabin, icy fingers shoved into his armpits. He was rather proud of his solution to the problem. He wondered what Sampson would think of it.

The thought arrested him mid-step, mid-whistle. Sampson surely would not like it.

Jack wasn't sure what he should have done but he had a sickened intuition that this was exactly the wrong thing. He raked his memory in vain for any time he had seen a horse inside a house. The Morgan stood there with its tail

draped over a cedar trunk, its filthy hooves on a rag rug. The sight was preposterous.

“Oh hell,” thought the boy. “What harm can it do for a few hours?”

As if in answer, the horse began to shuffle step forward and take on the unmistakable posture of a creature about to take a piss.

“Don’t,” said the boy. “Don’t you dare.” He cast about frantically for something to catch it in, a bucket, a tub, a blanket that might soak up the liquid, anything to keep what he knew would be a river of urine from pouring across his floor. “Wait!” he called to the horse, who was definitely not going to wait. Finally, he fixed on his mother’s precious stockpot, which

he snatched up by its handles and slid under the descending penis just in time. A harsh rattle as urine drilled off the side.

The boy sank down onto the blanket box and pressed his knuckles to his mouth, tried not to giggle. Then began the alarming process of watching the pot begin to fill. Already it was several inches deep, the liquid stirring in a gentle circular motion, and the Morgan was showing no signs of letting up.

Jack began to look around the room again. He remembered Sampson, packed and ready to leave the other day, having fed the kid his breakfast, leading Willow away, then turning and saying, “Don’t do anything stupid.” 🐾

•

## STRATEGIES FOR BEING NO. 1

The night he left, the claw appeared, protruding just above her left elbow, where her hand had been. It was red and lobster-like, tiny teeth-like spikes between the upper and lower pincers. Her friends said they could not see the lobster claw, even though she felt its bulk bump against the walls of their houses, saw the black marks the impact left behind.

She had told him she didn’t want to have sex, but he pushed her to the bed and called her a slut and her underwear was sticky with mucus and she asked him to hold her arms down. She remembers he squeezed her left elbow too hard, but she liked that too.

The claw swings heavily by her side as she walks to buy groceries, forcing her shoulder to slump, so that she walks with a slouch.

As a child on a rock beach, she’d gathered crabs in a large white painter’s bucket she filled with seawater and a brown tangled nest of seaweed. Some died, tiny bodies floating to the surface of the pail. And she remembers diving, eyes open into the water, pulling through a gold-brown mass of kelp, searching for more. She remembers the salt on her skin.

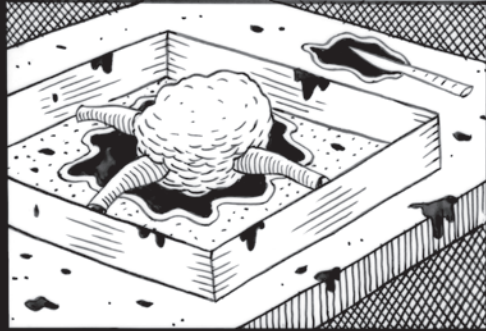
—KATE BARSS

FIBROID BY DAVE LAPP

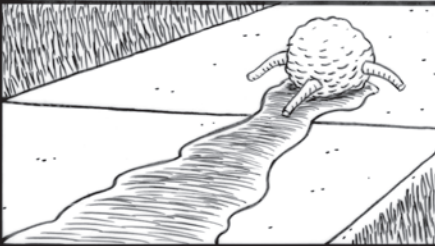
There was no way around it... there was a huge fucking fibroid and cutting it out meant no babies.



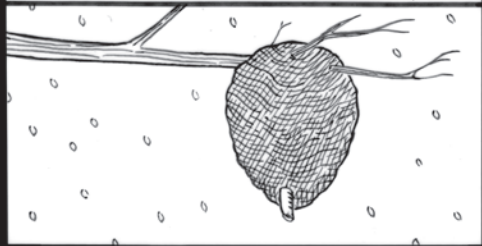
So the mass was removed and its birth weight was 2.2 kilograms.



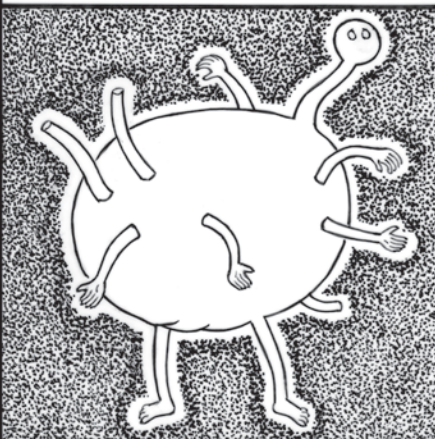
Where did it go? What did they do with it? That was the closest he was ever going to get to having a kid.



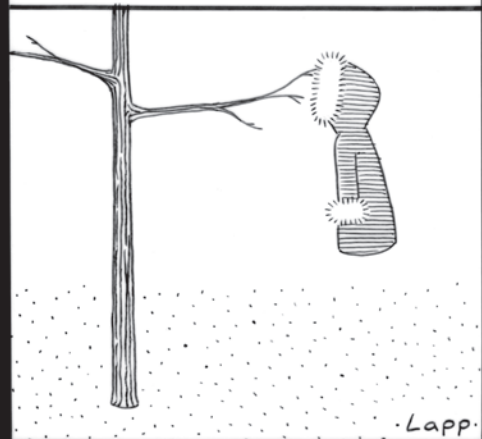
Years go by and he stares at wasp's nests wondering if there's a baby inside, slowly gestating... feeding on larvae.



As time passed, he dreaded the child who could one day show up wanting something, wanting everything.

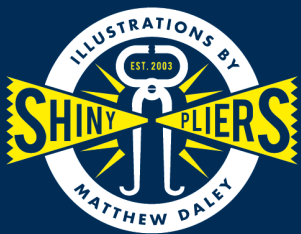
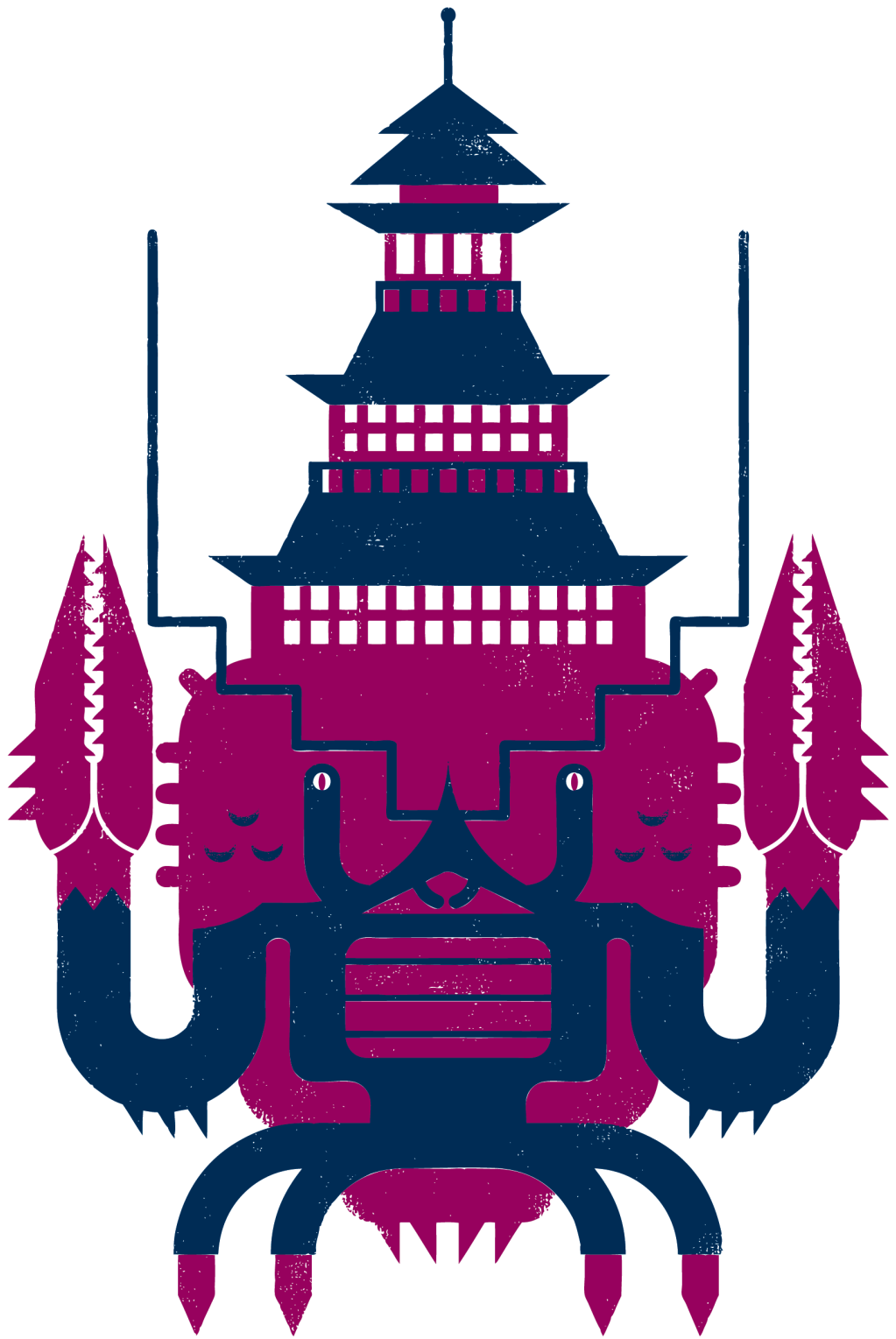


He preferred thinking of the one who wanted nothing and disappeared into a little coat hanging from a tree.



Lapp





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