



speculative fiction FOR THE REST OF US

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Table of Contents

The Ascension of Our Lady Boy by Mia Tijam.....	1
Prikaza by Dani Alexis Ryskamp.....	9
Anna Lee by Obinna Onwuka.....	12
Introducing Jim by Justin Whitney.....	17
Dreams by Jasmin Nanda.....	25
Contributor Biographies.....	29
Mia Tijam.....	29
Dani Alexis Ryskamp.....	29
Obinna Onwuka.....	29
Justin Whitney.....	30
Jasmin Nanda.....	30

The Ascension of Our Lady Boy by Mia Tijam

This story first appeared in print in [Philippine Speculative Fiction](#). It was later given an honorable mention in [2008 Year’s Best Fantasy and Horror](#).

Let us begin with my earliest memory as a lady: Daddy had complained to Iyay who was my yaya (and his yaya before and his mama’s yaya before that) that I was lacking something *strong* in my bones and in my hips.

He said that it was affecting my walk because I was walking like an upright duck. He said she should feed me, his only begotten son, more chicken in my broth. God knows there were enough chickens in his spread of a poultry farm, he had grumbled.

He did not know and he could not see that I was already walking *like a lady*.

But Iyay knew (the way *old* people just *know* things) and later on my playmates also knew (the way *children* just *know* things) and they gave me my nickname. When I could already talk in complete sentences, I would imagine saying my nickname and the name of the barrio where I come from in the imaginary beauty contests that I would join:

Mabuhay! My name is Lady Boy and I'm from Los Angeles Iriga Cityyyyyy!

Of course I had to hide my being a lady-trapped-in-a-boy's-body from my Daddy. Oh, he hated it when I would call him that because he said that "Papa" sounded more haciendero and more macho. Yes, Daddy was macho: tall, dark and as mean as a tikbalang. Not that he looked like a tikbalang — he was growing bald and had sported Mr. Clean's hairdo for as long as I could remember. He was the big-time copra/palay/corn/chicken/fighting-cocks king of all the machos in our city.

Calling him "Daddy" was more ladylike for me and thank goodness I did not call him *Papa* because later on I would call my own handsome jowa "Papa". Ay, never mind the difference in stress gagagirl; it's the same thing.

Anyway, Mommy dearest who gave birth to yours truly was also tall, dark and handsome. She was *very* tall, *very* dark (as dark as that soot you see under the pot or charcoal) and *very* handsome (like some women are just really handsome). She could have passed for one of her brothers who were very handsome men. I wish I could say that she was really a black beauty but she wasn't and she certainly didn't look like a horse, excuse me.

And really, I couldn't complain about Daddy and Mommy dearest's combined genes because I ended up looking like Romnick Sarmenta. But I am darker, chubbier— really, it's *baby fat* — and with traces of acne scars but there are so many beauty products that would take care of those and there's always Doktora Vicky Bello.

Anyway, I was a good little lady then and I loved my Mommy and for me she was the most beautiful animal in the skin of the earth. The first time I saw her slide her Gumamela-red-lipstick over her lips, it made her look like one of those exotic parrots and not like the usual birds we see in the farm. And I wanted to put on her lipstick because then I would be a lady just like her.

So as soon as she moved away from her dresser and left their bedroom, I dived for her lipstick and rubbed it all over my lips. I was puckering my lips in between squealing, then covering my mouth, then clapping and then jumping and repeating everything all over again. Ay, beautiful! It was all that ruckus that made Mommy dearest rush back to their bedroom, followed by Iyay, because they were wondering who in heavens and St. Peter's chicken was butchering a chicken in the bedroom?!

Then they saw me and I saw them through the mirror: I held myself still like a cornered animal, thinking that if I didn't move maybe they would go away. Then my Mommy dearest screamed when she got a good look at how I looked so I also screamed and started crying. And then she covered her mouth with one hand while clutching Iyay with the other.

"My God! My baby!" she whispered. Iyay moved towards me but Mommy dearest said, "No, no, don't touch it! The chicken that has taken over his body might get angry!"

But Iyay only laughed, came up to me, and removed the lipstick from my lips with the hem of her daster. Both women chose not to say anything about it to Daddy. Mommy dearest was convinced that an evil chicken had possessed me but deep in her heart she knew that I was really a lady. Mommy dearest was a denial queen, really.

But after that Iyay became my Fairy God-Aswang. Not that she looked like an aswang— whenever I

would look at her and see the wrinkly wobbly skin on her arms and throat, I would always think of a turkey. But really, she's an aswang. In Los Angeles, people knew that she was an aswang but she never really hurt anybody and would help almost everybody. And so what chocnut if everybody *thought* that her laugh sounded evil, or that her toothless smile would make your body hair stand, or that she would change into an animal once a month, or would prefer not to eat or touch or smell garlic, or that she liked to smell pregnant women every now and then?

Iyay knew a lot of things about many things and she *should* at her age. Just don't ask her how old she is: aswangs, especially very *old* female aswangs, are very sensitive about their age. Just ask that stupid bully who thought he was cuter than Aga Muhlach. I *know*, it's so Bagets! But growing up, Aga Muhlach was the crush-ng-bayan and now it's just yummy-ulam-pahingi-pa-ng-kanin Papa Piolo Pascual! So, feeling-Aga had sassed to her that she's so *old* that if she were a virgin, her hymen would be as tough as rubber. He ended up with dysmenorrhea everyday until he apologized to Iyay for making such ungentlemanly remarks and he stopped having menstrual pain after.

Anyway, she would always know without being anywhere near me when I would give in to my petal attraction to Mommy dearest's Gumamela-red lipstick. She would just pop out of nowhere like a mushroom to wipe it off my mouth just minutes before Daddy would see me. Later on she would be doing that and taking off the towel I would wrap around my head, which I would use as a wig, or hurrying me out of Mommy dearest's heels.

She continued to do that until I (and the rest of the boys in the whole of Los Angeles it seemed) was circumcised one summer. It was heaven for me. Of course it hurt like hell being circumcised and I wished I didn't have to go through it, noh! But see, I got to wear a *skirt* for weeks while I healed.

I loved how the skirt would billow around me when it was windy or how lady-like I appeared while arranging my skirt when I would sit down. But Daddy had noticed that I was wearing the skirt for too long. He had asked Iyay to make me chew more guava leaves and apply the paste on my *junior* so that I would heal faster and stop wearing the damn skirt.

Then one day there was a glitch in Iyay's aswang powers and Daddy saw me wearing the towel, lipstick, skirt and heels and sashaying like mother Melanie Marquez in front of the mirror. I wished he had tried to drown me in a drum, or in the river, too, so that I could also scream that I was not a boy but a "SIRENA PO!"

But, no, no, no — it was the chicken coops for me. Really, for someone who was an heir to a chickendom, I was a real chicken when it came to chickens. I mean, I would even run away screaming from chicks, sister!

So there I was being hauled screaming and sniveling like any little girl by Daddy while he was beating me with his big leather belt with the gold Texas chicken buckle, and I was crying for Mommy dearest and Iyay and Mama Mary to save me. I was thrust into the nearest coop looking like I was caged in a bartolina as I held and peered through the bamboo slats. (But really, the chicken coop was as big as a big room.) Daddy was roaring that I had spent way too much time doing sissy things rather than minding the chickens that fed, clothed, and sheltered us. Then he roared some more that I was to stay there and be given no food and no water until I had gotten some manly and chicken sense into me. He roared some other things but I couldn't really understand him because of the spittle coming out of his mouth.

Really, I didn't know what I was supposed to get while being stuck inside a chicken coop, noh? Was having manly or chicken sense better? Then I finally smelled the chickens and good lord they stank to

high heavens! Then I realized that I was all alone — with the feared, stinky chickens. I slowly backed myself into the nearest corner, softly saying, “Kroo, kroo, chick, chick, *nice* chick, chick, *stay*, chick, chick.” They all huddled in one end of the coop while I stayed in the other.

Anyway, Iyay had sneaked food and water to me as soon as Daddy was asleep that night and every night after. She told me that there was nothing to be afraid of, that the chickens were really nice, and that if I listened closely I would hear them talk and I could talk to them, too. And really, I was scared to death more of being bored to death— rather than being pecked to death or suffocating on the smell of chicken shit to death— because I could not talk to anybody or anything. After several days, I smelled like them so I decided that I might as well talk to them.

And mother, the chickens could talk and once they start to squawk they couldn’t stop! In addition to telling me their health problems, they could out-gossip Ate Luds or Cristy Fermin. I heard that this chicken was having an affair with this rooster, and the father of the eggs of that chicken was not the father, and that every 44th day there was an orgy among the chickens. I told Iyay all that the chickens told me and she replied with that *bruha cackle*.

None of the chickens suspected that they were all going to die after 45 days but they felt the need to party on the 44th. I didn’t want to ruin their party by telling them that they were all going to die after that. And girl, the chickens could really *party* to death.

Daddy finally let me out when it was time for the chickens to be delivered to wherever they were supposed to go; Iyay had told him that I had gained my chicken sense. I wanted to cry and wave a beauty-queen-goodbye to them because I knew that they were going to die horrible deaths and end up in someone’s plate as Chicken Joy or something. Really, have you seen what they do to a chicken cooked a la pinikpikan?

But crying and waving wasn’t a manly thing to do and I would just be hauled right back into the coops if I did that. And I was desperate for a bath. Besides, the chickens wouldn’t have noticed anything anyway because they were too hung-over.

I stopped eating chicken after. I couldn’t eat my kumares or some distant relative of theirs, noh?! Daddy didn’t complain because you wouldn’t want to eat chickens too when you’re breathing and minding them for the rest of your life. Daddy was proud of how I could tell what was wrong with which chicken — which I would find out during my *chikahan* with the chicas. He was also proud of how my voice got deeper and how I strutted around like a cock — which the chickens had advised me to do; they even got a rooster to show me. And as long as I wasn’t surprised, which would transform my deep voice into a squeal and make my palm and fingers fling upwards with matching “Aaaaay!”, I appeared to be more like his dream son.

He was so happy that I was finally turning more and more into a young man that he didn’t even mind when I began growing my hair long. In our *barrio*, rock music was a hit after all, especially Guns n’ Roses. Not a *baylihan* or a *barangay* dance went by without “Sweet Child of Mine” being played and all the people would go crazy-dog-wild to the chorus. I had posters of them in my room, together with White Lion, Skid Row, Metallica and Bon Jovi, and Daddy agreed that they all looked macho even if some of them had long hair and looked dirty and evil. Daddy was just so happy that I was listening to macho music even if it was noisy, instead of singing to Donna Cruz’s “Kapag Tumibok Ang Puso”.

Daddy didn’t know that I had a crush on most of them and that I would kiss their posters as I combed my hair 100 times, thinking that having long hair was so much better than wearing a towel for a wig. I told Daddy that my rock idols and the macho barbarians of old, like Conan the Destroyer, had long hair.

He insisted that I should at least not let it grow past my nape because I just looked too damn girly.

He did ask why I didn't have posters of girls in my room. I told him that I was picky but I did get from one of our boys in our farm, that calendar of some liquor with pictures of women in bikinis for each month. Every night, I would wish that I would be as sexy as they were. On some nights, I would even wish that I would also get to wear a red bikini and ride that white horse to a white castle where Prince Charming was waiting and where we could live happily ever after. And everyday, I tried so hard not to give in to my fatal attraction to Mommy dearest's lipstick or slip into her heels.

In high school, *obviously* I was more interested in the boys. One or two of them were interested in me too but I was a lady and I prized my virginity. Besides, the nuns said that you could get pregnant if you allowed a boy to touch your hand or kiss you and then you would go to hell. I believed them. And I was waiting for the right man to come who would give me that loving-lightning-feeling with matching fireworks and wedding ring. Anyway, I had drawn hearts with "Prince Charming" written in the middle and an arrow passing right through it. The girls didn't have a monopoly on that.

Some of the girls were interested in me too and I wished I could tell them, "I'm a girl too, noh?!" They made me want to slap them because of their eyelash-batting and giggling, especially when they were also flirting with all my crushes. And really, I was prettier and I could bat my sooty eyelashes faster and better. I even danced better in social dancing than those ugly, left-footed haliparots who kept on rubbing themselves against me every chance they could get. I swear, those girls made tango a full-body-contact sport for me! Daddy was suspicious though about my interest in ballroom dancing but he couldn't officially complain because my grandmother liked having me as her partner. It's good for her osteoporosis, you know.

Then it was time for college: did I want to be a teacher, an engineer, a lawyer, a nurse, a doctor or a priest? *Did* I want Tuberculosis, math, books, blood, more books and more blood, and being whacked by a paddle and having papaya for dessert forever? No deal, bakla!

What I *really* wanted was to go to fashion school and learn how to design and make gowns and definitely use a better name than "Pitoy Moreno". In our dialect, his first name refers to junior. Panget!

But no, no, no — Daddy wanted me to go to Philippine Military Academy. He filed my application and forced me to take the test. And *milagro*, I passed! Daddy said that he had always wanted his son to be a big-time General copra/palay/corn/chicken/fighting-cocks king of all the machos in our city.

My palms and fingers almost flew upwards and I almost squealed "Ay! Patay!" As much as I would be surrounded in PMA by a lot of delicious men in uniform, I heard that they beat up ladyboys like me. And I had to cut my hair! Nobody touches my crowning glory!

So I ran away from Los Angeles, from my future hair in PMA, and went to Metro Manila. I first stayed with my cousins but Daddy had told them not to take me in so that I would be forced to go home. I ended up hanging around Remedios Circle in Malate because I heard that's where people like me were. With no money and going hungry, I accepted the invitation of an older man, whom I thought was a Good Samaritan, for a meal and drinks without knowing that there was rabadonkey after.

He was not Prince Charming and there was certainly no lightning with matching fireworks. Don't cry for me Argentina, the truth is I did not think about it much — and I didn't want to act like a pig being gutted like Kris Aquino in the movie "Vizconde Massacre" or be a true-to-life teleserye queen who would cry buckets and buckets of water and have my face looking bloated after. Besides, my hormones were raging and my body had needs too, you know.

It was meals, drinks and rabadonkey with one man after the other. And mother, some of them you wouldn't think were mamas. The rabadonkey, I had learned, was a matter of inserting tab A into slot A or C because only women had slot B. And when the meals, drinks and rabadonkey were done, I got a little sleep until I was woken up because it was time to leave. Most of the time I was given money then it was back to Remedios Circle.

No cell phone load or rubber shoes or bling-bling for me. Really, at that time most cell phones were analog and you had to have a line and I wonder sometimes how the whole gift-rubber-shoes-giving began.

As I said, I did not think about it much. It was tiring but it was also fun and as far as I was concerned I was a girl who just wanted to have fun. In time, I had saved enough money to be able to afford to rent a room with three other ladyboys. I had stopped wearing my mesh-shirts because they said I definitely didn't look beautiful in them. I had also learned to apply foundation without looking like an espasol and lipstick without looking like I had a Gumamela on my lips.

It was in one of those group dates that I met my future papa— he was with this group of gays who didn't look like they were gay who met up with my group of ladyboys. It was like our barangay dance all over again with both groups whispering to each other about who would be for whom. And what a pair we made: he was the silent, stuffy type and I was the probinsyanong bakla as far as everyone was concerned.

The whole night, I was wondering when we would get down to it but he just asked me slum-book questions and wanted to talk and talk and talk. He also just wanted to talk while we ate and drank the next night we were together and the next and the next. I lost count eventually and stopped thinking that something would happen between the two of us. I had asked myself, "*Ano ba ito? Abnormal? May problema sa dalawang ulo ng katawan?*" But since he just wanted to talk, eh 'di go with the talk! After all, he would give me money just to talk to me and never had sex with me. I began looking more and more forward to seeing him and spending time with him, going through the motions of going crazy picking out what to wear, thinking about what to say and all. Harass!

Then one night while waiting for me in a restaurant, he looked up and when he said "hello", it hit me like lightning — but of course I really didn't know how being hit by lightning felt, just go with the flow bakla — *I loved him*. No more explanations because that's love, 'di ba? Like a rosary, it's mysterious! So yes, he had me at "hello".

That night, he also asked me, "Lady Boy, will you be my girlfriend?"

Ay bakla, dream come true! And I squealed and acted just like any beauty queen who won the Miss Universe title: opened mouth, covered mouth with hands, fanned the face, cried while saying "I don't want to cry", laughed and said "I can't believe it!", and then smiled and said "YES!" faster than 4 o'clock before he took it back.

I had finally found my Prince Charming and there was a matching fireworks show that night! I was treated like a princess after with the usual fights about this and that chorva. I don't want you to die with envy or make your eyes roll with all the details but he said he would love me forever and we would live happily ever after.

And I loved him so much and I wanted to please him so much that I even bought and read "Kama Sutra". I did some of the things there, that's why he kept on coming back for more, yes more, yes, yes, no, no, no more, more! Bakla, some of the things there I tried to do but I cannot really do! My god, I don't have the equipment for all those positions, noh?!

Anyway, I was a princess with the usual relationship problems for one year, eleven months and 23 days to be exact — because a day after that he told me that he was getting married and obviously I wasn't the bride.

Not because he really loved her because it was me he really loved but they had been together forever and he wanted kids and it was expected by their families. The rest did not make sense because in my head I was tumbling in a zigzag: *ANO RAW?! HE HAD A GIRLFRIEND? CLOSET QUEEN!* And in my head there was that gasp: *MY GOD! I ENDED UP WITH SOMEONE JUST LIKE MY MOTHER: DENIAL QUEEN! IBANG OEDIPAL COMPLEX ITO!* More tumbling in a zigzag in my head.

Then mother, it was a Nora Aunor and Vilma Santos all-in-one moment — I was pummeling his chest while saying “You lied to me!” and “You said you love me!” and “Stay with me!” and “Fight for us!” and “I gave you my heart, body and soul!” with matching *hayop, hayop, hayop*.

You know what hurt the most? He said, “I wish you were really a lady. If you were, then I would really marry you.”

It was like spraying vinegar on an open wound. That really hurt, ha? I had been *wishing* every night on every star light, star bright from the bottom of my hypothalamus that I were really a lady, too, you know. More pummeling and more *hayop, hayop, hayop*.

So all my bags were packed and I was ready to go: walk out ang lola mo with matching cryola. After all, he kicked me out of the apartment that he was paying for. Afterwards, I tried to go back to the way I was before but I couldn't. I decided to go home to Los Angeles.

Of course I wasn't welcomed home like the prodigal son because it was obvious that I was more like the prodigal *daughter*. But at least I wasn't turned away — Iyay was the first to recognize me and she welcomed me with her beaming toothless smile. She definitely looked older but I didn't tell her that; as much as I wanted to be a lady, I didn't want to end up with dysmenhorrea, too. She resumed teaching me about this and that kaaswangan.

Daddy had simply looked at me — fundas, lipstick, and long black shiny hair galore — and then refused to look at me or talk to me after. In fairness, he didn't drown me, or cage me, or kill me. When I stopped wearing the foundation and settled for moisturizer, wore lip gloss instead of lipstick, and cut my hair to my shoulder, he then answered me whenever I would ask him in my deep voice something about the copra, palay, corn and chickens. I just toned it down, sisters, because the heat would melt make-up in Los Angeles anyway.

The fighting cocks were still Daddy's sole territory; I had better relationship with the chickens because the cocks were all heckling me. Ay, if they only knew that *some* of them were like me, too, noh?!

Mommy dearest had wailed and embraced me and wailed some more and then began to pray 200 Hail Marys everyday for the evil spirit that had possessed me to go away. Sometimes I would wake up to her hand just above my head while she whispered, “You devil, you devil, go away!” and then more Hail Marys.

And for weeks I would cry over that *hayop, hayop, hayop* while I took care of the copra, palay, corn and chickens. I told each batch of chickens in our daily chika everything except the part wherein they're all going to die soon. I told them that *hayop, hayop, hayop* was more of a chicken than they were, no offense meant and they said none taken.

I had also asked Iyay if there was a spell that could transform me into a real lady. She said, “Babaeng hayop, puede. Babaeng tao, hindi.”

Then after many 45-days, Iyay finally told me to stop telling the chickens my story because it was depressing them and it was making them sick. I looked at them — ay, true! I saw that they all had the flu. Not Bird Flu, gagagirl— that came out after the Y2K bug.

But it was then that I got the idea of giving my ex-jowa's bird the flu. You know, like it had a cold that would never go away. So I asked Iyay if it was possible. She gave me that evil laugh which meant “yes” but there was a catch because I was crossing the line between the garden of good and evil; I wanted to hurt, not help.

Haller?! Of course I wanted to hurt my ex-jowa!

Then Iyay said that if she taught me how to do that, I would take her place as the resident aswang of Los Angeles. She was tired and older than old, wanted to retire and die already, you know. And the only way she could retire and die was if she would pass on her aswang powers to someone — girl, boy, bakla, tomboy, cannot be to a butiki, baboy, unggoy but yes to lady boy.

Oh my, being an aswang was an equal opportunity career after all.

Now how bad did I want to hurt my ex-jowa and become an aswang in the process?

I had thought about it day and night, thinking about love quotes and love songs day and night — first love never dies, he broke my heart and took it with him, I could never love again, if I can't have him no one can, hell hath no fury like a bakla scorned, don't get mad get even forever, because we are starting over again, que sera sera... And I had also asked Iyay day and night about the wonderful world of joys and horrors of being an aswang.

So what happened next?

Seeeeeecret!

Charot. No, really, it's a secret ceremony that I'm not allowed to tell because of a binding contract with so many clauses and after which — instant baklang aswang ititch!

I still live in Los Angeles and people call me Mother Lady Boy now. Sounds more fabulous than *Mother Ricky* or *Kuya Boy*, 'di ba? And so what chocnut if people think that I would change into a baklang manananggal once a month, or that I don't eat chicken because I use it for orasyons, or that if you were a man and I smelled your sweat you would be my instant-ulam, or that I'm mistaken for the multong bakla when I wear too much fundas?

I'm running our copra/palay/corn/chicken kingdom now and would help almost everybody and almost never really hurt anybody. Daddy will soon be the fighting-cocks king of all the senior citizen machos in our city. He doesn't talk to the macho senior citizens about me, of course. Mommy dearest is still praying 200 Hail Marys everyday and still hopes that I would marry and give her grandchildren someday. Still a denial queen, my mudra dearest.

I'm still single and available, and the konsentedora-pakialamera-chikadora chickens are encouraging me to get into the dating program, sister, with matching cluck, cluck, cluck. I still dream of joining beauty contests, but this time I want to be Miss Gay Universe:

Mabuhay! My name is Lady Boy and I'm from Los Angeles Iriga Cityyyyyy!

And for my talent, I'll show you my aswang poweeeeers!

Winner, 'di ba?

Prikaza by Dani Alexis Ryskamp

Drizzle and mist press down as I step off the bus in my grandfather's pea coat with my grandmother's black suitcase in hand. It's a two-mile walk to the house on High Street, and although I don't exactly know the way, the church bells that chime every quarter-hour give me some pretty clear direction.

I'm here for my ailing maiden aunt, a woman who until this point has always been there for everyone but herself. Or at least, I'm supposed to be here for her. I'm really here for my family's convenience; they know I have six months before I have to be in the Hague, and they know I have nowhere else to live, and a desperate need to save money during that time.

"You'll stay with your aunt," my mother had ordered, when suggesting, cajoling, and pleading had all failed. "She needs help and you need to start pulling your weight in this family."

Pulling my weight? A Harvard law degree is what – chopped liver?

But my aunt didn't have long; at seventy-three, her liver was failing her. So I couldn't refuse.

The High Street house is older than my aunt and I combined. Its upper story lists, fatigued, to starboard, and the porch columns have been threatening a strike for at least twenty years. The front garden is crammed with herbs, the back garden with tomatoes, and the porch with Shaker-style rocking chairs and crocks of uncertain provenance. In the year since I've been here, both gardens have gone to seed. I don't have to ask the doctors for an update; my aunt is wilting in the shrubbery, overgrown with tangled furze and sweet peas.

I knock on the door, even try the still-defunct doorbell, but I get no response; my aunt is either out, or out like a light. Either way, her door is never locked. I let myself in.

My aunt is dozing in her favorite armchair, directly in front of yet another "Law & Order" marathon. I deposit my suitcase and coat in the spare bedroom, where Sam, the cat, is dozing on the end of the bed. He sits up; obviously, I'm there to feed him. Everyone is.

He trips me as I step into my aunt's rock-maple kitchen. "Mrow," he says, short, sharp, and insistent. "Mrow. Mrow." He darts between my legs against and I hop on one foot, trying to avoid stomping his delicate toes beneath my clumsy ones. Not that he minds. Whether I put food in his bowl or fall and break my head, he eats either way.

"Mrow." Don't think he doesn't know it.

I plop a bowlful of mashed cat food in front of Sam. As I straighten, I hear a voice: "And just what do you think you're doing here?"

I turn. Staring at me with one eyebrow raised is a woman I recognize from my aunt's photo albums, fashionably dressed in brown tweed: my great-grandmother. She's standing dead center in the kitchen as though she's just walked in, though we both know she hasn't.

"Hello, Grandmother," I say. The eyebrow stays up.

I rack my brains. I've been told I've met my great-grandmother, but I don't remember; in the photos, as in reality, I was a tiny infant. All I have left of her are a few scraps of language, words, phrases from "back then," necessary to communicate with her and my great-grandfather, neither of whom ever did master English.

“Sar san, bibi?” I ask, knowing bibi is not the word I’m looking for and not really caring. The word I want to use, but can’t, is *choxãni*. As in, “My grandmother’s *choxãni* needs to stop bothering me and get back in her grave where it belongs.” A synonym is *mulo* – deceased, a corpse, a ghost. I may have written my final thesis on Romani slavery, but I haven’t needed these words for a lifetime; they clatter around my head like children’s blocks, chunky and slick. *Phuri*. Maybe?

“Besh tale, phuri,” I try again, because she still hasn’t moved. *Sit down, grandmother*. I can’t remember the word for *please*. *Nai bári dzela*. It’s not important.

“I’m feeding the cat,” I say, to answer her first question.

She’s not interested in the cat. “What are you doing in my house?”

“Taking care of aunt Bea,” I reply.

She sniffs. “It is Beatrice’s job to take care of *us*.”

Us? So my grandfather’s *choxãno* is around here somewhere as well. He’ll be as easy to move as a boulder, and twice as friendly. *Bibaxt* – what bad luck.

“Well, she can’t,” I say. “Not anymore.” And a good thing, too, I think. You two should have died when you died, twenty years ago, instead of hanging around needing her the same way you have ever since she was born, staying alive by sheer dumb stubbornness. No wonder she’s dying.

My great-grandmother has been studying me carefully. “You’re too pale,” she affirms. “Like a *choxãni*.”

Look who’s talking, I think.

“You’ll never find a husband that way,” she says. “*Maj bali e mura, maj gulo alo sako*.”

I catch enough of this to make out the dead-horse proverb: *the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice*. My great-grandmother was famously proud of her *garade lava*, her “hidden words.” Her English is better than I remember. She’s also the only person alive – or doing a fair imitation of it – not to see my paper-white skin as an asset. Everyone else assumes I’m default-white. I let them.

“I have a husband,” I say.

“*Him*.” Her mouth twists disapprovingly. “He is not your husband.” She’s technically right; we haven’t signed a marriage license.

“And you,” she goes on. Her next words hit me directly below the belt. “No respect for this family!”

“*Excuse me?*” Grandmother or not, I won’t hear it. “Do you *know* what I’ve done for this family? I spent three years in law school. Which might as well have been thirty years in prison. I’m due at the International Court of Justice in May, so that people like this family don’t have to be rounded up and fingerprinted en masse like some kind of criminal cattle. I don’t-”

“You don’t have *Romipen!*” she practically shouts back. Her eyes flash; she can get as angry as I can, and more quickly. “You are *marime*. *Gadji*.”

I open my mouth, close it again, hang my head. I deserve that last one. After all, I’ve spent all the years I can remember trying to be one of them, a “real American,” a *gadji*. I wanted to be an outsider. I’ve succeeded.

“I haven’t forgotten *Romipen*,” I say, hurt.

“*Gadji.*” She points at my feet. “What about those?”

I look down. They’re plain white cotton socks, like thousands of others in this very town, like the ones she used to dress my grandfather in. “What about them?”

“Your socks. Washed with his.”

I’m so utterly gobsmacked by this I have no response, in any language. I know about her silly rule, now my mother’s, about mixing men’s and women’s laundry, but- “I... I’m spending my career on the International Roma Union, and you’re lecturing me on how I do my laundry?”

“If you cannot keep the small rules, you cannot keep the big ones,” she retorts, which sounds nothing like the great-grandmother I know. Since when was that a Gypsy rule?

Prikaza. That’s the word I’m looking for. No one’s ancestors step out of the grave – much less fully dressed – to harangue them by chance.

I run a weary hand over my unmarriageable white face. “What did I do to deserve this?”

“Until today, everything,” says my grandmother.

“Even the laundry?”

“Even the laundry.”

I sit down at the kitchen table, feeling a million years old. My mother had tried to explain *prikaza*, how my indomitable dead Romni grandmother would know if we did not keep up appearances. This is what I thought she meant by *patyve*. I thought *patyve* was a bit of a joke, really; there were, after all, no such thing as *choxâne* really, just stories my friends and I would tell each other at slumber parties, to get scared half out of our wits.

But my mother would explain, patiently, endlessly, how important it was to keep the ancestors happy. How if we failed, we’d suffer *prikaza*, which meant we’d pay: in *bibaxt*, bad luck, or *nasvalipe*, illness.

Since pretty much everything in my childhood world supposedly caused *nasvalipe*, including playing hopscotch and jump-rope with the neighbor girls, I thought my mother was either joking or mad, and I ignored her. Instead, I pursued the only thing about my Romani heritage I did buy: we, like the Jews, needed a place of our own, a place we would no longer be bothered, persecuted, tortured. *Eke dzeno sama kana reslam k’a Oropate; thaj sam t’avas pale jekla dzeno.* We were one people when we entered Europe; we must be one people again. One people who must stop running, because there is nowhere left to go.

“What have you done for this family?” my great-grandmother demands.

What... I stare at my hands. “I became an attorney for this family,” I say. “A *dukáto*. I was going to take on the world for this family.” I look up. “I’m going to take on the world for you, for this family, and you’re on about my socks?”

“The world is not your family,” my grandmother says. “Your family is your family.” She points at the living room. “You start today. *Patyve.*”

I bury my face in my hands. No; not far enough. I drop my forehead to the table with a thunk, my eyes closed. *Patyve. Nasvalipe. Prikaza.*

I owe these people everything. Everything. And I went to *law school*.

Gadzi.

I'm waiting for another proverb, more *garade lava*. Maybe the one about the upright man who can profit even in a poor town, which my friends all think is a great Gypsy-pickpocketing joke but is actually about how we make our own luck, of which I have just run out. But I hear nothing.

When I raise my head at last, my great-grandmother is gone, as if she were never here. But I know better. She has never left.

I have to follow her example.

The cat is gone as well, along with his food; he's gone to the living room, where my aunt is, at last, awake. He is a good boy. She says so.

I stand up and step into the living room.

Anna Lee by Obinna Onwuka

Every headstone in the graveyard bore the name Anna Lee.

A young woman wandered through that graveyard. Her hair was well-coiled, blonde tresses worked into springs that bounced around a usually bright face. Her nose was small and pointed slightly upwards in a buttonish way. Her limbs were thin, not gaunt but thin, though she seemed even smaller in the red dress that flounced around her. She kept her skirts up away from the black mud with dainty little hands. Her eyes were green and they streaked from stone to stone, seeing that name under crosses and embossed on hard, square blocks of night grey stone.

The young woman's name was Anna Lee and she was quite perplexed.

The moon looked down upon her through bright, fleece-like clouds. Her feet, slipped by sleek red shoes, squelched into the mud as she whirled around and around, dancing frantically as she saw her name on the headstones. Her skin shone under the moonlight and against the deepness of the earth all around her. None of the graves bore flowers. None of them had even been visited. Her footprints, she saw, were the only ones. Anna Lee. Anna Lee. She drew her breaths more quickly as each second passed. Her eyes brimmed with tears and it wasn't because of how much mud, how much dirt there was.

"Miss Lee?" called out a deep, clear voice. Anna spun around. A man stood next to a headstone not far from her, his head bowed and a beaten, wide-brimmed hat covering his features. He wore a Union uniform that was handsome once, before all the dirt and the little tears that she barely saw, injuries of time and rage. He was too tall. He raised his face and his eyes were too big. He was darker than her. His black mustache hung over his top lip and drooped down the sides. The burning end of his cigar brightened angrily as he puffed.

"That is your name, isn't it?" he asked. He lifted a rifle and settled it over his shoulder. Her eyes slid up and down its length. A Henry repeating rifle. A killing tool. He leaned his hip against the headstone that bore her name.

"Yes, it is," Anna choked. She stepped backwards, her hand reaching out and finding a headstone. Union men never sat well with her. "May I ask yours?"

The man smiled. The moon did not look down on him. "People tend to call me the Halfwit," he said.

“Being half-white, they couldn’t pass up the opportunity.” He looked at the end of his cigar. “Better than being called plain old nigger, I suppose.”

Anna licked her lips and glanced away from him. “I... I don’t suppose that’s...” She looked at him. “*Mister Halfwit?*”

He looked away from her to cover his laugh. “Just the Halfwit,” the Halfwit said. He took a step forward and stood between four headstones. His finger was looped against the trigger of his rifle. “Quite a find, this place.”

Anna swallowed. “I am...” Anna said, wringing her hands together. She looked to her left, her hair swimming about her head as she looked at the rows of headstones. “I am quite perplexed, Halfwit.” And she was.

“Makes sense,” the Halfwit said, strolling towards her through the headstones, his left hand passing over the rock as he approached. She didn’t move. She simply watched him come.

“Nobody’s prepared to see a graveyard like this.”

“I don’t understand it,” Anna said, looking at the Halfwit walk towards her. His uniform was unbuttoned slightly. An officer’s uniform. “I am still alive, right?” Her eyes pleaded with him.

The Halfwit shrugged and came on, slowly, sauntering.

Anna’s trembling lips spread in a smile. “Maybe I get blown to pieces and these graves are just waiting, each one getting a little piece of me.”

“It’s possible,” the Halfwit said. “A stick of dynamite could be shoved down your throat.”

Anna shuddered and leaned her hip against a headstone. “I didn’t want to hear that, Halfwit.”

The Halfwit puffed on his cigar. “You brought it up, Miss Lee. In any case, I don’t have a stick of dynamite.” The Halfwit stopped not far from Anna. He fingered the trigger of his rifle. Anna pushed both hands down on the headstone and did her best to get the image of herself being blown into a thousand pieces out of her head. It was a spectacularly thrilling image, though, and that was what scared her the most. Perhaps if it was happening to someone else it might be agreeable.

“Do you remember an Army of the Illinois?” the Halfwit asked.

Anna looked up and steadied herself. “The War never interested me,” she breathed because a soft voice could never carry a lie, not to a man. The Halfwit nodded.

“All of these are you,” the Halfwit said. “All these graves. Your life has been replayed at least a hundred thousand times, Miss Lee, just like everyone else’s, just like all of history. And you’re trapped. You always make the same mistake and you always get killed right here.” The Halfwit tapped a headstone and puffed on his cigar. “Always for the same reason: that mistake.”

Anna tried to study the Halfwit’s face but he lifted his thumb and lowered the brow of his hat. She turned her eyes upwards and the moon looked back at her. “How do you know all that?” she asked. “You’re just a Halfwit, after all.”

The Halfwit smiled under his hat. “I know,” he told her. “I’m the one that kills you.”

Anna took a deep breath, closed her eyes and held it in, then exhaled. The Halfwit watched her. “Did you follow me here?”

“In a sense,” the Halfwit said. “I knew where you were going.” Anna nodded somberly. “Do you

remember a man named Brown?"

Anna smoothed her skirt down the back of her thighs and took a seat atop a headstone. Her toes scrubbed the earth, made two small smooth patches in it. "Lots of Browns," she said, looking at her name engraved a dozen times. "My mother almost married a man named Brown. I was almost a Brown." She smiled and gripped her skirts at her knees. "Anna Brown isn't a good name, though."

"Artaxerxes Brown," the Halfwit said. His eyes seemed to smolder under the brim of his hat even though she couldn't see them. His cigar did a little dance between his lips. "Major General Artaxerxes Brown of the Army of the Illinois. Do you remember?"

Anna looked at him. "Artaxerxes is a peculiar name, don't you think?"

The Halfwit walked towards her, growing as he came on. She didn't move but her knees quaked. He wanted to block out the moon but he wasn't quite tall enough to manage that. He stood between two headstones.

"Do you remember, Miss Lee?"

Anna nodded slowly, bunching her skirts together. Her toes knotted against each other. Her eyes darted from headstone to headstone, to dirt, to more.

"Do you remember John's Crossing?" the Halfwit asked. He lifted his foot and set it atop a headstone. He leaned forward, plucked the cigar from his mouth and studied the end, blowing smoke onto it, and then set it back between his lips. With his thumb he pushed his hat up and showed her his face. "Do you remember the sprawling camp of the Army of the Illinois? Neat blue uniforms, rifles, faces of the soldiers? Do you remember Brown's face?"

"I remember," she hissed. She looked at him, her features slack. "I remember Brown's face and the way he looked when he was giving orders. There was one day, a Tuesday I think, when he stepped out of his cabin in just his longjohns holding his revolver. His belly was always too fat without his uniform." She didn't smile. "He said that someone had stolen his hat and he was going to shoot every man in camp until he got it back. He actually did shoot some poor Ohio boy before the other officers restrained him. Oh, I remember it all."

She fell silent and looked at the dirty buttons on the Halfwit's uniform. His finger itched the trigger of his rifle. He slung his left wrist over his upraised knee and leaned forward further.

"This is an awful place to die," Anna sighed.

"Yes it is, Miss Lee," the Halfwit said. "No one wants an audience. Doesn't seem to matter that they're all corpses and that they're all you."

Anna swallowed and looked up at his face. She saw the creases that dissected it. There was a way out of this just like there was a way out of John's Crossing, just like there was always a way out. She bit her lower lip and watched his eyes soften.

"I want to stop it," Anna said. "I don't want to die here. Not again."

"Are you going to change the past? That's the only way I can see to do it," the Halfwit said. He chuckled and blew smoke.

"But how?" she asked.

The corners of the Halfwit's mouth twitched, turned up slightly. The stink of tobacco protected him, but it didn't protect Anna Lee, and she looked at his cigar and pined for it as she tasted the fetid air. She

thought she might retch if she stayed here too much longer. The red end of his cigar flared up. She dropped her eyes to the dirt again.

“What about my face?” the Halfwit asked. “Do you remember me?” She didn’t look up. “I barely got out as all that bad business was going down. Never rode a horse before in my life and there I was, my ass getting cracked on a horse’s bare back as I made my escape.”

Anna shook her head, kicking her feet a bit. “I don’t know what business you’re talking about,” she said. Slaughter wasn’t a business.

The Halfwit puffed out on his cigar. “Just because you weren’t there doesn’t mean you don’t know, Miss Lee,” he said. “Woken up at three in the morning by cannonfire, Rebs right across the river, splitting apart our camp with shells. Before we could even get our guns in our hands they’re charging across at us, yelling and firing, cutting us down with bayonets. They knew where we were, knew just where to attack. They broke us, beat us like dogs, killed us to a man.” He worked the cigar around with his teeth and his lips. “I was the only one to get out, Miss Lee. The only one. At best others might’ve been captured. General Brown caught a bullet to the gut. Bled to death on a Confederate cot.”

“That’s terrible, Halfwit, but I was long gone by then,” she said. Her fingers curled. “Whenever that was.” She glanced up, brave enough only to look at the buttons on his chest before glancing at the dirt again.

“I saw you crossing the river the day before,” he continued, “in that red dress of yours, the one you’re wearing now, just after you’d got done spreading your legs for my uncle. Probably went to spread ‘em for some rebel private.”

Anna Lee looked up sharply and found herself caught in the Halfwit’s glare, her body shivering like a wet dog’s. Suddenly she wondered how she didn’t recognize him before. And who else would have chased her so far except this grudge-wracked savage?

“Sergeant Julius Langston-Hughes,” the Halfwit growled. “Nephew of Major General Brown. Do you remember me, Miss Lee?”

“I do,” she said. “I remember you... but no one ever called you Halfwit then.”

“They knew better than to say it in front of my uncle,” he said. “Or in front of me. Or in front of you. But it’s all I am now.” He smiled at her, leered over the field of headstones, his tall, vulturish body not shifting, a Medusa’s statue with some malevolence still lurking deep inside. “Until I avenge my uncle.”

The Halfwit’s arms seemed to creak soundlessly into motion, bringing that hateful rifle up to his shoulder. He didn’t flip up the sights, but Anna Lee felt the heat of the muzzle’s deathly stare between her eyes and she forced tears from her eyes. The Halfwit didn’t smile as she began to weep, squeezing her skirts, lips trembling, all over pitiful.

“I’m going to kill you,” the Halfwit said slowly but not softly. “A spy’s death for a spy. I won’t show you mercy. Your crying isn’t going to do any good.”

She looked up at him with red and dripping eyes. “What will do good, then?” she asked. “What is going to help me?”

“Confess and apologize,” the Halfwit said, keeping his aim true. “Pray to God. Maybe He’ll have pity on you and you’ll walk into Heaven. The worst He can do is say no.”

Anna Lee bit her lower lip and looked around her at the endless rows of graves, her graves, her tombstones, as far as she could see. Her body was wracked with new sobs. She looked at the Halfwit,

stared right at the muzzle of that rifle. It wasn't over yet.

"I want to warn myself," she said, and then she swallowed. "My other selves. Not to spy for the rebels. I can... I can see my graveyard taking over the frontier and I don't..." She choked on sorrow. "I should be the last one here, if possible. The rest of the 'me's should... live their lives happily. They shouldn't come to be executed in this awful place."

Anna could taste the smirk on the Halfwit's lips. "And how do you plan to do that?" he inquired.

She gathered herself, taking deep breaths. "I have a friend in Philadelphia," she said, "A medium, a mystic... name of Morgan Woods. I... I want to send her a short letter. If anyone can contact my other selves, it would be her." She tugged the bodice of her dress out with her thumb and reached inside with two fingers.

"Hey," the Halfwit snapped. Anna Lee looked up, perplexed. He puffed on his cigar and its end flared at her. "Don't do that, don't reach for anything. You have two options: pray and then die or just die."

"Listen to me, Halfwit," she said, feeling the tears in her eyes again, feeling them roll into her voice. Hysteria 1863. "If I can tell Morgan and if she can tell my other selves, then they'll never betray the Illinois and the other Browns will still live! Your uncles, Halfwit! Help me! Please! I only ask that you take this message to Morgan. You'll still get your revenge."

The Halfwit watched her for a while, watched her weeping face and her tear-stained cheeks and her hands so close to her breasts. "Hurry up," he said. "I don't like this place any more than you do."

Anna nodded and silently brought forth a fountain pen with a piece of paper rolled tight around it. She was prepared, as always, to send secret messages. She unfurled the paper and pressed it on her knee as flat as she could manage despite its continually rolling up. She glanced up at that rifle and decided to be quick, scrawling as neatly as possible, her wrist quickly disagreeing with her. Still she wrote on, pleading with Morgan to do this thing for her out of love. As she wrote, she drove the point of her pen through the paper and dragged that tear to the edge. She stared at that rip, not moving a muscle, her jaw slack, eyes frantic.

"What's going on?" the Halfwit asked urgently. "You done with it? I'll take it off your body when I've finished killing you."

"I ripped it," Anna said quietly.

"What's that?" the Halfwit called across the headstones.

"I ripped it," she said, louder now. "I ripped the paper." She looked up at him, feeling tears beginning again. "Do you... do you have another? I'll copy what I have, I'll be more careful next time!"

The muzzle's angry stare wavered. The Halfwit tilted the rifle back and rested the barrel on his shoulder. "I have a piece of paper," he said, slowly walking past headstones, his boots pushing deep into the dirt. He reached into his uniform as he came towards her, every step making her tense, quail in fear. It was still a gamble. He had that rifle. He produced the paper and held it between his forefinger and thumb. "You're lucky, Miss Lee."

She made herself laugh with shame, a parting of her lips and a rough sound from her mouth.

The Halfwit came on and she could only watch the ground. He walked past the graves, past her names, not touching them- only looking on at Anna Lee and holding his rifle and the paper.

Finally he stood in front of her and handed her the paper. Anna Lee turned her hand around, flicking

her thumb along the pen to produce the hidden blade. Quick as a fox she jammed the blade between the Halfwit's ribs and she slipped off of the headstone and ran through the graveyard.

"Bitch!" the Halfwit groaned, letting the papers fall and slumping to a knee against the headstone. Anna Lee didn't look back as she ran, gripping her skirts. She felt the dirt flinging up with every step, felt it crawling up her feet, up her legs, and she fought down the urge to vomit. Dirt! Filth! She kept running. A shot buzzed past her thigh and she kept running. The headstones to either side of her were a whirl of Anna Lee Anna Lee Anna Lee. Another shot punctured the ground just before her.

"Stop shooting!" Anna Lee cried. "Stop shooting at me!" A bullet whizzed past her ear and she hunched her shoulders and kept on. She looked up as the Halfwit plagued her with shots and saw the bare hill ahead. The bare hill! She'd have to keep running for some time, but that hill was freedom, none of her graves upon it, none of this nightmare. She'd be free!

Her feet, unsuited for this hard running, managed to support her. Once she got free, she would have to get to Philadelphia, to Morgan, so she could tell her other lives not to let the Halfwit live.

A bullet tore through her dress. Anna Lee kept running.

Introducing Jim by Justin Whitney

I watched Mom watch Zee, waiting for the tension to crack and approval to wash forth.

As I scratched my beard, Mom sipped her coffee, eyes glancing over my partner, taking in every detail. Zee, bless him, just smiled back without a care in the world. His hair draped off his shoulders like a curtain of black agate. He had a sharply trimmed goatee and mustache that set off his deep indigo skin nicely. He wore a plain white t-shirt with khaki shorts. His hairy, muscular legs, the midnight blue of a twilight sky, were folded. He hovered about five inches above the sofa.

Mom's eyes flicked around his hair. Still smiling, she took a deep breath and raised her eyebrows at me.

It was the hair. I knew it'd be something.

We sat in her living room, the South's version of a parlour (but without the class or elegance). The room stank of cheap potpourri, strawberries and lilacs. Probably chemical-soaked wood chips from the dollar store. Through wide windows, the fierce Texas sun lit up an infestation of white and blue ducks. Mom loved ducks. Pillow shams, wallpaper, salt and pepper shakers, countless ceramics. Above the sofa she'd hung a picture of Jesus, bordered by blue ducks in oval needlepoint trimmed in white lace.

Mom cleared her throat. "So...uh..."

"Xeralis," I said.

"Oh that's right. Sorry, it's so unusual. Is that Oriental?"

"Asian, Mom. And no, it's not."

"It's a family name," said Zee.

"Oh, I see. And where is your family from?"

“The Ether Circle of the Extraplanar Dimension,” he said, nodding. He picked up a white ceramic duck wearing a blue bonnet and turned it over, fascinated.

“Oh, uh-huh. Uh-huh.” She turned to me. “Did I tell you about the new couple I signed up?”

Mom was gunning for Direct Distributor in a new multilevel marketing scheme that sold “all natural” vitamins. On our bi-monthly phone calls, she regaled me with her every conversation, every compliment, every petty slight. If anyone asked her what I did for a living, she would stop and try to remember. Then she’d get mad for not knowing. Then she’d blame the other person for testing her. And lastly, she’d call me up to complain about her rotten friends. And the cycle would begin anew.

As I listened to the details of her new couple’s marriage, Zee placed the duck back on the coffee table and brought it to life. Ceramic wings cracked and pulled away, fluttering. As he giggled, the duck craned its neck and quacked, then promptly slipped on the glass table top and broke apart.

“Oh dear,” said Mom.

“Oops, sorry about that.” Zee waved a hand over the pieces and they reassembled themselves. He gently put it back in place as Mom watched his hands closely. She glanced away, picking a spot on the wall, then staring at her coffee, and finally smiling at me again.

Looking in my own cup, I noticed an iridescent oil slick on the surface. Folger’s: hand picked by Juan “Exxon Valdez.” Angling the cup so I could avoid the slick, I took another sip. It cut through the awkward silence like a bedsheet ripping in half. The coffee tasted cold and bitter. Mom saw the look on my face and sprung into action. “Want some more coffee? I can make a fresh pot.”

“No, Mom. That’s f...”

“Oh, let me do somethin’ for my baby boy.” She bustled into the kitchen. “I ain’t got none of that Stardust or whatever that is you drink in the city.”

I let it go and looked over at Zee, giving his hand a squeeze. “How you holding up?”

“Fine. Why?”

“I’m sorry it’s so awkward. You’re not nervous?”

“Why would I be? Your Mom’s really sweet.”

His smile was beautiful. I smiled back gratefully and stroked his hair with the back of my hand.

Two years ago I’d found a charming antique store in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Not in the tourist section, of course. Overpriced trash. A friend had taken me to a more upscale area with tasteful shops. I like to rummage around in the overlooked and dusty corners, which is where I found an uneventful brass lamp. I rubbed it a little with a sleeve – in hindsight it makes sense that my neat freak partner would only emerge after a thorough cleaning – and decided it would make a nice incense holder for my creativity altar.

Later, after being visited upon by a fearsome and magnificent genie, or djinn as I was corrected, Zee gave me three wishes. The whole idea of servitude seemed so abominable to me that I wanted to stop this nonsense once and for all. So after wishing for a high-return socially responsible mutual fund and a larger penis, I used my third wish on him. “I wish for you to be emancipated and self-directed, for the rest of your existence!”

Zee was so touched that he hung around after that. We shared some wine and chocolate, told stories from our childhood, tried out my second wish, and fell madly in love. I think the moment things got

serious came after I told him how much I loved lavender. After brunch with friends I returned home to find the apartment filled with the stuff. Clouds of lavender floated in every corner and he'd turned the couch into a living nest of petals. Even the walls were covered with undulating stems.

I was deeply moved, and I'll admit a bit dizzy from the smell. But I told him, "No, Zee! I'm not your master! I don't want you doing stuff like this for me."

He said, "I didn't do it for you. I did it for me. So I could see the joy on your face."

I have to admit, I got weepy then. That's when I knew he was a keeper.

Zee and I sat on the sofa staring into one another's eyes, reminiscing while we held hands. I ran my fingers through his beautiful hair.

"I made some more Folger's. I know you like them fancy...oh." Mom saw us and stopped short. By reflex, I drew my hand back, then hated myself for it. She refilled our cups with fresh oil slick without looking at either of us, then set the pot on a coaster painted with white ducks in blue underpants. She took her seat and crossed her ankles and hands like she was a lady.

She wore her finest visiting clothes: white leather cowboy boots with fringe, carnation pink denim about two sizes too small, starched western shirt, equally starched and poofed blonde hair, with shiny silver cowboy hats dangling from each ear. I so wanted to take her shopping.

She tapped her pink fingernails against her cup. It was chipped white, made in China, and read "Don't Mess With Texas." Someone had painted a duck on the handle.

"So Mrs. Cooper," said Zee.

"Oh Betty Lou. Please. You're part of the family now." I flinched, wondering how Zee felt about that.

"Thank you, Betty Lou," he said, smiling. "Did you know your son is showing again at the Whitney Museum? He does really amazing work." I blushed and kissed him on the cheek.

"Wow, how 'bout that!" She stood and picked up a small picture from a bookshelf. Showing it to Zee, she said, "Did I show you this? That's my upline, Dennis and Barbara Nordich, giving me a Go-Getter Award. Stevie, did I tell you I showed the business to sixteen couples in one month? Aren't you proud of your momma?"

As she put the picture back, Zee looked over at me and gave my hand a gentle squeeze. He was surprisingly innocent for a 3000-year-old. He told me once that he slept most of that time, only coming out when some poor peasant stumbled on his vessel. He learned what he could until the three wishes had been wasted and he slipped back into a coma. As a result, he picked up things fast. Yet another thing I loved about him.

The screen door creaked open and we heard someone fumbling with the doorknob. As Zee and I stood, Mom walked over and opened the door for Dad. "Oh, thank ya." He poked his head in and saw me. "Hey, hey, stranger!" He pried his muddy boots off with a boot pull and left them on the porch as he shambled in, wearing one white and one black sock. He noticed Zee, studied him briefly, and gave me a big hug.

"Look who's finally come home," Mom announced. "Our prodigious son has arrived."

"Prodigal. Hey, Dad. Here, I'd like you to meet my partner, Xeralis." I presented Zee with my best Vanna White hands. Dad looked dubious.

"Say who? Zippy? Zorro?"

“Xeralis.”

“What is that, Oriental?”

“No Dad, he’s a djinn.”

“A Jim?”

“Djinn. Like gin? Like what you put in a martini?” I figured a drink reference would clue him in.

He looked at me and carefully pronounced, “...Jim. Jim...Martin?”

Before I could correct him again, Zee put out a hand. “Jim is fine, sir. Good to meet you.” Dad grabbed the offered hand and shook, then glanced down at what he was shaking. The smile slipped into something disconcerted.

“Boy-hidey. Got some fingernails on you, boy. You got any clippers? I got some out back, if you need ‘em.”

Zee looked at his fingers.

“Dad...”

Mom leaned over to Dad, looking at Zee conspiratorially. “I was just about to tell our baby boy that I got some scissors for that hair. You think Mary Bell could fit him in for a cut. She could give a shave while she’s at it.”

“Mom, please. He’s standing right here.”

Dad hunched over with his elbows sticking out and started bouncing in rhythm. “Shave and haircut... six bits! Shave and a haircut...six bits!”

“It’s two bits,” I said. “And he looks fine.” I grabbed my man’s hand and squeezed. He was holding his hair in front of his face as if pondering it.

“Aw,” whined Dad. “We was just funnin’.”

“Well...it’s kind of rude, Dad.”

He scratched his ass and gazed around with a sour look on his face. Mom jumped in, almost frantic. “Who’s hungry? Dairy Queen’s still open. I could sure eat me a dilly bar.” She sang the last part, tempting us with the prospect of tasteless vanilla ice cream, enrobed with wax-like chocolate. On a stick.

“That’s great. I’m starving,” I said. “How about you, Zee?” He nodded.

Dad shambled out. “Welp, I’m gonna lay down for a nappy-nap.”

“You’re not coming with us, hon?”

“No, y’all go on without me.” He sounded like he was sacrificing his every joy for our one moment of pleasure. Before he disappeared into his room, he stopped and wiggled his fingers at me. “It’s good to have you back, son. We missed you.”

“Let me run get my purse,” said Mom.

I watched her scurry in the other direction, then turned to Zee. He had manicured fingernails and short-cropped hair, buzzed close to the sides. That sexy beard I loved so much was gone. “Zee! What’d you do! You didn’t have to change!”

“Well, I thought it would make your parents more comfortable.”

“No, no, no! That’s the whole point. We talked about this. We’re not going to act any different, right? We shouldn’t have to change for anyone. If they have a problem with the way we look, or whatever, then that’s their problem!”

“Oh,” he said, eyes downcast. The short black hair spewed out like play-doh until it reached his shoulders. “So you want me to have long hair?” The hair kept going. It reached past his waist and hit the ground. He looked like a blue Morticia Addams. Or maybe Cousin It.

He gave me a sly grin that was usually much cuter. “It’s not about what I want,” I said. “It’s about what’s natural for you. Look however you want to look.”

“Seriously?” With a poof, he exploded into a cloud of blue vapor, then imploded, churning into a swirl. I put my hands on my hips and stared at my beloved blue tornado.

“Ok, now you’re just mocking me. You know, there is a balance.”

Thunder rolled into fractured words. “You said...”

“Ok, forget it. Let’s just go, Zippy.”

I wasn’t sure what to do about the lamp at first. Zee said it was both a gateway and a leash. So if we destroyed it, would it set him free or return him to his home dimension? I wanted him to be liberated, but not if it meant his going away forever. Then there was the question: what did he want? I didn’t want him to go, but it would be hypocritical of me to force him to stay if that wasn’t in his best interest.

We decided not to decide. It seemed to keep the most options open.

I kept the lamp on my altar, though. Not as an incense holder – that just didn’t seem appropriate. But Zee had a special place in my life now.

As we pulled into the parking lot, I leaned over to Zee and whispered, “You’re going to love this.” His hair (and body) were back to normal and sexy as ever. He’d never been to a Dairy Queen. I couldn’t wait to see the look on his face.

Crossing the lot I felt like an ant under a magnifying glass. The Texas summer sun felt radioactive. Ghostly bodies in the window twisted around to face us. I held Zee’s hand and squeezed, trying not to smirk.

The Dairy Queen wrapped us in a pillow of cool air. Mom glanced over the faces, her cowboy hat earrings jingling as she jerked her head. She waved at a dry Texan in a beige Stetson. “Hey there, Tiny! You met my baby boy?” I cringed. I don’t mind an audience if it’s my show. But I despise being exhibited. The codger waved once and turned back to his wife, a pinched woman who stared at Zee with a look of horror. I could feel their judgment coating us like the stench of old grease from the fry station.

“So this is a Dairy Queen,” said Zee.

“Yeah,” I said. “They have a lot of choices.” I ran down the menu. “Deep-fried animal toxins. Botulism burgers with antibiotics. Hormone-enriched ice cream.”

A wide woman with a lazy eye and mustache sauntered to the register. “Hidey, Mabel,” said Mom. “You met my baby boy, Steve? This is his friend, Zuh...Jim.” The word “friend” made my skin crawl. Mabel looked over Zee and turned back to Mom with a flat stare.

Zee thrust his hand out. "Hello, Mabel. It's a pleasure." She tried to ignore him, then brought up a hand. Her arm flapped as he shook.

"Mabel, could I get me a dilly bar? And whatever these boys want. My treat," she announced in my direction.

When it was ready, our "food" came to us in little plastic red baskets. For Zee, a deep-fried melange of chicken parts known as chicken fingers, with a side of fries. For me, iceberg lettuce and too much ranch dressing, sprinkled with grated carrots. And a dilly bar for Mom.

About half a dozen men and women sat in clusters and stared as we passed their booths. The men sat bow-legged in their starched Wrangler jeans, sipping dollar-a-gallon coffee from thick diner-grade cups. The women folded their hands and looked at their coffee, at their men, or when they thought I wasn't looking, at Zee.

I led us to a booth at the far end. Cozy maroon naugahyde seats that gracefully cupped chipped white formica tables. Zee and I sat facing the back wall, with Mom facing out into the restaurant. Behind her head, a plexiglass frame protected an offensively inoffensive print of country living: a pasture, a farmhouse, and some hills. It looked like my salad tasted. But it served my purposes. In the reflection of the plexiglass I could just make out the restaurant behind me.

Mom slurped her dilly bar and looked past us. Her eyes scanned back and forth. Zee took a bite of a greasy plank and said, "Steve, these don't taste like chicken's fingers at all. Are you sure I have the right order?"

"Does it taste like chicken?" I said.

"Not really."

"Then you have the right order."

I put my arm around his shoulder. In the reflection, I saw shadowy blobs moving. The locals were staring. I watched Mom. Her eyes flicked back and forth, back and forth. "Did I show you these? I got 'em at a garage sale." She held up a dangly cowboy boot with her free hand.

"Wow, how 'bout that," I said. A garage sale. Imagine.

"Hey Steve," said Zee, munching on his food. "Did you tell your Mom about the print you got at that yard sale?"

"It was an estate sale," I said, glaring at him in the reflection. But he didn't see me. He was setting his remaining meat planks on the table.

"What if these really were chicken fingers?" he said. The air above them shifted and a giant deep-fried chicken clucked across the table, walking on its chicken finger toes, bobbing a head that looked like coagulated meat scraps battered and fried to a soggy brown.

Zee laughed and pointed. The chicken clucked and poked at my salad, smearing ranch dressing on its beak. As I gently stroked the back of Zee's indigo neck, I watched the reflection. "Tiny" wobbled to his feet and led his wife out by the elbow. The others just stared in disgust.

Mabel brought a coffee pot around, shuffling her feet on the linoleum floor. Passing by our table, she glanced at Zee and said, "Betty Lou, I think Mary Bell is open today if anyone needs a haircut." She shuffled off, shaking her head in disbelief. The chicken dropped a little turd that looked like the crumbles of batter that floated in a vat of grease.

Mom scanned the restaurant and said, “Did I tell you about that new couple I signed up?” Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Zee watching me.

We came home to find Dad sprawled in his easy chair. In the time we’d been gone, he’d evidently gotten up from his nap, rolled over, and fallen headfirst into a glass of whiskey. His eyes had gone red and beady. And his hair, his own special alcohol barometer, had started to jut out. Despite my unsurprise, I felt let down. I never got to tell him about my show at the Whitney. Or help him get to know Zee. He hadn’t asked. And now he was too drunk to care.

“How was it, y’all?” his slurry words oozed.

“Your baby boy was testing me again.”

I stopped in mid-step. “What do you mean testing you?”

“He thought he’d rub it in that his friend’s a little hippy-doo.”

Dad struggled out of his chair. “Ain’t that pitiful!”

“One, I was not testing you. Two, Zee is my partner, not my ‘friend’. And three, we’re standing right here, so stop talking about us like we’re not in the room!”

“Don’t talk to your momma like that!”

Zee followed the argument like he was watching a live bird being batted back and forth. He looked concerned and a little sad.

“I’m just saying we didn’t do anything out of the ordinary. We’re just trying to be ourselves.”

“Honey, you should’ve seen the way they was watching those two.”

“I don’t understand why, Mom. Why? Why should anyone care?”

“Oh, now. You know what kind of people they are.”

“No, I don’t. Tell me.” I did know. That wasn’t the point.

Mom glanced at Zee. “Well... you know they don’t like the long hair. It’s different. Personally, I think your hair is beautiful, Jim.”

Dad bounced around. “Shave and haircuts, dah dah. Na nana na na, boo boo.” I ignored his drunken attempt to diffuse the tension. Infantilism was sad enough when sober.

“No,” I said to Mom, shaking my head. “That’s not it.”

Dad gave us a sour look and waddled back to his bedroom. Mom stuttered and blushed, glancing at Zee. I said, “Honey, it looks like the sun’s going down. The sunsets here are beautiful.” He nodded and went outside.

After the door was closed, I said, “Mom, what is it. Seriously.”

She looked around for something to distract me with, then gave up. “Son, I don’t want to upset you. It’s your life and it’s your choice.”

There it was. “Go ahead.”

“I just don’t understand why you brought home a... you know...”

“Yes?”

“Well...” She sounded defiant. “Why does he have to be colored? That’s all.”

I was stunned. Speechless.

“Oh, don’t give me that look. You know what I mean. All that blue!” She shivered.

“Ok one, what century are you from? Two, he’s not blue, he’s indigo. And three, how many indigo people do you even know?”

“That’s not the point. He’s just... I don’t trust him.”

“Because he’s indigo? Mom, he floats. He made his chicken fingers walk across the table at the Dairy Queen. You have no problem with that?”

“Listen, this family is full of loonies. Your uncle found a live bat in his driveway once, did I tell you this? And he picked it up – a live bat! Dang thing bit him right there.”

She showed me the heel of her palm. “Had to take him to the hospital for rabies shots.”

As she shook her head at the insanity, I tried to think of what to say but couldn’t. I brushed past her and went outside, slamming the door a little too hard on the way out.

Zee stood out by the decaying barn. Tall pecan trees bordered it on all sides, hiding the last of the setting sun. Crickets and frogs chirped from a nearby pond and ducks, real ones, splashed into the water, twitching their tails.

“Your Mom thinks I’m blue.”

“You were listening? Baby, I’m so sorry.” I held him close, my chin resting on his shoulder, my hands cupping the small of his back. He did the same.

“It doesn’t bother me, Steve. I can be anything she wants, see?” He turned pale and pinkish, a perfect facsimile of Caucasian flesh that turned my stomach.

“No, baby. Don’t do that. That’s not who you are.”

“Well, neither is this.” He turned back to deep indigo, still in human form.

“That’s different. I mean you shouldn’t have to change who you are for them...”

“Only for you.”

“No! No, that’s not true.”

“You’re getting angry. I’m sorry.”

“No, I’m not, dammit.”

“Oh. Well, since you’re not going angry, can I point out something?”

I held my breath. “Sure.”

“You and your mom have a lot in common.”

I gasped. “How dare you! What do you mean?”

“You both care a lot about what other people think.”

“I don’t...”

“I saw you watching everyone at the restaurant. In the reflection? Look, I can take any form imaginable

and you want this one. You definitely care, Steve. You say it shouldn't matter what other people think, but it still does. To you."

I stared at an old tire swinging in the wind, grasping for a snappy comeback. "But don't you care? Don't you want people to accept you for who you are?"

He held me by the shoulders and gently turned me to face him. The moonlight gave his skin a diffused glow that highlighted his strong features and deep violet eyes. He said, "What you're looking at now is no more natural than this..." He shivered and collapsed into a powder-white blonde with fake tits. "... Or this..." His skin turned green and he sprouted three heads, of three different races. "...Or this..." He became eight feet tall, hairless, very male. Enormous feather wings unfolded from his back. I took note – I'd have to ask for that again. "...Or this..." With a sucking sound he imploded into a translucent blob with visible organs.

"Ok, ok. I get it."

He shifted back to the Zee I knew and loved – tall, strong, and indigo. "None of this is what you would call the real me. That person is unnameable. But I know who he is. And that's all that counts. Everything else is just a matter of convenience."

I watched him, considering. "A matter of convenience." He nodded. "Are you suggesting I don't know who I am? If that's the case then I'm asking my therapist for a refund."

Zee shrugged. "I think if you did, maybe you wouldn't have anything to prove."

He looked so innocent. But sounded so wise. The bastard. I wrapped my arms around his waist and held him for a long time. The night air felt cool and smelled of manure and hay. I closed my eyes. "I don't quite get what you're saying, but it feels good to hear you say it." I followed the curve of his back with my fingers, feeling his muscles through his thin t-shirt.

"Hey, I may only be 3000 years old, but I know a thing or two about human nature, young man."

"Yeah, well I hope it doesn't take me 3000 years."

"Me neither. We're meeting my parents next week."

I pushed him back. "Oh crap."

Laughing, he leaned in. "Don't worry," he said. "You'll do fine." He smiled. I melted. Our lips met in a soft kiss as I cupped his strong jaw in my palm. Around us, the wind kicked up. His firm body dissolved and he wrapped me in a deep indigo mist.

Dreams by Jasmin Nanda

We often dismiss dreams as events popping up at night from the dark recesses of mind. However, there are times when dreams make you think about their meanings, when dreams have an impact on your life.

I can recall my dreams from as young an age as six. My dreams ranged from the mundane to spiritual, and often to the prophetic – dreams that make one think about their origin, and utility.

My first prophetic dream came at the age of eight.

I saw winged angels from heaven had come with palanquins to take away some small children sitting on a wide deserted road. The angels led the children to the palanquin. Nobody took notice of me as I watched them, a mute spectator.

The next morning, I told the dream to my mother and schoolmates, excited that I had seen real angels in my dream. My excitement turned into sorrow when I learnt later in the day that a school van of another school had met with an accident on the main road, that morning, claiming the lives of some children.

I was numb with shock that I had seen the event a night before. I told my teacher, who snubbed me for making wild statements to attract attention. I kept quiet.

My mother was quite upset on knowing that my dream had come true. She gave me an iron bangle to wear, to ward off evil spirits and asked me to sleep after cleaning my mouth and saying prayers. She asked me not to dream such dreams that brought grief to people. I was astounded! I protested that the event had not occurred because I dreamt it but I had foreseen the event that was bound to happen. My mother was surprised to hear this from me.

A few years later, I had a strange dream again.

I was standing on the terrace of the house of my aunt (my mother's friend, who lived 80 miles away), with my mother and my aunt, to witness the funeral carriage of a Sikh saint leader. The carriage was bedecked with marigold garlands and I could see the white bearded face of the leader. There was a sea of humanity around, chanting religious hymns as they passed on the road in front of the aunt's house.

When I awoke I told my mother about the dream, who rebuked me for dreaming about the death of people and asked me not to tell it at school. I obeyed and soon forgot about it.

Some months later, we visited that city and went to my aunt's house to spend the day with her family. We were having late morning breakfast when a man came running to the house to announce the death of a Sikh saint leader, and told us that his funeral procession was going to pass through the bazaar for saying the last prayers at the Golden Temple, a stone's throw from the house.

We all ran upstairs and stood on the terrace near the railing, looking at the bazaar below. Some minutes later the procession entered the bazaar and reached my aunt's house. I immediately remembered my dream as I saw the flower-bedecked carriage, carrying the same man I had seen in my dream with sea of humanity around, amidst the chanting of religious hymns, as I stood looking down from the terrace with my mother and aunt!

I was goose-pimply and my legs were trembling as I realized that the dream had happened. I looked up at my mother and found her looking at me with fear writ large on her face. My aunt was perturbed to see us visibly upset. She thought that the sudden death of the saint was the cause. She was disturbed when mum told her about my dream, and she asked my mum to get me cured from some holy man.

My dad had something different to say. "Coming events cast their shadows before! But only pure souls dream of future events!"

Dad's statement did not comfort my turbulent young mind, as I feared that my nightmares would come true too. My other dreams of minor achievements and mundane things would often come true, too, but I never minded that.

My dad said some prayers, touched my forehead, and reassured me that I would no longer have to bear the torture of foreseeing the coming events.

Nevertheless, as the years passed, dreams good or bad often came true, and these dreams became a part of my existence and a heavy burden to bear until I decided to act upon the bad dreams and stop them from happening.

I was a student of dentistry, staying in a girl's hostel. The main chef of the hostel mess had a sweet little boy who would often accompany him to work. All the girls loved teasing him and we would often ask him to sing and dance to popular songs. He always obliged and made us laugh with his silly jokes.

One night I dreamt that the boy was seriously ill and on his deathbed. I was very disturbed and enquired about him from the chef the next day. However, the chef told me that he was well and had gone to school. Reassured, I forgot all about it until one day, the chef stopped me after lunch and asked for financial help.

I was surprised to know that he had spent the major part of his savings on the sickness of the boy. He told me that his son had been having fever for many days, that they were getting treatment from some private clinic, and now he had no more money to spend.

I was furious, and rebuked him for not telling me and for not availing himself of the health services of the government hospital affiliated with our college.

We immediately took the boy to the children's ward, where he was admitted for treatment. The doctor in charge was a senior and a good friend of mine. He assured me of best treatment, and free medicine from the hospital drug store. The chef was grateful and weeping as the little pale and sickly boy smiled at me weakly.

The boy had miliary tuberculosis, the prognosis of which was bad. I often visited him and he showed some signs of recovery, which was comforting.

A few weeks later, I found the chef missing at dinnertime. Enquiries revealed that his son was seriously ill. I immediately rushed to the hospital and found him sitting beside his gasping son. The boy was attached to equipment and surrounded by doctors and nurses. The doctor friend of mine took me aside and told me that it was the best they could do. Only a miracle could save the child. I was shattered beyond words.

That was the scene from my dream!

I stood besides the child, caressed his face, and looked deep into his stony glazed eyes as he looked back at me. I could stand it no more! I consoled the chef and rushed out of the ward, to avoid witnessing the inevitable.

I prayed all night for a miracle. Next morning, we found the mess empty and the kitchen closed! A servant told us that everyone had gone to the chef's house. His son had passed away after midnight.

I stood there rooted against the wall, as tears streamed down. The prophetic dream, again, had come true, making me feel that we are but puppets in the hands of destiny, as the Higher Self carves out the roadmaps with intricate side details in advance. I stared at the vacant skies searching for the hands that held us, the puppets.

This incident did not deter me from unsuccessfully trying to help the people who featured in my dreams. These included the father of my friend (whose legs were severed in a train accident), the wife of my servant, and even my own husband.

I dreaded sleeping, lest I dreamt badly! Sleep eluded me, and this affected my efficiency. Gradually, I accepted that I was designed by destiny to be a painfully mute spectator who knew about the future.

The dream of my husband affected me the most.

Some months after the dream, he was diagnosed as having prostate cancer. It was an ordeal as a wife and doctor to deal with a patient who himself was a doctor!

It was hard to balance my emotions but I decided to try to prove the dream wrong once again.

Cancer spread to his vertebral column and brain, causing paralysis. He was totally dependent and depressed. His bones were full of metastatic tumors and he became very anemic.

I was fighting with him, for him but my hope was diminishing with every passing day. I had promised my husband that I would not allow the god of death to steal him from us.

I was praying, fasting, and doing all sorts of tantric rituals to protect him from impending death. In short, I was fighting against God.

The day I got his whole body scan done, at a clinic 250 kilometers from home, was the worst in my memory. My husband was in the recovery room and I was all alone in the clinic.

The doctor came to announce the latest reports. "Doctor," he addressed me, "I am very sorry. The cancer has spread to all parts of his body. His bones are weak and there can be spontaneous fractures. There is no treatment now except palliative radioactive injections to relieve his excruciating pain. He has only some weeks to live."

It was as if the ground had slipped under my feet. I staggered, he tried to support me, but I left the room, slowly.

It was late January; the spring was yet to come. All around me were naked trees, barren lawns on a chilly, cloudy morning. I wrapped my shawl tightly as I stepped out onto the lawn and looked up into the skies. I could not see God there, but I could feel His overwhelming presence around me. How small I felt, standing there all alone, tired, and defeated, amongst His vast universe.

It was the end of the battle. I knelt down in the brown grass, dejected and beaten by destiny. I had lost this battle. I conceded defeat, surrendered, and lay my soul bare before the Almighty.

Tears flowed as I whispered, "Forgive me, my Lord. I fought in vain against you. You are the Master of the universe and our destiny. I place my husband and myself in your hands. He is yours now; you can take him back, when he is destined to be with you. I will not fight from this moment onwards. I will let the things happen, as they are destined to be without any sorrow or regret. I will go with the flow and serve my husband, compassionately, and accept your will."

Suddenly, a flow of unknown energy entered my being. I felt blissful, light and empowered. The fatigue, the hopelessness, and sorrow vanished. I knew God had accepted my prayer and had blessed me, as I accepted His will.

I went back to my husband, in the recovery room. The glow on my face and chirpiness in my voice alerted him.

"Are the reports negative?" he asked with rare enthusiasm.

"Yes," I said without qualms. "God has taken you into his care. Do not worry, all will be well now."

He was happy, though he could not judge what I really meant. He was still in pain. I arranged for the radioactive injections to be imported from America. Within a week, he had the last shots of his ebbing life.

There was a gloom in the family. However, I did not allow them to mourn his impending demise in front of him. His condition worsened with each passing day, though he was painless.

He worried about the kids, babbling in his paralyzed voice. The cancer cells had affected his speech as well. I assured him I would look after them.

I told him not to waste his precious moments worrying about his disease or family, but to spend his time meditating and praying to God. Strangely, he, an agnostic man, agreed readily.

Twenty bottles of blood and palliative radioactive injections, along with his spirituality, alleviated his misery a little.

I allowed myself to be detached from him, just to lessen his agony of dying. I left him alone for hours, as I watched him getting calmer and more detached from us. He was at peace with himself, and accepted the obvious with the wisdom of a sage.

All seemed fine now emotionally and spiritually, for the first time in four years of his disease.

A few weeks later he slipped into coma and passed away peacefully, a night later.

Another dream had happened to be true....

How helpless we are as humans. Whether we know about the future or not, does not matter!

God's will prevails in good or bad that happens in this universe.

He is the Master of this universe and we are His puppets.

Contributor Biographies

Mia Tijam

Mia Tijam is a graduate of the Creative Writing Program of the University of the Philippines (Diliman) and a fellow for Creative Nonfiction in the 2007 National Writers Workshop in Dumaguete. Her short fiction has been published in the [Philippines Free Press](#), [Philippine Speculative Fiction](#) anthologies, and the Digest of Philippine Genre Stories, whose blog can be found [here](#). Her speculative fiction has been given an Honorable Mention in the [2008 Year's Best Fantasy and Horror](#), and she was awarded as a finalist in the 2009 Philippines Free Press Literary Awards. She is the resident critic of the Happy Mondays Poetry Readings and the co-editor of [Philippine Speculative Fiction Sampler](#). Recently she has made it into the annals of Philippine Secondary Worlds history via www.farthestshore.kom.ph while her CNF has been included in a sampler of Asian writing at www.writersconnect.org

Dani Alexis Ryskamp

Dani Alexis Ryskamp is a part-time lawyer and part-time freelance writer currently living in Kalamazoo, Michigan. She also has a B.A. in English, and, in a previous lifetime, was published in the Muskegon River Review and [Unscripted](#).

Obinna Onwuka

Obinna Onwuka is a senior at Oberlin College. He summers in Virginia. He is the son of Nigerian parents, was raised in the suburbs of northern Virginia, and sees those influences everywhere. He is drawn towards Southern Gothic and pulp fiction.

Justin Whitney

After 8 years working as a code monkey and tech journalist in San Francisco, in the spring of Ought'9 Justin Whitney moved to rural East Texas, where the rest of his family lives. He now spends his days managing storage units, building web sites, writing, and hanging out at the Dairy Queen. He still hasn't found his genie.

Jasmin Nanda

Jasmin Nanda is a dentist from Amritsar, India. She loves story telling. She writes articles on Helium.com, Howtothings.com, Storiesthatlift.com, 4Indianwoman.com and is a runner-up in the Olympic poetry contest held by [Radio Netherlands and Radio Henan \(China\)](#). She loves reacting to great programs on Radio Netherlands on their website: www.rnw.nl, her daily addiction.