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## String of Fingers

By Timothy Eric Wood II

Red lights blinked in the night between the tree limbs; the blue lights rotated around the trunks. Terrance looked at the mangled shell of a car, metal curled up like torn beer cans. *She was in that*, he thought. *She was in that.*

A tug on his arm. Terrance turned to the officer, nodded, and followed over to his car to let the cleanup crews get to work. The cop asked questions, Terrance watched as the metal was scraped off the road, and hoses washed over the sticky parts.

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Terrance shut the car door behind him, the drive home a fog of signs and lights. *Did I stop at the stop signs?* Terrance couldn't remember. He'd called the Manvilles, Emily's friends, before going out to the accident. The short man with glasses and his tall wife with straight

blonde hair stood over the porch stoop. The wife clutched a necklace like it might ward off this moment.

“Terry,” she said.

Terrance looked up at his name, eyes like an old dog’s. Then his face flicked back to the sidewalk and he continued past them into the house. They followed.

“Let him breathe, Juli,” Mr. Manville said.

The first room was wood paneling and furbishing like a mahogany store, polished coffee table and book-lamp stands. A glass cabinet stood in the corner. Emily’s books lined the shelves inside, titles with curling names and rigid symbols. She’d been into the occult, and Terrance had thought that made her spicy like an exotic dish that never got old.

Now the dish was empty, Terrance scraping his knife and fork on the cold plate.

Terrance sat beside the case, opened it, the scent of leather and old pages drifting to his nose. He thumbed the pages, like moth wings beating. Terrance put it back and took out another, leafing through the pages more slowly this time. The ink was sharp, each word a knife. Strange syllable groupings, consonants like strange Egyptian words.

“Terrance.”

He closed the book, set it beside the chair instead of putting it back, the heavy bound tome thudding to the floor. “Yes,” Terrance picked up another and opened it to the middle and started reading.

*-to Tcheerom, the fourth door opened-*

Terrance saw the words, reading fragments as his eyes focused and unfocused.

*- light of the star, Kezeb-*

“Terrance,” Manville walked closer, his feet padding on the hard wood floor.

*- Songs of the eliol drifted up from the river-*

*-I lead the calf to the dragon-*

“We’re here for you,” Manville said. His foots steps grew faint, he and his wife slipped out, afraid they had lost *two* friends tonight.

Terrance sat in the chair in a lit corner of the wooden room, the walls glowing red from the deep burnish.

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The pages turned, the black lines blurred. One after the other, the last carefully set to the floor, the next tenderly lifted from the shelf. The slurry of books drifted into Terrance’s micro sleep as he strained to keep searching. Searching for something that might help him, keep him going. More and more, he plucked the books out of the cabinet. They fell, their pages torn. Emily’s books, their pages flew in torn wings to the floor, the bindings slamming on the hard wood, the color of blood with a fire over it.

Terrance snorted himself awake, almost choking.

He heard a thud and the whisper of pages. Terrance looked up, saw the ceiling, its wooden surface filled with eyes, then noses, stretched mouths. They were screaming. Terrance looked away from them. He felt the rocking chair under him, gripped its arm rests as he relaxed and the curved wood creaked.

Terrance blinked the strain from his eyes. With a final blink and eye-roll, a clock on the wall came into focus, the black numbers sharpening out of the white blur. It was two in the morning. He hadn’t been asleep even half an hour.

Emily had been gone for less than a day, so close, he could probably call her now and she might come done and tell him it was all a dream.

“Emily?” he said. Then louder.

Tears welled up, Terrance’s nose burned. *It was a few hours ago*, he thought. *She was here a few hours ago.*

Terrance screamed his wife’s name. His throat shook, vocal cords quivering as they beat themselves raw. And he broke down, doubling over, the rocking chair on its toes as Terrance almost fell out onto the floor.

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Something moved on the floor below Terrance’s face.

A book lay open, and something moved across it. It looked at first like a caterpillar. But it was white. Terrance bent closer. A finger. *You’re not seeing this*, he thought. *You’re hallucinating.*

The little digit scrunched up and released, inching across the page. A little red streak trailed behind its stub.

Terrance stood, felt vertigo and a tipsy feeling as he seemed to soar into the ceiling.

He took, a step, felt his stomach come up, cramps in his intestines like solid lead strings pulling through the soft and tender organs. He kicked the book aside and ran. The bathroom was dark, the door cracked open ajar. Terrance reached for the door.

Several fingers, bone white, poked around the other side into the light.

Warmth burst out of Terrance’s mouth, splashed on the floor. The feel of hot sauce, sour lemons, and burning pepper etched red lines in his throat.

*Lost it, lost it.* Terrance fell back against the wall.

*Lost Emily.* He grabbed his hair and pulled it as far as it would go, felt the pours scream, the roots tugging at the scalp. Then Terrance banged his knuckled fists to his head and squeezed. He shut his eyes.

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When Terrance woke up, the light crept in through the tiny windows siding the front door.

When did he fall asleep?

Then the sour taste filled his mouth, and Terrance smacked his lips and shivered at the taste. He felt a cold patch on this shirt, looked down, saw the semi-dry vomit.

He got up, joints aching. He went to the bathroom.

*Wait, wait.* Terrance's hand clawed up, froze an inch from the wood. He remember those fingers, nails pointed at him as if they were looking at him, little eyes on stalks. Poking out of the dark, from around the corner. Staring at him.

Terrance turned around, saw the rocking chair, the mahogany, a lamp still on, its orange glow superfluously lighting its stand in its orange glow, the cooler sunlight illuminating the whole room. Books were strewn around the chair. *None ripped*, he noted. They were set, not neatly, but shut, pages protected inside the covers.

Except for one at the foot of the chair.

It lay open.

Terrance stepped over, arching his neck up as if looking over something. It looked normal for a moment. *Just fell off my lap*, Terrance thought. He bent down to pick it up.

A red smear ran over the middle of the page, across the black words.

It was the width of a finger. Every inch or so, the blood bulged out, as if it had collected before moving on. Then the image of it bunching up, then springing forward again returned to Terrance.

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The outside air was cold. Terrance shut the door behind him, heard its hefty wait slip into the lock. Terrance sat down.

The sunlight looked so fresh, like spring peeking through green trees. It must have still been morning. Terrance held his hands to his face, sucked the air in between his fingers. He felt grimy, a mixture of sweat, bad sleep, and fear.

And pain.

Slurping the air in, Terrance let his hands slide down till his eyes were in the sunlight. The warmth of the light seeped into his ragged lids, lighting on the flesh. There was something bugging his mind, tapping on the door to be let in. He wouldn't. He couldn't think about... *that*, not now.

If he did, he'd admit it.

"It didn't happen," Terrance squeezed his eyes shut. "It didn't, it didn't, oh god it didn't." He began to shake. Tears cracked up his voice, his cupped hand muffling the sound. Terrance took his hands away, raked his hair.

It was coming again, a salt water tide. It burned his eyes, the lids feeling full like sloshing fish bowls.

He got up. He wanted his bed. But first, he wanted to clean up.

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Terrance opened the door. The house was quiet, oppressive. A tomb.

The bathroom door stayed open, the darkness shifting in Terrance's vision. He sidestep the hallway and went to the kitchen.

With the polished wood floor, the marble sink made it rich, like a resort. The air was crisp, the fresh light of the morning the only illumination.

Terrance went to the sink, pulled off his shirt, making careful to not touch the nasty mess on the front.

Then he turned the faucet. He thought about getting a towel before ladling the water onto his face. But then, what was the point? He turned the faucet off. *A shower would be better.*

Terrance came to the stairs, looked up into the dark at the top of them.

He shook, felt a sinking feeling.

"No," he said. The dim upstairs glared down at him. "No!" he screamed. Then again, he repeated himself over and over. "No! NO!" Terrance hit the wall. He took the first step. What might be up there, did it matter? It was who wasn't up there that mattered.

He beat the wall, screamed as he went up.

The main bathroom door was closed. The wood was segmented into four indents. They looked like eyes. Terrance grabbed the gold handle, his reflection circled around it, and wrenched the door inward.

They crawled over the walls, behind the shower curtain, behind the toilet.

Terrance stopped. His face was stony. Nothing had moved. It was micro sleep, stress, he was seeing things.

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He turned the handle, pulled the stopper on top the faucet, and listened to the drops hits the tub. Steam rose. With the door shut, the lights on, Terrance was in a better world. The

hollowness was numbed a little. Gingerly, he stepped into the falling stream of hot water. It burned. Terrance thrust himself into the torrent, felt his skin scream at the touch of piping liquid, that cold feeling of ice entering a hot tub shooting up his legs. He grabbed the soap (*What's the point?*) and pushed aside thoughts and delved into automaton motions. Terrance started with his head, brushing the naked bar of suds across his forehead. The greased disappeared as if erased.

*I'm tired,* He thought. *Just want to sleep. Sleep.* He bent down and scrubbed his legs, seeing his actions as clearly as he saw the steam against the white walls, wafting in and out of sight from shadowed tub corner to light spot on the wall. Terrance stayed bent over, then moved into a crouch, holding his knees. He stayed under the steady pelting of the water, unfocused as he listened to the drops tip-tap around him.

No thoughts.

Nothing to lose.

He sunk back and laid himself out in the tub, staring at the ceiling while the shower drizzled his chest. Droplets shot up onto his face, but Terrance didn't blink or wipe them away. When he sat up, his fingers were pruned, his body feeling warm as a simmered broth. He stepped out, little curls of steam rising from his skin.

The mirror was fogged.

Terrance wiped a slash, enough for his eyes to peek back at him. He saw the blood shot whites, the dark circles starting to fill under his eyes.

He opened the mirror cabinet.

Something fell out. Terrance gave a start, reached for it before it hit the sink. He caught it and felt a soft fleshy surface. He yelled and it dropped from his grasp into the sink.

A human finger, cut off at the knuckle. Blood pattered out the stump when it hit the porcelain drain. It tumbled over to the black hole.

It started to squirm.

Terrance's mind raced. *What to do (these things are real) this isn't happening (yes it is) how get rid of it (what if you can't)?*

He turned on the faucet, watched as water bathed the center of the sink bowl, sweeping over the little finger. It writhed in the liquid making little splashes. The water pulled it to the black hole of the drain. Its tip slapped down on the bowl, trying to hold, but its stump reached the silver circle around the drain, and it tumbled back.

For a moment, Terrance felt sorry for the little thing, struggling for its- life? Then he came back into himself, realized he hadn't taken a breath the whole time, and started to breathe again, heavily.

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The bed felt soft, the sheets cool and clean. Terrance forced himself to not think about the fingers he'd thought he'd seen. *Not real, just stress.* But stress from what? And Terrance couldn't let himself examine that question, because it seemed like a nightmare, but waking up and he was still in it.

As he lay against the pillow, the light outside almost in full noon, he felt his eyes just might rip out of his head and tumble down they felt so heavy.

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Terrance woke up, not knowing who he was or where. The room was lit, a room with wood furnishings, paneling, a cooking red glow in the low orange light from the window.

*My room,* Terrance thought.

*Don't you mean our room?* And Terrance turned over to check on Emily. She wasn't there. Terrance wondered where she was. Images of metal torn like foil, shining in light, the ground dark. Terrance closed his eyes and squeezed them as shut as they could go.

*I just want to sleep*, he thought. *Just sleep, not wake up.*

He let himself out on his bed for a while, not wanting to get out, not wanting to remain, not wanting anything.

The phone rang.

Terrance buried himself in his pillows and sheets. The phone continued to ring. He should answer, he knew, it was probably important, probably family, friends, or the cops.

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Terrance jumped out of bed the tenth time the phone rang. The sheet flew off him, he gritted his teeth, and he picked up the little cordless phone from its charge stand and threw it. A Doppler effect as the phone zoomed away, then a spurt of plastic clattering on the floor. Blood pumped in Terrance's face. He stood there.

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Some time passed, and Terrance found himself standing on his floor, everything dead quiet. The room was dark, just light shards from the street lamps painting over the room.

Terrance took a step. A sharp pain cut into his arch. He stopped, lifted his foot, and pulled out the plastic.

*You smashed the phone*, he thought.

He took his shirt off, set it down and stepped onto it, and shuffled over to the light switch. He felt little bumps along the way, more pieces of the damn phone. Terrance flicked the light on.

Dozens of little movements all over the room.

Terrance thought of mice. He yelped out, tensed, standing on the balls of his feet. Then there was no movement in the room.

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Terrance was by the light switch by the door, finding himself tired after standing so long. How long had he been standing here? He began to look at the clock. *Does it matter?* something inside said, and he stopped. What would he see? Then his ears prickled. The silence was like a vacuum, but Terrance could swear there was a sound. Maybe from outside. Maybe he was hearing a ringing in his ears (*doesn't high blood pressure do that, don't people hear their own blood pounding, what about the electricity, could it be electric hum?*)

Then a gurgling sound and a low creaking. The house. It was the house stretching and moaning.

Terrance settled himself. He looked over the plastic on the floor. He bent to clean it up.

“...”

A low sound crept through the floor. Or not low, but soft, like hearing the wind through a house sized block of cotton.

Terrance bent closer.

“... errr...”

He was hearing something for sure. He pressed his ear to the floor.

And then, they crept from under the bed and ran toward him. Terrance screamed, fell over the plastic of the busted phone. They ran against him like a wave, and Terrance flung his arms at them. Little squishy things, they thumbed their way across the floor, digging down, pulling, inching like a herd of worms. Terrance backed away, his mind cold, going so fast it was blurred to a mental white noise. *Why's this happening what's going on ohohgodfuckpleaseno!*

Then, from downstairs, a voice boomed, "TERRANCE!" The voice was filled like a scream escaping a child looking out a window at night and seeing something ugly running at them.

The room shook, the pipes in the walls strained and gurgled.

The swarm of severed fingers coursed to the door. Terrance shot up, shaking, knowing something familiar about the voice. (*It isn't, don't dare hope*). He did, he ran, the digits were under foot, scrambling, some clinging to his pants as his waded through them. The skin of his calves crawled, but Terrance had to get to that voice.

It screamed again. His name. It was a plea.

"EMILY!" Terrance yelled. He jumped the stairs. He landed on the tide of fingers coursing down, feeling them dent and squish underneath. Terrance was on his back. He felt the fingers clawing over him, racing to the sound, the screaming.

It was coming from the book longue.

Terrance got up, shivering at the thought of the things crawling, clinging, squirming on him.

He reached the hallway.

An ocean of the fingers churned on the floor. Something reached out of them. Terrance waded, feeling them creep into his clothes, intimately close, his skin crawling. The screaming hurt his ears. He reached to the arm sticking out of the floor, pulled.

She lifted out of the fingers. First a head, bald, bleeding. Then a torso. Her naked breasts. Something strange about the flesh, patterns, ridges, as if it were joined together out of separate parts. Terrance bent down, lifted under her arms, his ears against her head, her screaming puncturing. The fingers disappeared like a writhing soup froth dissipating itself.

And she was out and on the floor. Terrance had time to hold her to him before he collapse. Emily was in his arms, screaming like a newborn. But she wasn't herself.

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The night wore on and Terrance listened to the thing made of fingers, a human statue of severed digits. Pinkies and their nails formed her teeth, thick index fingers her lips, her tongue a trio of upside down fingers lapping at her palette. She looked up at him, her eye sockets made of thumbs and fingers circling each other, how children make themselves into owls.

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She cried little red droplets. "It's worse," she said. "Worse over there." She whimpered her voice an alien echo of her former throat and vocal cords.

Terrance understood, after time. He bit back the squirming in his skin, trying to cling to Emily, denying the natural repulsion to her body. It was her, her voice, and that was enough to fight for. But alongside his courage to hold his wife, Terrance feared death more than ever after hearing her wailing. They continued to talk things over, slowly easing their nightmare into reality. How would they stay out of that place, that horrible After? They'd need strong powers to stay alive. Dark, blood drenched formula the old Emily would only talk about jokingly.

And talk of the Manvilles crept into their dark delving conversation.

END

Lindsay  
Fagan

The Suiciders

In a cheap hotel room in Oakland, a bald man sat slouched in a worn-out chair and tongued a dirty pistol. The room had been his for less than an hour. The beds were still made. The glasses next to the ice bucket were still wrapped in plastic.

Directly outside of the room, Ryan and Barrett leaned cross-legged against the hallway wall. Ryan checked his watch.

"I hate this part," he murmured, eyes darting to the elevator.

Barrett chuckled a throaty laugh and slid down the wall into the lotus position, her leather pants clinging to her thighs. She readjusted the weapon beneath her black jacket and waited, calm.

Back in the hotel room, the man with the gun opened the drapes, letting sunbeams trickle into the room. For a paralyzed second, he arched his back for a final glance at the cornflower blue sky. The man heaved a sigh that left his chest cavernous.

Then he pulled the trigger.

The noise of the gunshot penetrated the hotel room door. Ryan jumped.

"Jesus!" Ryan fiddled with his cuffs and collar while Barrett stood up and produced a key card. She creaked the door open in time to see the man's dead body slide into a tidy heap.

"Leave him on the floor?" Barrett asked Ryan, who shrugged and coughed uncomfortably.

"I don't know, set design is your job," he forced out.

"Hmm," Barrett paused and tapped her finger against her lip. Her killer eyes pierced past her bangs like gunpowder blue arrows. Her black hair fell down her bony back like a shawl around her pale frame.

"Back up in the chair, I think," she finally answered. She yanked a pair of rubber gloves onto her doll-like hands. Ryan kept his bulky arms folded and shuddered.

"What's his story?" he said, gesturing to the dead man on the floor. "Barrett?"

"Depressed," Barrett said nonchalantly, opening her black satchel and pulling out a crisp white envelope and a photograph.

"I know depressed," Ryan jeered. "They're all depressed. That's why they kill themselves. Why else would they--"

"Ryan," Barrett said, her voice icy. Despite the differences in stature--Ryan was a meaty, tanned specimen of six feet with carefully highlighted and gelled metro-sexual hair, and Barrett had the threatening menace of a ballerina--he seemed to cower beneath her.

"Enough," Barrett said. "You know the job. Get it done. Put him in the chair. Unless you would like to join him?"

Ryan unbuttoned his sleeves and pushed them up, his forearms so large they nearly split the seams. After placing his own rubber gloves onto his hands, he lifted the man into the bloodstained chair, neatly positioning the carcass facing the window.

"Sorry," he muttered. "Sometimes I just wonder, you know? What their stories were?"

Nodding, Barrett said, "I know you are a sentimental fool, Ryan. That's why you are the muscle chump, and I am the boss."

She turned her back to Ryan and continued with her setup. The photograph was placed in the dead man's limp hands. It showed a fifty year-old woman in a red power suit and blonde French twist, waving to the camera from an American flag parade float. The envelope, propped onto the table in front of the corpse, was addressed to Senator Becky Smith.

Ryan nudged the gun back underneath the chair of the bleeding body. The hotel phone rang shrilly. Barrett gave the grisly scene one final survey.

"All right," she said. "Let's go."

Quickly, the pair hightailed it out of the room, the phone still desperately ringing. The origins of the gunshot echo had, at this point, been speculated on by everyone in the hotel. The police had been notified by the front desk: possible homicide in 408.

Safe in room 406, Ryan straightened his shirt and put on a sport coat. He washed his hands tidily and utilized a lint roller. Barrett peered at him while she dialed a cell phone.

"Getting ready for the ball?" she said.

Ignoring her, Ryan asked, "Did you enter the scrambler code?"

Barrett shook her head. "Unnecessary. The media doesn't care where their sources come from. All they want is the scoop"

Ryan leaned to retie his shoe, and a silver ruby-encrusted cross necklace escaped from his shirt. Immediately he hid it, and looked at Barrett like a child who needed punishing.

"I told you not to wear that to work," Barrett said.

"I'll take it off," Ryan promised.

Barrett's line picked up. "Good afternoon, Oakland Examiner, how may I help you?"

Barrett wasted no time. "Have I got a story for you."

"Name?" The receptionist was cheery, and Barrett snickered.

"Forget the name. Courtyard by Marriott. Downtown. Room 408. You're the first paper I've called, and I have a long list. So send your people here fast."

The receptionist scoffed. "What makes you think we'd be interested?"

Barrett licked her lips. "A death involving Becky Smith, California senator."

She hung up and called nine more newspapers, each time sticking to the same concise script. The envelope in the hotel room offered an explanation for the man's suicide: he was involved in a year-long affair with Senator Becky Smith, and she snubbed him at the post-state dinner meet-and-greet.

The affair never happened. The man had never met Senator Smith. The story, the envelope, the photograph--all doctored by Barrett to produce a controversy that would end the senator's political career.

This was Barrett's function, to find people on the brink of self-destruction and convince them to commit suicide for a cause. "You can throw your life away. Just don't throw a perfectly good death away," she would tell them.

Ryan prepared himself a chef's salad with a lemon-raspberry vinaigrette. He offered a serving to his partner.

"No, thanks," Barrett said, sipping her thermos of green tea.

"I don't think I've ever seen you eat anything," Ryan mentioned between bites. His face contorted foggily as he seriously considered this phenomenon. "Really. In the last year, I've never seen you even take a bite."

"What about it?" Barrett said. With her two rail-like arms, she grabbed her charcoal turtleneck and pulled it off her body. Her back faced Ryan. He balked at her gaunt build, skin so white it was nearly lavender. Her ribcage and spinal cord bulged beneath her flesh.

"Nothing, never mind," Ryan said. Despite her helpless-looking demeanor, he had once witnessed Barrett rip out a grown man's entire dental set with her bare hands while he flailed, loudly dying.

Barrett removed her pants without shame and tuned out her partner's wishy-washy narrations of the day's proceedings. She was used to his affected introspection. He was weak--a former Christian, still tangled in the web of the hypothetical moral fuzziness regarding his career. She kept him around because he was inexpensive, loyal, and could lift their obese clients when needed.

"Aren't you getting changed?" she asked, bundling herself in a faded hoodie, dark jeans, and white Keds with no socks. Even as she attempted to play the part of an exhausted college student on a fall break sabbatical, she exerted quiet violence.

"No," Ryan reminded her, pointing at his suit. "I'm playing a businessman today, remember?"

"Then get down to the conference room. I'll see you up here when the reporters come." She gathered her thatch of onyx hair into a tight chignon at the nape of her neck and added a plastic watch with an obnoxiously large face to her wrist. Her disguise was complete.

"All right, boss--" Ryan began. A scuffle in the hallway cut him off. He ran to the door and looked out the peephole.

"Housekeeping," he confirmed to Barrett, and she sighed. They were usually out and in place by now.

"Fine. We're honeymooners leaving for an early dinner, then," Barrett said. She ripped out of her casual clothing and cloaked herself in a jewel-toned wrap dress that clung to her tiny breasts alluringly. She slipped out of the Keds and into three-inch black birdcage stilettos.

"We came to Oakland for our honeymoon?" Ryan mocked.

"You had a business meeting you couldn't miss," Barrett said, releasing her hair from its bun and shaking it around her.

"No one cares about our back story," Ryan told her. "You always have some elaborate scheme to explain why we're here, when they don't care about anything besides the body--"

"See, you're just an idiot, Ryan," Barrett said. "We've never been caught because of my back stories. So next time you want to criticize the way I do business, either shut the fuck up, or I'll fire you. And you know what happens to former employees." She smiled as he glanced at the gun she hid under her clothing, around her waist.

A shriek pierced the hallway, followed by moans of "Ay, dios mio!"

Ryan's eyes widened like a child. "I think the maid found him."

Barrett glanced at the clock radio. "We'll give them a minute to get the panic out of their systems." She stretched onto the bed, and gravity pulled her bulbous eyes down into their sockets. For a moment, the thousands of deaths, thousands of pains, and sleepless nights registered on her features. Ryan remained standing, tense and pacing. The hallway filled with the horror movie sounds of other patrons discovering the suicide scene.

The hotel manager approached the room, along with emergency rescue teams. Through the thin walls, the familiar dialogue between the press and the police played out:

"Sorry, ma'am, police line."

"I have a right to report on this if the senator is involved!"

"Later, ma'am, after the proof sweep!"

"Let me in!"

Barrett chuckled as she heard the crowd gasp. The media had broken through, pushed past the police crime boundaries like dogs unleashed. They always broke through. The reporters had little respect for police barriers. They were far too greedy, wanting to turn yesterday's tragic turn-of-events into today's lucrative headlines.

"Boss?" Ryan's nagging tone made Barrett groan inwardly.

"Let's go," she said.

They slowly creaked the door open, their mouths rounded with curious innocence.

"What's going on?" Barrett blinked, tapping another patron on the shoulder. Her dagger-filled voice was now sickly sweetened with naivety.

"We heard screams," Ryan added thickly. He tugged on his belt as if he had just fastened it, expertly playing the role of cocky newlywed alpha-male. Barrett eyed him with feigned wantonness, but she couldn't be less attracted to him. This attention to miniscule details--curling her fingers around Ryan's bicep, his standing protectively between her and the crowd, the elusive, we-just-fucked smiles exchanged, suggesting lustful satisfaction--these are what separated other criminal professionals from Barrett.

All along the hallway, the whispering masses pointed and gossiped. Hums of "killed himself," "blood everywhere," "Becky Smith was cheating on her husband with him," and "scandal" filled the corners. Barrett and Ryan played along brilliantly.

Ryan noticed the maid hovering in the foyer of the hallway, hunched over her housekeeping cart. Her hands blanketed her face. Her apron was untied. She was convulsing in sobs.

"We just scarred her for life," Ryan mumbled out the side of his mouth to Barrett.

Barrett glanced at her faux-husband. "Then maybe she'll be our client next week."

Ryan and Barrett remained in the hotel hallway while elevators brought up detectives, the medical examiner, and a woman with grey hair in a trench coat.

"You're the wife?" an officer asked the woman, who nodded. She seemed bored.

"We need you to look at the body, make an official ID," a detective said, leading her through the crowd and past the press. They folded back the white sheet and revealed the man's mangled face.

"That's him," the woman said, emotionless. "I can't believe he finally did it."

Ryan opened his mouth to speak, but Barrett beat him to it.

"If I have to coddle you again, I'll replace you."

Ryan considered this, and immediately hardened his expression.

"Good," Barrett said. "Let's pack up and check out. It's in motion. We need to be across town in one hour to make a murderer of that anti-PETA bitch."

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Exactly one year ago, Ryan had walked into a fast food burger joint to interview for an assistant manager position. He parked himself on a stool at the counter, waiting for the manager to deal with a milkshake crisis before beginning the interview.

He twirled his silver cross necklace around his fingers, aware that he was being watched by a lithe, ballet dancer of a woman who sat at a booth beside him. She had long black hair and giant blue eyes that bulged out of her face a little too much for comfort.

"Ryan," she said, as if it were perfectly natural that she should know his name. "Have a seat."

He was strangely compelled to obey her. He sat in the booth, and she sipped her drink.

"I'm Barrett," she said, offering a delicate hand to shake.

"How do you know my name? Are you from corporate?"

She shook her head. "I want to hire you. I know you're looking for work. I think I have a position that will better suit you than operating the deep fryer."

Ryan was insulted. "I'm not interviewing to flip burgers. I'm interviewing to be a manager."

"Assistant manager," she corrected, "and I'll pay you whatever you want."

Ryan steadied himself. "Come on, now. Anything I want?"

Barrett remained untousled. "Anything."

"I'm not doing anything illegal," he said.

Barrett smiled. "Let's walk down to the park for a minute, shall we?"

Ryan followed her behind the parking lot and into the family park, where the leaves on the trees had turned scarlet. She guided him to a park bench, where she explained the position she had open.

Suicidal people, she had told him. She makes big time bucks from people who off themselves. They commit suicide, she sets it up to look like it was part of a bigger scandal.

"The Atwood murders," she confided in Ryan. "The scandal with the Bailey Corp. All me."

"Who pays you?" Ryan asked, peering at Barrett's ensemble. The leather was real. She was clearly a woman who had money to spend.

"Special interest groups. Private hires. People who want shit on the news."

Ryan watched a group of ducks waddle to the edge of the pond, then float away in a congregational V.

"So, I don't have to kill anyone?" he repeated, ease sinking into his body at this knowledge.

"No," Barrett said. "I need you to do some heavy lifting. Be my number one. My assistant manager."

"But I don't have to--to shoot anyone, do I?"

"We don't pull triggers. We don't poison. We don't hang. We find suicidal people who kill themselves. Then we use them as pawns."

Ryan pursed his lips in deliberation. "I can do that," he finally said, "for twenty thousand a month." He winced, certain the amount was overreaching.

Without saying a word, Barrett unzipped her black jacket and removed her gun. She cocked it and pressed it to Ryan's temple.

"Well?" she said, giving him the same emotionless gaze one would give a spider before crushing it. "Are you ready to die?"

Ryan panicked, the gun cold against his skin. This tiny stranger had set him up seamlessly. He wondered how he could have missed all the classic signs of entrapment. "No," he stammered. "No, please."

Barrett chortled at his pleading, then slipped the gun back into her belt. "Our clients are ready to die. Don't ever forget that feeling, how it feels to have that gun there. How it feels to stare down the barrel like that. Picture actually wanting that, wanting the bullet to blast your brains away. That's how our clients feel."

Ryan shook out his gasp, sweating in relief. He took this to be an acceptance of his salary request. "You want me to respect the feelings of our clients," he said.

"No," Barrett said. "I want you to realize how ape-shit crazy these people are." She smoothed her hair away from her face, not even a ripple of discomfort floating through her from the unpleasant exchange.

"Tomorrow, noon. The King Cole Bar," she reminded him. "Your first client." She walked away from the bench, starting into the park.

"Oh, Ryan?" Barrett called back to him, pirouetting around on her toes. "Don't even think about not showing up. At this point I have to either hire you or kill you."

Ryan stared after her, his pulse still firing against his Adam's apple like a drumbeat. He knew he would be there tomorrow, despite the creepy factor of the position. Twenty thousand dollars a month was too good to turn down.

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It was hard for Ryan to believe that hotel rooms could get shoddier than the Oakland one they were just in, but forty-five minutes later he stood in a greasy, dim hotel room with mauve curtains and cigarette smoke stains curled onto the walls. He could never go back to this kind of living, not after a taste of wealth.

"Where's the client?" Ryan asked, chewing the last bite of a granola bar.

"Not here yet," Barrett said. She was busy removing the client's fictitious suicide memorabilia from her briefcase.

"You know what today is?" Ryan said. "The third. That means I've been working for you for one year now."

"One year," Barrett repeated. "It's three hundred and sixty-four days longer than I thought you'd last."

"Oh, come on," Ryan said, pretending to be insulted.

"Maybe you need a raise," Barrett said, handing Ryan a letter. "Put that in the envelope."

Ryan grinned and scanned the letter. It was Barrett's standard organization-to-chaos letter, detailing the client's reasons for committing suicide (in this case, the general public's failure to respond to PETA's borderline terrorist acts, all in the name of protecting animal rights).

He stopped cold when he read the typewritten name at the bottom of the page: Ryan Jordan. Below his typed name, his signature was forged.

"Don't you dare," Ryan said, whirling around to face Barrett with his hands spread into defensive claws. Barrett already had her bulky gun pointed at him.

"One year, Ryan. I told you when I hired you the first year was probationary."

"Please, Barrett. Not PETA!" Ryan cried, but Barrett aimed her Desert Eagle at his chest and pulled the trigger. He had never been shot before. The bullet felt like a mere bee sting on his clavicle, but it stole his breath. He lay facedown on the dirty carpet, waiting for his blood to pool around him. His diaphragm twitched and curled under his lungs, searching for oxygen.

Barrett found his face and blinked her eyes at him. "I gave you one year. But let's face it, you aren't cut out for this line of work."

Ryan could smell the cordite from the gunshot mix with the scent of the old sweaty mattress behind him. Barrett pushed a dummy gun, a smaller, lighter gun, into Ryan's outstretched palm, smearing his fingertips all over the grip.

"It's too bad," Barrett said. "I think if you had just taken the assistant manager job at the burger place, you and I could have dated." Ryan gagged. His head was feeling warm, and he wondered which of these slow inhales would be his official last breath.

She tiptoed around the room, securing the details of the scene so when the hotel staff raced in and discovered the body, she could slip away.

Ryan strangely felt his strength returning. He pushed himself into the plank position and looked for blood-smearred carpet beneath him. He couldn't see even a drop.

Then he realized: his silver cross necklace, the one Barrett hated. He never removed it earlier like she demanded. The bullet had penetrated the cross. He wasn't dead. He wasn't shot. He would be horribly bruised, but he would live.

Quickly, he lay down flat again, pretending to struggle with his breathing. His fingers clenched around the grip of the gun.

Barrett propped the fake suicide note up against his bicep.

"I guess now you can re-meet our old clients," she said. "Ask the guy from earlier what it's like to pull your own trigger..."

Ryan pushed against the floor, jumping up to a squat, and fired the gun into Barrett's shoulder. She jolted backwards, falling onto the carpet in a graceful arc.

"One year," Ryan said, holding the gun to her face. "I've sure learned a lot from you."

"You... wouldn't..." Barrett spat, her mouth filling with blood. "You... weak..."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Ryan said. "I'm the muscle, and you're the boss." He put another bullet into her, splattering the contents of her head across the mauve coverlet. As she died, her feet pointed themselves into perfect ballerina toes. She closed her eyes.

Ryan took the fake suicide note with him. He knew Barrett's greatest fear was dying without purpose. He left her body there, anonymous and undedicated, and when he reached the ground level, he filled his lungs with the fresh, clean air.

## Odder Side of Heaven

“Now serving: Cancer twenty-five-three-oh-eight.”

Kicking a heel against the linoleum tile in boredom, Carl turned his gaze to the red nebula blooming above him like a paint smear across the blackness of space. He felt as if he had been there long enough to watch the stars born in its cloudy mass of gases and dust, a testament to his long stay in this line.

The line for cancer beside him went on halfway to Pluto, and continued to grow longer every second. The sad thing was, he could see the end of the line from where he stood, about two-thirds of the way back in Motor Accidents. At least dying in a car crash was a recent way to die, so the line wasn't as long as others, like War. He pitied the people in the Old Age line.

“This blows,” Carl griped to the guy in front of him, who was missing half the skin on his face and bore a long, diagonal bloodstain across his chest. Apparently, he had gone through the windshield halfway before the seatbelt locking mechanism had yanked him back.

“Would you stop *whining* already?” the guy groaned, wiping something from the corner of his remaining eye with the tip of his finger. “You'll get up there soon enough.”

“If ‘soon enough’ means before Judgment Day, I'll be glad,” Carl sighed, wishing again for seats. Who in heaven would be sadistic enough to make a waiting room without chairs or even anything to lean on?

Well, technically, it wasn't an official room. He could see the stars and planets in all directions through the semi-transparent ivory tile that stretched on forever while Saturn rotated beneath his feet, humongous, orange, and more fantastic than any artist's

rendering could have ever imagined. The “room” had no walls. The sight of eternity displayed in all its majesty, however, had long grown old for him while he waited in that interminable line.

So instead he looked at the others in line – or avoided the sight of them. He had tried hard not to look at the woman behind him the entire time he stood there. The first time had been a mistake, to turn around and witness the way she cradled her half-charred head under her arm, like a Christmas present waiting to be bought while she waited for the cashier to serve her. Now he could not get this sick image out of his mind of the lady in a line at Macy’s with a box of shoes under one arm and her head, wearing a patiently bored expression, under the other. Worse than that, there was a man across from him in Murder who was still on fire, his clothes stinking of burning gasoline and his expression calm, as if he did not even know of the flames’ existence.

Carl watched the red boxy numbers on the digital screen high above his head change again. Somehow, Motor Accidents never seemed to move up. It always went to Cancer or to shorter lines – like Murder or Overdose. Even Smoking, beside him, moved along easily with its cloud of tarry exhalations given off by those in line who could not give up the habit even after death.

Impatient, he scuffed the floor again, making one of the Celestial Workers who wove in and out of the lines glare at him in a most un-heavenly way. Carl rolled his eyes and bent down before the man could chastise him, buffing the dark line off with his thumb. Shouldn’t the floor of a waiting room in Heaven be made out of marble or gold? Who would pick linoleum? It made Heaven look cheap.

“It’s not Heaven,” the guy in front sighed, now picking at a loose piece of flesh that dangled from the right side of his jaw like a piece of sloppily-eaten food. “This is *waiting* to go to Heaven.”

“Of course you could always go...” The lady behind Carl balanced her head on one hand and jabbed her thumb downward.

She meant that literally, Carl had learned. Way up at the front of the line, Carl could distantly see a long row of gleaming brass elevator doors and the shafts of ethereal starlight going up until they vanished beyond sight or dropping down into dark nothingness, many millions of miles. Carl did not want to think about that coming lift, either up or down. Up would certainly be better, but with the way things were going so far, he was positive it would hurt. What kind of place was this?

He glanced down at the paper in his hand again and winced at the seven-digit number printed on its now wrinkled and sweaty surface. “Um,” he said, reaching out and snagging the sleeve of one of the Celestial Workers. “Can you tell me how long this is going to take?”

The man, dressed much like a janitor and pushing a bucket full of water that never got dirty, gave him a surprised look, buggy eyes widening until Carl thought they would pop right out of his skull. “It takes as long as it does,” he said.

“They obviously didn’t train you in being helpful,” Carl muttered, turning away.

“I can go get someone for you to speak to if you are dissatisfied?” the Worker suggested.

“I’m pretty dissatisfied,” grumbled Carl, sarcasm leaking like battery acid.

To this, the Worker merely nodded and, leaning on the mop in the bucket to push it forward, scuttled off towards the head of the line. It would probably be at least a hundred years by the time he got to the front, Carl griped.

“Excuse me.”

Oh, well, that was fast. On his other side stood the janitor he had sent off with a trim, athletic man in an immaculate Italian suit over a dark maroon shirt and a black tie in a shell knot, his black hair slicked back with utmost precision. Carl wondered for about half a second if this guy was Mafia-related before he found his hand grasped in a firm and painful handshake that ground the bones of his knuckles together. “I am Giorgio. I hear you have complaints?”

Effective way of silencing whiners, Carl thought. Anyone who had ever watched a gangster movie wouldn't want to complain to Giorgio. He half-expected thugs to appear behind him for dramatic effect.

Giorgio, however, merely waited for the victim before him to speak, hands folded in front of him.

Swallowing past the lump growing like a tumor in his throat, Carl choked out, “Well ... the line's kind of taking forever.”

Giorgio's lips twitched in what almost became a smirk. “That is the point.”

“To make me stand here for eternity?” Carl demanded, impatient even in the face of this intimidating man.

“Death does not stop for anything, particularly not you,” Giorgio told him, the flash of amusement gone. “You should be grateful that you're not in one long, eternal line, served by time of death rather than the manner of it.”

Carl's posture straightened in defiance. "I'm just a little pissed that this line never moves. It's like being at bloody Costco during the holidays and watching every other cashier get through people twice as fast as the lazy moron taking care of your line! All I ask is a little consideration from whatever a-hole is up there servicing Motor Accidents!"

The whole time, Giorgio never moved, like he had suddenly turned to marble. The muscles around his eyes gave a miniscule contraction as if he was going to narrow them. He seemed to think better of it, instead flashing a white, insincere smile at Carl. "If you really think you are better than everybody else, then go right ahead. Head up to the front of the line."

"What? Really?" Carl asked, surprised.

"Go right ahead." Giorgio gestured. "Make your way up there. Tell them Giorgio sent you, as a matter of fact. I won't stop you." He folded his hands again, waiting.

This was better than expected. Carl hesitantly stepped out of line. Behind him, the man with half a face and the lady holding onto her head bunched up, taking the space Carl had left.

Between the lines stretched the whole expanses of space. He could see more stars than he had ever hoped to see on Earth, as if the invisible dust in the black space had been cleared away for post-mortal eyes.

Looking far ahead at the shiny elevators, Carl turned his back on Giorgio, striding forward. The janitor had only taken a few seconds to get all the way up there and back with Scarface. Carl would sort this whole thing out in a matter of minutes.

"Now serving: Poisoning Forty-three-twenty-four-five-six," "droned the bored female voice up at the very front of the line. As a man with cyanide-blued lips and protruding eyes lumbered forward, she glanced up to see a thirty-year-old come staggering to the counter. "Oh, you. We've been waiting about six months for you. About time you decide to show up."

"Finally, something I can lean on," Carl moaned, falling on the counter while the woman curled her lip. "That janitor got here in like five minutes! How come it takes me six frickin' months?"

"That's the way it works," the woman said coolly, placing her interlaced hands on the counter. "How can I help you?"

"Look," Carl gasped. "All I wanted was to get the line moving forward just a little. Okay? Can you ... start serving more Motor Accidents? Is that too much to ask?"

"But we have been," the concierge told him, smiling just enough to show her teeth but exclude her molars. "Look." She pointed behind Carl, and he turned, weary eyes widening.

"Why hello, there. Haven't seen you in a while." The lady cradling her head under her arm waved with her free hand while the guy with half a face smirked.

"What? You mean to tell me the line moved?! It actually started moving when I left it?!"

The woman shrugged. "Bad luck. That's the way life goes, hun. I can get you a lollipop if you want to make you feel better," she added sarcastically. "Cherry-flavored."

Carl snorted out a breath through his nostrils and crossed his arms. "Fine. Then I guess I can just get back in line--"

“Oh, no, you can’t do that.” Giorgio stepped through the people in Motor Accidents and bared his teeth at Carl. He still wore that immaculate black and maroon suit as if only a matter of moments had gone by for him. “Once you’ve left the line, you can’t get back in at the same spot. Don’t you remember elementary school rules at all?”

“So, you’re saying I have to go back ... You! You tricked me!”

Giorgio turned to look at the concierge, smiling in some kind of shared joke. “You could almost see the light bulb turn on over his head, couldn’t you?”

“This isn’t fair! I want to talk to somebody, right now! Somebody in management!” Carl shouted as thousands of spirits waiting to enter the elevators turned and stared at him.

“What do you think I am?” Giorgio asked. He chuckled, inviting more laughter. “Some kind of thug, is that what you think? This is not intimidating enough for you, is it?”

Carl looked at Giorgio and back at the concierge and her coolly smug look. His hands clenched into fists, and he glared, losing patience. “Okay, so you’re in management of this place, then. Explain to me what is going on here.”

“What do you want me to explain? You’re dead. Anything can happen here – but you just don’t believe it. Everyone else can put up with waiting in their lines, but you can’t stand that. That’s what led to your fate, don’t you remember?”

Nobody else seemed to remember how they had died, so Carl had tried to pretend he didn’t recall getting behind the wheel, too drunk and irritated to wait for a taxi to arrive rather than take his own car.

“You were driving down a lonely, hilly stretch of highway,” Giorgio recalled in a very calm voice, but his black eyes glinted with something like malicious humor. “You got impatient with the driver ahead of you, didn’t you? I mean, there’s no excuse for keeping to the speed limit when you’re in a hurry. I don’t blame you for trying to pass her... even across that double yellow line, on that hill. Of course you thought you could get in front of her before anyone else came in your path. Then – bang! The knowledge you were dead hit you ... like a truck.” He snickered.

“Cut it out,” snapped Carl. “What kind of Heaven is this, anyway?”

Giorgio laughed, deep and hideous, sounded like it came from the depths of Hell. It called up every worst nightmare, which showed on the faces of every person near them. The lady at the desk clapped both hands over her ears, cringing.

“Carl, whatever gave you the idea that you were *waiting* to get into *Heaven*?”

Matthew Bishop

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## Old Shoes

Spitting out a stale, rock-hard, peppermint candy from the bank, Todd stands on a leaf-strewn sidewalk, his walk halted by a red light. The glass skyscrapers of the crowded metropolis block the sun and drop the mercury. Stuffed in a nearby trash can is a coat his dad gave him last week. Shivering in the cold wind he regrets throwing away the coat on this cold Minnesota afternoon but he doesn't retrieve it. The pungent fumes from the automobile traffic agitate his already upset stomach.

*I really need to ask my boss for a raise*, he thinks to himself while looking at the meager figures on his bank deposit slip. The traffic light turns green and he quickly shoves his bank slip into the front pocket of his plaid polyester slacks and walks briskly forward. His wavy brown hair and chiseled facial features attract the admiring gazes of several smiling women but he is so wrapped up in brooding about the uncertainty of his financial future that he is oblivious to everyone in the crowd walking by.

There is one thing he is certain about regarding his future: he's not taking any more charity handouts from his dad. For most of his life his father, a decorated WWII vet with an abnormally large head, has used the power of money to dominate the direction of Todd's life course; from which girls to date to which college to attend. His dad nixed his admission to Berkeley in '69 because of the freaky hippie counter-culture, and blocked his engagement to Karen because she didn't come from an upper class family. His dad has even dictated what clothes Todd wears.

Halfway down the next sidewalk Todd approaches the facade of a shoe repair shop. A mammoth sign, consisting of a giant wing-tip with ropes for shoe laces, may have been impressive decades ago when it was new, but its dilapidated and soot covered condition is an eyesore to Todd; as well as a symbol of the corruption and decay of the older generation: the greed mongers, robber barons, and bankers.

He looks down at his polished shoes and examines the holes in each sole. When he began his job at the local TV station, eight months ago, against the will of his father, he had been given these worn shoes from his dad. *Hand-me-downs from the old handy man*, Todd thinks to himself as he shakes his head disapprovingly. *They'd be almost as good as new if I had them resoled*. He gazes momentarily at the grimy red neon letters of the "Modern Shoe Repair" sign before entering the shop. As he opens the rickety door a foul wind of noxious chemicals rushes towards him and overwhelms his senses. He fights a gag response to keep his lunch in his stomach.

"Can I help you," asks a little man behind the counter, wearing a stained leather apron and displaying a yellow-toothed smile with a prominent gap.

"Uh... no thanks, I think I'll just go somewhere else and buy myself some *new* shoes," replies Todd. He abruptly leaves the store and continues his walk on the dirty cracked concrete of the downtown sidewalks.

The next hour seems to pass in a moment, a whiz of blurry images and faint memory traces of shopping for a jacket at Gladstone's department store. He has experienced disassociated episodes before; numb segments of his life in which he seems removed from himself, observing the automated movements of his physical body like a disinterested bystander. These disassociated episodes used to terrify him when he was a child, but now he has become accustomed to them and has learned from experience that nothing seriously bad ever happens to him during the few minutes to several hours in which he sometimes blanks out. As he walks up the concrete stairs to his apartment he realizes that he doesn't even know what the Gladstone jacket, buried deep in his shopping bag, looks like, nor how much it cost, or even what form of payment he used.

Entering the warm solace of the 75 degree environment of his apartment he kicks off his old shoes and forcefully throws them across the living room into the garbage can of his kitchen. Sailing through the air like sleek missiles, the wing-tips crash land on top of a rotten mess of bananas and

coffee grinds.

With a mildly happy feeling of satisfaction, Todd removes his itchy wool socks and enjoys the softness of the green shag rug as he walks barefoot to his kitchen. He makes a vow to never wear shoes again and never leave his apartment. Although he knows this is an unrealistic vow, the fantasy gives him momentary pleasure.

No sooner does he finish pouring himself a glass of goat's milk, after making himself a non-kosher BLT sandwich with pumpernickel bread, his telephone rings. He is suddenly overcome with nausea and it seems to him as if the pause between each ring grows longer and longer, and the sound of each ring diminishes in brilliance and approaches a soft but menacing sound similar to the rattle of a rattlesnake. A few minutes later he is startled by a loud voice at the other end of the phone.

"Are you listening to me?" yells his dad.

Suddenly realizing that he hasn't been paying attention to the telephone conversation, nor even aware that a conversation has been taking place, Todd meekly apologizes to his father.

"I was just asking you," says his dad, "if you were ashamed at your lack of motivation for pursuing a substantial career."

"What?"

"I'm talking about your job. Your lame job at the TV news station."

"Oh, well, knock it all you want but I'm proud of my job; I get a steady paycheck and I really enjoy what I do."

"But all you do is paraphrase information that comes over the wire. There's no talent or ingenuity in your work."

"It's my first real job after graduating from the community college. I have to start somewhere. And I don't plan on doing this kind of work forever."

"You know you can have a higher paying job with greater prestige."

“I was wondering when you’d bring that up this week. It seems you’ve brought it up at least once a week for the past several months.”

“You’re being foolish to write news copy for the local TV station when you could be taking the reins of the business I’ve built up.”

“Yes, we’ve had this conversation endless times, dad. I’m not interested in joining your real estate business. I’m not interested in soiling myself with the lies and cheating involved in selling over-priced homes, nor the cruelty of evicting renters from apartment buildings. I want to be a writer. That’s why I used my GI bill to go to college.”

“Yeah, well that bill was just a drop in the bucket sonny. I paid for most of the cost of your college from my own pockets. And that measly financial aid from Uncle Sam is the only reward you got for your wasted time in Nam.”

“We can’t all be war heroes, dad.”

“I’m not talking about being a hero. I’m talking about being a man. And you’re not even what you pretend to be: a writer. Instead, you’re a paraphraser who adds flowery adjectives to news bulletins for the anchorman of the 6 O’clock news to read.”

“Listen old man, I don’t have any more time to waste with you. I’m sick and tired of listening to your whining voice, so this is ‘good-bye.’”

“Wait a minute! Don’t you dare hang up on me. I still have something to say to you ...”

Todd immediately hangs up the phone.

Finishing his sentence, his dad says (not realizing Todd has hung up) “... I’m at your work and I’m going to give your boss an ultimatum.”

The doorbell rings and Todd opens the door.

“Hello sunshine,” says Barbara, his girlfriend; a lovely woman with excessive makeup and a perfectly hair-sprayed bee-hive hair-do.

“Come in, darling,” he says after kissing her. They divide his sandwich in half and drink from the same cup of milk. After this simple meal they leave for a night on the town.

“Are you walking barefoot, tonight?” she asks with a sarcastic smile, pointing her gloved hand to his feet.

“Oops, sorry, I almost forgot,” says Todd with embarrassment. He quickly pulls on some socks, retrieves his shoes from the garbage can, and makes a mental note to buy some new shoes with the money from his next paycheck. They leave his apartment complex holding hands, kissing, and giggling.

Once outside, in front of her parked '67 Mercury Comet, she holds up a pair of tickets and asks, “Are you sure you want to see 'Fiddler on the Roof' tonight?”

“Sure,” he replies as he brushes a loose strand of strawberry blond hair on her forehead that the wind had broken away from her beehive. “I just made a personal resolution today to start breaking useless traditions... just after I engage in one final time-honored tradition: will you marry me, Barbara?”

Surprised but pleased, she exclaims, “yes! A thousand times yes!” and throws her arms around him. After a rapid succession of kisses she pauses and asks, “But won't your father object to us getting married? After all, I'm not orthodox. And even if I was I still don't think the old bugbear would approve of me.”

“It doesn't matter, Barbara, I'm cutting all my ties with him, and I don't care what he thinks anymore.”

“Is that something you're going to tell him to his face?”

“Sure, but why do you ask?”

“Because he just pulled up in his car.”

Todd turns his head and sees his dad coming out of a parked Imperial LeBaron.

“Hey, I need to talk to you, right now,” his dad loudly exclaims while waving his hands and walking briskly towards him.

“Sorry pop but I’m taking my fiancé to the movie theater. And we’re going to be late for the movie if we don’t leave now.”

“What I’ve got to say can’t wait, son. I’m afraid it’s about your job at the news station. Or, technically, *lack* of a job. ”

Barbara smiles at Todd and whispers, “go and talk to him, I’ll wait in my car, and when you’re done we’ll go to a later showing of Fiddler, or even a different movie if you prefer.”

After protesting for a minute he gives in to her insistent command and leaves her to walk up to his apartment with his father.

After slamming the door shut behind them, Todd yells, “What’s this all about? What do you mean by ‘technically, lack of a job?’?”

His dad, matching the intensity of Todd’s voice, yells back, “Your manager says he wants to talk to you immediately!”

“How do you know?”

“Because I just came from his office.”

While dialing his boss’ phone number, Todd angrily tells his dad, “I wish you’d stop interfering with my life! Why were you talking to my boss?”

Before his dad has a chance to respond, Todd’s boss answers the phone and he quickly learns what the problem is. His dad had visited his boss to pressure him to give Todd a hefty (and unreasonable) raise and promotion. And, according to his boss, his father threatened that Todd would quit immediately if he didn’t get the raise and promotion. Talking over the phone in halted sentences, his boss angrily expresses his annoyance that Todd didn’t ask for the raise in person and sent his father instead.

“Is that true, Todd?” demands his boss.

“No, it’s not true at all. I did not send my father to talk to you. And I did not give him permission to intervene in any way on my behalf. And, most of all, I’m happy with my job and I certainly don’t want to quit.”

After a few more minutes of discussion, clarification, and apologizing for his father’s rude behavior, Todd secures his job back.

As he hangs up the phone he blacks out. When he regains his identity he finds himself standing in his apartment over the bloody body of his father. His fiancé, Barbara, is standing nearby.

“What happened here!” she demands.

“I don’t know, how long have you been here?”

“What are you talking about, Todd? Are you crazy? You must have seen me come in a couple minutes ago.”

Looking at his bloody knuckles and the swollen bruises on his dad’s face, Todd surmises that he got in a fist fight with his dad. He makes the logical conclusion that he dissociated during the physical struggle.

His dad groans and awkwardly stands up. After sucking in a lung-full of breath he says, “I’m cutting you off, you ungrateful dog. You won’t get one penny from me Not today, not tomorrow, not ever.”

As his dad stumbles out of his apartment, Todd yells, “I don’t care, I don’t need your money.”

Todd storms to his kitchen and washes the blood off his hands in the sink while Barbara offers to wrap up some ice in a dish towel. He then sinks into his couch, while she gently applies the toweled ice to a bruise on his right cheek. An intense discussion ensues in which he explains to her his lifelong history of dissociation spells.

“Have you seen a doctor?” she asks.

“Yes...no.... I mean I have seen a doctor in the past, but not lately.”

“This sounds like a really dangerous problem, Todd, you need to get some professional help - immediately.”

“But usually nothing bad happens during these spells. This is the first time I've been violent. But, hell, my dad had it coming to him.”

Barbara lets out a deep sigh and says, “Yes I know... But I'm afraid I'm going to have to decline your wedding proposal, Todd, at least until you get your psychological problem with disassociated black-outs under control.”

After several moments of silence, Todd says in a soft voice, “I understand. I'll make an appointment with a psychiatrist and remain firmly committed to therapy until my monstrous Hyde problem is completely cured.”

“You don't need to sound so melodramatic. Don't worry, I'll stand by you. I'm not abandoning you, Todd. I just want you to get help. Our future depends on it.” She softly kisses him on his tear stained cheek.

He gently squeezes her hand and says, “I'm not worried about the future because my past won't drag me down anymore.”

“I just hope you're not going to use fighting as a means to solve problems from now on.”

“No, I assure you I won't.”

“We'll see.”

“Yes.”

They kiss and plan their future together.

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### And They Ate Happily Ever After

“What seems to be the problem here?” Dale, the extremely obese store manager of the department store, asks an angry customer.

“Your sales clerk won't accept my coupon for 20% off the floral capris,” says a middle-aged woman wearing a green paisley scarf that partially covers her bright orange hair wrapped in curlers.

“I told the cry-baby her coupon expired yesterday,” says Caleb, a sharply dressed sales clerk with a hawk-like nose, fierce eyes, and a crooked, wicked mouth.

“You're fired,” says Dale.

“What!” exclaims Caleb. “Didn't you hear me say that her coupon had expired?”

“Just pick up your things,” replies Dale. “We'll mail you your final check.”

“This is bull,” complains Caleb. He tears his name tag off his blue shirt and slams it on the counter, accidentally stabbing his hand with the sharp pin of the tag. While walking past the customer he says, “Your capris are hideous... and they make your butt look fat!”

As Dale apologizes profusely to the customer, Caleb storms into the employee lounge, grabs his brown woolen jacket, and curses when he looks at the clock. The time is 6:07 pm. His work shift officially ended at 6:00. If he hadn't stayed a few minutes later he wouldn't have got into the argument with the red-headed cry-baby with the floral print capris and the expired coupon. He kicks a garbage can, spilling coffee grounds on the floor, leaves the store, jumps into his junky '86 Yugo, and tears out of the parking lot.

As the orange sun sets in the late autumn sky, Caleb changes lanes unsafely without signaling and speeds onto the highway. He drives around and around the beltway with no purpose or plan. Blasts of rock music from the radio heighten his agitated internal emotions but block his senses from the

external world. He doesn't notice the screaming siren or the red flashing lights of the highway patrol car until several miles after being followed.

Caleb's sullen attitude towards the highway patrolman, who pulls him over and asks for his license and registration, guarantees him the maximum fine on several moving violations.

"Please drive safely, sir," says officer Bill, a roly-poly, chubby cheeked fellow with ketchup in his bushy mustache.

After Bill drives away, Caleb yells, "Messy pig!"

As Caleb surveys the darkness around him, on the side of the road near a freeway exit, he is reminded of his wife when he sees a billboard advertisement of her favorite fast-food restaurant: the Burger Barn. *Oh no*, he thinks to himself as he checks his watch and realizes his marriage therapy session will be starting without him in five minutes on the other side of town. Talking out loud to himself he says, "Well, it doesn't matter if I don't show up. Money is the only thing that can save our marriage. And therapy certainly isn't going to make us rich."

His cynical attitude towards his rocky marriage is interrupted by a growling sound from his stomach and severe hunger pains. Having skipped his lunch break today, to get in good with his boss, Caleb hasn't eaten since breakfast and he's tempted by the neon sign's promise of satisfaction for his hunger.

He drives to the restaurant and pulls up to the drive-through intercom. A pre-recorded voice asks him if he'd like to try a triple mocha coffee shake.

"Just shut up so I can talk!" he yells into the intercom. "I'll have a triple by-pass patty melt."

No response comes from the intercom.

"With extra lard and carcinogen sprinkles," says Caleb.

Again, no response comes from the intercom.

Caleb repeats his order, without sarcasm, but still receives no response.

*Some punk kid is probably texting his girlfriend instead of taking orders,* he thinks to himself.

"I'll teach the slacker some manners," he mumbles out loud as he parks his junky car and leaves it in the middle of the drive-through lane. He pulls out a concealed handgun from his brown woolen jacket and enters the restaurant through the back door.

After closing the door behind him he is surprised to see a gun pointed at his face. A man wearing a yellow ski-mask angrily demands that he drop his pistol.

Caleb immediately complies and says, "your voice sounds very familiar - aren't you in my anger management class?"

He receives no answer and is shoved by another man, wearing a President Nixon mask, towards a small group of frightened people who apparently are being held against their will, half of whom look like employees of the restaurant. Near the group is an old man writhing on the floor while clutching his chest and seemingly having a heart attack.

"I know CPR, get out of my way," snarls Caleb. The two masked gunmen nod affirmatively and allow Caleb to administering CPR to the man on the floor.

"He needs a cup of ice," says Caleb after reviving the man.

Sighing with annoyance, the gunman with the yellow ski mask gets a cup of ice and hands it towards Caleb who suddenly springs to his feet and shoves him against a deep fryer. Harry, the restaurant manager, a tall, gangly man previously passive during the robbery, rushes the second, Nixonian, gunman.

Caleb repeatedly smashes his opponent's arm against the metal side of the deep frying machine in an effort to knock the gun out of his hand. But the gunman holds on tight to his pistol. Frustrated with the stubborn resilience of his opponent, Caleb shoves the man's arm into the scalding hot oil of the deep fryer. As the bad guy screams in agony and falls to the floor, Caleb tears off his yellow ski mask and says, "Yep, I knew you were from my anger management class."

Meanwhile, the manager throws gallons of strawberry ice cream at the feet of the second gunman, who slips on the floor and falls on his butt. The manager rushes towards him but is shot in the leg after the gunman quickly regains his balance. Sneaking up from behind, Caleb carries a heavy stainless steel cylindrical tank of pressurized soda-pop and smacks it on the head of the Nixon-masked gunman, who immediately falls to the floor unconscious.

“Is there anyone else?” asks Caleb as he looks around.

“No, it was just the two of them,” replies the manager. “They snuck in through the back door about 20 minutes ago and demanded at gunpoint that I open the safe. I stalled for time, claiming that the safe had a time-lock that I couldn't over-ride. Then the old man screamed and had a heart attack, and right after that you showed up.”

“Yeah, well the excitement's over now,” says Caleb as he binds the manager's leg wound with yellow paper napkins while the assistant manager calls the police on the phone.

“Where did you learn these medical safety procedures?” asks the manager.

“Oh, I used to be a paramedic,” says Caleb. “Until I got fired last year because I teased a car crash victim for wearing dirty underwear.”

Three days later Caleb is offered a job by Harry, the manager, and is also given a large monetary reward by the old man whose life he saved with CPR. After learning the ropes of the restaurant business, Caleb buys the restaurant with his reward money. Bill, the roly-poly highway patrol man, stops by every morning for coffee, a breakfast bagel, and a joke-of-the day. Caleb makes his wife the manager of the restaurant. Their marriage is still rocky, but their mouths are so full of yummy food during mealtimes that they can't argue with each other. And they ate happily ever after.

## A Blind Justiciar

The chapel doors burst open. Baron Gregory Von Jorgon marched in with his crimson night-robe sliding on the cold stone floor. The room was dim with early predawn light. His advisor, Magnus, shut the doors behind them to protect them from the winter winds.

“My Lord Gregory, please see reason!” said Magnus.

“Brandol owes me a *son!*” He threw down a candlestick. “I shall take the tithes from this place ‘til a son is paid for.” In his rage he threw a pew over end.

Magnus adjusted his battle-worn breastplate as he prepared to present his argument. “But my liege, with a daughter we will finally be able to forge peace with the Marquis of Linton! The soldiers can come home and we will be able to fill the coffers with the wealth of the northern mines.”

The Baron stroked his rust-colored beard at the thought of the proposition. But the memory of the Emperor’s tournament forced the idea of peace out of his mind.

“That whoreson dog killed my brother; I shall not resort to peace.”

The chapel doors opened once again, letting in a stab of wind. The high priest Leif closed the doors and locked them. His black and white robes trailed across the floor as he walked toward the baron.

Gregory knelt before the altar of Brandol to appear pious to the priest. *You son of a whore! By the lips of the high priest you promised me a son! We shall see how many worship you once this place is torn down.*

“My lord,” said the priest in his decaying voice, “I have the most unexpected news!”

“My consort gave birth to a daughter yes, I know,” said the Baron, rising from the altar.

“My liege was there not moments ago and saw the birth you old fool” said Magnus

“Perhaps you have come to deliver a sermon on the will of Brandol the Great Justiciar!” mocked the Baron. “Yes, ‘tis the will of the Great Balancer that my revenge be curtailed. The will of He who let that dog kill my youngest brother.” He shook his fist at the holy symbol of Brandol, a balance placed atop a double edged sword.

“My good lord should not be so hasty,” warned the priest. “Brandol can see from beginning to end and has the patience to listen to feeble old men when they say they have news.”

“Spit it out old man,” said Magnus.

“Your daughter was not alone leaving the womb.”

“What do you mean, priest?” asked Gregory.

“Your daughter has a twin, my lord.”

“Are you certain?” asked Magnus.

“Quite.”

“Is the other child—” The Baron held his breath.

“A son my liege.”

The baron collapsed on the floor. His crimson robe spilled open revealing his royal blue night-shirt underneath. Another stab of wind entered the chapel as Magnus raced away, causing his clothes to wave, blood mixing with water. *Oh Brandol, forgive me of my haste.*

“Rise my lord. Take a seat. We have much to discuss.”

“Yes,” sighed the Baron, “we must continue our plans.”

“Yes, my lord, yes. We must continue to plot the demise of the Marquis of Linton.”

“Now that I have a son, I have no fear of prolonging the border disputes. Oh, that damned Marquis shall pay for his treachery.”

“Yes my liege, yes. The North shall fear the Barony of Pravo and her river folk.”

“Aye, the hills of Linton shall rise with the mounting corpses of her people and the rivers of Pravo shall run red with the blood of her enemies. Yes, yes.”

“Yes Lord. Brandol shall slake thy thirst for revenge.”

“Yes, and with a son, I can ally myself with the Duke Ilem. Ilem has been suffering from deluges from the sea that she borders. She shall need the wealth of the North more than I.”

“But if your son takes after you, the good Duke shall have his lands taken from him as well.”

“Yes, my son the Conqueror—his power, and that of his children, could rival the Emperor himself!”

“My liege, lower your voice,” hushed the priest. “Though we be alone in this sacred place, the Emperor has many ears and eyes. He must tread carefully. Besides, your son has but left the safety of his mother’s belly, we must be patient.”

The Baron sighed. “Yes, patience. If only for eighteen more years I must tolerate the Imperial decree of peace between he and I. Then, using that same decree, I shall march against him and take all the riches of Linton.”

Another thrust of wind stirred the chapel. Magnus stood in the door way, his face twisted with rage.

“You decrypted old fool!” he shouted to the priest.

“What is the meaning of this?” demanded Gregory rising from the pews. “When did you even leave?”

“I left once I heard the good news sire.” He shut the doors. “But this snake has led you astray with a false hope!”

“I don’t understand what you mean,” said the priest, cowering.

“Your son, my lord, he is not whole.”

“You mean he is malformed?” asked the Baron.

“Nay, his body will grow to be as large as you. His fault lies elsewhere.”

“Now it is you who speaks in riddles,” taunted the priest. “Speak plain!”

“Your son, my liege, is blind.”

“Are you certain?”

“What proof have you?” demanded the priest. He felt his influence on the Baron wane.

Magnus bowed before the Baron. “His eyes, they are as white as the snow that falls outside these walls.”

Gregory fell into the pews. He hid his sorrow with his hands. *Brandol, why do you give me a son only to make him a burden? Was it not this priest that said my son shall create the conflicting balance the Empire needs?*

“My Lord, all is not lost,” pleaded the priest.

“No!” shouted the Baron. “I shall hear no more from your forked tongue.” He rose from his seat and made his way to the door.

“My liege, please listen to —“

“Magnus,” said the Baron holding up his hand to silence the priest. “I shall not hear another word muttered against my new ally, the Marquis. Cut out his snake tongue.”

“With honor my liege,” said Magnus.

§

*Brandol, Lord of Balance, Hugo prayed, give me the strength to do thy will.* He had returned to the chapel after the wedding feast had ended. His twin sister was now wife to the heir of Linton. A few candles remained lit from the ceremony earlier, though it didn’t matter to Hugo. He was blind since birth. He felt the warm breeze of a summer night caress him as the chapel doors opened.

“Of course you are here,” said Gregory Von Jorgen, the Baron of Pravo. He entered the chapel. His red enameled breastplate, with the brass lion of the Barony emblazoned on his chest,

clanked slightly against the pommel of his sword as he staggered toward the altar. He knocked over an unlit candelabra.

“Of course, Father,” replied Hugo. “I wished to offer prayers that my sister should find happiness in Linton with her husband.” He rose from the altar.

“Always praying—though, since you are blind, I suppose that is the only thing that you can do well.” The Baron fell into one of the pews. Hugo caught the stench of rotten apples on the Baron’s breath.

“Father, I needn’t see to tell you are drunk.” *Of course, you often have entered these sacred halls intoxicated.*

The breeze stop as the chapel doors creaked closed.

“My Grace, how nice of you to join us,” he said.

“My lord of Pravo did tell me that though his son was born without the use of his eyes, he was given sight by Brandol—extraordinary.” The Marquis’ shrill voice rang off the vaulted ceiling and echoed through the chapel. He unbuckled his sword belt and left it near the entrance.

“Why has his grace decided to bestow his presence upon us?” The Baron rose and gave an exaggerated bow.

“I have reason to thank to Brandol this night. He has fulfilled many of my hopes and the prayers of my people as well. He also prevented the rain from falling, though the sky was black with clouds.”

“It gladdens me that you respect this chapel as a place of peace,” said Hugo. “Most men of war forget to leave the battlefield behind when they approach the altar of the Justiciar.”

“I needn’t face mockery!” The Baron rose and marched toward the chapel doors. He unsheathed his sword and threw it and it clanged on the stone.

Hugo walked toward the chapel doors. *He never felt at ease in this place. Or near me.*

“What a shame,” said the Marquis.

“Yes, your grace, he has always wrestled with his vices.” As Hugo passed the Marquis, he reached for his shoulder, only to feel it drop much farther than he expected landing on his blue velvet doublet. *I didn't think he was that short.* He sensed the silver wolf over the left breast.

“Please, call me Marcos.”

Marcos then made his way toward the altar of Brandol. *He is so arrogant that he expects people to follow him when he is talking.* Hugo's sister had once told him of a time where she and the Silver Wolf went riding. He started talking and in the middle of the conversation, rode off. When she finally caught up with him, he had asked her a question assuming that she was right behind him. He was shocked to learn she hadn't heard him.

“It's a shame you are blind.” He began talking about how wonderful the ceremony was. He spoke highly of the fire-eaters and the gymnasts. He also praised the castle's architecture. Hugo replied only when, and because, it was courteous.

“But, I digress.” The Marquis kneeled. “The real crown jewel of this wedding is in fact the Crown Jewel itself.”

“How is that, my liege?” Hugo grabbed his father's sword and began walking toward the altar.

“My grandchildren now have the rights to both my hills and your rivers. With the addition of a small alliance with the Duchy near the sea, my descendants shall inherit the Crown of the Emperor.

“Through a bloody civil war you would usurp the crown then.”

“The Emperor rots on his throne. Either I start a revolution or the people will start one without me. Why not-“

Hugo impaled him on his father's sword. The rubies set in the blade became cloaked in the Marquis' blood. The silver wolf turned red. Blood spilt onto the altar, landing on the east balance. Hugo knew he had hit his mark when the metallic taste of blood filled his mouth.

"I cannot allow a war to engulf the entire Empire. The scales of power cannot be tipped in favor of people like you. Brandol will not allow it. But take comfort, you shall not meet the Justiciar this night alone."

Hugo left the sword sheathed in the old man's corpse. He grabbed the Marquis' sword and sat near the chapel doors. The silver blade was unsheathed when they opened.

"My son." The Baron laughed. "I fear that I share the same fate as you. I have drank too much and can no longer see."

"Don't worry Father, I can see for the both of us." With the sword in one hand he supported his father with the other.

He led his Father to the altar of Brandol where the corpse of the Marquis lay.

"Father, your sword lays before you. Please take it, and I shall lead to your rest."

"I have done many sins my son." The Baron grabbed his sword. "Did I tell you that I had almost had you killed when you were but a babe? I wish-"

Hugo cradled his father's head and cut his throat with the blade of the Marquis. Vermillion flew onto the west scale. Hugo felt the warm sticky blood run over his fingers. It began to rain outside.

"I wish that you had. A blade through the heart hurts for but a moment, but the spurn of a father leaves a bleeding wound that cannot be tended. Brandol will welcome you with his justice."

Hugo then ran out of the chapel, Brandol showing him the way. The rain turned into a torrent and cleaned Hugo from the stains of his actions. He ran into the barracks and found an aged Magnus. Hugo told him of the dead bodies found in the chapel, that he was certain that they were

the Marquis and the Baron. Magnus sent for the Groom and his bride immediately. When they had all gathered in the chapel, the new Marquis declared that there shall be no alliance between the two lands, but, due to his wife's pleas, no war should arise. *Brandol*, he prayed as the seal of the Barony was gifted to him, *I am glad you gifted my sister with the foresight to stop the war I almost started. Balance has been kept, the Empire safe from wolves in sheep's cloth. But please Brandol, let me once a fortnight see my sister and the wonderful children that she shall have.*