



A Coup of Owls
Autumn 2023



Max Turner – Publisher
Rhiannon Wood – Editor in Chief
Dr. Sarah Boyd – Editor
Leonie Natascha - Publishing Assistant

Cover Image by Samantha McLaren
Cover Design – A Coup of Owls

Samantha McLaren is a queer Scottish writer and artist living in NYC. A confirmed ghost story and horror film addict, she is inspired by the beauty that lies in the macabre. Samantha can be found on most platforms [@themeatispeople](#) and on her website, <http://TerrorInTartan.com>, where she writes and paints about horror movies.

A Coup of Owls: Autumn 2023 (issue 11)
Published by A Coup of Owls Press
September 2023

Foreword**Page 5****Calavera by Corinne Pollard****Page 7**

People queue, waiting for a treat every year, waiting for their skull.

Corinne Pollard is a disabled UK horror and fantasy writer, published with *Sirens Call*, *Black Hare Press*, *Three Cousins Publishing*, *Trembling with Fear*, *The Stygian Lepus*, *A Coup of Owls*, and *Raven Tale Publishing*. Also, Corinne is co-editor for the Yorkshire anthology *Aire Reflections* with her dark stories and poetry inside. With a degree in English Lit and Creative Writing, Corinne has always enjoyed the world of dark fantasy. Aside from writing, Corinne enjoys metal music, visiting graveyards, and shopping for books to read. Follow her dark world on Twitter, Threads and Instagram: @CorinnePWriter

Recluse by Tucker Struyk**Page 8**

An award-winning author is tasked with writing a tell-all novel about his life.

Tucker Struyk (he/him/his) is a queer writer and podcaster for *Hookswitch Hotline*. He has pieces published by *Cosmic Horror Monthly*, *Starry Eyed Press*, *Not A Pipe Publishing*, and several other publications. His piece “Our Father’s Judgment” was published in the spring 2021 issue of *13th Floor Magazine*, where it was awarded an Editor’s Choice Award, and his piece “Getaway” was given an honorable mention in the Fall/Winter 2022-23 issue of *Allegory*.

Autonomy by Michael Staniforth**Page 19**

Sarah's body is disappearing, even though she can see it perfectly well, and no one will believe her, not even when the rats come nibbling at her toes.

Michael is an ex-academic turned engineer, a hobbyist folklorist and an amateur student of human psychology and consciousness. He has always had a fascination with the darker side of human nature and what we can learn about ourselves and each other from those things that we fear. He lives in the South East of England with his partner and enough unread books to fill him with a deep sense of existential dread. As well as with *A Coup of Owls*, you can find his words in the upcoming anthology *Dark Speculations*.
Twitter: @StaniforthMick

Like Father Like Children by You Lin

Page 37

There are four of us: formless, nameless, lifeless. We are nothing; we are everything. We are restless; we are dead.

You Lin is a writer whose pieces explore darker themes consistent with the fragments of her identity. Her work has been published by *Archer Magazine*, *The Bitchin' Kitsch*, and *The Minison Project's Pop-Up Pride Issue*, among others. Locally, you can find her work at *Malaysian Indie Fiction* and *NutMag Volume 7: Inheritance*.

Smoke and Honey by Ende Mac

Page 45

A guardian angel reflects on humanity—and love—at a hospital bedside.

Ende Mac is getting their law license somewhere out in the great plains of the American Midwest. They have a piece with *Robot Butt*, as well as other forthcoming publications at *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Fusion Fragment*, *If There's Anyone Left*, and *Drabblecast*. Their writing predominantly centers around abstract speculative fiction, queer identity, and criminal law reform. Please feel free to reach out to them at @endewriting on Twitter and BlueSky.

Foreword

I've been thinking about thresholds lately, particularly in my writing. After a note from my mentor, I read the word 'threshold' in large, red lettering on my latest draft. I had to think for a moment about what she meant in the context of novels. After I looked it up, I realised she meant the moment between the before and the after. We don't get to think about this in life a lot. Time moves us constantly from then to now. From there to here. We don't get to sit on the threshold. Unless you have Bernard's watch, the titular magical object from a very old English kid's TV show. I was always incredibly jealous of Bernard, who owned a watch that could stop time for everyone and everything except him, meaning he could walk around and do whatever he pleased while the rest of the world was frozen. How many times have you wanted to click a button and stop it all for a moment so you could just breathe? Bernard solved problems with his watch; I'd mostly use it to take a look around unnoticed!

Of course, when we write and read, we get close to the power of Bernard's watch. We can spend some time in the smallest moments and take it all in. The ultimate literary example that comes to mind is *Ulysses*. The events of that book take place in one day, yet it's over seven hundred pages long (unpopular opinion, but it *feels* seven hundred pages long). *Ulysses* spends time in (and lets its readers spend time in) the moment between. When a character exists in one experience and is about to be thrust, or gently nudged, into another. It's a millisecond in life, but in words, it can be over seven hundred pages.

It reminds me of when I fling myself into the sea. I've started swimming with a local group of people who also wish they had gills. We meet on a cold beach, usually early in the morning, depending on tide times, and collectively wade into the freezing cold sea. There is always a moment when your breath is pushed from your lungs, and you panic at how freezing it is. But you know that once you are in, it will be amazing. The knowledge of this fact, gleaned from the memory of previous times and the sight of your fellow merpeople swimming about with massive grins, is the only thing that propels you forward. You have to force yourself to breathe. To move. To just keep swimming, as Dory would say. It becomes a conscious act. As you shriek and flail, you know you are at a threshold. The 'before this becomes enjoyable' moment. It hurts. Your mind is filled with thoughts of 'Why am I doing this?' Then it happens – you are through. You are floating in salt water as close to weightlessness as you'll get on this planet. It feels incredible – and not unlike the process of writing.

Our stories in this issue are particularly thought-provoking. They exist in the threshold. Each one is that stuttering, forced breath I take in and then shudder out into the cold water. Death taking your hand once again and leading you back into life. Revenge served through words. The knowledge that what we do in life has consequences, and even if they take a while to find us, they will. When we fight to be heard, we lose our bodies to outside forces and must grab onto those remnants of self with every fibre of our disappearing being. When we are collecting parts of ourselves in the hope we can build something complete.

In our forest by the fire, owls ruffling their feathers under the full moon, we can all sit with Bernard's watch and stop time. We can cross a threshold together. Take a moment. Look around and find your fellow travellers, take comfort and take flight.

Rhiannon Wood, Editor in Chief

Calavera

by Corinne Pollard

Content Warnings: Body horror.

Not your thing? Skip to page 8 for the next story.

Every year, they queue outside, waiting for their treat. They disguise themselves. It is a wonder what make-up and costumes can achieve.

‘May I have my skull?’

I smile at the outstretched phalanges. His voice holds a note of worry. But I’m no monster. ‘Here you go, sonny.’

The magical skull plops into his cupped metacarpals, and with no hesitation, he rips his mask and cranium off to attach it. It’s stiff at first, then he grins with plumped lips and stretches his newborn neck, popping bones.

He wears his skin for one night, until I see him next year.

Recluse

by Tucker Struyk

Content Warnings: Drug use, death, suicide, non-consent.

Not your thing? Skip to page 19 for the next story.

‘It is a sad fate for a man to die too well known to everybody else,
and still unknown to himself.’

- Francis Bacon

From a first-class seat, thirty-thousand feet in the air, the mind of Herman C. Sriver fluttered from the here and now to the dead and buried in a death spiral of abstract thoughts. Behind his closed eyes, sweet dreams morphed into bitter memories. He saw himself as a stripling, sojourned in the Western Province of Sri Lanka – his eyes swollen from tears. He pushed through crowded sidewalks to the hospital entrance. Inside, he found his way to Anvit. His leaden footsteps echoed through the hospice care wing. In the hospital room, a Buddhist monk chanted in diaphragmatic song. On the bed, Anvit rested in a moribund state. His mouth agape, an intubation tube protruded from his parted lips. Herman watched from the doorway. Somehow – after five years spent together – he still felt removed from the spiritual tether that indwelled his lover.

Eventually, the monk left. Once they were alone, Anvit and Herman, the hustle and bustle of the world around them came to a halt. Herman sat by Anvit’s side, held his limp hand and read him passages from John Henry Newman’s *The Dream of Gerontius*. Anvit twitched a finger. Herman stared at the fullness of Anvit’s lips and imagined what Anvit would say in that moment. Words ran through his mind. Nothing could quite match Anvit’s voice.

Herman checked the time on his Rolex Submariner. A little over an hour had passed. He sighed. In their final moments together, Herman had never felt so alone.

*

Turbulence roused Herman from his doze. He peeled the sleeping mask from his face. His eyes adjusted to the sunlight in time to make contact with the flight attendant. For the remainder of the trip from San Francisco to Colombo, he snacked on caviar and sipped from a glass of Dom Pérignon to cleanse his palate between bites. The plane landed at the Ratmalana International Airport. From there, he took a taxi to his vacation home.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. The name Edi flashed across the screen. He squinted to be sure he'd read it right. His hand absentmindedly scratched the scruff on his chin. He held the phone in thought for a moment, then answered the call.

'How's my favourite Hugo Award winner doing?' asked Edi.

Herman scoffed. 'That's cute and all, but let's be blunt.' He cracked the car window by his seat. The fresh air acted as a reprieve from the stale cigarette stench. 'What does a literary agent, with the pedigree you have, still want with a washed-up writer like me?'

'Hey, you know me,' she said. 'Have I ever chased a false lead?'

Herman grinned. 'Not yet, but even you can't get me out of the trouble I'm in.' He fingered the creases of his forehead. Kottu roti vendors and wheeled food carts darted through his purview from the outside world. His smile faded. The taxi came to a halt in front of a group of schoolboys on the crosswalk. 'Can you?'

Edi chuckled; her laugh came dry and forced. 'I've spoken to some publishers,' she said, 'and there's interest in a tell-all book from you.' She cleared her throat. 'You know, about the whole scandal situation.'

'You've got to be kidding me.' Herman balked. 'That was ages ago.' He waved a free hand in the air as if to dismiss the idea. 'My thoughts on the matter might be better for a pamphlet than a book since there's not much to say – other than the whole thing was a bunch of baseless rumours.' Herman paused. He waited for Edi to agree with him, but she made no comment of the sort. He continued, 'The chief of Sri Lanka's National Child Protection Authority himself said there was no case against me.'

Edi waited for him to finish. 'Uh, no, actually,' she said. 'I was referring to the accusations from Clay Arkwright.' He heard the shuffling of papers on her end. 'He didn't out you by name per se, but people are doing the math and putting two and two together. You were *New Worlds* magazine's guest editor at the time in question, after all.' She suddenly dropped her serious tone for a more conversational one. 'Surely you've seen the online petition to ban your books from public libraries and schools.'

'Don't forget the *New York Times* article,' added Herman.

Edi let out a deep exhale. ‘So you’re aware.’ Her breath steadied. ‘Look, there’s two sides to every story. All it takes is your angle in hardcover to change people’s minds. Fans already want to believe you’re everything they dreamed you to be and more. Just feed them the narrative they want to hear.’ She hesitated. ‘Besides, if you don’t get ahead of this soon, your image will be beyond my repair. I’ll be unable to renew our contract.’

In a moment of distraught distraction, Herman watched the schoolboys until they drifted from view. His voice waned to a murmur as he scanned the crowds along the promenade. The taxi driver glanced back at him in the rearview mirror. ‘I understand,’ he said. ‘Just give me some time to consider. The ordeal was so long ago. I don’t even remember the boy.’

‘I don’t think you do understand,’ Edi scoffed. ‘I’m doing this as a favour to you – someone I once considered a friend.’ There was a lull. Herman could not bring himself to question why she’d spoken in past tense. ‘Our contract expires in the coming days. This is your last chance.’

The call ended abruptly. Herman sank into the headrest. His eyes closed. Somewhere, in the taxi’s start-and-stop rhythm through traffic, he found refuge in foregone bereavements.

*

In the days following Anvit’s death, Herman had retreated into his home office. There, he perused magazine articles and books he had already read and reread many times. He was eager for stimulation, but nothing would suffice. Anvit’s coffin rested in the kitchen down the hall. It sat in wait for the funeral to come. The first two days leading up to the funeral passed in utter despair. Herman cried for hours on end. Yet, he could not bring himself to get any closer than the kitchen doorframe. Monks visited the home, collapsed to the floor in seiza position, chanted, offered a white piece of cloth and left. They never paid Herman so much as a passing glance. To them, he was an outside observer. Nothing more.

By the third day, Herman turned to bourbon for company. His thoughts grew too loud in the home’s silence. The walls echoed bygone pleasures in his ear. Each came as a delicate whisper from the dark. Words that nipped at his earlobe and traced the helix with their silver tongue. He needed to dull the senses. He could not suffer the pain any longer – not sober, at least. He rifled through his liquor cabinet until he found the bottle. He poured himself a glass, downed the drink in one gulp, then poured himself another. A burn ran down the back of his throat and left a bitter taste in his mouth.

He drank until his eyes became glazed and unfocused. He figured by then, he would be numb enough to meet his deceased lover face-to-face once more. He was wrong. The thought still sent goosebumps down his spine. He had no scruples about seeing Anvit again; what set him off was the notion that this could be the last time. They had broached a moment they would never get back once it had passed. The final threshold. Though, he knew, even in inaction, the opportunity would slip through his fingers eventually.

With a low sigh, he entered the kitchen. His gaze fell to the wooden crate sat in his dining area. He lurched over Anvit's corpse and saw nothing but the wood grain. The coffin became an oaken shield that he hid behind. A Schrödinger's box, where Anvit was still alive – if not there, at least somewhere – as long as nobody peeked inside. Herman's head sank low. He palmed his forehead and fought the urge to cry. Anvit deserved better than that. He deserved someone who could meet him eye-to-eye, as true equals in life and in death. Herman opened the lid. Inside, Anvit lay in a zinc-lined bed. His face was bloated beyond recognition from the embalming fluid. His radiant eyes were withheld behind glued eyelids. His round lips were stitched together in a suture. He bore no resemblance to the man Herman loved.

Herman staggered backward. The coffin lid slammed closed. He exhaled in quivered breaths. Hot tears rolled freely off his chin and onto a buttoned-up Hawaiian shirt. He poured a glass of bourbon to take the edge off. The recollection faded from there.

*

The potholes along Havelock Road jolted Herman awake. He lifted his head from the taxi's backseat window as the driver turned into his driveway. His neck craned to get a look through the Ceylon ironwood trees in the front yard. The home was a modest place with stucco walls and ceramic tile roofing but none of the trappings of a gaudy writer's retreat. Nothing anyone would look twice at – unless they knew this was the home of a famous science fiction author. Herman smiled to himself. He went inside. His home consisted of a small bedroom, an office, a kitchen and a storage closet in the hall. In the office, model airplanes and an Olivetti typewriter, strewn about the desk, were left untouched from his last stay. He wandered over to the bookcase. On the shelves were awards, a collection of books by Isaac Asimov, and contributor's copies from a few of his renowned works. He found comfort in those old trinkets. A warmth no longer present in San Francisco or the world over. The house acted as a time capsule to a better era, a better Herman. He gazed out through the office window.

Outside, tucked away in a flower garden bed, stood a pair of headstones. One for each of his pet chihuahuas.

Eventually, he sat behind the desk and removed the laptop from his bag. His eyes lingered on the blank page long before his fingers had any inclination to move. He sucked his teeth. Autobiography was never his strong suit. There was no easy place to begin a story so subjective, so broad – only pitfalls that made him appear the predator. He struggled to even recall the details. After a few minutes with no luck, he minimised the Word document and pulled up the New York Times article in a separate tab on his internet browser. He squinted. His eyes strained under the computer's blue light. Clay's words exuded vigour and voice in spite of the subject matter. The reader could visualise the scenario at hand. He was not merely stating his claim. He dragged the reader into his memory and let them draw their own conclusions. His prose had the power Herman's lacked – perspective.

Herman flung his glasses from his nose and let them clatter onto the keyboard. His eyes, through blurred vision, drifted to an ornate urn placed atop the bookcase – to Anvit. He leaned back in his chair. Anvit's ashes acted as a testament of grief to remind him that, before the rumours and before Clay, Herman had already lost the world. Whatever came next, whatever torment Clay mustered could never match the anguish of heartache, and Herman had no heart left to offer. There was no life after love, not for him – that much he had made certain of.

The laptop screen faded to black in an effort to conserve battery power. He turned to the clock and shook his head. With the urn still fresh in his mind's eye, he rubbed his eyes until he disrupted the blood flow. Rings of light bled forth from the darkness until the office around him was consumed by splotches in the phosphene.

*

Spots of light faded to the black from whence it came. Traces of its irradiance remained only as a fragmented memory that dwindled with each passing second. Herman opened his eyes.

In memorial of Anvit's life, his urn was placed upon a pillar for friends and family to gawk at with tearful eyes and shallow solaces. Herman sat alone through the service. His eyes scanned the room. No one offered him condolences – not that he would have understood them if they had. Anvit's loved ones came in by the dozen. They all greeted one another with solemn recognition. Yet, Herman could not place a single face or name in the crowd. Not only that, but his face bore no meaning to them, as if he was to be dismissed as an

acquaintance and not a partner. He chose to skip the feast offered by the monk. After the ceremony, he caught a cab back home – his arms wrapped around Anvit's urn during the drive. Once inside, he was greeted by a message from Edi on his answering machine. She had arranged for him to be *New Worlds*' guest editor as his comeback to the literary world after a long hiatus. He accepted.

*

The memory left Herman numb. His eyes lingered on the loops and swirls etched into the pattern on Anvit's urn. Just then, there came a shuffling from down the corridor. Someone had opened the hall closet and removed the vacuum cleaner for a bit of spring cleaning. Herman crept out from the office. He found the culprit untangling the vacuum cleaner's wire in the bedroom. His housekeeper, Dilipa. She regarded him, from across the room, with wide eyes. Her brows raised up to her hairline. 'Itu mutiyumā?' she said. Once the realisation sank in, she reeled him in for a warm embrace. 'Nāṇ puriyavillai.' Her eyes narrowed. 'What brings you here?'

He grinned. 'It's great to see you,' he told her. 'It's been a long time.'

'It's been too long.' She paused while she looked him up and down. 'Time is a funny thing, huh?' she said. She gestured toward the chihuahuas' gravestones in the backyard. 'Every time I look out there, I think of those little hellions. You loved those dogs.' Her gaze loitered in the garden outside. 'Remember?'

He cleared his throat as if to cut off this line of questioning before it had begun. 'Thank you again, Dilipa, for all your help over the years.' He wrapped an arm around her. 'I'd love nothing more than to sit and chat right now, but I'm on a tight schedule, and I've got to get back to work.' He shrugged and patted her shoulder. 'You understand.'

She nodded. 'Say no more.' She backpedalled out of the room with the vacuum in hand. Her feet shuffled backwards while her eyes were in a deadlock with his. The amber hue of her irises pierced his shrewd exterior. 'I'll give you your privacy.' On her way out the door, she said, 'I'll be back tomorrow morning.'

He returned to the comfort of his battered desk chair. He stared at the ink pen he had propped up upon its stand. His hands steepled above the laptop. Without a second thought, he typed the first words that came to mind. Each stroke of his fingers grew more tentative than the last. He propounded, from an apocryphal perspective, until he hit a wall. He reread the

paragraph he had just written, then promptly deleted it. His tone reeked of desperation. He closed the laptop and moseyed over to the liquor cabinet.

He poured himself the stiffest drink he had on hand. The booze burn arrived at the back of his throat to put his mind at ease. He rose to his feet and tripped over an ottoman. His drunken stumble sent him rocketing toward the shelf until he caught himself – mere inches from Anvit’s urn. He straightened his posture to meet Anvit face-to-face. His mien appeared warped in the urn’s reflection. He cursed under his breath. His eyes were cast elsewhere – anywhere, as long as Anvit was nowhere to be seen.

He rummaged through desk drawers in search of a downer to put him on his ass. He had not partaken since a time out of mind, but decades ago, he had acquired the taste. It took a couple go-rounds with rehabs across the country before he managed to kick the nasty habit, but now was an altogether different story. He needed something to make him forget his woes, at least until the morning light. Eventually, he found an old pill bottle labelled Quaaludes. He washed down the sedative with a sip of bourbon. His slurp was followed by a sharp inhale. Then, silence. After an hour spent in wait, the effects never kicked into gear. He figured the pills must have reached their expiration date. He checked the label to confirm what he already knew. They were duds.

He thumbed at the inner corners of his eyes. His vision blurred from grey to black. Novels, honours and bibelots sprang from the colourless void. Memorabilia spun around his head like a halo of twittering birds in some old cartoon. He could no longer stomach it. He tore through the room in a whirlwind. By the time he got to his luggage, the office was laid bare. His hands fumbled for a razor blade in his travel bag. He unfolded the razor from its handle and held it to his arm. Cold steel pressed above his radial artery in a push downward. The skin cracked under increased pressure and, finally, broke. Blood spilled out. He moaned. From the crimson droplets upon the porcelain sink, a devil burst forth – a yakseya in the flesh. Herman knelt at the demon’s feet. His eyes lowered to the nylon fibres of the carpet. The demon spoke under the guise of one’s own thoughts. His name was Wesamuni. He wore an opulent crown and tendered wonders from the palm of his hand. As a show of good faith, Wesamuni offered up his written word in exchange for Herman’s soul. With a nod, Herman accepted. The great king rested his golden blade upon each of Herman’s shoulders in a debased knighting ceremony. As part of the ritual, the demon king named his servant anew. Herman repeated the name. ‘Maha Sohona,’ he said. With that, Wesamuni was gone. Herman sat alone behind a computer desk. He bore no wound on his arm nor saw any blood in the sink.

He opened the laptop. His eyes scanned through files, but he came up empty-handed. He looked over his shoulder and into the darkness of night – a doe-eyed stare from spectacle to spectator. In a plume of smoke, Anvit materialised in disembodied form. He stood in adlocutio pose. His face was obscured in black. Somewhere, buried underneath the soot, Anvit's eyes still remained. Herman leapt out of his chair. He ran to Anvit with arms outstretched. His lips parted to make way for a toothy grin. Suddenly, as he approached the lamented, he took note of the incisors that protruded from Anvit's closed lips – fangs concealed behind a puckered muzzle. He came to a halt. Anvit opened his mouth to reveal a pair of ivory tusks. Herman fell back. His feet struggled to keep up with his jerky movements. With eyes that bulged out of their sockets, Anvit had Herman backed up to the bookshelf.

In a series of rasping clicks, Anvit unclenched his jaw and bellowed a guttural ballad. The lyrics held familiarity in Herman's prudent heart.

Anvit's recited words floated in the putrid air. He spoke, through decayed lips, "Rouse thee, my fainting soul, and play the man..." He lurched forward until he had Herman pinned between Anthony Burgess and F. Scott Fitzgerald. "...And through such waning span..." Herman looked into his eyes but saw nothing. They were empty – a world devoid of life. "...Of life and thought as still has to be trod." Herman looked away. His head turned to the side. "Prepare to meet thy God." Herman was confronted with an old photograph of himself, printed on the back of a *New Worlds* edition from decades ago. "And while the storm of that... bewilderment... is for a season spent..." Anvit's cold hands gripped Herman by the shoulders. "...And, ere afresh the ruin on thee fall..." He wrung the breath from Herman's lungs. "Use well the interval."

Blood vessels burst in Herman's eyes. He cried out in an inarticulate wail. Anvit thrust his fingers beyond Herman's occluded lips, inside the mouth and down the throat. Herman tasted the rot on his tongue. His eyes watered. He fought the urge to gag. Anvit pried until Herman's jaw unhinged from its temporomandibular joints. In that moment, Herman disassociated from his corporeal form and transported himself to a dream long forgotten by time – through will or happenstance, he could not say.

*

In the back channels of his mind emerged a reverie. Outside, through the bow window, inhered a back view of Kensington Gardens. Inside, red curtains were draped from the

canopy mantled above the hotel bed. A sitting nook was placed off to the side, away from the bed and the TV. There, Herman poured two glasses of Dom Pérignon. One for him and one for Clay Arkwright. The two were celebrating after having signed a publishing contract. Herman sat across from Clay. His single-breasted, grey suit sat low and exposed a long knit tie. He eyeballed the young writer from afar. Meanwhile, Clay floundered in the quietude. His eyes darted across the room to avert Herman's ogling.

Herman cleared his throat. 'Do you know why I selected your story over the thousands submitted?' he asked. His brow raised as Clay awaited an answer. He chuckled. 'This isn't a rhetorical question.'

'Oh, uh, I'm not sure,' Clay tittered. 'Please, enlighten me.'

'Yours had true craftsmanship, you know, nuance.' Herman raised his glass to Clay with a pointed finger. 'That's something that can't be faked, and it can't be duplicated. It's art.' He rose from his chair. 'I saw that in you immediately. You and you alone.' He dawdled around the coffee table between them and pivoted to the ottoman near Clay's feet.

Clay smirked. 'I'm flattered,' he said, 'but I'm not alone in this edition.' His smile faded as he drank from his glass. 'You gathered a great compendium, and I'm honoured to be among those selected.'

'Don't be modest,' said Herman. 'It's so mundane.' He set his drink aside. 'You've seen the magazine in print. You've read what the others have to offer.' He grabbed Clay, by the big toe, in a playful wiggle. 'None of them holds a candle to you, and you know it.' His touch lingered.

Clay's foot recoiled. His legs folded under him in tailor fashion. 'Oh, I don't know what to say.' He brushed a shaky hand through his lush head of hair. 'Thank you, I suppose.'

Herman walked over to the foot of the bed. 'Don't be so timid with me,' he told Clay. 'We are contemporaries, after all.' He patted a spot on the mattress just beside himself. 'Come, have a seat over here.' He beckoned Clay with a wave of his hand.

Clay obliged. The colour drained from his cheeks.

Herman placed an arm around Clay. With his free hand, he rummaged through his pocket. As he searched, he felt Clay squirm from his embrace. Eventually, he found the little baggy. In the palm of his hand rested a couple of pills. He offered one to Clay.

Clay's face fell. 'What is it?'

'A party in a pill.' Herman brought Clay in closer. He muttered in Clay's ear, 'Come on, try one. It's just a lude.' He simpered. 'One won't bite.'

With hesitancy in his eyes, Clay accepted.

*

Launched from past to present, Herman found himself asleep in the flowerbed of his garden. He pried open his weary eyes to the sight of an ant perched upon a blade of grass. He sat upright. His arms and chest were encrusted with grime. Beside him, the chihuahuas' graves were excavated to mounds of discarded dirt next to two big holes in the yard. His mind strained to put together the missing pieces to the puzzle that was his memory. In a trice, it came to him: Dilipa's visit, the expired Quaaludes in his desk drawer, Wesamuni's proposition. He rushed inside to the trashed office and checked the laptop. He saw an email from him to Edi; attached was a document labelled 'Tell All Manuscript.' He froze. As he scrolled through the pages, his heart rate came to a standstill. He could not help but laugh. Perhaps, somehow, his dream had come true. His laughter subsided. He looked about the room – half-expecting to find the crew for a hidden camera show. There were no gods nor monsters in this world; he had seen enough to know that much. Yet, the words were right there – not his words, to be sure, but words all the same. He rested his head in the palm of his hands. When he looked up, his eyes homed in on a leather-bound book placed upon the bookshelf. He got to his feet. As he inched closer, he noticed the limp binding, like a vellum from the eighteenth century. He cocked his head to the side. By the time he plucked it from its bookcase, he'd realised the binding was not leather. Rather, the book was bound in macerated flesh. Inside were pages typed, under his name, full of words he did not recognise. Strange, horrible words. He retched. The book fell to the floor.

Police sirens sounded from outside the front door. From across the street, Dilipa watched the house with pained eyes. Meanwhile, Herman scrambled away from the siren's call. Through torn pages and shattered glass littered across the floor, he fled to the backyard. He picked up pace as he heard police officers enter unannounced. His lungs lit ablaze as his body put in overtime to pump in oxygen. Just then, his foot got caught in a shallow grave, and he collapsed. Inside the hole, he came face-to-face with the dearly departed who had resided there all this time. He recoiled. His lips tightened to a moue. He stumbled back to his feet and looked down at the graves from above. He stared in disbelief. Down below rested the bodies of two flayed human boys – strangled, decades ago, by the very hands that had dug them up.

The police found him there, in the garden, tucked between the blue lotuses sprouting from an ornamental pond and the wilted Kadapul flowers by his head. He held his befouled hands up in the air.

*

Months later, at a bookstore in San Francisco, a woman approached the podium. Her high-heeled pumps clacked across the linoleum floor. She scanned heads among the assembly. The crowd watched on with vacant eyes. They suspired in open-mouthed breaths. Their shoulders lurched forward in slouched positions. The presenter plastered a counterfeit smile upon her austere countenance. ‘Thank you, one and all, for being here tonight. The Bookworm Cafe is honoured to present high art to the community, and tonight’s speaker is no exception,’ she said. She looked off to the side to be sure the reader was in their position. ‘Now, without further ado, please give a warm welcome to our live reader for the evening. She’s the author and editor of the *New York Times* bestseller, *Devil’s Bible: The Confessions of Herman C. Scriver*. Put your hands together for Edi Ezer.’ The audience clapped.

Edi took the stage. Behind the cat’s-eye frames, her eyes beamed with rapture. She waved to the spectators. ‘Thank you,’ she said. The cheers died down. ‘I’d like to open this reading with a content warning.’ She paused. The lull impregnated the room with anticipation. ‘This book details the crimes of Herman C. Scriver. A man who hid his perverse exploits behind a reclusive façade. A man who lied to everyone he knew – even himself.’ Edi bore a distant look in her eyes. She lost her place in the crowd. Her eye-line lowered to the microphone cord at her feet. The wire, wrapped around her ankle, appeared as the noose around Herman’s neck. In her mind’s eye, his limp body dangled from the jail cell ceiling. She caught herself in suspended animation. She met the audience’s gaze once more. ‘As well as listener discretion for the reading itself, the Bookworm Cafe and I would like to caution viewers of the graphic content depicted in Scriver’s illustrations. Scriver’s sketches are amateur but gruesome, nonetheless. If anyone is squeamish, please feel free to excuse yourself at any time.’

With shaken breaths, Edi read an excerpt from the novel. The book’s dust jacket was meant to emulate human flesh. Her hands gripped the hardcover panels with zeal. She buried her face in the very pages she read from. In the selected chapter, Herman described his years spent in Colombo after the death of Anvit. The crowd sat on the edge of their seats. Some recorded from their phones; others gave an inquisitive stare. Not a soul winced at the crude drawings of sexual assault projected onto the wall behind her, nor at the mention of child murder. When Edi finished, they all erupted in applause.

Autonomy

by Michael Staniforth

Content Warnings: Body horror, rats.

Not your thing? Skip to page 37 for the next story.

Sarah's body was disappearing, although she could see it perfectly well. She watched as fingers that were not her own waggled about on the end of her hand. They were there and not there all at once. They clenched, unclenched, waggled again at her command, but if she closed her eyes, they were gone, her sensation of self terminating as a fingerless lump on the end of her arm.

'It's probably nothing,' Sarah's husband Pete said as he paced the room, looking for his shoes. But then, he would say that.

Sarah hummed in response, low and non-committal, then went back to working the digits.

'You must have slept funny,' Pete said.

Sarah poked at them with her other hand, trying to massage the blood back into them.

'Probably,' Sarah finally said, although none of the feeling returned for all her worrying. 'Probably nothing.'

'Yeah, just give it some time.'

Sarah pinched at the fingertips, leaving deep furrows in her skin, almost drawing blood. There was no pain, no pins, no needles.

'Hey, it's not so bad,' Pete said. 'You can touch yourself and pretend it's someone else.'

Pete shot a wink at his wife, which bounced off the steel of her scowl and lay between them, embarrassed and lame. Sarah would have slapped him if she'd had the power in her hand. She might have used her left, but she was unsure of the strength in her non-dominant hand. Then the moment had passed, and Pete had already kept up his smirk all the way out of the front door on his way to work. Now she had to live with the fact of that grin going unchallenged.

'Arsehole,' Sarah said to the walls, shaking her numb hand at her husband's retreating

footsteps.

Despite her best efforts, Sarah could not convince the blood to flow in the extremities of her right hand. In the privacy of her own truth, without Pete's expectations and opinions filling the room, Sarah could admit that, if anything, it was getting harder to move her fingers, not easier. She grabbed her phone from the kitchen counter, and immediately it flew across the room into the washing up.

'Ah, fucking shit! Clumsy idiot!'

Sarah fished her phone out from among the dirty dishes with her left, now more dextrous, hand. The sink had not been full, so the phone was wet but working, but the screen was cracked. Sarah swept the lifeless stumps of her fingers across the screen, but it didn't respond. Her fingers weren't just numb, they apparently didn't exist. Not that it mattered, she considered. She could call a doctor, but she'd just be told the same thing her husband said. Give it time; it's probably nothing. They might throw in a 'Could you be pregnant?' for good measure. It seemed to be the only idea they ever had.

What was she supposed to do with this? She couldn't work. Maybe if it had been her left hand, but she could barely hold a pen. She tossed the phone back onto the countertop, as useless to her as her lifeless hand. As useless as her husband, leaving her with only one working hand all day.

No, Sarah thought, *I'm not being fair*. What was he supposed to do, drop everything, skip work, just because her hand had gone to sleep? No, that would be unreasonable, too demanding, wouldn't it? He might have been just a little bit late for work, though, to help her out, it wouldn't have killed him. Either way, Pete had left her on her own, and she was just going to have to deal with it.

*

By the third day of dealing with it, Sarah was unable to move her hand at all. It was a dead weight, worse than useless. She found it impossible to put her right arm anywhere without having to drag about the lump of flesh and bones. Her hand was becoming scratched and raw, yet still, she felt nothing. There were ways to work around it. She was quickly becoming adept at typing one-handed, and if desk work didn't work out for her, Sarah could always join the circus as a contortionist for the skills she had learned in dressing herself with only a single hand.

What Sarah had not anticipated was the arguments, that her having an illness might be

a point of contention between Pete and herself. But when she pushed Pete to take a little more of the responsibility on himself, what started as deep sighs, rolled eyes, excuses of ‘I’m tired. I’ve been at work. I’ll do it tomorrow,’ soon became something more forceful, even (although Sarah was loath to admit it) vicious.

‘I’m not saying I won’t do it,’ Pete said when Sarah tried to broach the subject of housework once again. ‘All I’m saying is that doing the hoovering doesn’t really need two hands, does it?’

There was no concern in the question at all, no worry over something that was becoming debilitating. There was just the argument, a desperate need to be right he would never admit to. For Sarah, this was serious, and it was disabling, and it needed to be addressed. But to Pete, it was something else, a non-issue, an irritation, a temporary problem that would go away if she would just ‘give it some time.’

‘Is it really that bad? You seem to cope with it okay when I’m not in the house.’

Of course, what he didn’t see didn’t exist, like a baby without object permanence. Had he always been this way, Sarah wondered, or was the stress of her situation making her paranoid?

‘My body’s not up for debate, Pete! I’m just asking for a little damned support!’

‘I am trying to be supportive, I just don’t understand why I’m suddenly being treated like a slave in my own home.’

Sarah was silent. There weren’t words. There was a twinge of pain in her arm above her limp and useless wrist. She cradled it to her body, but it was like holding the handle of a broom, a lump of wood, not a person, nothing but a tool.

‘I need to see the doctor,’ Sarah said.

‘If you think you need to,’ Pete said.

What did he mean by that? If she *thought* she needed to?

‘I can’t feel my hand, Pete! I can’t move it!’ she said.

‘Yeah,’ Pete said, putting up both of his hands in self-defence. ‘I said you should call Jesus.’

There was a pause while Sarah fiddled with her mobile in her left hand, working up the courage for another fight.

‘Can you call, please?’

‘I have to get to work. Can’t you do it?’

‘It’s a bit tough for me, Pete!’ Sarah said, knocking her numb hand against her phone screen to demonstrate to him what she thought should be clear. Pete was already halfway out

the door, letting the momentum carry him away from a conflict he had no interest in.

‘Pete!’

Sarah grabbed him with her good hand, physically holding him inside the house in a move that she instantly regretted. The pair of them stood like that for a moment, which was a second of annoyance for Pete but for Sarah stretched out in an infinite recursion of all the possibilities of how he might react. Fortunately, Pete wanted to fight even less than he wanted to be late for work.

‘Okay, fine,’ he consented, taking his coat back off and dropping, near throwing, his briefcase on the floor.

Pete used the thumb of the same hand he held his phone in to flick through to the doctor’s number. He might just as easily have done it with two, but he didn’t, and Sarah saw that he didn’t. He did it with one hand, right in front of her, right in her face.

It took twenty minutes to get through to the surgery. With every minute, Pete’s face fell by degrees, a ticking clock of patience that was winding up instead of down. When finally, the call did connect, Pete tossed the phone at his wife and turned his back on the situation to get on with his own day.

It was a very careful act of acrobatics for Sarah to catch and answer her phone without dropping the call. After rushing through the necessary pleasantries, Sarah described the problem.

‘Okay. First of all, is there any chance that you are pregnant?’

Sarah took a deep breath and counted to ten.

‘Can you hear me?’ the phone said.

‘No.’

‘You can’t hear me?’

‘I’m not pregnant!’

Sarah wanted to scream, but she couldn’t show herself to be over-emotional. She didn’t want to be dismissed out of hand. Of course, she couldn’t seem blasé either. Just the right amount of emotion, concerned but not hysterical. She couldn’t just speak her truth; she had to paint the picture he expected to see.

‘Is there any discolouration?’ the doctor asked.

Sarah thought that he might know if he would just look at it.

‘No. Nothing.’

There were more questions after this, but Sarah drifted through them without paying much attention. The answers were all ‘no’ when they should be ‘no’ and ‘yes’ when they

should be ‘yes. Of course they were. The doctor’s tone said it all. There was nothing that appeared to be wrong. It was probably nothing. It would go away on its own. Stop wasting my time.

‘Give it some time,’ the doctor said.

Sarah hung up.

*

There was a creature crawling around in the bed. Something slimy with sharp little pincer claws, pricking on the bedsheets and the skin of Sarah’s leg. It settled somewhere on her right side near her knee. She could hear the sounds of wet flesh and grinding bone on bone and knew what she would see if she lifted up the sheets. Her body quaked at the thought of it, but none of that motion shifted the thing. It just sat there, gnawing. Another motion shifted below her, another set of claws moving over her body, another set of teeth waiting for their victuals. It slithered down to her feet and stopped. Sarah was too scared to move. It bit down, and searing pain shot from her toe to her heart. Sarah ripped off the covers to see rats, rats covered in her blood, rats with little human faces. Whose face? Was that Peter’s face?

She awoke in a cold sweat. In the dark, lying still, laid out like a body waiting for autopsy – except for her pounding heart – nothing seemed real. Sarah moved the focus of her mind across her body, from the seat of her self, down her left arm to a hand that was there, and back up and down the other arm to nothing. A veil hung over that hand. It had slipped into another world, a world of darkness and nothing. In the deep of the night, Sarah thought she could will the rest of herself into that world, to be whole again. To slip into that void, to be completely alone in the dark, was a frightening concept, but was it so different to her real life? Where were her allies? Where was there light? Possessing little else, Sarah mapped out the part of herself she still had, checking again and again, like picking at a scab. Arms, left hand, legs, left foot, right foot.

Right foot?

She checked again. She moved her left leg over and scratched at her right sole with the toes of her left foot. She kicked, she scratched, she kicked again. This couldn’t be happening. She was tired; she was mistaken. Surely, this couldn’t be happening.

‘Ah! Shit!’ Pete cried as Sarah’s fist battered against his shoulder. ‘What time is it?’

‘I can’t feel my foot,’ Sarah whispered to him, showing reverence for the dark, hoping that this was nothing but a trick that sleeplessness was playing on her.

‘What?’

‘I can’t feel my foot!’ louder this time, breaking the spell of the night.

Pete flipped over his phone. Two a.m.

‘For fuck’s sake.’

‘I can’t feel my foot, Pete!’

Pete turned his back on her, a silent message of intent that came across loud and clear.

‘You slept on it. Go back to bed.’

He said no more, despite Sarah’s protestations, but made a display of settling himself back under the covers of the bed and sleep. Sarah did not sleep and knew she would not for the rest of that night. She got up, tried some weight on the foot, almost immediately fell, but she knew she couldn’t give up, couldn’t rest. Tomorrow, Sarah would need to be able to get about – on her own, clearly – so she had to learn now.

As Sarah shuffled her way out of the room, Pete pulled the covers tighter over his head to muffle out the slide-thunk, slide-thunk, slide-thunk of her gait. He was just drifting off when a crash came from beyond the bedroom door, a thunder roll inside the house, an omen of ill portent.

With a sigh, Pete checked the time again as he slunk out of bed and plodded over to the landing. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he saw at the bottom of the stairs, twisted into an unnatural knot, the unmoving body of his wife.

*

Sarah awoke to the antiseptic stinging scent of a hospital ward. She wondered about that smell, if it was designed to disorientate, to keep people away. Only come here if you really need it, if you’re willing to suffer for it. But Sarah wasn’t disoriented. She remembered clearly her foot failing under her, the rush of the stairs towards her, the slow-motion fall into lightless unconsciousness.

‘Well, you gave your husband quite the scare, didn’t you?’ a doctor said, walking over to Sarah’s bed, giving Pete a smile.

‘I remember being pretty scared myself,’ Sarah said.

Pete patted her on the arm.

‘Of course,’ the doctor said, not looking away from his notes. ‘You’ve been lucky’ – Sarah held back a scoff – ‘looks like nothing’s broken, but let’s have a look. Can you move your toes, please?’

Sarah glowered at her husband, her face reddening, her one fist clenched white.

‘You didn’t tell them?’ she said.

‘I wasn’t sure what to say,’ Pete said, but his words were short, and his gaze didn’t meet hers.

‘What is this?’ the doctor asked.

Sarah did her best to explain, speaking to the doctor’s raised eyebrow and tapping pen, his eyes being occupied with his notes, to Pete for confirmation, to the middle distance. An old woman in the bed across from her was listening in to their conversation with very little subtlety, tutting at everything that was happening, at faults that Sarah could only imagine. The old woman’s tuts and the doctor’s pen were a metronome to Sarah’s words, forcing her at pace through her explanation, causing her to skip important details, stick to only what the doctor might perceive as facts.

When Sarah was done, the doctor pulled out a tool to test her reflexes, scraped the sole of her foot, which she could neither feel nor move, pawed over her arm, which was gone now from shoulder to fingertips, and her leg, which, for the time being, she still had some control over.

‘We’ll do some tests, see what’s what,’ the doctor said, scribbling arcane nonsense on her chart.

‘Okay,’ Pete said. Then to Sarah, ‘Happy?’

Sarah wondered how she could possibly be happy about any of this.

*

Somewhere, deep in the bowels of the hospital, there was a factory putting out this conveyor belt of identical doctors, Sarah was sure. Bland, reproduced boredom; bland, reproduced platitudes. There was an army of middle-aged men just waiting to be plucked off the production line and sent to tell her there was nothing wrong with her – physically. The pause before that last word was critical. There were tomes written within that pause. The most recent of these drab clones stood at the foot of Sarah’s bed, staring at her notes, like all the others, addressing the paper, never her.

‘So you say it’s moved to the other foot now?’ he asked.

‘No, I don’t *say* it has. It has!’ Sarah tried to take deep breaths before responding. She really tried.

‘Of course.’ He flipped the chart onto the foot of the bed, though he still found it more

fascinating to watch than his patient. ‘Nerve conductivity is good. There’s nothing we can see that’s blocking any signals getting to the hands and feet – physically.’

‘And there it is!’ Sarah said.

‘You’re obviously...’ and this pause was longer and more weighted than ever ‘...in distress. Perhaps if you saw one of our counsellors?’

‘I don’t need a counsellor, I need a cure.’

‘I’m sure you would consider yourself a rational woman,’ the doctor said.

‘Of course.’

‘There is a lot of very good, very well-researched literature that suggests that state of mind plays a significant role in recovery.’

‘Of course, I know that, but...’

‘And I’m sure that what you’re going through can’t be easy.’

Sarah stopped talking. She knew she wasn’t imagining things. She knew this was a distraction, nothing more. And yet she said nothing. There were too many people on the ward, watching, listening. The tuts of the old woman across from her had graduated into sighs and head shakes, and Sarah knew that anything she said would just be more ammunition for her arsenal of judgements. But she knew also that silence was the right response, was the expected response, and she had no energy left to be unexpected. The doctor took her silence for consent.

‘Very good. I’ll send the counsellor to you first thing in the morning,’ the doctor said and made to leave.

‘Wait.’ Sarah arrested his retreat. ‘What are the next tests?’

‘No more tests,’ the doctor said, walking away from something no longer his problem. ‘Talk to the counsellor first, then we’ll take it from there.’

*

If counselling was supposed to improve her mental state, then Sarah considered her healthcare providers had made a serious misstep. Stress had climbed up high on her shoulders and was pushing her low into the bed, holding her numb limbs down, keeping her paralysed. Sarah could see no good conclusion to this consultation. They would think her mad, that much was obvious, and then they would stop looking for an answer, and she would be left to lie helpless in bed having endless, fruitless conversations with this total stranger. Or, impossibly, they would not, and she’d be back to square one with nothing but wasted time to

show for it.

That was another lever that ratcheted stress's claws on her shoulders: the wasted time. There was so much she wanted to do, so much she had planned for, so much that needed to be done. And here they were, wasting more of her time, keeping her ill rather than helping her to get better, to get back to her life.

When the counsellor arrived, she told him as much.

'Honestly, Doctor,' she said.

'Please,' the counsellor raised a hand. 'James.'

'Really, I'd rather stick with doctor. I'd just like to get better and get home.'

'And why do you think that hasn't happened yet?'

'How would I know? I'm not a medical professional.'

'Of course.' The counsellor smiled. 'I more meant, do you think there might be anything stopping you from getting better? Anything that might be preventing you from trying your hardest?'

'Trying my hardest?'

'Of course,' the doctor said, his smile never broadening, never thinning, just the same throughout, eerily constant, right off the conveyor belt. 'Your own mind is one of the most important tools you have for healing. It can make you well, or it can make you sick, just like a virus can.'

Sarah just about managed to prevent herself from rolling her eyes. She looked around herself, the doctor, searching for cartoon characters or bright colours, anything that might prove she'd been accidentally put on the children's ward and was talking to a paediatrician and not a jackass. The counsellor continued.

'I'm sure your doctors are trying very hard to get to the bottom of all this. But you need to be trying just as hard from your end. We're all one team, on the same page, working together, you see?'

'Yes, I understand what you're trying to say, but...'

'Good, good,' the counsellor cut in. 'So we agree, then. Now, I'm going to prescribe you something just to help calm you down.'

'I'm perfectly calm.'

'Hmm,' the doctor said and leant over to take Sarah's chart. As he straightened up, he dropped the clipboard, and it fell, corner first, onto her left hand.

'Oh, I am sorry,' the doctor said, placing his hand on hers in a manner that made the skin on her arm shrink from him.

But she didn't move her hand. She didn't feel his hand on hers. She hadn't felt the impact of the clipboard. She couldn't feel a thing. Tears came to her eyes, and the doctor handed a tissue to her in a practised, disengaged motion. When she did not take it, he just left it by her hand.

'Try to get some rest, and I'm sure things will start to seem clearer once you're more calm.'

He scribbled down some notes with a self-satisfied and wholly unnecessary swirl of his pen and left her, just left her there, helpless and paralysed.

*

Sarah was covered with gnawing little rats. They weren't just in her dreams anymore. They were there in the day, all the time, crawling, sneering and snapping at her with tiny, white teeth. Each one had the same featureless, pure-white human face, and they were all Peter's face, and they were all her doctor's face. They were predators, but they had no eyes in their heads, totally blind – to Sarah, to her fear, to her pain – but this only made them more effective in their persecution, more vicious in their attack.

Sarah could do little for herself now, relying on the nurses to feed her, clean her, and do their best to preserve her dignity. The shape of her hospital ward had burned onto her retinas so deep that she could no longer see it. Her world was a hazy white cube, into and out of which shapes moved to no purpose and with no effect. One of these shapes might have been her husband, but she could no longer differentiate him from all the other people doing nothing to help her. Right now, someone was asking her the same questions she had been asked every day since the paralysis had become complete.

'Must we do this every day?' Sarah asked.

'We need to monitor your progress,' the doctor explained.

'What progress?'

'Nevertheless,' the doctor insisted and asked his questions again. 'Can you feel any of this?' he asked as he scraped his tool across her left palm.

'No.'

'What about this?' and her left foot got the same treatment.

'No.'

'And this?' Now it was her right hand's turn.

'No!'

Sarah waited for the next fool question, but instead, the doctor paused at her right hand, scraped it again.

‘Are you sure? You can’t feel that?’

‘No.’

‘Can you try to move the fingers for me?’

Sarah wanted to scream. Screaming was all she had the physical power left to do, but even that was taken from her. She couldn’t give them the satisfaction of proving herself overemotional, hysterical, even insane. She had nothing but the truth, and she repeated it now like a mantra, knowing that all the magical thinking in the world couldn’t help her.

‘I can’t move my fingers. I can’t move my fingers or my arms or my legs or my feet.’

But the doctor wasn’t listening. He was furiously scribbling on the chart. Sarah looked down to her hand where his gaze was fixed. It was almost imperceptible, but there was no denying it. Her fingers were wiggling, but she wasn’t moving them. It was the rats, pulling on her digits like a puppet.

*

‘The doctors just told me,’ Pete exclaimed, running into the ward, a big Cheshire cat grin on his face. ‘This is fantastic news!’

Sarah could not return the hug Pete gave her, nor could she match his smile. There were tears in her eyes, which Pete took as being from relief or joy, but she did not say a word. Her mouth remained thin and flat, underlining the message of her eyes.

‘What’s wrong?’ Pete said. ‘It is good news, isn’t it? You’re getting feeling back.’

‘I’m not,’ Sarah said, looking Pete dead in the eyes, holding his gaze with great care, using his eyes to stabilise her own. She couldn’t look down. If she did, she would see the rats on him, creeping out of his pockets, from around his feet, over his shoulders, dropping down into the horde.

‘Well, that’s okay. I’m sure it will come back. You’re getting movement back, at least, and that’s incredible!’

‘I’m not, Pete, I’m not,’ Sarah said, her lips starting to twist and quiver.

‘But the doctors said they moved.’

‘They did.’

‘You’re not making any sense.’

Pete was now entirely deflated from his elation; he stepped back from his wife and

crossed his arms, disconnecting himself from her.

‘It wasn’t me,’ Sarah said, keeping her voice quiet so the other patients, the nurses and doctors, couldn’t hear her. The old woman was asleep, and Sarah desperately did not want her to hear this, in particular. ‘They moved, but it wasn’t me.’

‘What are you talking about? Of course it was. You moved your fingers.’

‘I didn’t, Pete, I swear, I didn’t do it. I didn’t even try when he asked. They moved. They just moved on their own.’

‘Sarah!’

Pete was raising his voice. Sarah tried to silently shush him, but all she could do was purse her lips, and the sound that came out felt almost like a hiss.

‘Enough is enough,’ Pete went on regardless. ‘Finally, we’ve got some good news, and you just want to... I don’t know. Can you please not do this? We’re all very tired. Can you just try and see this as a good thing?’

‘What am I doing, Pete? I’m not doing anything.’ At this, Pete rolled his eyes and nodded. ‘I’m telling you the truth, Pete. I didn’t move my fingers!’

‘I’m going to get the doctor. You’re clearly confused.’

‘No, don’t!’ Sarah cried.

She wished she could move; she wanted more than anything to stop him, to put out her hand and grab him, but she was helpless, useless, powerless. Yet he did stop. He had risen from the chair on her right and stopped stood by her bed. Sarah looked down the bed to see her hand was wrapped around his wrist, little claws gripping it, keeping it locked around him. She looked from the gripping fingers to her husband’s wide eyes.

‘That’s not me. I’m not doing that.’

‘You’re not well,’ Pete said, wresting himself from the grip of her hand. ‘I’m getting the doctor.’

*

A few days later, Sarah was sat up in bed sipping the water held up to her face through a straw. She had not learned yet how to coordinate herself enough to drink directly from the cup as the rats held it up to her face. Across from her sat the counsellor, still tapping his pen against his clipboard. When Sarah’s outstretched arm offered her cup to him, he looked at it for a second, blank-eyed, before taking it and setting it on the bedside table.

‘And you say you’re not doing any of this?’ The doctor pointed to her hand, the glass.

Sarah took a breath and focused on the words she wanted to use.

‘I am making no conscious effort to move any part of my body below my neck,’ she said.

‘But when you’re thirsty, you can take a drink. You waved to greet me when I arrived?’

‘But I didn’t make any of that happen. I’m not doing it by my will.’

‘You think some external force has control of you? You understand why that’s hard to believe?’ the doctor said.

‘And you understand why I’m scared out of my mind?!’ Sarah snapped back.

But he couldn’t understand, couldn’t see the horror she saw. He went back to tapping his pen and reading his notes.

‘You’ve made really great progress... physically. It’s very unusual when there’s still a... well, a mental block.’

‘It’s not a mental block,’ Sarah said. ‘It’s a... I don’t know what it is. But it’s...’

Now it was Sarah’s turn to scour her vocabulary. It was a cat-and-mouse game being played between her and the doctor. She was chasing his understanding, he, her obedience. But she could find nothing, think of nothing that might convince this man of the truth of her lived experience.

‘It’s not me,’ she said limply.

The doctor took in a deep breath and let it out again.

‘I’m afraid,’ the doctor began, ‘that if we don’t see some progress soon in your mental state, we’re going to have to consider moving you to another ward.’

‘Another ward?’

‘The psych ward,’ the counsellor clarified.

Sarah could have screamed. She could have cried and wailed. She could have argued and protested. But she knew that was what he wanted, what he expected to see. A hysterical woman, proving everything he held to be true about hysterical women. So she said nothing; she did nothing.

‘Please leave,’ Sarah said and bowed her head, remaining silent until the doctor left.

*

‘I think it’s best,’ Pete said as Sarah watched the rats pack her bag, watched them move her feet around.

‘Best for who?’ Sarah said.

She wanted to run for the door, to escape this madness, to just keep going until she found somewhere she could be safe. But however hard she tried, her legs just kept on going on their own agenda. Her body did what others expected of it but never what she wanted.

‘Best for everyone,’ Pete said.

‘Because you don’t want to have to deal with me.’

‘It’s not... I don’t...’ Pete stumbled. ‘That’s not fair! I’m not a doctor, I don’t know how to help you!’

‘They don’t know how to help me!’ Sarah said. ‘You know what any of you could do if you really wanted to help?’ No answer came. ‘You could start by believing me!’

‘Honey, be reasonable. You have to admit, it all sounds a little...’

‘Crazy?’ Sarah did as much as she could with only her eyes to posture a challenge at her husband.

‘Strange,’ Pete said. ‘I mean, what? You’re a medical marvel? The only person who ever lived to have whatever disease this is? Logically, I mean, Ockham’s Razor...’

‘Oh, don’t give me Ockham’s fucking Razor like you’re the bastion of all logical thought!’

Sarah was shouting now, her face red, but her body still calmly going about its packing.

‘Why would I lie about this?’ she continued. ‘Have you ever known me lie about something like this? About anything?’

‘I guess I don’t know,’ Pete said, staring at the ground.

‘You don’t know? You don’t know?!’

‘You’re hysterical. I think you need to calm down.’

And there it was. She had allowed herself to fight and had reached the exact point she knew she would. She would have been better off not saying anything, saving her strength, trying to beat this by herself. It was clear to her now there would be no help coming from anywhere else. She was on her own.

‘Get out,’ she said through gritted teeth.

‘Look, honey.’

‘Just get out, Pete. Just get the fuck out.’

Pete saw the opportunity to escape an uncomfortable situation, and he happily took it. Sarah watched old eyes watch her husband leave, smug satisfaction curling wrinkled lips.

*

There were subtle differences between the room Sarah now found herself in compared to her view for the past few weeks. The scent of the air was slightly less acerbic, and there were pictures hanging around her, pastel hues of gentle flora that seemed to whisper, ‘Be calm, be calm.’

Sarah was not calm. Sarah was scared.

It wasn’t the fact she felt trapped that scared her. Sarah had been trapped for weeks now, perhaps longer, perhaps forever. She was already used to that feeling. While she had just been paralysed, there had been a link between herself and her body, even though she could not move it – indeed, precisely because she could not move it, and thus it did not move. That link was broken now. Her body was entirely separated from herself. It was not hers anymore; it belonged to something else, it belonged to them. Crucially, however, it was not unpredictable. It was precisely predictable. Sarah’s body did what those around her expected it to do. It fed her when she was hungry, cleaned her when she was fouled, it greeted people she met. In their world, in their rat world, there was far more reason in what her body was doing. In hers, there was nothing but fear.

When given tasks for her therapy, the rats completed them. She had a diary that her doctor had told her to keep. She had watched it be written in words that were not her own, powerless to put down on the page what she wanted to write. *Help me*. But what really scared her was that the words that were written were so reasonable. They spoke about her feelings during her illness, about her relationship with Pete, and they related these in the way the doctors had tried to teach her. It was everything they wanted to hear and nothing she wanted to say.

The doctor sitting opposite Sarah flicked through the diary, nodding with a half-smile and a self-satisfied hum. When he was done, he tossed it onto the table and began to take notes, speaking as he wrote.

‘This is very good. There’s some real progress here. I’m very happy with how you’ve gotten to grips with your illness in such a short time.’

Sarah said nothing.

‘From what you’ve written here, you harbour some resentment towards your parents. Would you like to talk about that?’

Sarah said nothing.

‘Your husband figures prominently, too, as a more supportive character. Perhaps that

is something you would like to elaborate on?’

Sarah said nothing.

‘Is there a reason you won’t speak to me?’ the doctor asked.

Sarah said nothing. She was trying; she was willing her mouth to open, to protest once again that the writing wasn’t hers, that the words were not hers, but nothing was happening, no words came out. The disgusting horde of rodents had made its way up to her face and were nibbling away at her lips. Sarah’s eyes screamed, but the doctor did not look to see. Rather, he sighed to himself, scribbled a few more notes.

This is it, Sarah thought, this is your last chance. To look me in the eye and listen to me. I know we can fix this if you just listen to what I’ve said and believe me. Just trust that I know what’s happening to me and what’s happening to me is real. Just believe me. That’s all you have to do.

The doctor didn’t look her in the eye, didn’t think about what she’d said, didn’t believe she could know better than he did about her own world, her own life, her own experience. Slowly, the edges of Sarah’s vision began to darken as the rats skittered in around her face until all she could see, at the very centre of her vision, was that pen scratching away, writing down opinions on her sanity, signing away her last hopes of a reversal of her terrible fate. Until that too was gone, and she was left deaf, blind, speechless, with only her thoughts remaining to her. Surely those could not be taken away? Surely this was the limit of her suffering? Surely her mind would always be her own?

*

An old woman smiled as her nurse tucked the sheets in around her bed with the distant focus of a well-practised task.

‘You seem in a good mood this morning, Mrs Robson,’ the nurse said.

The wrinkles on the old woman’s face stretched flat by her broadening grin at the recognition.

‘Did the girl across from leave?’ she asked, staring at the now empty bed where Sarah had lain.

‘Yes, she’s gone to another ward.’

‘Good,’ Mrs Robson said. ‘It wasn’t right, those filthy animals with their paws all over her.’

‘I’m sorry?’ the nurse said.

‘Filthy,’ was all the reply the nurse got as Mrs Robson closed her eyes and settled into her freshly made bed.

*

How long had it been? Sarah had no way to know. Five minutes, five hours, five days. It was all the same. She was a single point of thought in an endless, infinite darkness that extended everywhere and yet was nowhere. Was she dead? Was her body living on without her, controlled by those things? What was it doing? What lies was it telling? What life was it stealing from her? Wake up! Wake up! Sarah willed herself to come out of this, to get back to the real world, to get back to her life. But she was awake; she could tell that. It was all she could tell. And this darkness, this nothingness, this lifelessness, was her life.

*

The car pulled gently into the drive, and Pete was immediately out of his seatbelt and opening the door for Sarah to get out. She had barely taken a step towards the house before he threw his arms around her and hugged her body hard.

‘It’s so good to have you back!’ Pete said as he constricted himself around his wife’s chest.

‘Yes.’

‘When the doctors called, I was so worried. But you’re all better now? You’re sure you don’t still feel, I don’t know, dissociated, or whatever?’

Pete was talking fast, running to open the door to the house to escort his wife over the threshold.

‘They said you’d stopped talking. I’m sorry I didn’t visit, I just didn’t know what I could do.’

‘That’s okay. I’m better now.’

‘I thought something terrible might have happened,’ Pete said. ‘But when they said you wanted to come home, well... well, I’m just so glad you’re back to, you know, normal.’

‘It was just like you said. It was all in my head.’

‘That’s so good to hear. So good to hear.’

Pete took her coat and hung it up. It slid off her sloped shoulders without resistance. Everything felt right and natural to him, just as it was supposed to be. She moved perfectly

with his movements, she thought with his thoughts, the very image of the easy, unchallenging spouse he carried everywhere in his head.

‘I’m so glad,’ Pete said again. ‘I love you, Sarah. You know that, right?’

‘Of course. I love you too.’

Like Father Like Children

by You Lin

Content Warnings: Death, murder, violence, child abuse, (physical, mental, sexual), rape, revenge.

Not your thing? Skip to page 45 for the next story.

There are four of us: formless, nameless, lifeless. They call us One, Two, Three and Four – we call us One, Two, Three and Four. We are nothing; we are everything. We are restless. We are stuck. We are dead.

No one knows that. No one knows that we're still here, existing, not existing. No one but us, and perhaps the men who brought us here in the first place.

But now you know. Now, you're here: in this cold, dark place where the bloodstained floors creak with age, and the ceilings scatter poisonous asbestos powder at the slightest disturbance.

We've been here for a long, long time.

We don't know how much longer we will be here.

Maybe forever.

Maybe just a couple more days.

What we do know is no one has ever got our story right before, and we are here to tell you – if you will listen, if you stay long enough to hear it.

A warning, though: no one has ever stayed long enough before. We doubt you will.

Trust us. And don't hate us when we finish. Because you will think of us as cruel and hateful and a dozen other insults you could come up with.

It's okay, though – it's not like we don't already call ourselves all those names when night falls and the world slumbers, oblivious to our cries for help.

We can take it.

Can you?

*

Our story starts with One. One: our guardian angel, our level-headed parental figure, our ringleader. No one knows where they came from or what their past looks like. No one knows anything about them because One is private and secretive and keeps their cards to themselves. Maybe that's why they're also among the most stable of us – ignorance is bliss, but in One's case, bliss is art and deflection.

Oh, we can't begin to tell you how creative One is. They once told us the carousel was a tree with its leaves on fire, and stars used to spill from the rotating centre. There was an entire galaxy trapped within the spinning horses and gilded carriages, they said, drawing us into their beautiful world where gravity is defied and rules broken. It's crazy, it's unbelievable, it's ingenious – but it's also what makes them, them: an artist, a storyteller. None of us believes them, but we love how they see the world in colour. We love how they tell us the most impossible things they can think of. We love how they still look at the world like it's something beautiful.

We love that their creativity and curiosity still wrap around us like a soothing balm, even though it's been decades since its flames were stoked with air from a living body.

Today, it's the Ferris wheel that catches their attention. *What is it?* Three asks, drifting closer to them. Three is a barely contained flame, a hastily annotated book with its pages folding into one another as if the owner had simply left for a stroll to clear their weary mind. *What is it, One?* we chorus after her like a group of preschool kids hot on their heels. They smile; we've always loved that smile, even when we were still alive. It reminds us that we still have each other, unlike some of you out there who have no one despite living in the utopia we could only dream of.

What does the Ferris wheel remind you of? they ask.

The Christmas ornaments our nanna used to put out. Two jumps excitedly, sharing a look with Three.

They're doing the twin telepathy thing again, Four groans. He's always pretending to hate our antics, even when they secretly thrill him. Or maybe our quirks are just another experiment he runs through his complex, ever-active mind.

It does look like a Christmas ornament, One sighs wistfully. We wouldn't know. What do Christmas ornaments even look like now? Are they still made from age-old fabric and knitted by calloused, loving hands? Do people still prance and sing in the middle of busy streets, colourful headdresses bouncing in their hair? We don't know. We want to know.

What do you think it looks like, One? Three asks, breaking eye contact with her sister. Out of the four of us, the twins – Two and Three – are always more in sync with each other than anyone else. It's like Four says, a twin telepathy thing.

I think it looks like a black hole, One says slowly. *A vortex that sucks everything in, swirling the colours and pixels until they all become one black pool of nothing,* they reply.

We nod. That's what we thought we would become when we died. We thought we would scatter into the darkness, fusing with the churning abyss that was once alive. We never thought we would wake up and find ourselves here again. Here, *their* hideout. The place of our nightmares. A haunted amusement park long abandoned but never quite fully.

Never fully abandoned because we're still here, existing, not existing. Haunted because we're us. We're not human. We're not ghosts. We're memories – we're the past.

We're not going anywhere, are we?

I think it looks like Kacey's eye, Four says belatedly, breaking the whimsical spell we inadvertently found ourselves in. All of us flinch. Kacey: Kacey, the doorkeeper; Kacey, the manipulator; Kacey, the beautiful-good-cop-with-eyes-that-sparkle-like-rainbows-who-pretended-to-be-nice-when-she's-a-word-One-never-lets-us-say.

We know better now: Kacey is not nice. None of them are nice.

No one but the four of us is nice. Look what happened to us because we are.

*

We were what we used to be because of our parents; now, though, we are what we are because of the meth they used to cook in the basement of the haunted house. It makes them happy, we think – the meth. We want to be happy too. Once, Three asked Eric, the man who oversaw everything, if she could have some, if we could all have some. She's always been so brave, so outspoken, even when she was but a sack of bones and blood towards the end. We admired her – we still admire her. She's a spitfire that rages through the grounds, breathing life forcefully into every being that comes her way. I think we're all a little too protective of her. *We love her*; we think. *You're annoying*, we tell her instead. Not that she minds.

We looked like we really needed some meth at that time. We were holding on by a thread. We were barely alive. We needed to forget: the blood, the screams, the cries. We needed to forget the stale darkness and the chains clanging noisily on our wrists and ankles. Even the haunted house upstairs wasn't as scary as its basement, we used to say. Nothing was

scarier than the basement – it was where everything happened, where we were reduced to shells with no souls.

Where we were beaten to pulp and burned with cigarettes and broken light bulbs.

Where we were tied on the ground while men, so many men, pushed in and out of us, blood trickling down our thighs.

You don't want to know all the horrid, unjust, violent things they did to us. You think you do, but you don't. Really. Turn away now, we're begging you. We might not be strong enough to hold it all in.

We're never strong enough anyway. We wouldn't be here if we were.

Oh, by the way, Eric chained Three upside down after she asked and hit her again and again and again and again on the stomach with an iron thing with spikes until she bled so much she passed out.

She was hung upside down in front of us for three whole days.

*

Four came later. He was brought in by his dad, who had done something to wrong his buddies. Four was a peace offering, a new plaything for them to experiment with. They'd never played with little boys before.

We'd never seen little boys before.

We weren't sure if we even liked little boys.

We watched him kick and scream and fight, but we knew that, like us, he would succumb. Eventually. We knew that he would give up, and when he did, he would have no one. We pushed our bread to him that night when they were all asleep, the smell of urine and vomit thick in the air. That was our peace offering. A peace offering for a peace offering. If we hadn't been in that place, we would have laughed.

'How long have you been here?' he asked us, munching hungrily. We shrugged. We didn't remember. We couldn't even remember our own names.

'What are they going to do to us?' he tried again. Once more, we shrugged. We didn't know. We didn't know if they would hurt us until we died. We wish they'd killed us instead. Maybe that would've been better.

'Does it hurt?' This was spoken in a whisper so low we had to crane our necks to hear him. Three reached out to hold his hand. Two held hers, and One held Two's. Together, we

formed a united front, a line of prisoners breathing together in the dark. In, out. In, out. That was the position we stayed in the entire night and all the nights after until we died.

*

Sometimes, even now, Two gags involuntarily. She's the only one who doesn't puke after having penis after penis shoved down her throat; it's incredible. It's terrifying. We ask her how she swallows the thick, disgusting semen. She tells us she imagines it's cold, oversalted broth. Her mother's broth, she adds, swiping a finger in her mouth. We don't think she realises she does that all the time.

We miss our moms. We hate our moms. Our dads were the ones who brought us here in the first place, and our moms were the ones who let them. At first, we used to imagine them bursting through the doors, superhero capes flying behind them as they unlocked the chains binding us and led us back out where there was sunshine and laughter and life. We forgot they were only humans. We forgot that no one was going to come for us because we never even had a life outside this place.

Still, we hoped. We prayed, even when none of us believed in God. We prayed and cried and prayed and cried and prayed and cried until all that dripped down from our eyes was blood we didn't even realise was there in the first place.

*

When the basement blew up, it was unlike anything we'd ever seen. It happened so quickly – flames licking our faces as we eagerly turned in their direction. Please kill us, we begged. Please destroy this vile, disgusting place and the vile, disgusting men in it. We didn't care that there were innocents running around above us. We didn't care that there were babies, teenagers, adults and the elderly screaming above us. We didn't care. We wanted them all to suffer. They didn't deserve this, but we were tired of doing the right thing.

We didn't deserve this either, we thought. Why should they be any different?

*

We thought we knew pain. We thought we would grow up to become artists and fashion designers, doctors and lawyers. We thought a lot of things, but we were wrong, just like we

always are. This hurts more. This – dying. Being burned alive. We heard bones snapping; we smelled flesh charring. The men who hurt us screamed. We screamed. Theirs was a scream of agony. Ours was a scream of freedom.

Finally, we thought. This is it. The end.

We were wrong about that too.

*

We woke up. We were not strong enough to live; now, we know we are not strong enough to die either. We are stuck in between. We hate it. We resent it. We're tired of it.

We hear them praying for us. We see our pictures in newspapers. The four victims, the poor, poor abused children. We ball our fists. We stomp our feet. We're not abused; we're broken. We're not victims; we're playthings. They don't know us like we do – they don't know One's talent at sketching and building sculptures out of mud when the men are not looking. They don't know Two's eye for fashion, her sharp sense of what's trendy and what's not (Kacey was really the only one among them all who had taste). They don't know Three's wide knowledge of the sciences, her desire to change the world, her passion to touch hearts at their most vulnerable. They don't know Four's quiet rage, his studious air, his photographic memory. They don't know us at all, and yet they act like they do.

It makes them feel better.

And then, they forget about us. They always do. We're dead, our bodies buried under nameless graves; they're alive, their lives stretching ahead of them unconditionally. We envy them; we hate them. We want revenge because we were supposed to go to heaven, because those men were supposed to be the ones punished.

Why us? we ask every day. Can you kill the dead? We wish we knew.

We wish we had just faded, not just for our sakes but for the poor, poor victims who came after us.

*

We don't know why we did it or how we did it, but it feels good. It feels so, so good to hurt someone, even if they had nothing whatsoever to do with our eternal imprisonment. To put a dent in this world full of innocents who simply happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time... We think we know why they did it to us now.

Kacey screams and screams and screams as the snakes hiss and hiss and hiss. One by one, they wrap their scaly lengths around her, squeezing, biting. *They're eating her from the inside out*, Two whispers to us.

That's her intestines, Three points out. *I've seen a picture of it in a medical textbook before*.

Ew, we say in unison, but we also laugh together as our captor, our jailer, our gatekeeper dies a slow, venomous, painful death.

We laugh. And laugh. And laugh. And laugh. Even as the snakes leave, sated.

We laugh for so long we think it might have been hours, or days, or weeks, even. We laugh, and we realise that maybe we're actually kind of like them: the men, our abusers. At the end of the day, they were once our fathers, too, weren't they? Maybe some things are just meant to be. Maybe we're all just the same.

And maybe, just maybe, being the same as them isn't that bad after all.

Smoke and Honey

by Ende Mac

Content Warnings: Mentions of death, mentions of religion, brief mentions of previous animal death.

Not your thing? Then you have come to the end...

And the apartment is still and empty, and darkness shrouds the depths of the bedroom, and I hover over the still face of the carpet. And I see that it is good.

The girl sleeps. She sleeps an awful lot these days. It seems like a good sleep, one that didn't take much to earn. She tilted into it (gently, gently), and her breathing steadied (gently, gently), like the regular musical notes of the machine at her bedside – the one that chirps out a lovely melody I don't need the machine to vocalise. I can hear the girl's heart without it.

The girl doesn't wake up. Sometimes, when the girl sleeps like this – or on other days, when she doesn't leave the bed – one of her home nurses will reposition her so she doesn't get sores. It's a dutiful, gentle sort of motion that – when the girl is confused – makes her think her mother is there. The nurse will handle her pinched, fragile skin so delicately, put a damp sponge to the girl's lips, and the girl will smile.

Tonight, I let the nurse sleep deeply. The girl will not need her anymore.

Not that she's alone. There is always me.

I knew her. Before her parents were born, or their parents. I knew her before her earlier parents sang stories around cypress fires and before her earliest parents pressed red handprints against stone. I have loved her all the while. Since before the plates in the Earth wrenched themselves apart, since before meteors ribboned through the thin atmosphere with little to no resistance. I have loved her since the start of love.

Though she has no name for me, she has loved me too. She loved me when I was her parents' first cat, coffee-furred and with a purr that betrayed the lung infection I had as a kit. She loved me when I was the dog she adopted in college. She found me shivering outside a bar, and just as I knew she would, she lured me to the car with promises and slivers of cheese. She loved me as the nesting pigeon outside her first apartment. As the spider she collected from her bathtub drain. As the wilting basil on her kitchen stoop.

I have cradled these decades so carefully.

It is almost time to wake her and to lead her home. But not yet. For now, I watch my girl sleep.

Her hands are folded delicately over her chest, a swollen knuckle holding a ring in place. I had already guided her wife home some years ago. Yet, when the girl is confused, sometimes she forgets. The nurses do not correct her. One nurse will tell her that her wife is late from the store, but she is bringing her saltwater taffy when she returns. Another nurse will turn music on, and they will sway to it, together, until she forgets what she was confused about. The third nurse – the girl's favourite, I suspect – will sneak the girl one of her favourite honey-flavoured cigars, and they will share it, extinguishing its last ember in a small rock garden on the nightstand.

When asked about the next-day smell, that nurse will only smile serenely at whichever of the other two has the morning shift.

'Smoke and honey?' she always asks, winking at my girl. 'It must be an angel.'

To my surprise, I don't have to wake my girl after all. She looks up at me. She smiles. My girl has no name for me, but for the first time, she recognises me: the kitten, the hound, the dove, the spider, the basil. She is the one who reaches for me, childlike in her lack of fear. I take her hand, the one with the ring, the one that used to work tangles out of my fur and had dirt-stained fingernails from repotting kitchen plants. The machine protests; neither of us pays much mind.

I guide my girl home before the sun rises. And it is good, and it is love.