



speculative fiction FOR THE REST OF US

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Urban Phantoms by Anne Abad

“...creation (which is physical) is suffused with the [spirit]...The movement of atoms, even in every stone and rock...is that of dance.” – Agnes Miclat-Cacayan, The Babaylan Symposium

Diffusing lucent pinions into wisps, the wind gently deposited Bayuhaue four strides away from Dakaue’s hut. It had been an arduous flight to the upper spheres of Kabunyan, the Sky World; nevertheless, Bayuhaue was relieved to be back in her region of birth, Luktag.

The thin, pure air smelled of stardust and kissed the skin like a lover. Not much had changed, she

thought. There was relatively the same number of huts as when she departed a century ago. In the distance, undulating blades of grass that were as green as grasshoppers stood out against the backdrop of black space. Few clouds were strolling across the firmament, thin as mist, obscuring the stars a bit. Shimmering with delight, the stars winked at her from above, their celestial garments cascading as they waved their arms, beckoning her, *let's play!* She could almost hear their gleeful voices that tinkled like silver chimes. But not today, not today. There was a lot of work to be done.

Bayuhaue pried her eyes away from her friends. Facing her mother's hut, she checked if her hair was still folded in place, prodding the slacking parts of the atake, a string of white beads in her hair. Breathing deeply, she smoothed the elaborately-woven red, white, blue and black ampuyou around her waist, a gift she received from a priest while passing by a small barangay in Kiangan. She would remember to ask the rice gods to be kind to those people this year, as they had shown her kindness.

"My daughter, what are you doing outside?" The voice echoed from inside the windowless hut, calm and certain like the orchids budding in the mountains down below. Bayuhaue instantly knew that it was her mother, Dakaue. Overcome by a strong yearning, Bayuhaue's heart drummed excitedly within her chest and she ran up the narra ladder, but her smile withered away before she could even do it when she found that it was not only her mother who was in their house.

"You have returned, Bayuhaue!" exclaimed Bagilat, becoming a newly-sprouted pilapil as he straightened his back. His short, black hair was as rugged as she remembered, when he first asked for her hand in marriage. When he stood up, she noticed how his legs had become more sinewy and toned, same with his earth-brown shoulders that had broadened and hardened from running around hither and thither—north, south, east, and west—hurling streaks of lightning across the heavens. Wearing his belt of round, polished shells, and, around his loins, an ornate wanno with black lizard patterns running across the front, he was one dashing figure to behold.

Hiding a frown, Bayuhaue crouched as she made her way to the mats, seating herself before the earth-and-stone fireplace. As one in a daze, Bagilat mirrored her movements until he, too, was seated, his raven eyes never leaving Bayuhaue's face.

"Bagilat has been visiting every day since you departed. He asks when he may begin gathering firewood for us as is the custom before the wedding," Dakaue explained, watching her now-scowling daughter.

Bayuhaue's smooth, brown face twitched in a forced smile. "Ah, yes, the wedding. We might have to postpone. I will be here only today," she lied, avoiding Bagilat's intent gaze. Initially, she had planned to stay for one moon cycle, but now she changed her mind. She should have known that a century wouldn't be enough to quell the fiery love he had confessed so ardently.

"So soon?" Bagilat's face darkened like the rainclouds that carried his lightning streaks. "Lovely Bayuhaue, surely you must be tired from your wanderings on Puga. Stay the night, at the very least."

"I prefer you call them quests, or missions, Bagilat," she said coldly, studying a new effigy that had been carved into the king post. "Now that I have seen Dakaue, I may go back to Puga to awaken the Chosen before all is lost."

"Apo baket, please ask her to stay," pleaded the saddened Bagilat.

"My daughter, will you not abandon this fruitless endeavor?" Lines of worry appeared on Dakaue's face. Her shriveled lips tautened, and Bayuhaue knew that she was pressing back the urge to reproach. "I can see it clearly even from this region of the sky... can you not? All is already lost."

“That is yet to be seen, mother.” Bayuhaue tucked her candle-hewn fingers into her palms. “Balyan of the Sama, catalonan of the Tagalog, mabalian of the Bagobo, baylan of the Manobo... whatever they call themselves, all over the lands they are awakening from their long sleep and are beginning to accept spirit guides once more.” Her face radiated the blaze of the stars as she spoke, and Bagilat seemed to fall deeper into his daze.

“And what songs will these abyans sing? What dances will they dance? They have made an enemy of the earth, of the forests and all that grows in them.”

Bayuhaue arose. “They will hear, Mother, and they will dance.”

Realizing that there was nothing she could say to dissuade her daughter, Dakaue hurriedly produced a pouch of betel nuts which she had been keeping in the folds of her tapis.

“Bring this with you then... to keep you strong,” she bade the younger. Reaching out, her copper bracelets clinked and clanked in sublime melody. As Bayuhaue took the pouch from the elder, she smiled inwardly, for this was the same scene as when she had first left. The music of her mother’s bracelets made her heart ache, and she suddenly wanted to break down in tears. Yes, she needed this, needed to be strong both for herself and for her Chosen. Her resolve was cast in stone, and she would leave now, return to Daniel whom she knew was waiting although he had sent her, his abyan, away so vehemently.

Thus, on the wings of the wind, Bayuhaue descended to Puga, the Earth World, once more.

*

Daniel got the refrigerator for a bargain 3,500 pesos. Two-door. Barely a scratch. Compressor coils fully intact. A bit old, though, at a full ten years. The back leaked, so he had someone affix a piece of water hose to channel the water to a plastic basin. Otherwise, it was still quite decent, better than his old one which defrosted with a mind of its own. This would do for business while Daniel couldn’t think of a job that would accept a deaf man. His companion Niño, a muscular, six-foot tall man with a semi-kalbo pate, was the one who told him about this prize of a ref. The family who owned it were said to be migrating to Canada, and they had to get rid of most of their belongings ASAP.

And that was over a month ago, before Daniel experienced the high fever that wrecked his hearing and gave him delusions. Niño said that it must have been caused by the foul stench that a thief had unleashed from the imburnal when he or she pilfered the cover of the manhole, which was right in front of Daniel’s house. The barangay captain had his men slap on boards of plywood to block the stench of human and animal excrements that had combined with noxious chemicals and putrid domestic refuse. However, the makeshift cover must have moldered from the rains, for the stench had returned with a vengeance.

He had been bedridden for two days, and without Niño’s help and the kanto-bought barbecue-with-rice that he brought with him whenever he visited, Daniel thought that he must surely have died from that ordeal. Paracetamol did him no good, and it was Niño who placed and replaced the dampened bimpo onto Daniel’s brow to appease the fever’s fury.

Come to think of it, he remembered little from that event, just that he saw her face. Like a genie, or more like a princess, her hair was tied up with garlands of white beads that framed her oval face and raven eyes. Bare from waist up, save for a layer of beads that swathed two gently sloping hills that were her breasts, her ruddy skin, brown as roasted castañas, seemed to be on fire. Bayuhaue—the spirit’s name. He knew, for she was familiar, and her name came to him in the same way that thoughts

seem to just tiptoe into people's awareness. Still, he became frightened, so much so that he had driven her away before she could finish speaking—*death from the sky; death for those*—and he had begun screaming, raving, thrashing, and neighing as one experiencing *sapi*. How frightened Niño must have been to see him like that, though he never made mention of it.

He hadn't seen Bayuhaue since then. Sitting before the plastic dining table that had once doubled as his study desk, he stared vacantly at the newspaper headlines—"40 Dead in Anibungan flood, loggers blamed"; "Landfill collapses from rain: 30 families buried"; "Marikina still submerged, more than 200 missing!"—there was more, but he'd seen enough. The numbers just kept rising; the typhoon happened a week ago, lasting merely for two days. As if a powerful hand had tipped-over the sky's basin, the downpour was so ruthless that he could have swum in space and still drowned. Niño could not have visited even if he wanted.

At least now it was over, he consoled himself. Years ago, he lost his parents in a flashflood that occurred while they were visiting relatives in Quezon. Their bodies were never found, so he assumed they were dead and he was all that was left of their family.

"Death from the sky..." Daniel tried to verbalize Bayuhaue's words but heard only thick, soupy blubbering coming from his lips.

Ting! Ting! ...Ting! Ting!

Momentarily, he looked up. There seemed to be this high-pitched ringing in his ears. Then again, he'd been having that a lot these days, kept hearing it from morning until night, a long *tooooooot* or *tiiiiiiiing* as from the television when a channel signs off. Sometimes it was so loud that he thought he would lose his mind altogether. Unable to afford a doctor with the day-to-day 200 pesos he earned selling ice water and ice-candy, he had decided to consult the next best thing—the internet—in order to look up the hearing loss he had acquired from his bout with the mysterious sickness. He'd learned to tap this knowledge-spring (as he liked to call it) in college, before his scholarship was terminated due to his excessive absences. For less than 10 pesos in the only internet shop in Pansol, he discovered that the relentless ringing was a totally normal thing for those suffering from deafness. Tinnitus, it was called, the sound that kept him in perpetual noise.

Ting! Ting! ...Ting! Ting!

"Oyr, Daneeyel!" Even though the speech sounded more like underwater gurgling, Daniel knew that the ringing wasn't coming from his head this time but from the doorbell. Putting down the broadsheet, he jumped from his seat and peeped out the curtained windows. It was a surprise to see Niño in his maong and t-shirt, standing beside five scrawny, sando-clad children. Niño snatched one of the two laminated signs that were hanging from the gate and waved it at Daniel—

"Ice-candy, P 2.00".

Opening the door, Daniel asked them what flavor they wanted. Immediately, the children sniggered, watching him with eyes that cut like glass, whispering among themselves, and he sensed that the way he formed the words in his mouth must have been weird since he could hardly hear himself. He felt a sharp twinge in his gut, a raw contraction, and was tempted to lock himself back into his tiny sanctuary, the one-storey house he had inherited from his parents. Then he saw Niño talking to the children heatedly, punctuating his rebuke with sharp flicks of his hands and stomps of his feet. He opened the gate to let himself in while the children stayed where they were, heads bowed low, chins touching their bony chests.

“Don’t mind them,” Niño said, making his deep voice loud enough so that Daniel heard fairly clearly. “Here, they want the mango-flavored ones.” He handed Daniel a 10-peso coin that had been warmed in his clutch, a warmth that seemed to assure Daniel that it would be all right. He would be normal again. The deafness would pass...

But it wasn’t just the deafness, Daniel wanted to say, if only he could without making a fool of himself. Their eyes did not meet. Perfunctorily, he gathered the pale-yellow tubes of the sugary delight from his prized freezer and nearly dropped them into Niño’s brawny arms. They would not talk, not today, not until he could speak normally again. As his friend was leaving with the children, Daniel stood statue-still between the doorjamb, a narrow sentinel lost on what to do next. Soon, they were gone, fleeting as phantasms. His face felt hot. How awkward and stupid he felt. Not a smile or hello. Niño did not deserve that.

When he decided to stop studying his slippered feet, he leaned against the doorframe and noticed the flat sheet of sky overhead. Ashen, like the sooty walls of his house. No sun in sight, yet it was midafternoon. There was a heaviness to the air, bearing down on his shoulders, compressing his heart and organs until it was hard to breathe... *Death from the sky...* Why did he have the feeling that it was not yet over, that the heavens were merely holding back?

Entranced by this oppressive sensation, he felt himself being led away from his house. Removing his slippers, he buoyed up his arms, sensing the atmosphere’s tendrils that splashed against his skin, the same feeling you get when alcohol evaporates from your skin. Tepid as Niño’s hands, the rough cement warmed Daniel’s bare feet as he went. He was on edge, though his steps were steady and focused. Passing by the patched-up manhole that continued to reek with that unimaginable odor, he made his way down the inclined strip of road, yet instead of the stench abating, it seemed to intensify, stirring in an absent wind, thickening the air and making it even more oppressive than it already was. He turned left, squeezing into a mossy alley so narrow that even his slender self had a difficult time. Then he stopped in his tracks, coming back to himself, all the time wishing that he hadn’t.

The body of a little girl. Lifeless. Bloated. Rotting. The flood had washed away her face, and the stench from the manhole had masked her very existence.

You were correct, Daniel. The sky is not yet finished. The voice flew right into the threshold of his mind, bypassing his deafened ears.

“You led me to her...” Daniel swallowed, wheeling away from the corpse. “Bayuhaue? How did you know?”

Unchanged from the first time he saw her, the fiery-skinned goddess held him with her raven eyes. *Not I, my Chosen. Your spirit has awakened. You heard the dirge of the wind, and I merely pointed you to the right direction.*

“But...the sky...it isn’t finished yet?” His must have squeaked in apprehension.

Following the laws of the earth, father Bayuhibe has decided to open the sky’s sluice gates to its full extent. Her gaze shifted from his face and settled onto the little girl behind him. *There will be more of her, and you will be needed to find them.*

“Needed!” Terror seized him. “This... this is God’s judgment?” He no longer minded how his words might have sounded.

Judgment comes from humans. God has done its part.

His face contorting into a grotesque expression, he restrained himself from jumping at her, “Tell your father to stop! It is too much, too many have—”

There is nothing you can do about the sky! Worry about the death that comes from the ground! That, perhaps...

But he had dug his willowy fingers into her shoulders and begun to shake her. “Enough! Please don’t do this!”

“Daniel! Daniel! It’s all right, we’re here!”

“Niño?” All of a sudden, it was no longer Bayuhaue before him. Daniel blinked furiously, realizing that there were tears in his eyes. With his brow wrinkled like that, Niño looked extremely worried. When did he get here? The other folks from the barangay were behind him, peering furtively into the narrow alley, their lips rustling in inaudible whispers. When Daniel pried his fingers from Niño’s well-built shoulders, he noticed that he was clasping something in his right hand—a woven pouch, with blue and white stripes and a pattern of little people running...

Be strong, Daniel... he heard Bayuhaue in his mind. She was still around... listen to the ground...

No one saw Daniel slipping the pouch into his shorts pocket.

*

Before Daniel found the dead girl, Niño said that the villagers saw him humming to himself and prancing down the street. That was when they heard him suddenly shouting and yelling from the alley, so they sought Niño’s help at once. Lea was the girl’s name. Her parents had been searching for her since the typhoon, all the time suspecting that she had been caught in the flood when a wall at the lower areas burst due to the accumulation of water. She was given a proper burial, but shortly after that, the clouds darkened abnormally quickly, as though someone was charring them with flamethrowers.

Worse than last week’s downpour, the deluge came down on them in one harrowing blow. PAG-ASA never saw it coming. There was no low pressure area. No inter-tropical convergence zone. And no letup for an entire seventy-two hours. With an inundation that powerful, half of the Katipunan area was transformed into a lake. Communications was down, and with it most of the television channels. Thanks to Niño who always listened to the radio, Daniel found out that already-waterlogged Marikina had been wiped off the map, the same with Manila that reporters now dubbed as the ‘Atlantis of the Philippines’. The elevated parts of Pansol, including Daniel’s house, had been spared from the catastrophe.

But now that the turbid waters had ebbed a little, Daniel decided to take it upon himself to look for those who might have suffered Lea’s fate. Still not wearing any slippers, he stood beside the barren mango tree that grew at the perimeter of the barangay’s only basketball court. It was barely light, and Pansol was still in a stupor, both from grief of loss and the exhaustion of trying to get their homes and lives back together. In his palm, he held a betel nut chew that he had extracted from the woven pouch that Bayuhaue had granted him a few days back. Without giving it much thought, he popped it into his mouth, grinding the dark-red nut, tasting the lime and the sappy leaves. He’d read that heroes did this in the ancient epics to—how should he say this?—power-up, perhaps like Son Goku becoming a Super Saiyan. In any case, he was doubtful of what help it could give. He just let himself take comfort in the assumption that it could, at the very least, cause the placebo effect on him.

Sunbeams began to pour in, still dim and dozy. The street felt like ice to Daniel’s skin, and he shivered involuntarily. But it was not from the chill. He shivered because the ground did. Troubled, he waited.

There it was again! Though very faint, the bowels of the earth seemed to be ticking and even crawling. It made his hairs stand on end. It was difficult to be sure since it was only a flutter that he felt, but now he was really afraid. He put more betel chews into his mouth. When he cast about, he realized that he had actually left his spot under the mango tree and walked across the basketball court. There were scrawny, sando-clad children and a few women in flowery dusters giving him confused stares. This had been happening a lot, him moving around, actually prancing around without him realizing it.

Unexpectedly, the atmosphere's tendrils splashed against his skin again, making him jolt into hyperawareness. Daniel's heart and mind raced, for the tendrils were much, much more numerous this time. Closing his eyes and pocketing Bayuhaue's pouch, he heard her tranquil voice—*you are needed...*

Tears seared his face as they dribbled down his cheeks without his control. He gave up his hands and feet to the rhythm of the wind, and when he opened his eyes again, he saw that the people of Pansol had begun to crowd around him. A spectacle, was that what he was to them? The children, his main ice-candy customers who always laughed and patronized him, gazed at him differently. The others, too, were unusually intent.

Daniel gestured with a willowy hand, beckoning them. Like sheep, the barangay folk followed, an uneasy procession. No one spoke, or if any did, their voices were hushed. He led them to the ruined entrance of Pansol, to tight edges, hidden clefts on the cracked walls, where faceless bodies had been sprawled together by the currents. Like spears, screams ripped apart the morning's veil of silence. Daniel heard only the ghost of that sound, but he could very well imagine it in his mind. To the church, the Maria Della Strada, they went next. He pointed his fingers at the creek without looking at what it was he was trying to show, for he already knew. More heartrending screams.

Daniel went on with this the entire day, going where he could, where the gray depths of the opaque floodwaters appeared not too perilous for him and those who trailed behind him like shadows. By the time he was back, the sun was half-mast and he was completely spent. He had been traveling barefoot the whole time, yet his soles didn't have any blisters or cuts. As he was trudging back to his house, the ground crawled under his feet again, a lot more palpable than before. What more, there was that oppressive sensation as when he found Lea, a force that pressed down on him from all sides. He began to sweat profusely. When he checked Bayuhaue's pouch, there were only three betel chews left. How many had he consumed?

When he was in front of his house, he noted that someone had removed the makeshift cover of the manhole again. A shirtless man with a swollen crocodile belly was lumbering towards him, embracing a large black garbage bag in his podgy arms. Without even giving Daniel a passing glance, the shirtless man dumped his trash straight into the manhole. The ground bucked at that, causing Daniel to topple over. But the shirtless man never felt anything. He just lumbered back the way he came.

"Hoy! What did you just do?!" Daniel flared up, his speech an incoherent babble, at least to his ears. Now the ground's trembling wouldn't stop. Clambering on all fours towards the opening of the imburnal, he examined its gloomy depths and was assailed by waves of cadaver-breath fumes. Although light was poor, he managed to make out the sheen of mound upon mound of plastic bags. Apparently, the barangay folk had decided to make this into the local dumpsite while the garbage men couldn't come to pick up the trash.

Retching and coughing, he rolled away from the hole and saw another villager, a stocky woman, approaching with her own rubbish stash. At once, Daniel was on his feet. He hastened to her, flailing his hands frantically.

The mere sight of him caused the stocky woman to recoil. Short of running away, she barked at him, “Tangina! You get out of my way, salot ka!” Crab-like, she scuttled sideways to evade him, then it came to her that she was a lot bigger than he, so she shoved him away like a ram. But Daniel would not relent, no, he could not. Bayuhaue’s words were reverberating in his mind, compelling him to act—*listen to the ground... death... from the ground... listen! Listen!*

Shrieking, he whipped the smelly trash bag right out of the stocky woman’s arms. It bounced once, twice, until its contents—empty cup noodles, banana peels, and bloody napkins among others—were scattered all over the street.

Without warning, two hands gripped his shoulders firmly and started to haul him away towards his house. “Daniel, please you have to stop! You’re not like this!” At once, he knew that it was Niño. The streetlamps had come to life, painting everything in orange, brown, and black hues.

“The ground... shaking! ...Have to bolt it shut!” Eyes wild, Daniel was breathless and could do nothing more than writhe like a worm and scour Niño’s face with his fingernails, all the while hating the other for dragging him away like this.

“We can help you, Daniel. Just calm down!” Niño had pinned him to the ground. The other villagers rushed to help him restrain Daniel, and soon so many hot, oniony, sweat-covered body parts were bearing down on him that his eyes seemed to be the only things he could move.

Herb-scented palms that were as rough as tree barks fleetingly settled on Daniel’s eyes, then lifted. Looking down on him was the harsh, heavily-creased face of the barangay albularyo, his hook nose pointing at Daniel like a verdict. The albularyo hoisted himself up with much difficulty, and Daniel spotted a rosary, a glimmering medallion, and a bunch of feathers in the old man’s tree-bark hands. Now that he was on the ground, Daniel felt that he could connect with it more fully. The trembling was a portent, and a very urgent one at that. “Let me go! Let me go!” Writhing again, he cried out desperately. Oh, if only they would listen to him!

Upon inserting the shafts of chicken feathers between Daniel’s toes, the albularyo commenced coarsely chanting into his patient’s ear a strange and lengthy orasyon, “Crux sancti Pater Benedicti, crux sacra sit mihili lux, non draco sit mihi dux, vade retro satana nun quam suade mihi vana, sunt mala quae libas ipse venana bibas, eius in obito nuestro preasentia muniamur, pax aja xax...”

Exhausted, Daniel stopped screaming and became limp. Closing his eyes slowly, he spoke to her, *Bayuhaue, please forgive me...* Yet she did not appear. There were only the anxious Niño, the albularyo who was now wiping Daniel’s forehead with oil, and the obstinate villagers.

As you said, I listened to the ground, but these people wouldn’t heed me... The land was quaking so hard that it was practically pummeling his back like fists. It was coming. Any time now.

“You, evil spirit!” the albularyo boomed, brandishing his rosary and saintly medallion. “Tell me your name! Why have you possessed this man, and why have you brought us these misfortunes? Speak now before I punish you!”

In answer, a piercing bat-like shriek issued from the manhole. Even Daniel heard it. “Screech! Screech! Screech!” The albularyo froze, and the villagers let go of the patient. With bated breath, they gaped at the manhole when the first of the rats emerged. Its fleshy claws clasped the edge of the street tentatively before it revealed its large, rodent head. Its long, wiry-whiskered snout sniffed the ground as it gaped back at the villagers with vicious, nocturnal eyes. When it was out at last, everyone saw that there were raw, hairless patches on its sodden body. That thing was as big as a street dog, and its

squirring tail was a scourge that reached up to a meter in length.

Like an oil slick that caught fire from the streetlamps, more of the giant rats surfaced from the darkness of the hole that they had made into their abode. Ten, twenty? No, there were hundreds of them at once, a great army that had been fattened by the city's excreta, a hairy plague that poured out of that single hole, skittering and scattering into every possible direction. Forgetting everything else, the villagers took to their heels, screaming even more stridently than the rodents. Niño was urging his friend to rise and flee, but Daniel had closed his eyes and refused to open them again. Unable to hold out any longer, Niño gave up and was soon gone.

"Screech! Screech! Screech!" Within minutes, Pansol was completely overrun. The rodent horde went on a rampage, shrieking and making weird sucking noises, gnawing at doors and walls until they were reduced to sawdust, devouring every morsel of both the edible and inedible in the kitchens, invading rooms, cars, jeeps, and tricycles alike. Their time had come, and they would certainly make the most of it. Yet none of this was enough. These creatures were famished. They needed meat, so they hunted down the dogs, the cats, the mice, and most especially...

...the humans.

Miss Lonelyhearts by Georgina Bruce

Dead air. Static buzz itches around the old speakers in my cab. Then the dashboard clock flips all its green digits down to zero and with a crackle and a hiss, she's there. Talking in that serious drawl of hers, saying,

it's the bewitching hour, loners, and you're listening to Miss Lonelyhearts, righteous professor of the one true path, doctor of voodoo, lover of women, slayer of the undead, and speaking of which, let me say it, loners: do not be afraid to take those manbie fuckers out. Just make sure they're dead before you shoot. First up tonight I'm gonna play a song for Lola, who is somewhere out there in bedsit land. She wrote me about the dude she's shackled up with who's been twisting her loner-lobes with his dudely words of wisdom, such as – and I quote – 'Hey fatty, you're too fat, you fat pig.' Hey, Lola, why not buy that man a thesaurus. Get the hardback copy and drop it on his head. I've got a little number here for you Lola, and all you chicks out there who got the same problem.

There's a hollow thud as a needle drops onto vinyl, because Miss Lonelyhearts is all about the vinyl, and then Rebel Girl by Bikini Kill blasts out (*rebel girl you are the queen of my world*), and I wonder if this Lola chick is getting a kick out of it like I am, singing along and feeling the rise in my veins, when BLAM! the cab radio squeals.

"Zero seven oh, gotta pick up in the Jungle." Mara's voice has been roughened by years of smoking and dealing out the cabbie jobs over the radio. She sounds like a grizzly bear, but when you see her, in the tiny kiosk office with the phone in one hand and the radio in the other, and a joint hanging out the corner of her mouth, she's like a kid. Real small and skinny, with a way pretty Afro do. "Passenger name Kiko, waiting outside the Hot Squeeze Burgers."

"Got it," I say, flip my orange light off, and make a U turn in the middle of the road. Bikini Kill are doing their thing again which makes me want to drive fast and aggressively, but I don't, because I don't need the smackdown when the cops pull me over and Mara has to spring me from the cells. Don't give

them an excuse, Mara always says, and she's right. They don't like the girl-cabbers, it makes their dicks wilt when they see us driving around like we got a right to. We don't pick up dudes and we don't deal with the undead, which is the same thing anyways, and for some asshole reason, that annoys the cops, who don't like our health and safety policy. They say it's discriminatory. Yeah, I guess. Considering that only males get this zombification virus, that any man can get it, at any time, and that when they get it, the first thing they want to do is eat some ladybrains, I figure it's just common sense. And business is always good, because women want to go places at night, and nobody except us will take them. Leaving your house is an act of provocation, and as far as the cops are concerned, it says you're cool with pretty much whatever happens to you. So the women we drive around all week are mostly workers: bar hostesses, dancers, prostituted women. Not that many chicks go out at night, unless they have to. But the weekend is different. It's party time.

So I'm driving to the Concrete Jungle, which is a really infected area of town and I'm thinking this Kiko person ought to be waiting inside the Hot Squeeze if she had any sense, not standing around outside looking like someone's idea of dinner or a hot date. Miss Lonelyhearts is giving us a riot grrrl medley, all on her own scratched vinyl, and I'm hoping tonight's the night she's going to play me some Janis Joplin, even though it never seems to be that night. I request it every week. Send her my letter, my same-old-shit tale of woe, and I tell her she's the greatest, because she is, and I ask her for my song. She must get a lot of letters.

When I pull up in the parking lot outside the Hot Squeeze I'm not sure I needed to worry about Passenger Kiko. She is one tough looking girl. Her black hair sticks up from her head all over, and there's black eyeliner smudged around her eyes, and red lipstick slashed across her mouth. She's wearing a short skirt with stripey Alice tights that are dirty and ripped, and big boots with silver zips and toecaps, and leather pads on her knees and a too-big, battered leather jacket hugged around herself. She looks like someone's idea of a very bad time.

I spring the door for her and she jumps in the backseat, then it's full lockdown while I get the destination, check in with Mara, and pull out of the lot. Passenger Kiko is headed to the Strip. I'm guessing the comic-book gear is all in order for a night out in one of the Manga bars, not that I've ever been in one of those places myself. The real world is shitty enough without acting out somebody's cartoon fuck fantasy for kicks. Still, she doesn't quite look sexy enough to be cruising the Strip; she looks young enough, definitely, but she doesn't look enough like a victim, and she's wearing shoes she could actually run in, if she had to. They like their girls pretty beaten up over on the Strip: latexed and slashed; six inch heels, corsets, bruises all over. It's the Strip, right? Cartoon sexbots and super-powered villains. So I'm curious about Passenger Kiko, and I twist up the volume on the radio to see if I can get a read on her when she cops a load of Miss Lonelyhearts, who's saying,

a letter from a way troubled sister called Alyssa, who wrote me to say her lover turned up dead last week and told her to get a bikini wax. Loners, this is a dude whose own personal appearance features rotting flesh and maggots. But it's Dude Rules, loners: chicks better look hot twenty-four-seven, but dudes can be out and out zoms and it makes no diff. So Alyssa's all alone in her trailer of broken dreams, and she doesn't know what she'll do if her dead guy should come a-shuffling back. Girl, get some weapons, is my advice. If that dude comes back for you, you take him out. And don't feel bad. This is for you, Alyssa, queen of the trailer park.

She drops the needle on a Mia Zapata number: a rare choice. I love this song.

I flick my eyes up to the mirror and see Passenger Kiko has got her groove on, too. She's leaning back on the seat, arms by her side and she's singing along. That's another thing I love about Miss

Lonelyhearts: she lets you know who's on your side. Passenger Kiko catches me looking and grins, sits forward. We smile at each other, laughing at the connection between us. It's that easy, sometimes.

"How's it going back there, Passenger?"

She shrugs. "Poor Alyssa, huh?"

"Mm-hmm."

"I know her, actually. My sister went to her school. Her boyfriend's a fucking douchebag, so Miss Lonelyhearts got that right." She leans forward, grinning at me. She's got a great smile, the kind that makes everyone else want to smile too. A real sweetie, this one, and suddenly I think the last thing I want to do is drop her off on the Strip on a Friday midnight. Even if she has got steel toecaps on her boots.

"So, what's on at the Strip then?" I ask, trying to make it sound like cab-talk, like I don't really care, because I've got a feeling that if she knew what I was thinking she'd be insulted. She's not a child, I tell myself. Don't talk down to her.

"My boyfriend's a DJ," she says. "He's playing a set at the Best Friend bar tonight."

"Boyfriend, huh?"

I swear I just want to gather up this kid, brush her hair, and tuck her in bed with a cup of cocoa.

She leans forward, lowers her voice. "Hey. I heard all you girl-cabbers are lezzas," she says. "Is it true?"

What a question, huh? I mean, I guess most of us are. Me, though, I'm not... I'm not anything. I just know I don't like dudes. Seems to me they either want to fuck you or eat your brains, or both, and they don't mind in what order. I've been single a long time. But then I think about Mara, and how she's been single for a long time, too, and how we've been hanging out a lot lately, sharing after work margaritas and swapping records. Maybe I ought to stop that. I'm no good for her. Anyway, I don't say any of that to the passenger. Just shrug.

"You ever done it with a dude?" she asks.

I take another look at her. Yeah she's young, even younger than she looks, maybe.

"How old are you, Passenger?" I try to make my voice neutral, not judging her for this.

"Thirteen."

"Well, I'm thirty-seven. Do you think I could have stayed alive this long if I was doing it with *men* left, right and centre?"

"Good point." She slumps back in her seat, nodding her head wisely.

You don't get to live even thirteen years as a female without working out how dangerous dudes are. Even before they started getting all zommed out, it wasn't exactly safe being in possession of a vagina, and these days, it's practically a death sentence. Passenger Kiko knows all this, for sure. She frowns, like she's thinking it through, and then she sits forward again. "Do you think Miss Lonelyhearts has ever done it with a dude?"

Huh. I shrug again. How the hell would I know? I guess not, but weirder shit happens at sea, or so they say. Then I get it. Why she's asking.

“So, how about you, Passenger Kiko,” I say, letting her know I’m going to lay this heavy shit on her now. “You ever done it with a dude? This boyfriend of yours?”

She shakes her head. She won’t meet my eye. “No.”

I don’t say anything, just wait. You learn this stuff, driving a cab. You learn when to shut up and just wait for it. I turn the radio down. She’s quiet for a long time, and I just keep driving. It’s raining a little, and I’m stuck in traffic trying to get up onto the Strip, when she finally speaks again.

”I didn’t do it with anyone,” she says.

I let her words settle, nodding my head to let her know I heard her. “Right.”

“He’s not really my boyfriend. He just said he was, when he wanted to do stuff to me.”

Hell. Got to keep my face neutral, don’t react, even though this stuff makes me nauseous. I hold it down, and when I can speak again I say, as casual as I can manage, “You sure you want to go to the Strip tonight?”

She’s silent for a moment and I think I’ve crossed a line. Then she laughs. She properly giggles, like something is really tickling her, and it makes me laugh too.

“You want to see something cool?” she asks me.

I shrug. “Sure.”

Still smiling, she sits up straight and opens up her leather jacket. Crossed over her Hello Kitty bra are a couple of big fat rounds of ammo, and there are two black guns strapped to her sides. I sort of want to laugh, because the first word that comes into my head is ‘cute’. Then I get scared.

I stop the cab. We’re still on lockdown, but it’s the middle of the night and dark as hell outside, so I speak fast and with as much clarity as I can manage. “Passenger Kiko, I got to take you home now, or somewhere safe.” Her eyebrows raise up when I say ‘home’, and she looks down at her hands. I know I shouldn’t be doing this. It’s not my business. She’s thirteen, officially an adult. Besides, it’s against company policy. Even so, I keep talking. “I’m not taking you to the Strip,” I say. “I’ll take you somewhere else, anywhere else.”

She doesn’t speak for a while, and I don’t say anything more. I’m hoping that she’ll give me an address, someplace safe I can drive her. I won’t even charge her the fare. If I think she’s *cute*, those dudes on the Strip are going to eat her alive. Literally.

When Passenger Kiko speaks, it’s in a small, sad voice. “Don’t you think he deserves it?”

Deserves it? After five minutes of Kiko, I’m ready to punch the dude’s heart out for what he did to her. But I’ve got more sense. “I think you’ll get killed on the Strip tonight, is what I think.”

She falls into silence again. She’s been heading down this path for a while, I guess. Long enough to buy guns, come up with a plan. It’s gone too far. Maybe she needs an out. I’m not a religious person, but I think this constitutes a prayer.

Then she sighs. “Alright. Let’s go somewhere else.”

I stare at her, and she smiles. She’s brave, this girl. I realise I’ve been holding my breath, and I let it go with a big sigh, and then Kiko says, “Let’s go get Alyssa.”

And at the same time Miss Lonelyhearts’ voice comes on again,

I've gotta tell you, loners, those zomdudes will say anything to get you back, but it is all just dude bullshit. I'm talking to you now, Alyssa. I know you loved Dwayne, and you thought he loved you back, but that's all over now, he's dead and gone, and the next time you see him it's not going to be a crazy sweet reunion. It's going to be your brains on toast. More on this after a cool musical interlude.

Me and Passenger Kiko stare at each other.

“Alyssa? Trailer park Alyssa? Are you for real, Passenger?”

“Fucking hell, you think she's going to see Dwayne off by herself? He's horrible, you don't know him.”

I pretend to think about it. Truth is, I'm feeling it, I can't lie. I want to go and blast some manded zombie dude to hell. I want to go grab Alyssa and put her in the back of my cab and drive her to a bar I know where she can drink a margarita in peace and Miss Lonelyhearts is playing on the surround sound. Also, I am remembering being thirteen. Perhaps Kiko is wondering what it's like to be thirty-seven. Maybe we each feel like taking a chance on the other.

I flip on the two-way and say, “Zero seven oh, clear.”

Mara's grizzly bear voice. “Gotcha.”

“Mara, can you free me up for half an hour? I've got an errand to run.”

I never ask her for anything, and she knows it, and so she comes back straightaway. “You got it, driver. Everything okay out there?”

“Yeah, thanks Mara. I'll radio you soon as I'm done.” I don't need to lie to her, but I don't know how to explain what I'm doing here. I just really dig this passenger. I feel like helping her out.

Kiko is grinning and I start up the cab again. She clambers over into the front seat and I give her a look, meaning, what the hell are we doing, but she's just laughing, so I pull out and turn into the main street and head away from town, opposite the flow of traffic, towards the trailer park. Neither of us say anything, just listen to the radio, which I turn up full blast, and for once I go over the speed limit, the adrenalin shooting round my veins and making my head spin.

The park's on the very edge of town. It sprawls over a couple of miles of mostly scrubland and some churned up roads. I park the cab a few hundred yards from where we can see the first caravan and switch off the radio and all the lights. It's dead quiet out here. I get my guns out from under my seat, which impresses Kiko no end.

“What?” I say, trying to look nonchalant as I load up ammunition. “I'm a cabbie. I need this shit.” Like you wouldn't believe. Every night, we have to escape Mara from the kiosk with heavy weaponry, peel manbies off the cab, get rid of asshole dudes and dead guys who think they should ride in a girl-only taxi and get to prong the driver, too.

When I'm done loading up, I nod at Kiko and we both get out of the cab.

“Where's Alyssa's place, then?” I ask. She shrugs. Great. This is a hell a stupid idea, I decide. The trailer park is big, and it's not looked after by anyone, so it's mostly dark and there are no real paths either. Lights burn behind thick plastic windows but don't throw off enough illumination for us to see where we're walking. There's the smell of fried onions in the air, and here and there are lines of cold thin washing strung between the caravans. We wind our way through a labyrinthine tangle of caravans and sheds. I hope Kiko's got a good sense of direction, because I'm starting to feel pretty lost. Stumbling around in the dark looking for zombies with a thirteen-year-old girl is not my idea of fun,

although strangely, I am feeling kind of intrepid here. Brave, even.

Alyssa, queen of the trailer park, sitting on her step with a hot cup of shine in one hand and a sweet, mellow number in the other. She's wearing a white dress, Dwayne's favourite. And she's thinking: it's Friday night. Usually Dwayne'd be in a bar somewhere, listening to Elvis hits, getting wasted with his pals, probably hanging out with some hot cartoon chicks on the Strip, (but he always knew not to bring any of those girls back to your pad, right, Alyssa?), and Alyssa would be just kicking back, listening to the radio like all you other loners, smoking a doobie, waiting. Alyssa always felt kinda sad for the chicks who wrote me, and kinda happy that her Dwayne was one of the good guys. Hey, what do I keep telling you girls? There are no good guys anymore.

Thing is, nothing's changed for Dwayne. He's still going to be at some bar on the Strip tonight, drinking beers with his buddies. Except, instead of grabbing some manga-sexy teenager and banging her up against the wall round the back of the bar ('cos that's how Alyssa and Dwayne met, my sweet and gentle listeners), he'll be bashing her head against the concrete until it breaks open and he can scoop out her brains.

I'm telling it like it is, Alyssa. Now would probably be a good time to go inside, bolt down the windows and get the axe from under the bed. Stay tuned, loners. This is the queen of fucking everything, your one true love, Miss Lonelyhearts, with your letters and requests.

We're lost. Of course we are. What the hell am I doing, going on a rescue mission with a thirteen-year-old kid? I can't see how we're ever going to find Alyssa in this place, and Kiko doesn't seem to have any better clues than me. It's an endless junkyard, a maze of broken parts and jutting standpipes and the sad, corrugated metal shacks with carpet rolled out over the roof, next to the grey caravans with metal shutters over the doors, dogs sleeping underneath and cats furtively pawing in the rubbish. I don't know how many people live here, but it's got to be in the thousands.

So I grab Kiko's hand and make her stop, and I start to whisper to her, saying come on, let's get the hell out, when all of a sudden she puts her hand over my mouth, her eyes wide, and I hear what she hears. The screech of a cat, the clank of something metal rolling against aluminium siding, and shuffling feet. Dogdamn it.

We dash into the space between two caravans, and I put my arms round Kiko and hold her tight as I can. I'm holding my breath, making like a statue, and waiting. He comes closer; his shuffle is a sort of *clomp, scrape, clomp, scrape*, like he's dragging one foot along behind him, and it's punctuated by the sounds of whatever he's walking over: empty cans, plastic bags, broken glass. As he gets closer, I realise that Kiko is vibrating nervously, like she's going to leap out at him, guns blazing. But I hold on to her and stay her, and the manbie shuffles closer, until he's right next to our hiding place, and then he stops and sniffs the air.

It's too dark to get a good look at him, but easy enough to tell he's one ugly zom. He's big, too, at least six foot tall. He wears a miasma of sweat and blood and semen and stale cigarette smoke, and I want to puke, but I just hold myself steady, with my arms wrapped tight around Kiko, and the manbie lets out a great deep sigh. I hear his lungs rattle, all the loose parts shaking wetly inside him, and he then he starts with this low, guttural croon. It's more or less tuneless, but I know the song. *Love me tender; love me true*. He shuffles off again, slowly, *clomp, scrape, all my dreams fulfil*.

I let go of Kiko and mouth a question at her. "Dwayne?"

Kiko shrugs, but she's smiling. Like, an excited kind of smile, her eyes all lit up. It hits me that she thinks this is fun. Hey, maybe it is.

It's hard to describe how painfully slowly the zomdudes walk. Gives you a false sense of security around them, like you forget how strong they are, and how violent, just because they're slow and dumb. But they don't need to be able to run and hunt; they can just hang out in bars, pick up girls, and go back to their wives when they get hungry again. So yeah, Dwayne's walking real slow. Me and Kiko are following behind him, quiet as we can, crazy slowly so as not to catch up with the dude. Then Kiko starts imitating his limp, dragging her leg behind her and pulling a crazy, bug-eyed face at me in the dark. It's so dumb and childish that it makes me giggle, and I pull a face back, and do a little zom dance to Dwayne's back, which cracks her up. We giggle as quietly as we can. I can see Kiko's body quaking, and occasionally little snorts and gasps come out, which start me off again. We laugh so hard and breathlessly that we half forget what we're doing and nearly walk right into Dwayne's back.

That brings me to my senses with a snap, and I pull Kiko back so she's right next to me, in the cover of an awning.

He's standing on the lip of a puddle of light. Inside the light, a caravan door is open, and a woman is dancing in a white dress, turning and twirling with her hands in the air. Her long braids are beaded red and white, and they bounce and fly around her head as she turns and jumps, in her bare feet. Patti Smith, *Because the Night*.

For a few surreal moments, it's like we're in some kind of musical. Alyssa is spinning around, braids flying, trailing white and red against the indigo night. She's singing, in a high, whispery voice, harmonising with Patti Smith's strong one: *desire is hunger, is the fire I breathe, love is a banquet on which we feed*; and a few feet away, there is Dwayne: *love me tender, love me long, let me in your heart...*

And soon Alyssa's song ends, and as the music falls away, Dwayne's croaking voice creeps out into the night: *for it's there that I belong, and we'll never part*.

Alyssa stands still, peers out into the darkness. "Who's there? Dwayne?"

She looks small and defenceless in the yellow light, in her white dress, with her pretty braids hanging still, her bare feet. And I know she's been waiting for him, that she's been telling herself she's just going to have one last dance then go inside, that she's going to fetch a weapon, or hide out at a friend's house, but all that was just stuff she told herself. Because, really, she was waiting for this. She's all dressed up for it, in a white dress that's going to get torn off her and bloodied, but she doesn't understand that, she doesn't believe it. Because Dwayne's not like that, not really, not when you get to know him. It's just that you don't know him like she does. And she loves him.

And this is what you do for love.

And then Dwayne steps away from us and into the light, and Alyssa screams, and Kiko leaps up and smashes the butt of her gun into the top of Dwayne's head and he turns around and kicks her away, so she thuds into the side of a caravan. And then he shuffles forward again, towards Alyssa, and I run over to Kiko, kneel down in the dirt next to her. I've fucking killed her, is what I'm thinking. Killed a passenger, and she's only a kid, too.

But Alyssa is screaming and I realise that Kiko is shouting at me, and trying to push me out of her way so she can get up on her feet, and I roll aside, grabbing my gun on the way, but by the time I'm on my feet, Kiko is pulling the trigger and she's blasted a huge hole inside Dwayne's dead head. He turns around, dizzy and confused. Half his face has been blown away.

And then Alyssa runs to him, throws her arms round him. "Oh my god, oh baby, are you okay?"

He grins at her with what's left of his face, his blackened tongue hanging out the side of his jaw. I can see the grey sludge that used to be his brains slipping down his face through the socket of his eye. He reaches towards Alyssa, grabs her hair at the top of her head, and lifts her clean off her feet, like she's a rag doll, and she's kicking and flailing about, and that's when me and Kiko let loose with the firepower. We blast his arm off, and Alyssa falls to the ground, crumpling up, with his hand still in her hair.

Dwayne comes towards us, roaring with rage, and it's just easy then. We decimate his manged body, splattering the whole place with creepy little bits of zom, and when we're done, and the dust settles around us, I become aware of Alyssa pulling on my arm, screaming, and trying to punch my face. I must have been holding her off, and now I pull her to me, try to hug her, but she breaks free and screams in my face.

"You bitch! You bitch, I fucking hate you!"

She still has Dwayne's fist in her hair, and I grab her and hold her so she can't move while Kiko uncurls the rotting fingers and throws the hand away. She screams at us the whole time. Cries. Some lady in the van next door comes out to her steps and screeches at us to shut the fuck up, and then Kiko walks up to Alyssa and slaps her around the face, which doesn't do anything except make her even madder.

"Don't," I say. "Don't be violent."

Kiko looks like she's going to bite my head off, but instead she turns to Alyssa and shouts in her face. "We saved your life! He was going to kill you!"

"You don't know shit! He loved me."

"He was going to eat you, you fucking stupid idiot." She seems so young to me now, so full of simple rage and justice, an answer for everything, and a right for every wrong.

"He's not like that," Alyssa says. Like, why does no one believe her? She's sick of telling people. "He wouldn't. Not Dwayne. Not to me. He wouldn't do that to me." And then she sinks to her knees, holding onto her ruined white dress, screwing it up in her hands. Jilted on her wedding day. I can't help feeling we've done her wrong.

But Kiko can't give it up. She steps towards her, crouches down in front of her. "What did you write to Miss Lonelyhearts for if you thought he was such a fucking catch?"

Alyssa shakes her head. She doesn't know, or she's not saying.

"Hey," I say, softly touching Kiko's shoulder. Because not everything has an easy answer, I think. Maybe Alyssa just wanted someone to know that she was sad. "Let's go," I say.

We walk back to the cab in silence, and it seems easy coming back, making each turn and each step by instinct, hardly thinking. I keep wanting to say something to Kiko, but I don't know what. I've let her down. I should have taken her home; damn, I don't even know if she's got a home. I've taken a kid out with me on a zombie takedown, like that's an okay thing to do. Because what? I wanted to be her buddy? Wanted to show her that I can still kick ass? Should have never let her in the cab. Feeling sick with myself as we reach the line of caravans that lead up to where the cab's parked.

Kiko gets in the back seat, and I lock us down tight. I've got to call in to Mara, but I need a minute, just breathing in the familiar smell of the leatherette and ersatz pine freshness inside the cab. Resting my head against the back of the seat. Then Kiko lightly punches my arm, gets all up in my face with that big grin of hers.

“Your sister didn’t go to school with Alyssa,” I say. “You lied.”

She shrugs. Like it’s no big deal. “I haven’t even got a sister. But I know plenty of girls like Alyssa,” she says.

“What did you get in my cab for? Did you plan this?”

That’s a fucked up question and as soon as the words leave my mouth, I regret asking it. I’m blaming her because it makes me feel better, that’s all.

But she’s too smart for me, anyway. She just smiles. “We did the right thing,” she says. “I’ve thought about it and it’s right. He was going to kill her and eat her brains. You know it, and I know it, and maybe one day Alyssa’ll work it out, too. If we hadn’t turned up, she’d be dead, and you can’t work anything out when you’re dead. Am I right?”

I shake my head, not meaning no, just that I’m not able to process it. Of course Kiko’s right. It’s not just right, it’s the only thing we can do. What choices have we got, people like us, if we want to live in this world, keep living, stay alive? The loners, the rebel girls, women like me and Mara. And Kiko?

I start the engine, check my mirror and the dashboard clock. “If we don’t move it, we’re gonna be someone’s dinner,” I say. This place is going to see some full-on zom action pretty soon. It’s getting to that time of night.

I pick up the radio. “Zero Seven Oh, I’m clear and reporting in.”

Mara comes right back at me, “Thanks driver, but I got nothing for ya. Come back to base and get me outta here? I could do with a margarita.”

“On my way,” I say. Then I catch Kiko’s eye in the mirror. “Where to, Passenger?”

“Fuck that shit,” says Kiko. “I’m no passenger.” She climbs over into the front of the cab, grins, and flicks on the radio. We’re just in time to catch the end of Miss Lonelyhearts, and her voice is soothing, just really floaty and nice, and she’s saying,

my dear loners, my gentle listeners, my fine warriors, amazons, cold hearted bitches and chicks who know what it is and where it’s at, that’s nearly all for tonight. We’ve just got time for one more letter before I sayonara on your asses, and it’s from a way lonely woman name of Judy. Hey Judy. Judy wrote me about her little girl lost, a same-old-shit tale of zomrape and murder in the city at the End of the World, and I know all you loners out there are gonna be raising your moonshine and margarita glasses to this chick, who just wanted to say she’s dealing, day by day, and she asks would I play a song for her. So here it is, Judy, especially for you, wherever you are. Stay safe, be well armed, and keep on trucking. This is Miss Lonelyhearts, the utterly righteous, sending love to all you loners out there. Till next time, I’m out.

The echoing drop of a needle on vinyl, and after a few scratchy seconds, music fills the cab. I can’t look at Kiko, except out of the corner of my eye, because I don’t want her to see my face. I say, “Hey Kiko, you ever had a margarita?”

“What’s a margarita?” she asks, shooting me that unstoppable grin of hers.

“Huh,” I say. And I turn the music up, full blast, so I can drink in every note of Janis’s voice, *singing when a woman gets lonely*, and I’m sort of crying and laughing at the same time, as we drive to Mara’s rescue and a jug full of margaritas in a friendly bar someplace.

Silver Veins by Michele Lee

Years, Trista thought. She stared out, through the foot-by-foot square window in her wall, and wanted to scream. She wanted to pluck the lamp from the table beside her and bash in the window, the only window in her quarters. She wanted to punish it until either her emotions bled out in sticky red on the walls, or the window gave way and the stars bled into her chambers.

She'd spent years on starships or space stations or off planet condos. For years, the same small square of technology and blankness had held her hostage. Her quarters were shaped to fit the people who lived in rooms like these. It was nothing, empty in its natural state, and there was not much more than that around her.

The air was recycled again. The same air was breathed by the Vesvians, and the Astrarians and the Terrians, sanitized, re-oxygenated and cooled, then spat back into the room to suffocate Trista one ion at a time.

"You should go to the stimroom," Lyvia, Trista's counselor, told her at that morning's session. "Experience a story, visit a new place. Or better yet, stop isolating yourself in your quarters. Join a club, or attend a party."

Trista's AS-classified brain bothered Lyvia. Despite being biologically Earthling — human was a slur, a epithet best left to gutter backstreets and uncivilized areas where the living creatures were unable to be polite — Trista's brain worked closer to those of the insect-like races than other Earthlings. It was its shape, and its chemical make-up. It was legally recognized, considered completely normal for the subclass of Earthlings labeled Neuro-Atypical. And while Lyvia counseled fifteen different races on the ship, she couldn't tolerate Trista's noncompliance.

Lyvia wanted to drug her, a prospect that made Trista want to scream and claw the woman's pretty purple face to shreds.

She'd tried the drugs in another place, another deep space community. They hadn't made the parties and clubs and endless sea of people easier to deal with. They'd made it harder to escape. Harder to give a voice to the crawling sense of discontent that charged beneath her skin.

They locked her inside, still aware and unable to break free.

Drugs, therapy, had caused her last meltdown. Six months unable to find her words, trapped under the constant assault of the world around her. She would not let that happen again.

The vid screen beeped and a new general message from the ship appeared in purple type that reminded her, again, of Lyvia and her useless suggestions. "We will be docking at the Vesvian star port in two estimated hours," the overly pleasant auto voice read. "All requests for supplies should be into ordering by 2100, standard time."

"Show the planet," Trista called out. The black screen vanished, replaced by a shining orb, pale as the Earth's moon. The planet — Trista eyed the specs — named Coyol, glowed in the darkness of space. The stars' light glimmered off whatever lingered in Coyol's atmosphere. Then the ship rounded the planet and the spider web of metal and glass that made up the spaceport obliterated the view.

"Off," Trista snapped. The screen went blank.

The planet's beauty meant not a damn thing, because no matter how much Trista hated, loathed,

despised the endless gray halls and chambers of the ship, she feared being outside them. More than agoraphobic, the few times she'd been outside of domes or space ports that were controlled down to the scents in the chemically regulated air, her body had shut down on her, the real atmosphere air refused to inflate her lungs, and memorized pictures and case files of local diseases and parasites flashed through her mind at high speed.

The anger threatened to give way to sobs. Rage-sadness-excitement, her brain clicked over and stuck on yet another emotion that was too strong for Trista's mere human body to feel.

She turned the screen back on and rolled the sound up high enough to block out her own thoughts. News, crap, crap, crap, and there was the planet again. Softly luminescent like real silver-stone. Maybe that's what made it so beautiful.

"What's the status on planet surface visits?" Trista asked the screen.

"Denied," the soft female voice replied. "There are no known settlements on the planet's surface. Acquisition of supplies is estimated at three hours. Time limitations dictate..."

"I get it." Trista expected to feel relieved. Instead she found herself staring at the planet's image, longing to know what it felt like. What it smelled like. "Show the planet's skin."

"No images available. Vesvian scientists have not yet released a detailed profile of the planet."

Trista cursed them in three languages. In a way it made things easier, knowing that she couldn't psych herself up then let herself down by not showing up on the planet's surface. So she went back to staring out the window, hating it for existing.

The soulless geometry of the space port crept past the tiny window, then obliterated it completely. Trista could no longer see the stars, just the dull walls and duller people in the dock as they began loading and unloading particulars from the ship.

"The port does have many fine dining rooms and splendid shopping."

"Are you a computer or a commercial?" Trista snapped.

"I do not understand."

"What about glider flights? Are they allowed?" Trista asked.

"Yes. Gliders are allowed to file flight plans and disembark until 2400 standard time."

"File personal plan Trista-5 for Glider Three. To leave as soon as I get there."

"Affirmative" was the last thing Trista heard before she abandoned her quarters for the hushed halls. She kept to herself outside, avoiding the main sections of the ship, and the exits, which would be filled with people going back and forth between the spaceport and ship.

The glider hold was her territory, more so than any other place on the ship. Trista maintained the ship's fleet of twenty gliders, small light personal crafts that qualified people could check out for a little off-ship private time, or short space trips. Most often they were used for ship personnel to move back and forth from a planet or spaceport and the ship when the ship was in orbit. Trista kept them up and running, almost single-handedly. It looked harder than it was, but Trista wasn't about to let anyone realize that.

One of the perks was free rein to use the gliders almost anytime she wanted. Hyperspace movement aside, the gliders let Trista transcend the walls, the rules, and at wonderful moments, her own

overactive brain.

“Going for a spin?” Trevor, the security guard posted outside the glider hangar, asked with a too large smile as Trista walked up. He looked right into her eyes and the crawly feeling flared up on Trista’s skin.

She broke the eye contact and offered half a smile. “Yeah, it’s a good time.”

“If you want to get out for a while, the spaceport has this great place, The Rio. It cooks real food to order, and has shopping areas from five different star systems. I bought a necklace there for my wife last year. Gorgeous silverstone and white gold.”

Trista didn’t care. The guard kept spitting out words she heard but couldn’t put in context as he checked for her flight plan registration before opening the bay’s door.

“I’m not a people person,” Trista said, in an attempt to stop his verbal diarrhea. In the end only the hangar door sliding shut cut off the sound of his voice. Trista strode down yet another red and gray corridor before a second door opened at her approach.

The hangar was small, as far as hangars went, because the gliders were small. Each glider connected to the ship with two thick-coiled black umbilical cords. One monitored systems and downloaded flight plans into the glider. Many of the ship’s residents didn’t know how to fly anything, so the gliders came with some automated features. The other cord charged the gliders’ batteries off the ship’s main reactor. Nice and clean.

Trista powered on her chosen glider, then let it go through standard system checks while she unplugged the cords. Then she climbed in, sealed the doors and aimed the glider toward the bay door. The first one opened and the glider rolled slowly into the airlock. The second door opened and Trista was free. The glider dropped a few feet then recovered. The ship’s gravitation held the glider for a moment before it surged forward, out into the blanket of stars.

The first thing Trista did was disable the autopilot. She’d chosen a flight plan meant to test the glider, which she commonly used when she just wanted to fly around and had to file a flight plan due to protocol. She didn’t know what exactly she planned to do, but she knew she couldn’t stand the sight of Coyol obscured by the manmade port monstrosity. She circled the planet until only its luminous surface was visible. She found her attention drawn down toward the atmosphere, found herself trying to discern what was beyond the layers of gas.

The glider followed, skimming the atmosphere, then penetrating it. Trista watched the console carefully. The glider analyzed its environment to keep a steady speed despite wind shear and gravity. The readouts indicated the planet had high amounts of oxygen. Plenty to support Trista, she thought.

She flew lower. The luminosity, she discovered, came not from the mix of gases in the atmosphere, but from the surface itself. Trista let the glider sink gracefully to the surface.

The view around her changed from solid radiance to a thicket of long, tangled silver-pearl branches. Whatever it was looked too delicate to truly be as large and heavy as it seemed. Trista followed a branch. It twisted around, as far as Trista could see, up to twenty feet in places. It looked as if trees made of the stuff reached for space, with vines for branches and glitter for bark.

She didn’t plan to get out. She just wanted to get a look. No one would be on the surface so no one would know anything about her. There would be no expectations of small talk or smothering closeness. But once the glider sat on the surface, her curiosity over took her. She didn’t have to go out, but she

wanted to see if the vines were just a trick of the camera or if they really were so brilliant. The door to the glider slid open.

Trista sat in the doorway, dangling her legs in the three feet between the glider's deck and the planet's surface. The air felt colder than she expected. The planet was the sixth from the system's sun. The third was a tourist paradise, the fourth contained the most productive mines in the system. They were conquered things. This one, Trista didn't know what to make of.

It was quiet. Still. Beautiful. A pleasant, slight scent carried through the air like a memory of a scent rather than the present, full-on assault of the real thing.

Off in the distance she noticed a spot of lavender in all silver. Her feet touched the ground. For a moment she expected the paralyzing fear of danger, the familiar press of a wild environment assaulting her senses. But it never came. The air was still, not a breath of movement. The silver tendrils around her were not unlike the spaceport above. Raw and natural instead of geometrically and chemically strengthened, but the same. The planet didn't feel real. It felt muted and too beautiful, like a dream.

The ground below her feet was a duller, dusty version of the planet around her. Perhaps dead and powdered pieces of the tapestry around her. Not far away the blur of purple waited.

Trista stood two feet from it before she realized it was a flower, blooming, like many others around and above her, out of the silver vines themselves. They were plants then, Trista thought. A plant that filled the land and the purple blurs were the flowers.

The one in front of her stretched nearly five feet tall, counting the petals. Its center was almost two feet in diameter, darker purple, but not by much. The petals, huge as they were, faded toward the tips. The darker pigment from the center section decorated the petals in speckles, like drips of paint. In the very center was the stamen, a lacy, star-shaped piece of creamy white in all that purple.

Trista's skin tingled. It did that when she was genuinely excited. The smell was heavenly. She'd barely smelled it from the glider, but here, right on the flower, it smelled like vanilla and strawberries. A smell so solid and smooth she could roll it on her tongue. Wrap up in it like a smooth, cool blanket.

Something broke the silence. The call blew out again and Trista jerked to attention. Someone was paging the glider. Trista looked around, frozen for a moment because she couldn't see it. She spotted it right when she thought her brain was about to shut down in panic. She'd walked much farther than she realized.

A fast jog brought Trista back to the glider as the third page rang out. When she saw it was a general page, Trista wanted to scream. But she already felt horrible for breaking the tranquility of the planet's surface. "All personnel should be back on the ship in half an hour. Half an hour."

Trista spent far more time on the surface than she expected. She'd never planned to set foot on it at all. She closed the door, giving the foliage a last, longing look before setting off back for the ship. It would take her more than half an hour to reach it. It wasn't a problem. The ship moved slowly enough while leaving port that the glider could catch up with it. She set the glider on an auto-path back to the ship and watched the surface recede, then become obliterated again by the ship and star port.

"How was your flight?" her assistant mechanic, Joe, asked when the glider rolled back into the hangar.

"Amazing," Trista answered. She found herself smiling into Joe's oily reddish face.

Joe looked taken aback. "Wow, must have been. That's good, Trista. I'm glad you had fun."

Trista couldn't shake the thrill of what she'd done. She'd deleted the flight record so no one would

know, and yet she felt energized, refreshed, charged in a way she'd lost years ago. She made it to her quarters and skipped inside. Then she caught herself and laughed. The sound echoed through her room, which hadn't heard anything like it since Trista moved in. She was practically shaking, so she decided to calm herself down with a shower and a cup of warm tea.

"Get a hold of yourself," Trista told her reflection before she climbed into the shower stall. The water came on at her default temperature and it hit her skin like pinpricks. The heat of the water on the coolness of her skin gave her a pins-and-needles sensation. After a few moments the feeling washed away in the torrent, but the elation remained.

Trista squeezed a berry-scented soap onto her palm. It smelled nothing like the flowers, but it made her think of it anyway. She hit a rough patch of skin at her hip, but a little hard scrubbing had her shiny and smooth as a baby's bottom. Once wrapped in a soft robe, a stillness came over Trista. She felt calm and sated for once, so she decided to take advantage of the feeling and try to sleep.

Her dreams came in glimmers of textured silver. She didn't remember the actions, just the glimmer. When she woke, the elated feeling had sunken slightly into her skin, become a part of her almost. She couldn't stop marveling at the feels and scents around her. She inhaled, savoring the citrus scent in the air, as if it circled through one of the hydro-gardens on the ship before filling her room. The air caressed her skin as it filtered in. The blanket, itchy and stuffy every other day, bathed her skin in warmth that offset the air flow perfectly.

Her alarm went off, and instead of cursing it, Trista verbally turned it off and stretched. She stood, and when she caught sight of herself in the mirror on the bathroom door, she froze. Her skin was the pasty pale of someone who'd never seen a real sun. Her shoulder length hair was shiny and curly enough, thanks to the composition of the bathing water. But across the somewhat convex expanse of her stomach, a tattoo spread. It reminded her, not of the blackish ink of the Earthlings, but of the Ryllian tattoos she'd seen. The Ryllians had a gift for metal working. With their bare hands, they could work most metals and stones to a semi-liquid, malleable form. They commonly adorned their skin directly with inlays of metal and stone.

A Ryllian-style tattoo spread across Trista's hips and stomach in delicate stripes of silverstone. Trista touched one and felt a definite difference between her soft flesh and the cold silky stone. She felt an edge to the marking and slipped a nail beneath it. She expected pain, but the silverstone peeled away like the coating on cheap jewelry. Trista peeled it all off, washing the flakes down the drain of her sink. She ran the disposal as well, to make sure whatever it was ended up in pieces small enough to wash into the ship's sewer system. There the filters and sanitizers would sift it out before the water would be treated for safe use again.

"Trista, are you coming in today?" Joe's voice rang out into the main room. She had the audio line set to open, but thankfully not the video line. She'd have been damn embarrassed if Joe saw her peeling silverstone off her stomach.

"Yeah, yes," she yelled from the bathroom. "I'm running late, but I'll be there."

She took extra time to scrub her skin smooth. Beautiful as it had been, the overnight tattoo struck her wrong.

The positive feeling wore off a bit during the shower. It wore off completely after nine hours of work in which not one but two batteries overheated, melting part of their casings and spilling out onto wires and carpeting. Nothing important, other than the batteries, had been lost. But Trista never did like messes.

She was beat by the time she walked back into her quarters. She was sticky with mostly-dried sweat, itchy, her face and arms bearing smears of who-knew-what. Trista stripped and tossed her clothes into the auto-clean machine. The little window in the door steamed up. All Trista wanted to do was go to sleep for a day, maybe two. But she couldn't stand the thought of going to bed nasty. She checked herself in the mirror and cursed in three languages.

The gossamer tendrils of silver covered her stomach and hips again, threading their way down her legs toward the floor and gently cupping the bottoms of her breasts toward the top. She felt for the edge again, surprised to find a third texture in her skin. She it peeled off and pulverized the cool, smooth silverstone again. The new texture, like silk and suede spun together, fanned from a point just south of her sternum, and flaked away into a fine, pale powder when she rubbed at it. Trista tried to inspect the dust it left on the floor, but it was too fine to scoop up between her fingers.

Instead she blew into it to scatter the faintly dusty spot on her carpet. She scrubbed herself again, a distinct feeling of discontent and downright paranoia coiling in her stomach. She should go to the sick bay. She should tell someone, at least. Someone who'd isolate her in a quarantine chamber, more walls and less windows than even her current box allowed her.

In the morning. Yes, after one last, decent sleep. Then she could turn herself in, confess if the situation warranted it, and relent to whatever protocol the medical professionals dictated. Feeling cold and somewhat empty, Trista burrowed into her blanket and tried to sleep.

The sun, a gentle, computer generated simulation of sunlight, woke her, most likely later than she should have been up. Trista didn't want to move. She wanted to turn the sun off and cry. The first time she'd been brave enough, fierce enough to set foot on a planet's surface and somehow it had infected her, ruined her.

She'd never managed to do anything right, and never without much irritation and strife to boot. She finally crawled out of bed and hazarded a glance at herself. The veins were back, as lovely and brilliant as the first time she'd seen them. They curled around her body, growing across her skin like some kind of luminous fantasy armor. Except she wasn't some exotic-breed warrioress. She was just Trista, a stupid human who made a stupid choice.

Trista choked down tears and dressed for what she thought would be her end on this starship. She took a last look out her little window and her nervousness gelled to a sickness in her stomach and chest. The window was dark. The shade was open, always, but the window remained dark save for an occasional glimmer or shine off the surface of whatever obliterated the view.

Trista's door slid open on command, but instead of the empty sterile halls, she found a beautiful tangle of silver branches, growing up from broken pipes beneath the floors and between the walls. A heavy knot with a tiny purple bud blocked the passageway door. Trista slunk back to her quarters.

The ship was quiet. The blips and beeps that, at times, felt like they violated her, from boards, systems and displays were dark. Silent.

It was wrong because the social constructs of the ship said it was wrong. They said this was not how life was supposed to be. But it was right to Trista's senses and her overworked brain. It was calm and soothing. It was beautiful and safe again, like the peace of the silver planet had come to her when she failed to return to it.

Trista stripped and stood in front of the mirror, watching the artificial light play along the growing silver on her skin. When the bloom pushed gently out of her stomach and her skin folded open into a

brehtaking purple-speckled bloom, she watched that too. Finally smiling.

Thrilling Wonder Stories #52: The Invasion of the Zog by Lavie Tidhar

This is how it ends: with a sky brittle like purple-coloured glass, with the death of the kid Morano, on a lonely beach at the edge of a dark continent.

It begins... it begins with the Zog.

I was sitting on the beach in Clifton watching the penguins. What they were doing on a tropical beach I have no idea, but there they were, amidst the almost-naked rich burghers of Cape Town.

The sun was approaching the waterline, casting reds and purples across the sky and the sea. It was peaceful.

Then, snow began to softly fall. Purple tears came from the skies, fell on the sand, in the water, on people's towels; on people. When they touched the ground they seemed to move of their own accord, stretching and bending until they merged together into people-sized, purple blobs.

I didn't know what they were, but I knew they were trouble and I needed none of that.

I got out of the way.

I got on my bike and revved it up and was gone along the narrow rockface road towards Hout Bay.

#

Morano threw stones into the sea; where they hit foam rose. He was the only one on the beach. On the other side was a Zog.

The current joke amongst the South African intelligentsia was that the Zog would have fucked up Apartheid: blue was clearly not an appropriate colour. Morano, who was half-Portuguese and half-Zulu, neither knew nor cared, and he approached the Zog and stood before it.

The Zog was flowering: small blue branches spread out from its body, bearing small, delicate fruit, their colours fading across the spectrum.

Morano reached a hand and took one of the fruits. There was no one to tell him he shouldn't, anyway.

Morano put the fruit in his mouth and chewed it.

#

The whole world was affected. It was an invasion, pure and simple: non-violent, non-reversible: one day the world was ours, the next it was shared by the Zog, and there was nothing you could do. I watched all the news reports from my hotel room in Hout Bay, overlooking the quay and that magnificent bay. Hout Bay's pretend-republic, previously a harmless tourist attraction, became in effect a real republic a week after the invasion: the rest of South Africa, the rest of the Cape – hell, the rest of the world, really – was closed off.

They were going to somehow get rid of the Zog – though how do you kill off an amorphous blob of something that keeps coming together again is beyond me – but they were sidetracked when Morano came.

Morano came from the sea: he walked. His eyes were burnt amber, and his cropped thick hair was the colours of the rainbow.

He took over the quay and turned it into a giant warehouse; he found musicians (and where in the Cape can you not find a musician?) and they played the music only Morano's people could hear, the ethereal, doomed beats of the Zog, that echoed and pounded against the sea and the earth, through day and night, sunrise and sunset.

And on the highest platform Morano stood, his eyes burning in the flashing pounding bursts of light, and his hand a continuous blur as it moved in an arc, spreading the dancers below with small, purple blobs.

And they wanted me to kill him.

#

This is what Morano saw:

The earth was glassy disc; he could see the red veins pulsing underneath the glass, tentacles slamming against the underground. Green and purple vegetation grew everywhere, and insects, large flying things with emeralds for eyes, flew between them, seeking giant yellow sunflowers that sucked in the sun.

At night, the moon in the sky was replaced with a large, misshapen yellow rock. And the song was everywhere: the movement of the flowers mixed with the pounding of the purple tentacles under the glass disc, with the humming of the insects.

He became rich.

#

There were three of them. A judge, a second-rate M-Net presenter, and a hotel magnate. Pretty impressive stuff.

I smoked and listened.

'We will pay you,' the judge said.

'What with?'

'Whatever currency you prefer,' the M-Net presenter said smoothly.

'What currency is good anymore?'

'Oh for crying out loud, man!' The hotel magnate, a cigar quivering. 'Do it for humanity! Do it for community value! We'll give you anything you want. Twenty million Rands.'

'Why?' I said.

They looked at each other. They didn't like me using the w-word.

'Why what?' the judge said.

'Why do you want him dead?'

'The kid is a plague! He is a servant of the Zog!'

'Fifty percent,' I said.

'What?'

‘Fifty percent of the kid’s stash. You can keep the other half.’

‘What?’ the cigar, quivering.

‘Look,’ I said. ‘You’re racketeers. Hoodlums. Mafiosos. You want the kid’s business. Fine. That’s not my problem.’ And again, slower: ‘fifty percent.’

And there it was.

So I killed him.

#

This is what Morano saw at the moment of his death: the ghostly shape of a man, blowing through the thick vegetation toward him. He saw the bullet like a trail of red tears freeze-framing through the air. He heard it as a melody that encompassed and surpassed the song around him. The bullet connected with his head and Morano was transformed.

#

From the place of Morano’s death grew a Zog. As it grew, the earthly body of Morano disappeared and was absorbed into the purple mass. I just stood there.

It grew branches: the whole thing took seconds.

Nobody noticed. They were raving down below like it was the end of the world.

I couldn’t get away. I had to know. I dropped the gun to the floor and reached toward the Zog, and picked one of the small, delicate fruits. Then I left.

It was cold on the beach, and quiet. The sky was a brittle purple-coloured glass.

I figured I’d leave town for a while. Head into the wine farms around Stellenbosch or Paarl, or up along the Wild Coast, to George or Knysna. I threw the piece of Zog in my hand into the water and watched dark foam rise.

The Zog are here, and they are here to stay. Maybe it’s worth seeing the world the way a Zog does. I wouldn’t know. When it came to it, I couldn’t do it. Perhaps I just couldn’t face Morano, on the other side.

I rode my bike down the highway under the yellow, misshapen moon.

Purple snow began silently to fall.

Distant Deeps or Skies by Silvia Moreno-Garcia

Esperanza was oiling the snake’s new tongue when the door opened and in walked Mr. Morales with a box in his hands and a homunculus behind him. At first she didn’t know it was a homunculus. She thought he’d met a dandy at the auction and dragged him to the shop.

He was tall, blond and blue-eyed with a face made of sharp, elegant bones. He stood still, observing the snake that rested on her work table.

“I bought some defective dragonflies at the auction. We can repair them and sell them,” Mr. Morales

said, opening the box and showing her a handful of metal insects. “And I bought a homunculus.”

“What are we going to do with that?”

“Sell it, what else? It’s English, top quality.”

Their second-hand shop was not the best place for a high-ticket item. Clockwork birds and reptiles were one thing; a homunculus was quite another.

“Where are we going to put him?” she asked.

“In the back.”

“There’s no space there.”

“Go make some space then.”

Esperanza wiped her greasy hands with a rag, then headed to the storage area. She shoved her way through boxes, crates and metal parts until she reached the room with a smelly cot and a chair. Mr. Morales’ apprentice was supposed to live in the little room with the yellow wallpaper, but the last boy had left over three months ago. Mr. Morales’ nephew, Abel, was bad-tempered and he quickly drove away the young men the guild sent them.

It didn’t matter. Esperanza was able to handle everything without any help. Although she was supposed to only decorate the animals – the mechanical reparations and construction were strictly off limits and restricted to the automaton makers’ guild – she often dabbled in other areas.

Esperanza grabbed a broom and swept the floor. When she was done she called Mr. Morales and the homunculus.

The blond homunculus sat down on the cot and the springs squeaked. Quietly, the homunculus looked around the room, his knapsack still dangling from his left shoulder.

#

She arrived before seven. Mr. Morales would not show his face until eleven and then it would be a short while until he dragged himself out to play dominoes with his friends, then back up the stairs to the second floor for a nap and back out for drinks at the cantina. But she had responsibilities, and without an apprentice, and Abel off in Veracruz, there was more stuff to accomplish.

Not that she minded. Abel tended to lord her around. The apprentices were not as rude as Mr. Morales’ nephew, but she couldn’t do the work she was interested in when they were there for fear they might report her infractions. She was better off alone with old Mr. Morales.

Esperanza sat down at her workbench and opened a mechanical duck. She removed the silver belly, leaving its gears and levers in the open. Esperanza held up a magnifying glass in one hand and her tweezers in the other.

“Mr. Morales said you’re good at fixing automata.”

She looked up at the blond man. He was still wearing the fancy purple frock coat, cravat and gloves he’d had on the day before, a wealthy dandy’s outfit now wildly out of place.

“I manage,” she said.

“Mr. Morales said I should help you while he arranges for someone to purchase me.”

“I don’t need help.”

“Mr. Morales said...”

“What do you know about fixing automata?”

“Nothing,” he said.

She flipped her tweezers and went back to inspecting the duck’s insides. She felt his gaze on her and glanced up again. He was standing in the same spot, looking at her.

“You want to help?” she asked. “The floor needs a good scrub. All the stuff is in the back.”

He went away. A long time later he reappeared with a bucket and a brush in his hand. His trousers were soggy.

“You ruined your nice clothes,” she said, disapprovingly. “Why didn’t you change?”

“I don’t have other clothes.”

The homunculus got on his knees and continued scrubbing. The sloshing of the water and the tinkering of metal tools was the only noise in the shop. At last Esperanza put the duck’s belly cover back on and wound the animal up. It walked around the table, shaking its tail.

The homunculus also seemed to be done, a bucket dangling from his fingers. He tilted his head and stared at the duck with that curious, far away stare he’d used on her.

“What should I call you?”

“They call me Theodore.”

“I’m Esperanza,” she said, but did not offer him his hand.

“A pleasure to meet you.”

“Your Spanish is good.”

“I speak six languages.”

“You’re a translator, then?”

“I was employed in a magician’s act, but I’ve had other chores.”

He took his bucket and brushes and went away before she could ask him anything else.

#

“He’s weird,” Esperanza said. “You sure you want him sleeping here at nights?”

“Don’t be silly. Homunculi are well trained.”

“I’ve heard they’re frightfully strong.”

“They’re just pretty things.”

Mr. Morales stood up as she flipped the sign hanging at the front door.

“Close the shop,” he muttered, as though she were not doing exactly that.

“Mr. Morales, he needs some new clothes,” she yelled before he disappeared up the stairs.

Esperanza finished sorting her tools and walked home. The shop dangled at the edge of a respectable street, but Esperanza’s vecindad was further to the east, uphill. It was an ugly, squat building and the portera was a shrill woman who spied on everyone’s comings and goings, but especially distrusted

Esperanza.

That night the portera was nowhere to be seen and Esperanza did not have to stomach her angry glares. She walked down a narrow corridor, past the altar to the Virgin of Guadalupe, and went into the room that was her home. She only had one small window, and the wallpaper decorating the walls was rotting with mould in several spots, but she covered these with diagrams of mechanical animals, a large calendar with flower drawings and pretty postcards.

There, piled around her bed were all the magazines and books about automata she collected. Mr. Morales, with his tired eyes and slightly shaky hands, did not read much anymore and he gave her many things he did not find useful or interesting.

She read frequently, but it was a slow and tedious process. Many of the publications were in English or French, and although Mr. Morales taught her how to read both languages – he said the very best automata came from Paris and London – she preferred working with her hands rather than sitting still and learning about the clockwork mechanism that simulated the purr of a mechanical cat.

Esperanza dug beneath a pile of papers until she found a slim, red little volume. There was a section in it about homunculi and she wanted to read it again.

#

Abel returned on Tuesday. He'd gone to visit his fiancée, and Esperanza expected him to arrive happy and content. He barged in to the shop in his usual foul mood, stopping at the table where she was sitting. Theodore was helping her sort gears into the appropriate boxes.

“We've got a new apprentice?” he asked, frowning.

“Your uncle bought a homunculus,” she said.

“And he didn't tell me?” Abel asked as he walked up to Theodore, sizing him.

Abel muttered something and rushed up the stairs, no doubt to wake up the old man with a round of screaming.

“That's Mr. Morales' nephew. He hates it when the old man spends any money. He expects to own the shop and he doesn't appreciate his inheritance being squandered,” Esperanza explained. “Stay out of his way. He's a regular bastard.”

“He mistreats you?”

Esperanza traced the teeth of a gear with her fingers. She thought about the times Abel tried to paw her breasts and how he infuriated her with his criticism about her work. But neither of these mattered much. She moved away when he tried to touch her and ignored his comments.

“He's not any worse than others. I came to Mexico City when I was thirteen and spent a whole year doing some sewing and it wasn't any better than here. I get paid more with Mr. Morales and I get to do the things I like.”

“You like to work on automata.”

“I do.”

“But you're not allowed to do it. Women are not members of the guilds. Women are not supposed to fix mechanical animals.”

She'd been fixing things since she was a child, starting with her mother's sewing machine: a black and

yellow Ward Arm & Platform. In Mexico City, the master artisans in the guilds did well and the automaton makers sold pricey collector objects to the people that went in their carriages down Plateros and bought fancy hats at the Iron Palace.

So she'd obtained a job giving new paint coats to Mr. Morales' animals. He allowed her to learn some of the mechanical aspects of the trade, piling more and more work onto her shoulders while he went to the cantina. As a woman, as someone who was not a member of the guild, she was not supposed to acquire that knowledge. But the old man didn't care because he did not pay Esperanza what he ought to have paid a man and she fussed less than the apprentices.

"I don't give a rat's ass about the guild," she said, upset that something which was not even really human – the church said a homunculus was a sin of nature without a soul – was judging her.

"I meant no disrespect," Theodore said with his slow and measured voice. "It was merely an observation. I find it interesting that you perform these functions."

"It's not like I'm doing something bad," she pointed out. "It's just sometimes you can't do everything clean and open, you get it? Except in Baja California. It's different there."

His blue eyes had no depth to them. He blinked and tilted his head to the left.

"I don't understand."

"You know what Baja California is? It's a state, up north. There's nothing there. Only the desert. But that's why it's great. If there's nothing then you can build anything. Anything at all. The laws are, I mean, there's no laws. Everything's starting there. That's where my sister Lupe lives. She went there and it's completely different from anywhere else."

Esperanza had never seen Baja California, she knew it only by the smudged map tacked to her wall, and she had not heard from Lupe in nearly three years, but she had saved her meagre earnings. One day she would have enough to set up a shop there. But that would be after she went to Paris to train in automata making.

That's where Abel had trained. He loved to rub it in her face. Esperanza had not finished primary school.

"Can you read poetry in Baja California?" Theodore asked.

Esperanza frowned. "That's a dumb question. I guess you can read anything."

"In London they did not allow poetry but John gave me his book."

She was going to ask who John was but Abel came down and tossed a bunch of clothes on the floor in front of Theodore.

"There. My uncle says he got another outfit for this thing."

"Thank you," Theodore said with a perfectly polite voice.

He did not look offended. It seemed like Theodore was barely there with his neutral expression and his head tilted to the side. And yet his eyes acquired a shine to them, a flickering light similar to a jaguar's.

His eyes, unlike the rest of him, were suddenly not placid or neutral. They fixed on Abel, just for a second, and Esperanza noticed Abel's discomfort. He was a deer, surprised in a clearing.

She smiled. Not wishing to attract Abel's attention, Esperanza glanced down quickly and focused on her work.

#

Abel said Theodore was another of the old man's silly purchases, like the mechanical unicorn they restored only to sell it at a loss when nobody wanted it. Mr. Morales often spent money on trinkets they didn't need, toys and automata that caught his fancy without much thought of how they would dispose of them later.

"I'll talk to some of our old clients tomorrow and tell them about Theodore," Mr. Morales said, but then he went out for a few drinks and napped the afternoon away and he never went to call upon their clients.

Abel told Esperanza he feared they'd be stuck with Theodore and panicked, muttering at her ear every morning.

"Good for nothing piece of trash," Abel said. "They don't let us make them in Mexico because they're the devil's work and that's good and sound policy."

But Esperanza only shrugged. She didn't mind if Theodore stayed a little longer with them. With him around Abel kept his hands in his pockets. Abel was intimidated by the homunculus and it only made her like Theodore better.

#

"There. What do you think?"

Theodore did not answer. He touched the cheap calendar she'd gotten from the local grocer as reverently as if it were a fine painting. He ran his fingers over the sheep frolicking in a meadow and nodded.

"I thought you might as well have a little something to lighten up the room."

"Why did you think it made the tiger and the lamb?"

"What tiger?" she asked.

He was quiet, and she figured it was one of those occasions in which he would halt mid-sentence and walk away, as though she were not there. Instead, Theodore pulled his knapsack from beneath the bed and took out a book.

"The tiger in Blake's poem," he said, handing her the book. "Why is the symmetry fearful? And why would someone make a tiger if it'll eat the lamb?"

"I don't read poems," Esperanza said turning the pages. "Is this the book you were talking about?"

"It's John's book."

"Who's that?"

"John trained me and my brothers," Theodore said.

"You mean the other copies? Other homunculi?"

"There were twelve."

She tried to picture a dozen Theodores standing side by side with their shallow blue eyes and their tall cheekbones. She also tried to imagine the original Theodore, the human after which all the copies were patented. She wondered if they'd modified his copies much or if they were exact duplicates, and then she thought maybe Theodore had pieces of metal in him because she'd read there were homunculi who

possessed hands of steel, though it didn't look like he was anything but flesh and bone.

"It was not in our authorized reading materials but John gave it to me before they shipped me off to Paris."

"Paris is the capital of automata development," she said very proudly, repeating Mr. Morales' words. "It's the most modern city in the world."

"In Paris we worked in an accommodation house."

Esperanza had seen plenty of prostitutes, some young and some old, some men and some women, but she'd never thought he'd be one of them with his fine, aristocratic face and shallow eyes that sometimes glinted mysteriously.

"I thought you were an actor," she said.

"My last owner had me perform in a magician's act but I've had other chores. I provide entertainment."

Esperanza, who fixed and made mechanical animals for this same purpose, nodded her understanding.

They sat on the cot, both staring at the lambs running under a bright orange sun.

"I'll read your poem if you want but I don't know if I'll make any sense of it."

#

She couldn't talk to Theodore until two days later. Abel hovered around her, and if he saw her chatting with Theodore, he'd say she was lazing around and ask his uncle to cut her week's pay. There was always a good excuse to cut her wages.

Esperanza looked down and ignored Abel. She'd been doing this since Abel arrived a year before from his fancy mechanical studies in France. He was only a minor annoyance, just like the apprentices who tried to boss her around, or the rude customers who swooped into the shop, tossing the carcasses of their clockwork pets for her to fix without a look in her direction.

So she waited until both Abel and Mr. Morales left the store. Theodore sat polishing a tiny butterfly, long, spidery fingers in motion.

"I read your poem," she said.

It seemed he did not hear her. He continued his polishing without the smallest bob of his head.

"I didn't understand it. But maybe it's fearful because it's so pretty."

"Why?" he asked.

"I don't know. I'm not a poet, right? I just fix the animals. But have you ever seen how there are some animals that are really ugly? But even then they're sometimes beautiful. Because beauty can be horrible. And you can never quite duplicate it, even when we make these fancy automata, there's this awe and this fear in certain things you can't copy with wire and metal."

Theodore stared at her with his blue milk eyes and she thought maybe the tiger was frightening because it was like the homunculi: so perfect, raw and empty. They hadn't stuffed a soul in Theodore's body and beneath the skin there lay the sharp edge of something inhuman and wild.

#

She was moving some boxes in the back area when Abel slipped next to her, his hand brushing her back.

“I’ve got work,” she muttered, pushing him away.

“You are an uppity bitch, you know that?”

Esperanza kept her head down, kept rummaging through a crate. He’d get tired of standing there after a couple of minutes and go out to find some food and drink and women.

“One day I’m going to be the owner of this place and you’ll have to do whatever I want or you’ll be out on the street with a snap of my fingers. You get that?”

He grabbed her arm and twisted it. It hurt, but the thought that flashed foremost through her mind was that if he injured it she’d be unable to do her work.

“Abel, don’t.”

His fingers dug harder into her.

“What are you looking at?”

Theodore stood in front of them. His face was blank but his eyes were open wide, as though he was analyzing every little movement they made.

“Nothing,” Theodore said. He smiled, a cat’s grin. It was frightening. It was not quite a smile but some bizarre approximation of it.

It must have unsettled Abel because he let her go and walked away.

“Fuck both of you,” he said.

He slammed the front door shut and the bell at the entrance jingled merrily. Esperanza rubbed her arm. She shook her head.

“He’s an idiot. But it’s not forever. Not forever at all. I’ve been here seven years and I’ll be damned if I’ll spend seven more. Not with him. One day I’ll go to Baja California and join my sister there. Do you know in Baja California everything’s different?”

But when Esperanza said this she felt she might weep and it was shameful because she was no little girl who would snap like a twig, especially in front of Theodore. She blinked the tears away.

“Give me a hand with this,” she said.

#

“Highest quality, of course. Direct from London,” Abel said.

The man smoked a cigar while the woman sitting next to him held a chain with her gloved hand. A Doberman lay at her feet, eyeing Theodore. Esperanza set a tray before them and poured some brandy.

“Our neighbours bought one the other day. But I’m not convinced it is a wise purchase,” said the man.

“There’s very few like this in the city. Even less at this price,” Abel said.

“What amazing eyes he has,” said the woman. “May I touch him?”

“Of course.”

The woman approached Theodore, a hand falling on his face. Her dog, sniffing the homunculus, growled softly.

“Does he talk?” the woman asked.

“Six languages,” Esperanza said.

“Say something,” the woman demanded.

The dog’s growling intensified but Theodore seemed oblivious to it and to the woman’s presence. His face was stiff, the eyes fixed on some faraway point. He wasn’t even blinking.

Esperanza wondered if he was used to this process. She wondered if it had been like this in Paris. Perhaps clients came to him, took a look, touched him here and there, before deciding if they ought to pay for his time.

“Oh, come on, say something.”

Theodore was staring at the dog and the dog bared its teeth at him.

“I don’t think your pet likes Theodore,” Esperanza muttered.

“Oh, please we should buy him. He’s adorable,” the woman said, ignoring Esperanza and turning towards the man.

The woman’s companion fretted and rubbed a handkerchief against his forehead. “I’m not sure it would look very proper. If it was a girl, well, it wouldn’t matter. But a man ...”

“Except he isn’t a man,” Abel reminded him.

The woman continued to touch Theodore’s face, petting him as though he were a cat. Esperanza was sure Theodore didn’t like it but he did not move a muscle.

“He certainly looks like a man,” the companion said.

Esperanza felt like slapping the woman’s hand away.

“But he’s got the most darling eyes. Oh, please,” the woman pleaded.

The dog barked and the woman tugged at its chain. She wasn’t strong enough. The chain slipped from her hands. The animal rushed forward, furious, mouth open wide. But before it could sink its teeth into Theodore’s leg he kicked it, one swift, brutal movement.

The dog flew across the room. It crashed against the wall shelves. Gears and cranks spilled over the dog and the floor.

The woman started screaming. She ran towards her dog and screamed and screamed. The man was also yelling and Abel babbled something that did not sound like real words.

Theodore turned his back towards them.

#

He was locked away. Abel wouldn’t have Theodore around the shop anymore. He said it was for their safety. Esperanza knew it was because he had hated Theodore from the very beginning.

It didn’t seem fair to wall someone in like that. Even dogs and cats were allowed to venture outside.

But perhaps he was used to this. She couldn’t imagine he’d had much freedom in Paris or anywhere else he’d lived before arriving in Mexico City. It could be perfectly normal for Theodore, just like it was normal for Esperanza to dodge Abel’s advances during the daytime, walk home every afternoon and read her publications on automata at night.

There was no reason to worry about him and there was no space for worrying in Esperanza’s life,

wound up tight as the clocks that ticked on the wall behind her worktable.

Her days, like a train of wheels, balanced themselves perfectly. Yet she thought about tigers in cages, lives spent in metal boxes.

#

He sat on his bed in the tiny room with one of his books of poems between his hands.

“I’m sorry. But you should have thought about what you were doing before hurting that dog,” she said, because she had to say something and he was not speaking.

“I always think about what I do.”

“I suppose you don’t regret it.”

“I do not.”

His fingers lay splayed upon a page but he was staring at the lonely calendar. It was drowning in a sea of yellow wallpaper.

“Why do you like poetry?”

“Because I don’t understand it. Words are complicated. They are not always what they appear to be. I want to understand.”

Esperanza sat next to him. He did not look at her, apparently fascinated with the frolicking sheep plastered on the wall.

“In Mexico we also have accommodation houses,” she said and paused to see if he might react. He did not. “They are selling you. Next week you’ll go live in another place.”

“I thought as much.”

Esperanza glanced down at her closed hands resting on her lap, stained with the paint she had been applying to a clockwork owl that morning.

“It’s not a tiger,” she said and slipped a metal dragonfly with onyx eyes onto his book. “It’ll have to do.”

The dragonfly sat on the corner of the page, flapping its wings.

“I don’t think I’ll see you again,” she whispered.

#

Esperanza locked the door but remained next to it, in the darkness of the storage area. She knew she ought to head home but at that moment home seemed very far and the walk stretched into forever.

“Why do you always disobey me?”

The outline of Abel’s body was blackness against grey but his voice was clear enough in its piercing anger. She undid the apron she was wearing.

“Didn’t you hear me?” he asked, walking towards her, blocking the light from the adjoining room.

“I apologize,” she said, neatly folding the apron.

“That’s not enough,” Abel muttered and snatched the piece of cloth, tossing it to the floor.

Esperanza glanced down, head bowed.

“May I go?”

Abel shoved her against the wall and she reacted at once, pure instinct, clawing his cheek. He responded with a hard blow that drew blood and a punch to her belly that made her gasp.

“Now you’ve done it,” he said. “This time you’ve done it.”

And he continued to repeat those same words over and over again as he stuffed his handkerchief in her mouth when she screamed, as she tried to kick at his legs.

“Don’t you dare,” he muttered, catching her leg, gripping her thigh and squeezing hard.

He pulled her down. One violent tug and she was flat on her back, her vision suddenly blurry and he was pulling her skirt up.

In the midst of it all, of the pain and revulsion building in the pit of her stomach and the blind panic, she heard something. The light warning of a cat hissing.

All of a sudden the weight of Abel was flung off her and she raised her head, pushed herself up in time to see how Abel’s skull was smashed against the floor, pounded in two violent strokes that sent blood spattering against her legs.

The homunculus bared his teeth, a predator’s snarl, and let go of Abel’s head, reaching out to her.

He pulled her up, his face quickly composing itself, mouth shut tight.

Esperanza’s mind, normally spinning fast, lay still as if a spring had broken inside her head. She could feel his fingers around her wrist yet at the same time she was not there, she was floating outside the room.

A dragonfly hovered before her and darted into a corner. The sound of its wings was as loud as a gunshot and she was back in her body, in the room, standing next to a corpse.

“It’s nearly six,” she said. “Mr. Morales will be back soon.”

Theodore’s flat gaze had returned.

“You’ve got to go.”

“Go where?”

She calculated the odds. That’s what she did best. She measured, she calculated, she predicted whether a golden peacock would be able to fan out its tail or would fall and lose its balance.

“Baja California,” she said, kneeling next to Abel’s body and searching his pockets. “There’s nothing farther than Baja California.”

“Why?”

Theodore observed her as she took Abel’s watch and his wallet. His cufflinks were worth two months of her salary.

She pocketed them and glanced up at Theodore. “Do you know what you’ve done? They’re going to kill you,” she said.

“I know.”

“Hey,” she said. “Did you hear me? Kill you.”

His eyes were flat like coins, a shade of ghostly blue. She remembered, for no good reason, that white

cats with blue eyes were born deaf and were drowned in the tinaja of the vecindad.

“My book,” he replied.

Esperanza ran to get it and when she returned he had not moved an inch. She did not think he would. He was probably not capable of even considering an escape. She could lead him like a lamb to the slaughterhouse, to the police quarters; he would not object.

She considered simply dashing uphill, back to the safety of her room with the maps, the magazines, the postcards and her papers on automata. She saw herself like a line drawing melting into a vanishing point.

The dragonfly buzzed next to Esperanza’s ear. Theodore caught it with his left hand and stared at his closed fist for a minute before releasing it.

Then the dragonfly flew out of the store, its body glinting under the last rays of the setting sun. The sky above the city was purple and red. The streets were growing empty.

“We’re leaving,” she said. “Stay close to me.”

The door slammed behind them. They headed downhill and away.

Bijou LaVoix and the Coal Dust Faery by Malon Edwards

If anyone could descry the gold fae, it was Oliver Cobbler. His eyes were keen, his ears were sharp, and his heart was greedy. His friends Robert Shepherd, Tobias Baker and Bijou LaVoix all knew that.

Intimate associates of Ollie’s for the better half of a decade, Bobby, Toby and Bijou were very much aware of their nominal leader’s selfishness and greed. Were Ollie to somehow (emphasis on the word somehow, since pennies usually eluded the thirteen-year-old boy) obtain a sweaty, grubby handful of Ms. Violet’s penny candy, he would, with great haste, cram the ill-gotten pieces into his mouth before his companions could beg him for some, let alone do anything about it.

And were Bobby, Toby or Bijou to whine at Ollie’s stinginess or complain about his rudeness, they would be right away shushed by his vibrant but hard North African green eyes and bunched, knotted fists. While Ollie was stingy, he also punched like a piston, which was no hyperbole since the lad’s left arm was made of metal and powered by a steam piston.

So come one early Tuesday morning, before first bell in the New City Elementary School play lot, when Ollie uttered the word “share” in the midst of divulging his plot for the foursome to kidnap a gold faery and steal her most prized element, Bobby, Toby and Bijou were struck dumb by his word choice. However, they soon regained their voices as they realized Ollie’s scheme was not playful jest, and, with fervor, they interrupted his scheme.

“Your scheme will not work,” said Bijou, bluntly.

Ollie raised his clenched left fist and pressed iron knuckles against the pleats and ruffles of Bijou’s black high-collared short-sleeved blouse, just above the dark brown leather chest harness bodice that cupped nothing, right over where her heart used to be.

“Keep sayin’ stuff like that and you won’t work. Ever again.”

Grasping Ollie’s metal forearm with courteous, careful honey-hued hands, Bobby shook his head,

sending the loose dark brown curls framing his face flying.

“Don’t.”

Ollie smirked. “Don’t what? Touch your flat-chested girlfriend? Or what? You gonna beat me up?”

Bobby pulled the bigger boy’s iron fist away from Bijou, utilizing the majority of his strength to do so, even though the piston in Ollie’s arm wasn’t offering much resistance. As a result, steam vented from Ollie’s armpit. The foursome guffawed, allowing the tension to slink away for the moment.

“What I think Bee meant,” Bobby said, turning his almond-shaped eyes upon Bijou in a brief but adoring gaze before casting a nervous but neutral one on Ollie, “is how we gonna catch a gold faery?”

“Yuh.” Toby pulled his Harris tweed sporting cap lower on tightly-woven, back-length dreadlocks bound with a thin leather strip, obscuring his dark brown eyes. “Those fings are majickal, fer flip’s sake.”

“But not when inside this.”

Ollie removed a small, wrinkled grayish pouch from the front right pocket of his high-waisted, rust-colored, navy-striped trousers. Bobby reached for it.

“Is that what I think it is?” he asked.

Ollie smacked Bobby’s hand. “Don’t touch.”

Toby pushed his sporting cap further back on his head to allow for closer scrutiny of the pouch. He glanced sideways at Bobby.

“An’ jus’ what the flip do you fink it is?”

“A goat scrotum.”

Bijou arched an eyebrow at Bobby then looked to Ollie for confirmation, her hazel eyes sparkling with amusement. Ollie nodded, an errant thatch of his straight, raven-black hair bobbing with the motion.

Just then, first bell sounded and the hundreds of children frolicking on the play lot plodded towards their respective primary, intermediate, and senior grade entrances, reluctance apparent in their heavy tread. With his good arm, Ollie yanked Bobby, Toby and Bijou away from the school and against the tide of children, towards the black wrought iron fence bordering the play lot. There, a shabby, threadbare rucksack sat on the ground.

“For the gold,” Ollie said by way of explanation. He continued to lay out his machinations. “We kidnap the faery, put her in the goat scrotum, and tell her she ain’t never getting out until she makes us enough gold nuggets to fill the rucksack.” He picked up the empty rucksack, stuffed it into his school bag, and then shrugged the equally threadbare knapsack onto his shoulders. “Got it? Good. Let’s go.”

Toby and Bobby grabbed the bars of the wrought iron fence and made to climb it, eyes fixated upon the spear point finials topping the barrier.

“Wait.”

Bijou glanced back at New City Elementary. Schoolmarms with folded arms and stern gazes watched the hordes of children climb the cobblestone steps and make their way through the entrances, vigilant for mischief.

“You did not tell us where we are traveling, nor did you disclose by what means.”

Ollie looked at Bijou, his eyes flat with annoyance at her perpetual reluctance to follow his lead without hesitation. He took a deep breath through his nose and expelled it through flared nostrils.

“Norfolk Southern locomotive at Forty-seventh Street Station in Canaryville to Lake View and the Red Line; Red Line locomotive to the Gold Coast mines and the gold fae.” Ollie bowed again, however, this time with his naughty iron finger raised to Bijou. “Art thou now pleased, milady? Excellent. Then make haste.”

Fifty minutes later, the foursome was standing before the decline portal of the Palmer Gold Mine, located at the far eastern edge of New City, within a bedrock valley flat remnant of millennia-ago glacial activity, not far from the ribbon-shaped Lake Michigan.

Ollie crouched on the ground, slipped the rucksack from his back, and unbuckled its leather straps. His mates huddled close, peering with curious intensity over his shoulder. Relishing the attention, Ollie made a show of searching the rucksack: his movements were slow and deliberate; his iron hand was soft and gentle. Finally, he removed what seemed to be an over-sized Chinese finger trap woven of bamboo and Lady Fern.

Toby scowled. “Oi! Ollie, we ain’t got time fer games, fer flip’s sake.”

“No games here.”

Ollie put the green cylinder under Toby’s nose.

“It’s a faery trap. Yeah, I know; it looks like a Chinese finger trap. But it ain’t. It’s a faery trap. The old lady assured me of that.”

Bijou creased her brow in skepticism. “What old lady do you speak of?”

“Well, milady, I speak of an old Chinese lady with a small, quaint shop just a stone’s throw from the Cermak Road Station. She has nothing but two teeth in her head and looks like she could be Bobby’s grandmother on his mother’s side.”

Two years ago, the affected manner of speaking Ollie frequently adopted to mock Bijou’s elocution, diction, and enunciation would have troubled the Creole girl so much so that she would not have uttered a word amongst her companions for a week or more. These days, however, Bijou more often than not neutralized the teasing by blowing a kiss at Ollie with her naughtiest of fingers, refusing to be aggrieved.

And why should she have hurt feelings? Since Bijou no longer spoke Louisiana Creole outside of the home (at the behest of her New Orleans-born mother), her school marks had showed drastic improvement and her mother was a much happier woman. For Bijou, that was all that mattered.

Ollie resumed his normal manner of speaking.

“The old Chinese lady said it works the same as a Chinese finger trap, but instead of catching fingers, it’ll catch a gold faery within a twenty mile radius.”

Bobby tried to keep the dubiety off his face. “How?”

“Inside are dew drops, nectar, sunlight slices, moonbeam bliss, and all that other good stuff gold fae like.”

Ollie placed the faery trap on the ground near the box cut entrance of the mine.

“There. Now scam for an hour. Go stoke your boilers; explore the area or something. Just stay away from the trap. Fae won’t come to eat if big galoots like us are nosing ’round.”

The foursome moved off in different directions towards the vivid green wooded slopes, slowly picking their way through the small boulders of the Gold Coast Valley flats, searching for a secluded copse or discreet brushwood. Stoking one’s boiler was just as private a ritual as urinating or defecation, but even more so given the naked vulnerability of the act. Ten minutes later, Bijou had discovered a thicket of trees and was feeding the tiny fire in the boiler in her stomach a scoop of coal dust from her rucksack so that the steam clock serving as her heart would continue to tick.

Bobby, Ollie and Toby were at that very moment engaged in similar behavior, though the measure of their coal varied: Bobby stoked the boiler in his midsection with one lump of coal to energize the tiny pistons in his metal knee; Ollie stoked his somewhat larger boiler with two lumps of coal to power the steam piston in his metal arm; and Toby stoked his boiler—the largest of the foursome—with half a dozen lumps of coal to fuel the numerous steam pistons that ambulated his entire metal lower body.

However, dear reader, the foursome was not the only children afflicted with what might seem a grotesque and unfortunate condition. Seven years ago, more than sixty percent of the adult population and eighty percent of children under the age of seventeen were infected during a polio epidemic that ravaged New City.

Thousands died, but thousands more were left with various body parts and organs withered by the disease. Instead of living a life of pain and hardship, the polio survivors turned to metallurgists and steam surgeons to improve their health and quality of life through iron, copper, coal, and steam.

As a result, life expectancy for polio sufferers was extended by decades. But for most of them, whether they were healers, cobblers, bakers or shepherds, the sacrifice was great and entire life savings were wiped out.

Which brings us back to Bijou, Ollie, Bobby and Toby.

Gathered back at the box cut mouth of the mine after the elapse of an hour, the foursome regarded the faery trap with apprehension and distance: it buzzed and jittered angrily.

Ollie nodded at the faery trap. “Bijou, go get it.”

“Me? Why me? It’s your stupid trap.”

“You have the smallest hands.”

Bijou scowled, but said nothing, unable to think of an appropriate retort. She didn’t move towards the faery trap, either, though. Instead, she fussed with the simple cloth hair band holding the exquisitely coiffed henna-tinted cornrows that exploded into a dark, wonderfully massive supernova fro at the back of her head.

“Aren’t you tired of being poor?” Ollie hissed.

“Aren’t you?” Bijou hissed back.

Ollie shoved her towards the faery trap and Bijou stumbled on the dusty, uneven ground, nearly losing her footing. She gave him a dirty look over her shoulder, but did not hold it for long; the faery trap had quieted with abrupt silence.

“Well, go on,” Bobby whispered.

Bijou crept towards the faery trap, stepping with soft care upon the sandy-colored dirt and gravel so

that the stones didn't crunch. When the faery trap was at her feet, she bent over it, cocking an ear towards it to listen for more anger from within.

"Oi! Watch out!"

Toby startled Bijou so badly that her steam clock stopped a tick or two and she nearly jumped out of her thick-soled, knee-high brown leather boots.

"It's gonna bite yer thrupenny bits!"

Toby grinned and slapped his chest with the flat of his palm.

"Oh wait. You ain't got any!" He and Ollie brayed with laughter.

"Wretched boy."

Bijou picked up the faery trap, surprised at the dense weight of it. She closed her right eye and peeped inside the narrow opening of one end. The bright day could not penetrate its innards.

"Just reach in there and yank it out."

Ollie circled his index fingers and rolled his wrists in a vigorous, impatient hurry-up motion.

"No."

Bijou squared her shoulders and pressed her plump, burnished bronze lips together.

"No?"

Ollie was taken aback. None of them had ever said no to him before.

"No."

Bijou lifted her chin in defiance.

"Give it."

Ollie snatched the faery trap from Bijou, his voice more snarl than pubescent teen.

"Stupid girl."

He thrust two fingers and a thumb into the cylinder, splitting it down the middle with a violent rent. His fingers probed and dug for a few moments before he withdrew them from the wrecked mass of bamboo and woven grass.

"What the hell is this?"

Held tight and fast in Ollie's hand was an ebon-skinned faery with a pewter mohawk. She was clad in a high-collared intricately laced sleeveless and backless pewter blouse and a deep purple ankle-length wrap skirt. Two sets of lavender-tinted translucent wings—a larger pair sprouting from her shoulder blades and a smaller pair from her lower back—were trapped by Ollie's index and middle fingers.

"Release me! "Her voice was high-pitched and ethereal, but loud and clear as it bounced around the slopes of the valley.

Ollie peered closely at her. "What are you?"

The ebon-skinned faery looked down her pert but African-wide nose at him.

"I am Asha, the Coal Dust Faery."

“Faery?” Toby snorted. “More like bug.”

“And an ugly one at that,” Ollie added, frowning. He tossed Asha aside. “Flippin’ hell. That Chinese lady tricked me. I’m gettin’ my money back.” He snapped his iron fingers at Toby, Bobby and Bijou. “Let’s go. We’re goin’ to Chinatown.”

Ollie turned and went but three steps before he yelped and slapped at his right earlobe. He looked at his hand and saw a dazed Asha crumpled in his palm.

“Stupid bug. I’ll teach you to bite me.”

And with the glee of a wicked child who takes pleasure in inflicting pain upon the defenseless and weak, Ollie plucked both sets of Asha’s wings like the petals of a forget-me-not, ripping them out of her back. The scream that issued from her distended mouth was unearthly.

For Bijou, time at that moment seemed to accelerate. Ollie flicked Asha and her rent wings away. Bijou rushed to Asha’s discarded body. Toby and Bobby gaped. Bijou pleaded for strips of cloth to stem Asha’s bleeding. Ollie ordered Bijou to drop the faery. Bijou refused. Ollie excommunicated Bijou from the group. Bijou begged Bobby to help her. Ollie commanded Bobby to stay where he stood. Bobby vacillated between Bijou and Ollie. Bijou searched her rucksack. Bobby fell in behind Ollie. Ollie shoved Toby and Bobby towards the trail to Gold Coast Station. Bijou withdrew a deerskin pouch from her rucksack. She selected vial of powdered goatweed from within. She sprinkled the goatweed onto Asha’s ragged wounds. Asha moaned. Bijou spit upon the powder, forming a paste. She tore a ruffle from her blouse and wrapped Asha’s lacerations. Asha shrieked again and fainted despite Bijou’s gentle fingers. Bijou removed a small crocheted drawstring purse from her rucksack. She placed Asha inside. She slipped the purse around her neck. She searched on hands and knees for Asha’s torn wings. She found them half-buried beneath the gravel. She tucked them into the front pocket of her leather trousers. She sighed. She pressed her full lips together. And then, with swift urgency, she set off for the best healer in all of New City—her mother.

“I am so very sorry.” Bijou’s eyes brimmed with tears.

“For what, child?” Asha’s voice was husky and tired, but pain was absent from it.

“For that.”

Bijou pointed at Asha, indicating her current state: naked to the waist and face down on a shabby throw pillow, weak, her mohawk flattened on one side, and, what threatened to wrench a sob from Bijou’s throat and embarrass a girl who thought she was too tough to cry, the ugly-red scabrous wounds on the faery’s back.

“Child, it was you who saved my life, correct?”

“My mother mostly.”

“Then I am forever indebted to you and your mother. For as long as you both shall live, I will be your servant and attend your needs.”

Asha looked away. “My mates and I just wanted to catch a gold faery so we would be poor no longer.” A tear trickled down the left side of her nose.

“And no longer will you be.” Asha pushed herself up on her knees, gritting her teeth at the pain. Sweat stood out on her brow.

“What do you mean?” Bijou’s face was scrunched in confusion.

“Child, I am a coal dust faery.”

Asha made a fist, blew into it, and opened her palm. Upon her tiny hand sat a small mound of the black powder.

“Never again will your mother have to take bread coin or rent coin and haggle with the collier so you can stoke your boiler. At your heart’s desire, you shall have pure, high quality coal dust, the kind coveted by every child with a small boiler.”

“But I don’t deserve it.”

“Child, the sins of that hateful boy are not your sins. Be grateful for your reward.”

“But Ollie—”

Asha snapped her fingers—a sharp, cracking report from appendages so diminutive—startling Bijou.

“He was the one who did this to me?” The coal dust faery reached behind her and ran light fingertips along the rough wounds where her wings once were.

Bijou nodded.

“Leave him to me.”

Asha rubbed her hands together with such vigor that they warmed from the friction. When she opened them, a perfectly round and smooth black pebble sat within.

“Do you see this pebble, child?”

Bijou nodded again.

“Take it to the entrance of the Palmer Gold Mine at dusk this day, just before the sun dips below the horizon. Wait there with your hand outstretched towards the entrance of the mine until my friend the Tikoloshe comes.”

“The Tikoloshe?” Bijou shivered as the word rolled off her tongue.

“Do as you’re told, child.”

Bijou arrived at the Palmer Gold Mine exactly at dusk, her nervous breath visible as white puffs in the chill valley air. She did not have to wait long for the Tikoloshe. Just as the red-orange sun slipped behind the valley slopes, Bijou heard heavy shuffling and stertorous, bestial bellows from deep within the bowels of the mine growing louder, coming closer. Her knees weakened and twitched to flee down the trail back to Gold Coast Station, but Bijou stood her ground, her wavering hand outstretched. It was the least she could do for the coal dust faery.

And then she saw it.

The Tikoloshe was a hulking monstrosity, resembling a shaggy man-sized teddy bear, but with a sharp, bony ridge atop its head. Drool slavered from its terrible, fanged jaws; a tangible, animal musk hit her like a slap across the face, bringing tears to her eyes and causing her to gag. The Tikoloshe bent forward to regard her, its large black eyes unblinking. Bijou shrank from it.

“Please,” she whimpered. “I beg of you. Do not hurt me.”

The Tikoloshe snorted and she could feel its exhalation upon her face.

“Please.”

Chuckling, the Tikoloshe reached out a furry claw and snatched the pebble from Bijou, scoring her hand with angry red weals.

“You may go now, child,” it growled, and swallowed the pebble. And just like that, the Tikoloshe was no longer there.

Bijou searched the growing darkness about her with frantic terror, whirling and turning, attempting to look everywhere at once for the horrid faery. It was not until she heard its chuckle again—close and intimate—that she screamed and fled to the station.

That night, as Ollie turned down the covers of his bed and blew out the flame of his thermolampe in preparation for slumber, the most wretched stench permeated his bedroom. Thinking it to be a dead rat, he checked the traps behind his wardrobe and chest of drawers, but found them empty. Determined to root out the smell that was beginning to turn his stomach, Ollie searched every corner of his modest and sparse room, taking quick, shallow breaths through his nose to keep as much of the stench as he could out of his mouth and lungs.

His search did not take long. Perplexed, he was stumped as to where the foul odor could be emanating from—that is until he passed his slightly ajar first-floor window.

Levering the crank within the windowsill, Ollie swung the window wide and the stink assaulted his nostrils. Curious as to the source of the out-of-doors foulness, Ollie pinched his nose and leaned his upper body through the window, turning his head left, then right, as he sought the source of the malodor.

Ollie could make out little in the darkness. Shrugging, he made to withdraw back into his bedroom, but froze when he heard a low, slow chuckle that caused the dense hair on his desert brown flesh arm to stand on end. The last thing Ollie ever saw was wickedly curved fangs and a solid mass of shaggy fur before he was swiftly snatched out into the night.

All Ollie’s parents found of him the next morning was his metal arm on the ground beneath his still open window, glinting dully in the wan sunshine.

The Wedding Runner by Mint Kang

The bride was coming down the stairs. Looking in through the glass doors, I could see the red carpet and the double row of girls strewing flower petals. Music was playing—some cheap Mando-pop song, probably the groom’s favourite. The tune was bland, and I wondered if the bride liked it.

“Ready?” Johnson said beside me.

“Lousy music,” I replied. I could see the front edge of the bride’s gown, a traditional bell-skirted monstrosity of stiff white lace. Another step brought her into view, her face a mask of pancake make-up as stiff as the gown. Her veil was raised, and even under the layers of powder, rouge and eyeshadow I

could see she was terrified. Clasped in her white-gloved hands were three long, smouldering joss sticks, their fine ash sifting over the lace of her skirt.

“Here comes the groom, skinny as a broom,” Johnson murmured, and I snorted back a laugh. The groom effigy did look very much like a broom beside the bride’s enormous gown. As the happy couple drew closer to the doors, the puppeteers became visible, sidling along at an angle and gingerly manipulating the long rods which controlled the groom’s cardboard limbs. Some people went for a three-dimensional model and dressed it up in the actual wedding suit, but the bride’s parents hadn’t been able to afford that. Today’s groom was a two-dee cutout of a pre-nuptial photograph, blown up to life-size and rather grainy. A miniature bouquet was glued to its lapel.

The ushers had taken up position by the doors, ready to swing them open. I shifted my weight, feeling the familiar tension begin in the pit of my stomach. Every time I did a wedding run, I had indigestion for the next three days. Not that I minded. Indigestion proved I was still alive.

The bride and groom had reached the doors. The ushers swung them open, and the bland pop music suddenly became clearer. It didn’t sound any better.

I fell in beside the bride as she came rustling over the threshold, walking in perfect step with her and sneaking sidewise looks to make sure she wasn’t going to faint or drop the joss sticks. Her hands were shaking.

“Stand by,” Johnson muttered as we went down the three steps to the driveway. “Stand by!” and I could tell he was saying it automatically, like a nervous reflex.

Any time now. I could feel my own breathing quicken, my pupils dilating so that everything became as clear and bright as the idiotic bland song still pouring out through the doorway. Beyond the gates I could see the wedding car standing in the road, bedecked with ribbons and flowers, the doors wide open.

We cleared the driveway, the bride rustling, the groom effigy creaking. Six steps to the car. I said a few swear words in the quivering silence of my head. Some runners liked starting off from a moving car—they claimed it gave them a kick start—but I hated it. The momentum was too hard to absorb, and there was a terrible risk of losing your balance and falling down.

In this business, when you fall down you don’t get up.

“Stand by, stand by,” Johnson was repeating under his breath. “Stand by—*here it comes*—”

The sunlight dimmed. A deathly silence fell. And then the world *warped* around the bride and groom, stretched and parted like a maw to form a ragged grey gap whose edges fluttered in a spectral wind. Time elongated; everything other than that flickering movement slowed to a crawl. The flower girls scattered in slow motion, the spilled petals from their baskets sinking to the ground as if through thick glue; the puppeteers dropped their rods and bolted for safety in long, dreamlike, balletic leaps. And just as ponderously, as if he were performing some slow taiji move, Johnson grabbed the bride around the waist and lifted her out of the gap, the joss sticks spilling from her fingers.

I reached out, my hand feeling the quickness of the motion but my eyes seeing it at quarter speed—a strange disconnect, and then the joss sticks were firmly in my grasp and I fell into the greyness in the bride’s place. Through the fluttering edges, I had a last glimpse of Johnson trying to disentangle himself from her train. Then the ghost dimension closed around me.

Why do people do stupid things? You might as well ask why people are people. The scientists and the mystics went on television to warn everyone about the danger. The churches and the temples preached against it. In the end, even the government stepped in and issued official advisories: to schools, workplaces, unions, societies, everywhere people were likely to meet and fall in love, or at least in lust. Flyers in mailboxes, posters at bus stops, radio broadcasts, e-mail circulars, everything.

And still the wedding runners do good business, because people are people.

It's mostly the younger set these days. Older people have more perspective. Well, mostly. We still get calls from middle-aged clients—frightened women whose loneliness pushed them into first an unsuitable love match and then a deadly promise, fearful men who made their vows to please their mistresses without thinking about the consequences.

The worst our firm ever handled, though, was a twelve-year-old girl. Her school counsellor put her parents in touch with us. Twelve years old! Why would a twelve-year-old-girl take the Heaven-Earth-Underworld pledge? Why?

And after we finished asking that, we asked: what happened to the boy she took it with?

The parents refused to give the story. We threatened not to take the case. They counter-threatened to sue for deliberately endangering the life of a minor. Johnson called a lawyer friend of his. There were words, a lot of nasty words, and finally the counsellor coughed up the details. The boy was seventeen and from a top school. He got her pregnant, her parents made a police report. He was charged with statutory rape. The day before he was scheduled to appear in court, he went up to the twenty-first floor and jumped.

We flipped a coin for the wedding and the other girl runner, Chanice, lost. Later she told me that all through the whole thing, she couldn't look the bride or the parents in the eye.

The stupid things that people *do*.

I ran down the street, the joss sticks trailing fragrant smoke from my right hand. Nothing else moved; the thump of my cross-trainers on the road and the pant of my breath were the only sounds. Overhead was a grey, sunless, cloudless sky. The road was grey. The houses to either side were grey. Behind me, the wedding car stood, doors open, in the driveway. It was grey too. There is no colour, no motion, no sound in the ghost dimension. There are no *people* in the ghost dimension.

Except the wedding runners, like me.

The trees bordering the road were grey and cast no shadow. The grass under them was grey too, and artificial-looking. Running through the empty, silent replica of the living world, I wondered: if I touched those trees, that grass, would they melt away and show me what really lies beneath? It was a question I asked every now and then, and it was always followed by another question: did I really want to know what lay beneath the monochrome façade of the ghost dimension?

And as I thought that, I heard it behind me. A sound like wind wailing through small openings, but there was no wind here. A sound like voices screaming, but there was no one here to scream except me. I'd heard that sound a dozen times since I started as a wedding runner, but it never failed to make my flesh crawl and my bladder want to let go.

I looked back without breaking stride. The myths all say that looking back will get you killed, like Lot's wife, but in reality looking back is quite harmless. What *does* get you killed is slowing or

stumbling because of what you see.

I saw a mass of fog, like haze from Sumatra on a bad day. It was paler grey than the surroundings and it rolled down the road towards me at the speed of a running man. Its edges coiled and moved like tentacles. And the high, choral, windy screaming came from somewhere inside it.

Most wedding runners see the fog. A few have the bad luck to see the deceased bride or groom—and those few don't stay in the business for long. Running for your life through the ghost dimension is bad enough. Running for your life, through the ghost dimension, from an angry reanimated corpse? People can only take so much of that and stay sane.

I moved my eyes back to the grey road and kept running. Ash from the joss sticks splattered the back of my hand, stinging slightly. The corner came up ahead and I turned onto a grey artificial-looking replica of the main road, trees and grass frozen in time, not a car or a bird or a person in sight. The joss sticks in my hand were about a fifth of the way down. I would be trapped in the ghost dimension for as long as they were burning, which wasn't really all that long. We used special joss sticks, custom-made to burn down into nothing in less than half an hour. All I had to do was outrun the fog until the sticks were gone, and then the Heaven-Earth-Underworld pledge would be null and void, I would be released back into the real world and the bride back there would be safe.

On the other hand, if the joss sticks went out without burning all the way down, I'd never leave the ghost dimension. Except as a ghost myself.

I looked back again. The fog rolled onwards, about a hundred and fifty metres behind me. The scream from within it never altered in volume or pitch, and if I listened carefully there were words—muffled, unintelligible and mindless.

I didn't try to listen. I concentrated on keeping my pace steady and my breathing even, maintaining the hundred-and-fifty-metre lead. It was like any other run I'd made: a test of composure, not of speed or stamina. Keeping my nerve was all that mattered, staying calm enough to judge my speed and my pursuer's speed and the rate at which the joss sticks were burning.

I paced myself down the middle of the road, angling the joss sticks so they wouldn't catch too much wind and go out, glancing back now and then to make sure my lead was secure. And I thought about the Heaven-Earth-Underworld pledge.

Like so much idiocy nowadays, it had started on the Internet. No one was really sure when, or who came up with it. It was just a modified extension of the traditional Chinese wedding ceremony, which involved the bride and groom paying their respects to heaven and earth. This version involved an engaged couple paying their respects to heaven, earth *and the underworld*—and then swearing with the underworld as witness that death would not part them.

It sounded like a harmless, romantic version of till-death-do-us-part. It still sounds harmless. And for some reason, it caught on. People loved it. They did it all over the place, no matter what their race or religion was. Pictures of couples going through the pledge, some with full ceremonial trappings, became commonplace on social networking websites.

People loved it. They saw it as a harmless fad. But the underworld took it seriously. Seriously enough to come and collect the surviving half of any couple who'd taken the pledge and then been broken up by the death, whether accidental or deliberate, of one partner.

It took a while for people to believe what was happening, and longer for them to accept that it was real. Then there was an uproar and a manhunt for the original culprit who'd started the fad. Warnings and

bans were passed, and governments, religious groups and cultural groups got into tussles over how to deal with it.

And meanwhile, someone found out that the ghost dimension was most likely to open up during a mock wedding held between the living and dead halves of the couple. Someone else worked out the trick with the joss sticks and yet someone else came up with the idea of having a proxy pass through the ghost dimension in the bride or groom's place. It wasn't long before the wedding runners were in business.

I ran past an empty bus stop, under a two-dimensional overhead bridge, through a junction whose lights were grey and vacant as the sky above me. The joss sticks were halfway down and I still wasn't breathing hard; my lead was secure, and the continuous high scream behind me wasn't bothering me. I'd never had any trouble tuning it out, not even on my first run. There were other things to listen to, like my own breath, the rustle of my loose clothing, the thump of my feet on the road surface that wasn't exactly asphalt.

And, to my right, a rustle that wasn't from my clothes.

My legs continued to move, but my breath stopped and so, it seemed, did my heart. There wasn't supposed to be anything moving in the ghost dimension but me and the cloud pursuing me.

Rustle. In time with my steps. My feet had gone cold inside my cross-trainers. Hot ash fell on my right wrist, and I hardly felt it.

Chanice had asked me the Big Why after my second run: with all the professions in the world to choose from, *why* did I decide to become a wedding runner? She herself had lost her younger brother to the Heaven-Earth-Underworld pledge; going into the running business was her way of atoning for not saving him. But I had no siblings, no one close to me had taken the vows, and right up until the day I walked into Johnson's office, I'd never even seen a wedding runner in person. I'd signed on in a fit of reckless randomness: I was a fast runner, I wasn't afraid of the supernatural and back then, almost three years ago, I'd believed that I was immortal and nothing as straightforward as the ghost dimension would ever kill me.

I didn't feel immortal any more. My face had gone cold too, and the inside of my mouth was dry like sandpaper.

Without breaking stride, I turned my head and looked to the right.

A small head bobbed up and down at my elbow. It was the head of a papier-mache mannequin, shaped from scraps of paper pasted together into a balloon oval, and it topped a child-sized papier-mache body that ran along beside me with little scuffling, rustling sounds.

The scraps of paper forming the head and body were rectangular and coarse, slightly yellowish, with gold and silver squares in the centre. Joss paper. Also known as ghost money.

You don't need special training to be a wedding runner. You don't even need to be able to run. All you need to do is hold the joss sticks when the ghost dimension opens up.

There's a story that once, during a mock wedding, the runner who was supposed to take the groom's place slipped and fell. He dropped the joss sticks, and the rift opened for the groom.

Except that the groom's nine-year-old brother caught the joss sticks before they hit the ground, and jumped into the rift instead.

That little boy never came out of the ghost dimension. Wedding runner legend says that he's still in there, wandering the grey roads of the ghost dimension, waiting for another runner to come and rescue him.

The story doesn't mention his name. So wedding runners call him the Little Brother, and during the seventh lunar month we burn a few pieces of joss paper for him.

I only realized I was screaming after several minutes had passed—screaming and running as fast as I could, the joss sticks and the fog forgotten, just screaming and running and trying to get away from that small papier-mache figure that scurried along beside me, reaching for the hem of my shirt with spidery fingers that were stiffly outlined in scraps of joss paper.

The spidery fingers found their mark. I felt a tug on my shirt, and the next scream that left my throat echoed off the flat grey surroundings. Then my breath tangled into a tight knot in my chest and I couldn't scream any more. I plunged onwards, but now my legs seemed to be moving through glue and a heavy weight was dragging me backwards.

Another papery little hand closed around my right wrist. I could feel my eyes trying to bulge out of my head and my mouth trying uselessly to produce another scream. But even in the middle of the panic, I remembered what to do. We all carried little black emergency pouches on runs, made up at temples or churches and blessed by priests or mediums.

I reached into the pouch with my free hand, groping for the first talisman inside. My fingers were numb; the folded triangle of yellow paper nearly slipped out of my grip before it unfurled, vermilion calligraphy splashing the names of three deities across square black seals of exorcism.

I skidded to a halt, the talisman fluttering from my hand, and reached it towards the little papier-mache figure that clung so heavily to my right arm. "Let go," I croaked, the words leaving my mouth in a half-audible gasp. "I can't do anything for you. Let me go!"

The papery grip did not slacken. The weight continued to drag me downwards, as if all my limbs had become three times as heavy. Distantly, I could hear the high choral scream of the fog approaching. I had completely outdistanced it in my panic, but it would catch up soon.

"I'm sorry, Little Brother," I gasped, and slapped the talisman onto the small joss paper-covered head.

A tiny sizzling jolt went through my numb fingers and up my arm. The dragging weight faded away as if I had dreamed it, and the thin papery hands clutching me suddenly let go. I staggered several steps forward, turning as I caught myself, and saw the little papier-mache figure frozen in place with the talisman hanging down from its forehead.

I didn't know how long the talisman would hold it there, and I didn't know how long I had before the screaming fog caught up with me. So I took a firmer grip on the joss sticks and ran again, breathing hard now, my throat raw and my chest aching. I ran, I kept running, and at some point the joss sticks burned down to a handful of ash that left a blister on my palm and the greyness around me dissolved into the moving light and colour and beautiful, blessed fresh air of the real living world.

I was running along Bukit Timah Road, nearly eight kilometres from where I'd started, and my legs hurt. I'd never run so far in such a short time before. But then I'd never run in blind screaming panic

before, either. My right hand hurt where the ash had burned me, and my forearm hurt as well—in the shape of what I now saw were five little bruises, deep and dark red. Four thin fingers and a small thumb.

I slowed and stopped, my legs shaking. Then I sat down on the curb, pulled out my mobile phone with fingers that were still cold and numb, and called Johnson. “Bukit Timah Road near Sixth Avenue, same side. Hurry up.”

Johnson’s big car drove up ten minutes later. Instead of getting in, I pointed to the boot and went around when he unlocked it. The interior was crammed with cartons of joss sticks, bundles of joss paper and hell money, boxes of talismans from various religions, small effigies of Taoist deities and a great many paper offerings.

I scabbled around in the paper offerings until I found representations of a PSP, a basketball, a bicycle—things a nine-year-old boy might have wanted. I piled them up on the footpath with a stack of joss papers. There was a fine for not burning incense or offerings in proper containers, but I was too shaken to care right now.

Johnson joined me and added a set of boy’s clothing to the pile. He handed me a lighter, and I set fire to the paper. There was no wind and the smoke went straight up in the air.

“These are for you, Little Brother,” I said over the crackling of the flames. “I’m sorry I used the talisman on you. I’m sorry I couldn’t help you. Please be kind to us in the future. We’re all trying to save people, just like you saved your own brother.”

When the offerings were all gone, I scraped the ash off the path with the side of my shoe. There was a big scorch mark left on the cement, but that couldn’t be helped. Then I got in the car with Johnson. He got a can of Coke from behind the driver’s seat and handed it to me.

“Bride’s father gave us a good red packet,” he said as he started the car. “I haven’t counted yet, looks like eight hundred plus.”

“Donate some to the temple,” I said after the Coke had soothed my raw throat enough to speak. When he raised an eyebrow I pointed to the emergency pouch, wordlessly indicating the talisman that had saved my life.

“Out of your share,” Johnson said, and grinned.

I grinned back. He was only joking, but I wouldn’t have minded if he’d taken it out of my pay. Business was business, even the wedding runner business.

Jaded by Daniel Gene Barkley

She had become jaded by the many years of false promises and crushed hopes. She would go alone to the movies to watch the latest romance lighting up the screen. She’d sit in the middle of the theater amongst the naive couples, each smiling and falling further into what they thought was love. What did they know of love any way? Big white, doctored smiles projected in a dark room, holding hands on a park bench on a chilly autumn afternoon. She would divide her time between actually watching the movie and trying to look through the audience. She would make wagers with herself on which couple

she thought would be the first to disassemble.

She had not always been so jaded. Disenchantment like hers is not something one obtains over night. It must be crafted and honed, developed and built upon in such a way that when it all comes tumbling down (and it always comes tumbling down), it lands with such a combustible force that all its materials ignite into flames. Like heartburn, true heart burn. She had lived with that fire roaring in her for so long now it had become her. She had a great way of melting all things beautiful, rendering them to a red, syrupy mess. Friends, family, they all stayed away. Fire needs fuel, lots of fuel, and her fire was no exception. The movie theater trips were just a way of fanning the flame.

She saw one young couple sharing candies. He'd take one out of the colorful bag and she'd open her mouth. He'd put it on her wanting lips, pausing a moment and just as she could taste it, he'd pull it back from her. Teasing her. Luring her. She'd sit there a moment or two, eyes closed, enjoying the tease. The girl opened her eyes just in time to see him smugly popping the candy in his mouth. That's when the girl made her move, she dove in taking both sides of his face in her hands and kissed him, their heads framed by a very similar scene on the screen. (Corny always seems to inspire corny.) As the two separated, the guy still in a daze, the girl opened her mouth to show the candy clenched between her teeth. They smiled.

She had become very jaded. She knew that such cutesy behavior wouldn't last. It couldn't if they were going to have anything serious, anything beyond the flirt. She knew all too well how quickly things fade. How fast sharing candy becomes separate candies that become no candies and no movies until both people sit alone so tired and bored that they just become sick by the mere presence of each other. How one day, the thought, "He has an incredible ass" is replaced with, "God, he's an incredible asshole."

She looked around the dim theater surveying, looking for another couple. The right couple, the ones on the verge of popping like over-blown bubblegum that leaves its sticky, gooey mess on anyone not smart enough to have moved away. Finding them would have made her whole night. This went beyond mere hobby. This was oxygen to her fire. It was sick validation of her perverse course.

Off to one far side, she could make out an older couple. She pegged them to be in their mid-fifties. They were both watching the movie. They were sitting apart, arms next to each other but never touching. He had the bucket of popcorn and she had her allotment in a brown cardboard drink holder. One soda sat between them, a super large so they wouldn't have to get up. Once this couple sits, she knew, they stay sitting. His wife adjusted herself in her seat; shaking his, he gave her a look. She was dressed up, nice but casual. A flower blouse, with a wild pattern, black polyester pants, elastic waistband. Her fake pearl and gold plated earrings sparkled just a bit; she had the look of a woman that used to be quite sensual. She had done her best to look nice but not sexy. No, sexy died a long time ago, part of growing and aging. She still had her mind though, quick as ever. He was in his nicer jeans, the ones with no holes. The top button of his soft maroon shirt was unbuttoned. His only ring, a wedding ring. He was oblivious. He ate his pop corn and enjoyed the cool temperature when inches from him, just tucked away, was the pumping, pulsating heart of a woman yearning to feel desire. She had been sucked into the movie, into the eyes of its romantic lead. Not because of him, not because he was handsome (which he was), but because of what she wanted for herself, a kiss in the rain, a complete disregard for anything proper and acceptable, anything age appropriate. She wanted to be exposed and vulnerable and naive. It had been so long since she had the luxury of naiveté. To share a look that meant more than a look. She knew she was going to go to the movies, to this movie, on this journey, and her husband was oblivious. He would remain so even later when they are alone and he discovers

she's wearing her silky ivory bra and black lacy satin panties that make her still feel sexy.

She had showered and shaved and lotioned her whole body. She had put just a drop of perfume on all the right spots and wore her fake pearl earrings. Even when he quickly removes her bra and casts it to the bedroom floor without any regard, when he undoes all of her procedures, when he gets her naked and all the mystery dissolves, not even then will he know why she has done all that and why she is ultimately so alone. Even when his head is inches from her pounding heart he won't hear it.

The leading man on screen was holding his lover after discovering she had ingested a bottle of sleeping pills. He was crying. The man in his nicer jeans took a big sip of his coke.

She was jaded. She knew that couple too well; they were not going to pop. No, their end would be a fizzle much like his ever-flattening watered down coke. It would just eventually lose all flavor.

The woman in the movie was rushed to a hospital in an ambulance; the man with her, holding her hand the whole way. Who would believe such a ridiculous movie? She was so very jaded. She let out a quiet laugh. It was just like a man though, she thought to herself, to drive you to taking a whole bottle of pills only to make a scene of it for himself later by holding your hand and acting like a damn human being. Too little, too late. Did the script-writer really think anyone would fall for that? Did he think so little of the audience that he thought he could just bat the viewers around like mice? Stupid blind tailless mice? All the drama, set just to string along gullible romantics.

In the beginning of the movie, the couple meets unexpectedly. They don't like each other at first. Why would they, they're both obnoxious? We are supposed to think they are quirky, but obnoxious is the correct word. But they discover they are more than just their offbeat facades. She comes to visit her sister who is dying of cancer at the hospital only to hear a voice she recognizes. She follows it down to the children's cancer ward to discover him there: reading the children stories, making them balloon animals, playing them songs on his acoustic guitar, giving them piggy back rides, making them snow cones... and whatever other ridiculous unbelievably pandering thing he could be doing to make him seem so sweet and caring that she falls for him that very moment. They come together, then things turn sour. They fall apart. They find each other's quirks annoying. A gap builds between them. And then, just when he's is going to tell her he's leaving, he discovers her, on the floor full of sleeping pills. He cries. We know he needs her. We cry. We need her. Will she be okay? Of course she will — it's a damn movie.

She was jaded. Where? Where was the couple that would explode? Where was her oxygen? They were here somewhere — she just had to un-focus. Let her eyes relax; the couple would make themselves known. They must. The fire roared up like magma turned to lava. She looked around — the first aisle, the second, the back row. Many couples, many lovers.

She looked and looked until she found a man sitting alone. He was a bit disheveled, a bit homely. Not the most handsome man. Someone you wouldn't be surprised to find sitting alone anywhere else, but in a movie for lovers? This movie theater was a transporter for lonely women. Why then was he here, alone? She thought a moment, about how she was alone. How she had felt alone for some time.

That was something by choice though. She could be here with someone if she wanted. She could be sharing candies and Cokes. She was alone because she knew better. She was jaded, she was aware; she would no longer be duped by the mischievous Eros. But none of that did anything to help her shake the loneliness.

The lady on the screen lay in a hospital bed. She hadn't moved. Her eyes were closed. The man in her room was balled up in a chair looking as if he hadn't left for days. He walked over to her side and

touched her arm. Hoping to make contact. He started to cry, soft fragile tears that swelled up in his eyes till they spilled over and down his cheek. He was trying to be strong.

The jaded woman looked around the room, again surprised that people were even buying this junk. She saw the young couple that was sharing candies, now transfixed on the screen. She saw the other couple, the man in his nice jeans and the woman in the gold plated fake pearl earrings. They were all transfixed.

On screen, the doctor comes in the room. The man doesn't stop touching the woman's arm. "Well doc, how will it be? Will she be ok?" The doctor starts to explain about her condition, about her coma.

The theater seems really dark. Darker than before. Everybody is hanging on the edge of their seat. The tension is stiff, thick. The script-writer has everyone right where he wants them. He has them caring. What a vulnerable place to be, to feel helpless. To feel like all you can do is watch the events of life unfold. To know it's already all been decided and you're just along for the show. Will it pay off? Will the journey have been worth it? If I walk away, will I walk away with something? If I were given another chance would I change it?

The doctor tries to comfort the man. It's hard to comfort when all you have is bad news. He says they are trying to make her as comfortable as she can be. The man asks the doctor where she is. He says he knows she's lying on a bed next to him, but in her mind where is she? Can she hear him? Can she feel him? The doctor tries his best to explain just how little is actually known about her state of being. He tells the young man not to give up trying, that medicine doesn't have all the answers. Touch her, talk to her; she is in there somewhere.

The jaded woman adjusted herself in her theater seat. She had a very uneasy feeling. Something wasn't right. There was something very familiar about it all, about these couples. The doctor's pager went off. He apologized, saying he had to check on another patient. The man asked him to wait, to explain again – everything was happening so quickly.

The theater was silent. The only sound was that of the confused crying man projected forty feet on the screen. The lady with the fake pearl earrings turned away. She couldn't bear to look any longer. She was crying. She turned her head to the side, towards the man sitting next to her. She could see he felt it too. By just a subtle change in his demeanor, in a way only someone so familiar, someone so attached to him could know. And that was when the jaded woman got a really good look at her face. It couldn't be, the clothes, the man — it just could not be. It was not even possible. Must have been a trick of the emotions. There was no way.

The crying lady's face was her own. Her stomach sank. She lost her breath. Her eyes darted to the younger couple. Why hadn't she realized before? The girl was so young. So full of life. She hadn't noticed that it was her, a long time ago. The whole room seemed almost frozen. She could hardly breathe.

On the screen, the man in the hospital is suddenly alerted by the sound of the machines next to the bed going off. He panics and screams for a nurse. The jaded woman in the theater looks around. Front row, second row, back row. This is not possible. They are all her, with different people. She when she was younger, when she was happy. A fleeting moment sits next to her indifference; her apathy munching popcorn in the back, desire sits hot next to a cold man. Amongst the candies and cokes and snacks, her whole being is played out. Some of them are memories and some possibilities. Was she the real one then? Who was she? She was jaded.

The man on screen stands in the back of the hospital room. He is pushed back by all the rushing nurses

and doctors. They all wear very concerned concentrated faces. One grabs a needle, another a tube. One nurse drops something; another assists a doctor who is readying paddles. It is pure chaotic ballet.

She feels the fire burst inside her chest. She can handle this. She can live with this. It is a sensation. It is feeling. For the first time in a long time, she is feeling something other than anger, like someone had untwisted all the rage, and now she could see clearly. She remembered again the man who was sitting alone. The disheveled man, what about him? Who was he? How did he fit? She looked over toward him. He was staring at her, stone cold, with a large grin. She tried to look away, but her eyes were locked on his. He somehow compelled her. She felt pulled in by him. She had never seen him before, but she knew he wasn't there by accident. Had she imagined him? No, it felt quite the opposite — like he knew more about her than she ever could. He scared her worse than anything else happening. Their eyes still locked.

It was he that broke the stare. He got up, almost in slow motion, and headed toward the doors that led to the lobby. She followed him the whole way with her eyes. Just as he got to the set of double doors he turned around and took in the whole theater. He looked at her one last time and waved goodbye. She tried to scream but nothing came out. Or maybe she did scream and no one heard her. She tried to get the attention of someone else in the room, the candy boy, and the man in the jeans, but they were all gone now. She was alone in the theater. All the seats except hers were empty. It was just she and the crying man on the screen. What had she done? Why? With a trembling voice he says, "I don't know if you can hear me. I don't even know where you are. But if you can hear me, I love you." The lights fade. Her fire now, just embers. She is jaded no more.

Contributor Biographies

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Anne is about to graduate from the Ateneo de Manila University with a degree in a business course that has a long name. She has been to two national writing workshops and wishes to attend more. You may find her story "The Vision of Sakti" in the October issue of [Deadman's Tome](#) ezine. Her work will also appear in the February 2010 issue of Morrigan Ezine's [Three Crow Press](#). She has a blog at <http://the-sword-that-speaks.blogspot.com>

Georgina Bruce

Georgina Bruce is a writer and teacher based in the West Midlands, in the UK. She writes mainly speculative fiction and teaches mainly English to asylum seekers and refugees. [She has a blog](#) where she publishes her flash fiction. At the moment, she is coordinating a mentoring scheme for her local writers' group, and editing an anthology of short stories. Her writing has appeared or is forthcoming in [Dark Tales magazine](#), [Byzarium](#), [Tuesday Shorts](#), [Strange Horizons](#), and [Clockwork Phoenix](#).

Michele Lee

Michele Lee writes horror, science fiction and fantasy from the relative safety of her haunted house in the oldest section of Louisville, Ky. When she isn't writing, she reviews books of all genres, spends too

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Lavie Tidhar is the author of linked-story collection [HebrewPunk](#) (2007), novellas [An Occupation of Angels](#) (2005), and forthcoming [Cloud Permutations](#) (2009) and [Gorel & The Pot-Bellied God](#) (2010) and, with Nir Yaniv, short novel [The Tel Aviv Dossier](#) (2009). He's lived on three continents and one island-nation, and currently lives in South East Asia. Lavie's web site is at <http://www.lavietidhar.co.uk>

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Mint Kang is a Singapore-based freelance writer specializing in business and finance. Her non-fiction articles can be found in a number of local publications, but her speculative fiction lives in the closet and feeds on night sweats. She keeps a talking African Grey parrot, occasionally rants about the publishing industry at <http://gardenherb.wordpress.com> and does as few noteworthy things with her life as possible.

Daniel Gene Barkley

Daniel Gene Barkley was born and raised in Southern California. He is a first generation Mexican American, born in the USA. He is very passionate about his art. This is his first publication.