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These stories have appeared in *Spelk Fiction*, *Out of the Gutter*, *Horror Sleaze Trash*, *Dark Corners*, *and HorrorNovelReviews.com*.

Cover art by Jack Arambula Layout by Andrew Hilbert Interior doodles by Andrew Hilbert

http://www.hilbertheckler.com http://www.weeklyweirdmonthly.com

THE GRAND CANYON

We got married on May 2, 1995 and we didn't have any money for the type of honeymoon reality TV pushes so hard on us these days. But this was before reality TV and Real Lives of Housewives and 24 hour cable channels dedicated to wedding planning so we weren't really brainwashed by expectations.

Our wedding was simple. Our honeymoon was just as simple. We road tripped from Los Angeles to the Grand Canyon. We wanted to be awed by nature rather than awed by the type of service money could buy for newlyweds.

I swear to God we took enough pictures to fill up three photo albums but I never did put those pictures in albums. I put them in boxes after the investigators came by and went through them all after they had them developed.

"This is the best picture I've ever seen of the Grand Canyon," one of them said to me as he sifted through the boxes. It was the last photo of the Grand Canyon I took.

Another investigator agreed.

"You should send this to Time or Life or some other magazine like that. It'd probably make the cover of National Geographic!" he said.

I was cold to them. I knew why they were investigating. They suspected me. Their fawning over a photograph was just playing nice.

They put the photos on the floor of my garage in chronological order. I always kept the time and date settings imprinted on my photographs because I like to know when memories occurred.

The first photograph was of her. I snapped it while she was driving. The windows were rolled down, her hair was blowing backwards; her sunglasses reflected me holding a camera in them. She was happy; her smile said so. I think that was the best photo of the Grand Canyon that I ever took.

They pointed at other photos, not in any pattern, not in any semblance of chronology. I looked at them from the first to last.

Our picnic: she packed sandwiches and little salads with the olive oil and balsamic vinegar already added. Sure, they made the lettuce soggy on our road trip but it tasted great. She added four extra sundried tomatoes to mine because I was crazy for sundried tomatoes. I can't even eat them anymore.

"You two get into any fights? Anything that was irreconcilable?" one of them asked.

"No," I said. I can't say I was angry at their insinuations. Anybody with a nose for this kind of shit insinuates what may be obvious. I was annoyed. Everyone suspected the worst even after having known us for

years.

"We bickered," I said. "Who doesn't bicker?"

"Did the bickering ever turn violent?"

"No," I said. "Never."

"What'd you bicker about?"

"What does anyone ever bicker about?" I asked. "She packed salads pre-dressed with olive oil. I mentioned that the lettuce was soggy. She was sour for a few seconds after that. I don't know if you can even call it bickering."

She snapped a few motion photos of the scenery while we drove. Red mountains, blue sky, black pavement dotted with yellow lines.

"This one's blurry," one of the investigators pointed to the second to last photo.

It's hard getting couples' photos when you're the only ones you're travelling with. We took turns taking photos of each other in front of the canyon. She snapped a few good ones of me.

"Take it," she said as she handed me the camera after the last one. "I want a picture too."

She stood just a little too close to the camera. I'm no good with fancy cameras. I couldn't focus right.

The first picture came out blurry.

"Back up a little," I told her.

The investigators pointed to the last photo.

"That there is the best damn photo of the Grand Canyon I've ever seen."

LIGUOR CHURCH

"That has to be some kind of mistake," I said to Crazy Bob and pointed to the line of folks waiting outside St. Nicholas Catholic Church. They didn't look like church goers. They looked like me and Bob; dirty and disheveled.

"You's always making big flea mountains out of mole hairs, you ass!"

The marquee outside the church read something like *Today* Only, Free Liquor. Step Into the Light!

"I don't know, Bob," I said.

"You dun need to know nothing, Corky. Les' wait."

We joined the line, the very bottom of it, it wasn't moving very fast but wait we did anyway. An altar boy came out of the front of the church, big wooden doors opened all slow like, like he was descending from Heaven into the earth. He had a silver platter with tiny little crucifixes hanging down from it. The platter had a whole shit load of shot glasses on it.

He went to each person in front of us and offered us a shot, no questions asked.

"Care for a shot of whisky, brother?" the boy said to me and Crazy Bob.

"Care fer?! I'll take two of them!"

"Ahhhh..." Crazy Bob said, "Like Holy Hell down my wind pipes. Now I can sing for the lord. When's he showing up?"

The altar boy smiled again, turned from us, and headed back for the steps leading the church entrance.

"That kid was stupider than shit in a whistle," Crazy Bob said. "I'm hopin' he come round again."

We waited for a few minutes, the line moved a bit faster. Some folks got their shots of whisky and decided it was time to leave. If they didn't get to their corners and access roads, they'd be cutting a mighty fine chunk out of their liquor funds for the day.

The doors to the church opened again and an altar boy came out dragging a gold encrusted and crucifix emblazoned cooler on wheels. Those folks, like us, patient enough to get to the front of the line were treated to a tall can. Freezing cold, too.

"These Catholics, they know how to treat a man," Crazy Bob said. "Fuckin' Mormons'd never do some shit like this."

"It must be some kinda mistake," I said.

"We weren't drunk when we entered the line, you no good

piece of shit. We weren't the only ones getting wet in line."

It was true. We were stone sober when we got there but now our buzzes were teetering toward drunkenness.

"I just never heard of a church liquoring folks up," I said.

"Sign me up. I'll be baptized in Budweiser ocean," Bob said. He laughed to himself.

We finally got inside the church. The halls were huge, the ceilings taller than birds would fly. Ornate woodcarvings of people dying and angels and trumpets lined the walls. Catholics were a colorful people, no doubt.

A priest sat behind a red wine stained desk. He smiled at each person as they took their handle of whatever liquor of their choosing and left.

"Hello, brother," the priest said to Crazy Bob. "What brought you in today?"

"The booze, what else?" Crazy Bob was hiccupping as he spoke.

"Would you be interested in hearing more about the church and humanity's savior."

Crazy Bob leaned himself over the desk and got right up in the priest's face.

"Sweetheart, I'd soon as listen to anything you gimme some more to drink. Whisky. More whisky."

The priest smiled at Crazy Bob. Without turning away from him he motioned for an altar boy to come to him. The altar boy came and the priest whispered into his ear. The altar boy nodded, grabbed Crazy Bob by the elbow and walked him into a private room. When they opened the door to the room, there was lots of screaming. Good screaming. Drunk screaming. Hooting and hollering and such. The door closed behind Bob and there was silence again.

"You, brother," the priest said to me. "What brings you in here today?"

"I guess the same as anyone else. The booze is nice."

"Yes, yes. But you get booze anyways. What made you step into a house of God for your booze?"

"Y'all advertised it being free. I'd go anywhere and drink anything for free."

The priest chuckled.

"Salvation, brother, is free," the priest said and looked into my eyes. I looked to my feet because too much eye contact with a man makes me uncomfortable. It's like they're sizing me up for a fight or a fuck. I wasn't interested in neither.

"Something is bothering you, isn't it?"

I didn't answer.

"You came in today because you are weak and you wanted

something more than the temporary joys of alcohol. I know. This is how I catch followers for Christ. You came in wanting more. You have a void in your life. There is no love, is there?"

All the sudden my stomach was turning and I felt all sick and tingly. I wasn't sure if what he was saying was getting to me or if what they was feeding me was getting to me but it wasn't a damn bit comfortable.

"You may never step in here again," the priest said. "Think about it. I have one shot to save your soul. You came because of divine providence. You are weak. You are empty. You are unhappy."

I nodded – he wasn't saying anything too surprising. Sleeping by the highways, making balloon animals for quarters wasn't exactly the idea I had for myself. Being the son of a circus clown didn't give me too high ambitions but I didn't see it this way.

"If you turn away now, you may never come back. I see this. Think about it but I warn you, if you turn away now the Lord may never open his heart to you again because you will have shut your heart out forever."

I nodded getting real worried that if I didn't make the decision to go where this fella was telling me to go I'd be out of it forever. I was getting real worked up in my head. I'd never heard someone say it just like that. I could feel the tears behind my eyes swelling like I was going to fall into some big happy family but the tears never came. It was panic mostly. I don't cry when I panic. Usually I piss. Didn't drink enough for that, though.

"Mm," I said in agreement. "Well, I'm just not too much into this stuff."

The priest smiled but this time the smile was wiped away pretty quickly.

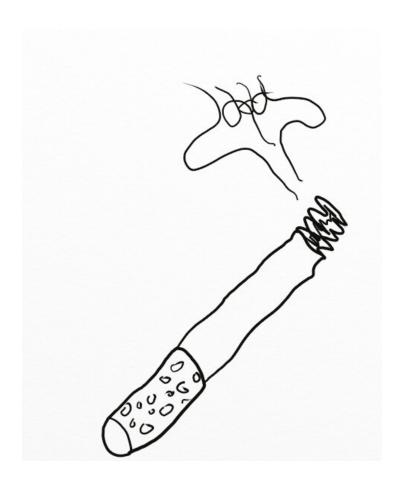
"Well, then. What will it be?" the priest asked me.

"Can I get a bottle of tequila and a six pack?"

The priest gave me what I asked for and called, "Next!"

I looked all around for Crazy Bob. Knocked on the door of the private room but no one ever came out. I figured he'd come by our normal meeting spot tomorrow to tell me about all the debauchery he didn't get into but he pretended he did so I just went down underneath the shade of the marquee and drank my beer and tequila. Would'a had to make about fifty god damn balloon animals to get off this good.

Thank the Lord.





Reginald pulled out another Marlboro and lit it. His rocking chair creaked on the patio as he looked out to the empty street in front of his house. He sipped his Bud, let out a sigh of relief, and took a puff.

It was one hundred degrees outside, too damn hot to enjoy a cigarette as much as Reginald did but he enjoyed this quiet time away from his wife, Martha, and away from his screaming grand kids. He changed diapers once in his life and after that he swore he'd never do it again. Martha swore he'd never do it again, too. He was a shitty diaperchanger. He smiled as he inhaled the nicotine, let it roll around his lungs, and blew it out. It was an almost spiritual ritual – like church, it was guaranteed peace. A prayer away from chaos.

"When are you goin' to quit smoking them damn things?!" Martha burst onto the porch, a screaming child on her hip. "You ain't goin' to be around much longer, these kids need to know more about they's granddad besides the fact that he sucked cancer sticks 'til it killed him"

Reginald leaned back in his rocking chair far enough for his head to rest against the wall. With eyes closed, he exhaled and smoke rose through the humidity until it disappeared far above them. Reginald looked at the half-smoked cigarette in his hand.

"This is my last one," he said. "Let me smoke it in peace."

"I can't even count how many times I heard that bullshit!" Martha went back inside the house.

Reginald got his pack of cigarettes out of his front shirt pocket. It was empty.

"Damn. Guess this is my last one," he said and took another puff – this one he held in his lungs longer than usual. He wanted to enjoy every particle or atom of that smoke for as long as he could.

Martha banged on the window from the kitchen. "And don't you be takin' yer sweet time on that last cigarette, Reggie!"

He exhaled as slow as he could and watched the smoke travel through the air. He laughed to himself.

"I'll take as long as I damn well please," he said and took another drag.

After a few minutes of what he thought would be his last inhalation and exhalations, Reginald realized his cigarette wasn't getting any shorter. When he inhaled, sure, he could see the orange burn underneath the gray ash tip but it never burned toward the filter. The

cigarette wasn't burning out.

"Goddammit, Reggie!" Martha said as she came outside again, this time with two screaming grandkids on each hip. "I can't watch these kids by myself! You must've smoked five cigarettes by now!"

Reginald flipped the top of his Marlboro hard pack open to show here there were no cigarettes left. He grinned and took another puff of the one he was smoking.

"Nope," he said, "Still smoking my last one."

"Well put it out! I need help!"

"I'll help you when I finish smoking. Please, let me enjoy my last smoke. I'll be in there, don't you worry."

Martha shook her head but protested no longer. She went back inside.

"Heh-heh," Reginald chucked.

An hour must've passed because the sun was on its way down but Reginald stayed on the porch enjoying what he knew was his last cigarette. Martha gave up on trying to get him inside.

"You must have a secret pack stashed away in those bushes!" she yelled the last time she came out to nag him. "I ain't stupid, Reg. Ain't no cigarette last that long! Not even an American Spirit!"

Reginlad nodded and smiled, inhaled and exhaled, and said, "Martha, my love, I'm enjoying my last Marlboro. Won't you let me have it in peace?"

Martha gave up after that but Reginald could hear her grunting inside. Better for him she grunt inside rather than out.

He kept smoking that cigarette that wouldn't end into the night, more and more happy he decided to quit smoking after this one. What luck he happened upon an everlasting cigarette. He reached for another beer in the cooler beside him. There wasn't anything in there but water and empty cans.

"Shit," he thought, "was hoping the cooler'd be magic too."

Reginald got up to go inside and restock his supply of beer. Without thought, instinctual, he almost put out his cigarette because Martha'd long ago forbade smoking inside the house. It yellows the wallpaper, she'd say. It was a close one – he dropped the cigarette on the ground and lifted his boot to stomp it out. Only thing that saved him was looking down and seeing the cigarette had grown from half-smoked to just-lit size. His eyes widened.

"Well, I lucked out didn't I?" He bent over to pick it up and put it back in his mouth. He inhaled as he walked to the kitchen window and knocked.

"Martha!" he yelled. "Martha! Could you grab me some beer?" but she didn't respond. She came to the window, stared bullets into his face, and closed the blinds.

That didn't stop him.

He banged harder on the window.

"Martha! There's a six pack of Bud in the fridge! Fetch it for me, will you?"

This time Martha answered.

"If you want it, put out that damn cigarette, and come in and get it yourself!"

"I can't put it out! It's my last one!" Reginald sat back down in his rocking chair. "Woman's being unreasonable..." he thought. He took a long drag and felt the smoke warm up his throat. It calmed him.

The sun left the sky. Cicadas hummed like power lines and the night air cooled to a nice ninety five degrees. "One good thing about smoking," Reginald thought, "is that the mosquitos don't attack you too had."

The cigarette dangled from Reginald's lips as he dozed off. The only thing that woke him was it falling out in the middle of a dream. He jumped out of his seat and wiped the ashes off his pants, picked up the cigarette, and drew smoke from it again.

"I gotta enjoy this while it lasts," he said. His voice was hoarse and his mouth dry from all the smoke. Spit hardened into film on his tongue.

"I need some beer, dammit," he thought and closed his eyes and fell back to sleep.

The morning birds awoke him this time; his cigarette secured between his lips, a skill mastered after years of smoking.

"Grandpa!" Huck, his oldest grandson at seven, said. The screen door slammed behind him as he ran to Reginald's lap.

"What is it, boy?""

"Aren't you coming in for breakfast?"

"Not allowed. Why don't you ask your mean ol' granny why," Reginald said. But before he could send Huck off, he had an idea.

"Huck," he said, "I'll give you two dollars if you hold this cigarette for Grandpa while I go inside to kiss your grandma and fetch me some drink."

"I dunno, grandpa. Grandma says cigarettes make your tongue forked like a snake."

Reginald stuck out his tongue.

"Forty years of smokin' and I've still got a good tongue. Besides, I'm not asking you to smoke it. Just hold it for a second."

Huck shrugged and held out an open palm.

"You can't hold it like that. You'll burn your hand." Reginald grabbed his hand and spread apart Huck's pointer and middle finger. "You hold it 'tween these fingers. Ashes away from your face."

Huck nodded.

"Now stay there, don't move," Reginald said. "I'll have two dollars for you when I get back."

Reginald fussed up Huck's hair in appreciation and walked back into the house. Almost as soon as he walked in Martha was yelling.

"You had the boy hold yer cigarette?! What kind of idiot are you!?"

"It's just a second, I'm getting some beer!"

"Aw, please. I'm parched! My throats drier than yo —"
"Get out!"

Martha took out her broom and waved it at his face. A few whacks to the back of the head, he calculated, was worth it for a few cans. He ducked as best he could under her broom handle and dove for the fridge.

"I said git!" Martha swung the broom once, twice, five, maybe eighty times by the time Reginald got ahold of the six pack. He was dizzy but triumphant and he ran as fast as he could out the front door.

By the time he got outside he caught Huck taking a puff and coughing.

"What in the Hell do you think you're doing?"

Huck stared blank faced and dropped the cigarette on the ground. His chin quivered like he was holding back a geyser. He didn't cry, though. Instead, he said, "I was just trying to be like you, grandpa." Reginald's pride swelled.

"That's my boy," he thought and patted Huck on the head. "Don't smoke until you're old enough to know how stupid it is. That's when you know you're ready for it. You're a good boy," Reginald said and leaned over to pick up the cigarette. It was almost all butt.

"Goddammit, Huck! This is my very last cigarette and you damn near smoked the whole thing. Go back inside!"

Reginald put the cigarette in his mouth and hoped it stayed lit. Otherwise, he'd have this broom handle concussion for nothing. Huck stared, arms crossed in Reginald's periphery.

"What's it now?" Reginald asked as he inhaled furiously in an effort to keep the cigarette lit.

Huck held out his hand.

"Two dollars," he said.

"Go inside and ask your granny for it. Besides, I caught you smoking. Your ma and pa won't like that too much, will they?"

Huck turned around yelling, "Grandma! Grandma! Grandpa's a liar!" The screen door slammed behind him.

Soon as the boy was gone, Reginald noticed that with each puff he took, the cigarette lengthened. Relieved and smiling, he cracked open a Budweiser and drank about half of it in one gulp.

"Ahhh," he said. "Ain't nothing like a cold beer and a cigarette in the morning."

Leaning back in his rocking chair, Reginald remembered all the good times he and Martha had with tobacco. There were sock hops, late at night in the freezing cold, when after a few songs and dancing, he and Martha would go outside and take a smoke break. She only took a few puffs of his but she kept him company and warm even when inside it was much more comfortable. There was pride at the Waffle House, not bigger than a public toilet, of choosing the smoking section separated only by a few table. She'd sit across from him, sip on coffee, and smile at all the nothings he had to say.

There were too many memories to put out. Quitting, he thought, would disassociate himself from the beautiful past. But there were other memories, too. He'd get sick and cough for nights on end. He'd say,

"Don't worry, darling. It's just the tobacco tickle behind my throat."

That was an excuse to smoke through the flu – prolonging it. "I worry," she'd say. "You're wheezing all night."

"Don't worry," Reginald found himself saying, cigarette still smoking between his lips on the porch. His son and daughter-in-law came in through the front gate.

"How were the kids?" they asked.

"Good as gold," Reginald answered, smoke accompanied each word.

"When are you going to quit, dad?" Reginald smiled.

"Everyone's so concerned about me quitting. Shit. This is my last one."

They nodded. They'd heard it before. They went inside, Reginald stayed behind. They'd had some good times, him and tobacco but the dry stick of his mouth and the burning tickling behind his throat told him that this was his final draw. Martha stood shivering in the cold in his memory. He inhaled deeply and held it in his lungs for as long as he could. Exhaled, there were the good times fading slowly into the air.

Reginald sat, quiet, in his chair as his son and grandkids shuttled themselves back into their minivan and drove off waving. Reginald dropped his cigarette onto the concrete and stomped it out. The never ending cigarette was gone for good.

Martha came out.

"Those kids is a handful," she sighed.

"Yep."

"I'm bone-tired. Got another smoke?"





It started with the hair. My son Alex first noticed it in the top corner of the living room.

"Dad," he said, "Look at this!" He put out his hand – a whole clump of curly hair was in his fist.

"What the hell are you doing pulling out your hair?" I asked but I knew it wasn't his own hair. It was a clump of blonde hair and no one in the family had blonde hair.

Alex sneezed. "It's on the walls!"

"Show me," I said. He led me down to the corner where the wall and carpet met. Blonde hair like a bush of public hair grew on the wall.

"Go wash your hands," I told Alex as I stared where the growing started. I don't know what I thought. I must've stood there for ten minutes scratching my head. The hair grew around framed photos of our family; Barbara, Alex, and me sitting on rocking chairs on our front porch. The house was painted yellow on accident and after a few days of crying, Barbara learned to love its old timey look. Yellow with white trim, like an egg salad sandwich, I used to say. That would make her cry more.

"Daddy!" Alex yelled from the bathroom. "It's on the walls here too! Look!"

"If this is some kind of prank, it's as funny as it's going to get. Mom will want this all cleaned up before she gets home, you know."

My steps were measured as I walked to the bathroom, already thinking about possible explanations for what I was about to see.

"It's curly!" Alex giggled, "and it's red!"

Sure enough, when I got there patches of red hair were growing on the walls. I could see them inch out beneath the white paint. They were getting longer fast.

"Keep this quiet in front of mom."

Alex nodded his head and skipped off to his room. I didn't know what else to do but grab shaving cream and a razor and start shaving the walls. I splashed some water on the hair patches and spread the shaving cream. With each stroke of the blade, hair grew back immediately. Little razor burn bumps accompanied.

"Shit, where the hell is Barb's bikini wax?"

I rummaged through the medicine cabinet and opened the cabinets beneath the sink. I couldn't ever find the fucking Q-tips and I had no chance with the wax. I had to keep shaving.

My hands were unsteady and I'm rarely in the shaving mood. I nicked the wall and it began to bleed. I took a tiny square of toilet paper and put it over the cut – the thought that the bleeding signified a much larger problem than hairy walls never hit me. I was in a shaving rage of

confusion. The hair grew thicker with each swipe, the razor bumps more irritated, and the tiny cuts continued to bleed.

When Barb came home, she found me sitting on the toilet frustrated. Alex had guided her to me.

"He's been there for three hours," he said. Hair and blood filled the sink and the wall hair was as thick as a Pollack's arm pits.

"What the hell is going on?" Barb was dumbfounded.

"Well, I'm not constipated," I said. "Your guess is as good as mine when it comes to our house hitting puberty."

"It must be some kind of mold," Barb said.

"That ain't mold," I said without looking up at her – still too frustrated with my own confusion to acknowledge hers, "That's human hair."

"We have to call the police," she said.

"I don't know that I can even dial a number right now. I've been shaving it for hours. Would you please call them?"

"You've been home all day doing God knows what. I just got home from work. I'm tired. You call them."

My face was in my hands.

"All right," I said, "Give me a moment."

"The moment's passed."

"Fine. Give me the phone." I stuck one hand out without raising my head.

By the time the police showed up, the hair had spread from the bathroom and living room to all the walls in the house, including the ceilings. But it wasn't just hair. Human skin coated the walls and the hair was more pronounced at the corners. There was considerable razor burn and the bleeding scabbed on the bathroom walls.

"Doesn't look like a crime has been committed," Officer Motopolis said as he combed his mustache with his middle finger.

"Any advice?" I asked.

"Dial 3-1-1 for non-emergency assistance," he said.

"If the skin was black it would have been a home invasion though, right?" I said and showed him the door. "Thanks for nothing."

I plopped myself onto the couch. Tired, frustrated, and sniffing the first hints of body odor that emanated from the flesh walls, I couldn't get much rest. Our framed photos were shattered and on the ground as the flesh thickened on the walls. Barb smiled at me from one of the photos as she cradled infant Alex to sleep. It was in this same house, the off-white walls not yet adorned with framed family photos, that most of these pictures were taken. This new interior would not be memorialized in frames with happy photos.

"Jesus fucking Christ," I said under my breath. Alex stared at me. "Why'd you say Jesus' name like that?" he asked.

"I really don't have time for this, Alex. Do you smell that?" I asked. "Do you smell that?!"

Alex stared up at me, wide eyed and on the verge of tears.

"That is the smell of a thousand unwashed human beings and it's coming from our walls! Do you understand? This situation is unlivable!"

Barb stomped in to interrupt my tirade on our innocent son.

"Do not speak to him like that! This isn't his fault!"

Alex didn't realize his feelings were hurt until Barb pointed it out. Now he was crying.

"What do we do about this?" I asked Barb over the wailing.

"You figure it out!" she said, "I have to cook dinner!"

"How could you have an appetite right now?"

"I've been working all damn day. Of course I have an appetite!" she put on her apron and banged pots and pans and slammed cabinet doors around.

I went back to the bathroom where my troubles began. The house needed deodorant, perfume, cologne... Hell, Listerine'd probably work at getting rid of the stench. I picked up Barb's stick of Secret deodorant. If it was strong enough for a man but made for a woman, surely it'd be good enough for a house. I surveyed the house for the patches of hair most resembling an armpit and applied the deodorant liberally. The smell didn't go away altogether but as the walls sweated, the aroma became at least as bearable as Barbara's.

In the corner of our bedroom, where the wall met the floor, was a ragged looking growth of curly black hair. I applied the deodorant and with each stroke, I felt something protruding and pushing up from beneath the carpet.

"Oh, shit," I thought and tugged at the carpet's end. Underneath was a hardening penis. Times like these made me wish I was still a Catholic and had a priest on speed dial.

"Barbara, darling," I called. "Do you know of any priests in the area?"

She answered with a scream so high pitched and blood curdling that if the police were still nearby they'd come and interrogate me for murder. To top it all off, boils and rashes emerged on the parts of the walls where I had applied deodorant.

Patches of red, with whitening and pulsing hives dotted the walls. Sweat dropped from the ceiling and onto my head. It was getting musty from all the humidity that the sweat brought in. I felt myself choking on the fumes.

A clang from the kitchen.

And then a scream.

It was Barb.

"What's going on?!" I asked before I knew how stupid that sounded. Of course I knew what was going on. Our house interior was made of flesh. She looked at me in silence; a stone face that betrayed no emotion. Growing beside her, where the oven lights should be for the stove top, were two large nipples. They hardened and softened in a syncopated rhythm all their own, synched alternately with each other as they quivered into growth. Barb's chin tried its damnedest not to telegraph her inevitable avalanche of tears. She used my shoulder as a napkin and I rubbed the back of her head to console her.

Alex stood in the living room with a pen and paper and mapped the new geography of the walls. He stood before a pulsing and pus filled sore. Around it, a black and blue bruise deepened. Alex, curious to the point of mental defect, pointed his finger and reached out to poke it. I watched this happen in slow motion as Barb sobbed into my shoulder. Alex's finger burst the sore wide open with a geyser of infection. Yellow and green mucous mingled with the red blood and splatter across Alex's five year old face. Alex stood there, not knowing how to process this turn of event. He looked at the finger that he stuck into the sore. I could feel the goose bumps on my body bubble up as sweat dripped from my forehead. I knew what came next. He examined his finger for a split second longer.

And then he put it in his mouth.

"No!" I yelled and pushed Barb away from me.

"You fucking asshole!" she yelled as I marched toward Alex. He stopped everything and let out a scream of terror or disgust or both.

"You need to stop tasting things!" was all I could muster up to say. If he had fallen into mud, I'd've probably swept him into my arms and threw him into the bath but he was covered in blood and infection.

"Come with me!" I yelled and turned back for the bathroom. I kept my hands in my pockets for fear that he'd try to hold them if I didn't.

"Take off your clothes and give yourself a bath like a big boy. You don't want to be a baby forever, do you!?"

"I want to be a big boy!" he smiled and clapped his hands. Little tiny spatters of blood flew off of his hands and hit my lips though I dodged as best I could.

The hot water knob was fleshy and I retracted as soon as I had reached for it. It was a purple, scabbing over tumor with hair and teeth growing all over it.

I swallowed my own terror, grasped the knob, and turned on the water.

"Wash yourself!" I yelled and handed him a bottle of shampoo. He was dedicated to earning the big boy title and lathered himself up. He looked to me and smiled and waited for my approval but I looked right past him. The sound of running water hypnotized me and I was finally allowed some peace to listen to my thoughts. But there were no thoughts. The sound of water rushed and emptied me.

After a few seconds, a pungent and warm smell steamed from the water. I looked down. The water was as dark a yellow as hangover piss. I grabbed Alex and threw a towel over him.

"Do not," I said. "Do not lick your lips or open your mouth or anything. Then you'll be a big boy."

He nodded his head without saying a word.

I went back to the kitchen for Barb who was now on the floor crying into the tile.

"What's your brother's phone number?"

She didn't answer. She reached into her pocket and handed me her phone. After scrolling through the contacts, I found it.

"Interesting, you still have Jason's number after ten years."

"Don't be a fucking as shole," she sobbed. "It was just a college fling."

I selected her brother's name and called.

"Sam?" I said into the phone.

"Who da fuck is dis?" he asked. "My phone says Barb but you ain't Barb."

"It's Kevin. Your brother in law. We need you."

"Kevin! Holy shit, man! We never talk. How's Barb?"

"She's crying into the kitchen tile right now. We really need your craftsman skills right now."

"But ain't you da one who said I'd never make it as a carpenter? Now lookit here. Who's calling?" Sam asked.

"Yes, yes. I was wrong. Bring lots of tools, please."

"I dunno, Kevin. I'm just sitting in my lawn chair drinkin' a six pack and enjoying the day. What's good there to lure me in?"

"Twenty dollars and a bottle of whiskey."

"See you in ten minutes. Five if I use the bike lane."

"Don't use the bike lane."

Sam dropped his tool chest on the floor as soon as he walked in. He was wearing black overalls, a head band, and he twirled his beard in his fingers.

"Y'all still have that stupid rule 'bout taking off yer shoes before you come in?"

He stomped his mud caked boots on the floor. I pointed to the walls around him.

"It doesn't matter today," I said.

"Holy shit. I never seen none of this before," he said.

"What should we do?" I asked.

Sam poked and pinched at the flesh walls. He left bruises in

some spots.

"You try tearin' this shit right off?" he asked.

"I don't have the stomach for it."

"You California types. Always tuckin' their dicks into their assholes like they's scared," he shook his head and giggled a bit. He pulled a knife out of his pocket. "My daddy always said a real man carries a knife."

"Good. Good," I said. My stomach knotted itself in anticipation. He made a deep cut with his knife parallel to the ceiling. Blood, like a waterfall, spilled down toward the floor.

"Well, that's real gross," he said as he grabbed the deep cut he had just made. "Just a little tug," he said and tore a strip of flesh right off. The house screamed and every single pimple, boil, sore popped at the same time and covered the floors with pus and blood.

He tugged again and pulled another strip. The house roared and shook. An artery fell out and sprayed blood all over him.

"You know what?" he said as he wiped some of the blood out of his beard. "I think I left my bar tab open last night. I gotta go. You got that twenty and the whiskey?"

"I couldn't get the whiskey, but please, take forty."

Out of my wallet, I pulled out two twenties and handed them to Sam. He nodded and half-smiled and went for the front door. He tried a few times to get the door open but he couldn't.

"Sonofabitch. It's stuck," he said. I went to examine the reason and noticed that skin had grown over the hinges and over the cracks of the door. It was completely fleshed over. Sam pulled out his knife and pointed it toward the ceiling. He grinned – telling me again that real men carry knives for just this sort of situation. I know, I know, I said with my eyes and he took that as his cue to start stabbing at the door skin. With each stab and cut, blood poured out onto the floor, onto his hands, onto our faces as we watched in horror. But try again to open the door, as he did, and there was no luck. The flesh had immediately scabbed over and hardened. A knife is good for many situations but this was something special.

"I gotta use the pisser," he said and headed for the bathroom. Barb was on her knees now looking at the tits on the oven. They were throbbing and purple with little drips of milk escaping one by one from the nipples.

"We need to milk it," she said to me. "We need to relieve its pain! I know its pain! We need to milk it!" Barb struggled to get off her knees. The tile floor was now wrinkled and damp and my high school years in wrestling informed me that either the floor or Barb's knees or both were going to have ringworm in the morning.

"What are we going to milk it with?" I asked.

"Alex is still young enough. He's still young enough!" Barb's eyes were crazy; her makeup was smeared from all the crying, her eyes were sunken in and swollen, and she was breathing heavy. She grabbed me by the collar. "Tell Alex to relieve its pain! Look at them, Kevin. They are swelling with pressure!"

"Calm down," I said to her. "Don't we still have a breast pump or something? Let me check our bedroom closet."

"It's not fair for it to suffer!" she yelled as I walked away. Lactation wasn't all it was suffering from. We had just nearly stabbed it to death. Milk was the least of its worries.

I walked into the bedroom and, ah! The penis I had massaged out of the carpet was still there. It had grown from a regular sized erection to a flaccid whale of a thing that rested atop our bed. It had to be ten feet wide and fifteen feet long. Stray pubes poked out here and there and it left a puddle of sweat on our sheets. When I walked to the closet, I noticed it perked up and pointed upwards toward the ceiling. It was only natural for me to follow where it pointed with my eyes. It was pointing to a ball sack growing out of the ceiling. I watched it grow from a tiny little thing, no bigger than an average pitbull's sack, to the size of elephant ears. It swayed as gravity pulled and elongated it until it finally found its resting place atop the penis that was on the bed.

"That's the weirdest anatomy I've ever seen," I said to myself, almost forgetting that I was on a mission for a breast pump.

I dug through Barb's walk in closet. Piles of clothes were strewn around with flesh from the walls growing and melding with them. The flesh's odor was now unbearable, like an old man who refuses to shower but once a month; his stubbornness a calculated outward symbol of his vitality, his stench a sign of dying man. It was like the smell of rotting fruit and uncooked meat left in the trash for days. My stomach was in knots and I gagged on the humidity of the house.

Brown age marks dotted the walls along with moles and wrinkles that sagged from ceiling to floor. The hair was turning white and falling out. Above me was a chandelier of skin tags that drooped and swayed. I tried my best to duck my head as I reached for Barb's shelves and threw my hands around blindly looking for something I wouldn't recognize if it hit me in the head. Meanwhile, the skin tag chandelier rested on top of my head like a toupee.

"Fuck! Shit! Son of a bitch! God fucking dammit!" I yelled as I ran out of the closet, my knees nearly hitting my chin. The dick was still there resting like a beached whale on my bed while the ball sack straddled it. White clumps of smegma accumulated around the foreskin and began to pile on our bed sheets. They were new bed sheets, too.

Sam was gagging in the bathroom. His moaning was dampened by the sweating flesh that covered our entire house. I opened the door.

His head was in the toilet which was acne riddled and pockmarked.

"I..." he said into the toilet, "Keep chucking because I can't stop thinking about how fucked up it is that I'm spewing into a skin toilet. It never ends..."

"Good thing you brought your knife," I said to him and closed the door.

On our hallway's wall it stared at me. An eyeball the size of my fist darted from side to side, up and down. It was in a panic. It had ooze dripping out of it and its pupils were clouded over. Once it figured I stood before it motionless, it did nothing but look me in the eye.

"Honey!" I yelled. "I couldn't find the breast pump. I think this thing's just going to have to suffer!"

The eye blinked and I turned away to head for the kitchen. Barb was sobbing as I watched her put a nipple into her mouth and start to suck. She gagged on whatever came out and burst into more tears. She had been pushed to the edge. The skin hung low from the ceiling and clumps of body cheese fell from the wrinkling flesh.

Alex, who's been told plenty of times not to pick at scabs, was peeling off the scabs that had healed over from Sam's stabbing session. He was putting them into piles by color. The younger, redder scabs in one pile, and the old brown scabs in another. When the piles were done being sorted, Alex picked up a young scab and put it in his mouth.

Sam was vomiting in the bathroom, his wailing muffled and echoed off of the corners of the house. Barb sobbed in the kitchen. Over and over again she said *I work all day, I work hard... and now this.* Puddles of milk she had spit out began to curdle around her.

And as Alex chewed on the first scab he put on his mouth, his fingers readied for another.

THE OWNER'S ROOM

We were drunk. It was stupid but we were drunk. It's not an excuse. It's just what it is.

We were celebrating Sofia's acceptance into grad school. We were anticipating having no free time between us once she started so we decided to do the whole Airbnb thing and rent a vacation home in Arroyo Seco, the mountains in New Mexico. On our way up, we stopped by a small bar. Thanks to the liquor laws of New Mexico we could do all our bulk shopping as we sat on barstools and drank cocktail after cocktail.

A bottle of Jack. Two twelve packs of Bud. Fuck it. Make that two bottles of Jack.

The house was beautiful. Heated floors, a gorgeous view of purple mountains, and a fireplace. We dropped our things at the front door. The owner had wood all set up for us with a note.

Welcome to beautiful Arroyo Seco and congratulations to Sofia on grad school! Mi casa es su casa. The hot tub should be heated! Remember to rate us on the Airbnb website!—Gordon

"Gordon," Sofia said, "that's a name you don't hear too often." I nodded.

"Let's get naked," I said. "The hot tub's ready."

We got down to our birthday suits. I uncapped the Jack and took a big chug and passed it to Sofia. She did the same. I took one of the twelve packs with me as we went outside.

"This place is fucking beautiful," Sofia said.

"Uh huh," I said and took another swig.

Fifteen minutes later we were both drunk. We can drink.

An hour was all we could take in the hot tub. The water was heated to 101 degrees. My nutsack couldn't take much more despite all the alcohol numbness that overcame me.

And I had whiskey dick.

So much for being naked.

It was something like 20 degrees outside. The snow was packed in. As soon as I got out of the tub, my nipples shot forward, hard as rocks, and I shriveled to the size of a fleshy coin purse.

"Hu-huh-holeeeeeeeeeeeey fuck it's cold!"

"Um hum, yeeah! It is!" Sofia giggled. Our words elongated with our disappeared sobriety.

We slop-hopped to the back door and back into the house, naked and giggling. The good thing about vacationing in the mountains is that there aren't neighbors to disturb. We could be as drunk and naked as we pleased and there'd be nobody to judge.

"Oh my god, oh my god," Sofia said. "I j-just had the, ummm, fuck. I forgot."

"Remember it when you tell me," I said. My eyes were crossing as I tried to roll them back into my mind to figure out exactly how drunk I was.

"Oh!" she said. Her feet were clumsy and her ankles wobbled as she shivered into some kind of clarity. "I got it! I had the, ummm, ca-raziest think – thought. I think, what if, wouldn't it be fucking crazy if the Gordon, if that's his REAL name, was like whacking off right now watching us on a webcam or something?"

"Pssssht..." my mouth was numb. "Fuck you. He's propubly, probubbly, probably looking at my fucking dick thinking, Woah. That'm big'm."

We both busted out laughing because we looked down at my dick at the same time. It was still recovering from the cold. Nobody'd think that'm big'm.

Sofia wandered away from me and I stumbled around looking for the other bottle of Jack. It was, of course, where we left it. Right next to the front door which we forgot to even close. I stuck my leg out in a stupid attempt at heightening drama to kick it closed but ended up nearly doing the splits and cutting myself in half upwards.

"F-fffuck."

I got up and uncapped the Jack and took a nice, big ol' swig.

"What? What? Larry!" Sofia sounded confused – not confused like she had no capability of understanding what she was confused about but confused like she was on the verge of understanding but never quite there. "What? What? Wow. Woah. Larry!"

"I'm c-coming, I'm c-comin'," I said. I kept the burps down. It was a bad habit. It just meant I'd be hauling ass to the toilet in the middle of the night to throw up. Burps relieve pressure. When you feel a burp, fucking burp.

"Larry, Luh-luh-lurry!" Sofia's eyes were half closed with bags under them. Her left eye looked upward and her right eye further rightward. She was hammered. "Wha-wha-what's erse ser?"

"Wh-whut?" I asked.

"Whaz erd sare?" She pointed to the placard on the door. It took me awhile to quit seeing double but I was able to make it out.

"Oh no room," I said, "Ohnor's room, do not enter."

"Owner's rum," she repeated nodding. "Fuck him. We paied f-f-for therse, we go whern we wantgoer. I, I, I thought we lived in a freedom country."

I raised my hand for a high five.

"Fuck yeah," I said, "Fuck him. This is America." I spit felt gas rising up my esophagus and barreling for my mouth but I caught it

before it became solid and spewed all over Sofia. "I almost threw up," I said, and then I did. Chunks of vomit sprayed the owner's room door. I could see that a little river of bile started to flow underneath the door and into the room.

"He-heeere's our chance," I said. "We's gotsa clean it up now, righ? We's gotta go up in!" I pointed, eyes nearly shut, at the puke spilling into the forbidden side of the door. Sofia nodded her approval. I nodded back and then winked because I noticed we were both still naked. "Fuck yeah," I said and pointed at her landing strip.

Sofia grabbed for the door knob but it was locked of course.

"Ki-kick it down, you fu-fuckin' pussy," she said and pointed to my dick.

"It's c-c-cold, shu-shut up."

I kicked and kicked but never really got the kind of drunk strength I expected myself to.

"We need to j-j-ump inna it," I said. I made the motion with my shoulder into the door. "Three counts," I said.

One, two, three...

The door came off its hinges and we landed inside.

"I think my butt's got sp-splinters," Sofia said. She had a good laugh. I was still overly concerned about my lack of length.

The laughs wore off – they always do – and we were still splayed on the ground atop a broken door staring at the ceiling. We were only staring at a very specific part of the ceiling – the small five inch radius our eyes could focus on. It wasn't until I stood up until I saw anything else.

"Sh-sh-shit!" Sofia said. She was still on the ground. I was up with my hands on my waist like I was getting ready to work or something.

"What?"

She didn't say anything. Instead, she pointed. Her teeth were chattering and her chin quivering. She looked scared.

I followed her finger to where she was pointing until she burst out laughing.

"God damn it," I said.

"No no no no no! Keep looking! No! Keep looking! I'm sorry! I'm sorry! It's just —" She burst out laughing again.

I looked where she was pointing though.

There was a very fat, pinkish man lying face down into a hammock made of chicken wire strung up from the ceiling. He was completely naked with little dribbles of blood coming out where the wire met his skin. Hanging in front of his face was a water dispenser and a kibble dispenser – the kind you see in hamster cages.

"Shit fuck dude! We gotta g-guh-get you downer there!"

"No, no, no-no-no!" he said. "He's watching..." his eyes darted all over the room as if whoever was watching was everywhere. "He's watching me."

He swung himself toward the kibble dispenser. His tongue came out just enough for the kibble to land on it. When he swung away a huge metal paddle came down from the ceiling and spanked him in the ass.

I couldn't help but laugh.

"What's so funny?" he asked. "That fucking paddle has nails on it!"

Sure enough I could see the blood dripping off about twenty nails on the paddle that hung from the ceiling.

"Every time, every time, every time I get a drip of water or a kibble meat, every time I swing that paddle comes and punishes me," he could hardly say it without welling up with tears. "I don't even know how to enjoy it anymore."

"Wha-what?" Sofia asked. "The kibble or the spanking?" He didn't answer. He swung for water and got spanked for it.

"The bastard. The bastard! The bastard makes the kibble extra salty so I can't help but get water. Two spanks! Two spanks, guaranteed! What kind of monster!"

Sofia and I looked at each other. We knew we weren't dreaming or hallucinating but we couldn't help but think something about our drunkenness was making this more bizarre than it really was.

That moment of drunken wonderment between us was cut short the sound of tinkling.

I looked up. The fat guy was pissing and moaning.

"Woah, oah, woah," he kept going on and on. "That bastard! The fucking son of a bitch! He's watching! And he's loving every minute of it! He puts something in the kibble and water to make it burn when I pee. He loves this! He loves to torture me!"

"Luh-luh-lissen, dude." Sofia got to her feet. Her knees buckled and her eyes fluttered as she stumbled forward, too close to the stream the poor guy was producing. "Listen, you know? Like, right?"

Sofia slipped on the piss puddle and fell to the floor.

"Ow, man," she moaned. "That's f-fucked up!"

"We go gotta go gotta get you out of here man!" I said.

"No! No!" he wriggled in the net. Each movement was accented by a rusty creaking of the chicken wire net. "He'll find me. He'll find me and then he'll kill me. And then he'll kill everyone I've ever loved."

But it was too late for reasoning. I hopped on one leg and flailed my arms trying to grab onto anything I could hold onto to tug his ass down. I was too drunk.

I lost interest when I noticed Sofia was snoring. I was jealous. I

hated when she went to sleep without me.

"You," I said pointing to the man, "You. What's your name?" "Ugh, what's the point?"

"Fine, dude. Whatever," I said as I sat down on the floor. "I'm j-just going to close my eyes for a second."

And that was that. I fell asleep immediately.

My head felt like someone was continually swinging a mallet inside of it. My eyes wouldn't focus. Sofia looked like she was in worse shape than I felt. She was scowling at the floor and dry heaving. Like Adam and Eve after eating the forbidden fruit, we were suddenly aware of our nakedness and ashamed in front of the naked stranger dangling above us.

"Hey, guys," the naked stranger said, "Maybe he isn't watching. Maybe he won't kill me. Maybe you could help me down." He swung himself to the kibble dispenser and sucked out a piece. His ass was greeted with the paddle. "Ow!"

Sofia looked to me.

"I'm scared," she said. "The door is off its hinges. Once Gordon discovers that, we'll never get our deposit back."

"Yeah," I said. "Unless he knows we know something we shouldn't know." I pointed at the stranger and winked at Sofia. She smiled giving me a look like I was the smartest guy in the world and she was the one going to grad school.





Geni was chewing her cereal half reading the ingredients and half checking to see if I was looking at her. It was one of those mornings – the type you wake up annoyed with each other not sure why.

"You look beautiful this morning," I said.

She kind of grimaced and moved the cereal box in front of her face and grunted.

"I'm going to open the window," I said. "The air is too stuffy." "Uh-huh."

I got up and went for the window, making big exaggerated and goofy steps to try to get that cereal box face to smile. No luck. I opened the window.

"If it's going to be one those kind of days just tell me so I don't bother to —" $\,$

A crow flew in, interrupting the placement of my foot into my mouth. The crow flew in and squawked like a lunatic, flapping its wings and knocking our photos over.

KILL IT.

"What'd you just say?" Geni and I both said at the exact same time.

"You heard it, too?" she asked. I nodded.

KILL IT.

"What?" I asked.

Geni pushed herself away from the table and took off her shoe. She stood up in her chair and swatted at it. She missed every time it flew near her.

KILL IT.

And, bam! She hit it and it went flying across the room, hit the wall, and slid to the ground.

FINISH IT.

Geni got off the chair and walked towards it. I followed close behind. We stood over the struggling bird as it flapped itself into a stroke on the ground. Geni lifted her foot to stomp but as soon as gravity pulled her foot down, the bird jolted into the air again shitting and squawking all over the place. It was having seizures in the air, its tiny

eyes hanging by threads out of their sockets.

KILL IT.

Geni swatted at the resurrected bird without much luck. It flew around raging in our little house. Its squawks were tiny symphonies of people screaming, crying, and begging for life. Every sound out of its beak was human misery; the crow was not earthly.

KILL IT.

Something came over me. My body tingled and numbed and, without my command, my legs moved for the kitchen. The spatula, for whatever reason, seemed like a good weapon. I grabbed it. As soon as I did, the crow perched itself on top of our fridge and, with its eyes dangling towards the ground, its empty sockets stared at me. It dared me to swing. Its eyes were human and knowing.

I swung.

The crow's body met the linoleum floor with a thud. We both stood over it as it squirmed. The defiant squawking was gone, replaced by breathy gasps of white noise as if from an old TV stuck on channel three. I was still holding the spatula with a death grip. I felt its wooden handle dig stigmata into my palm.

FINISH IT.

"It's not so fucking hard," I said to Geni but my voice didn't sound like my own. It didn't even feel like it came from me. It came from below me. I glared into her eyes but hers glared with equal intensity back. Staring at her, I stomped on the crow. It gave out one last whoopee cushion gasp and its eyes finally unthreaded themselves from its skull and its sockets shut but not before I looked into them to see my kill.

GOOD, GOOD.

Just like that, my trance was over. The numbness disappeared and my palms got so sweaty that the spatula slipped out of my hand and onto the floor, right next to its victim.

I looked at my palms. They were bloody from my grip.

We both returned to the table.

"That was weird," Geni said.

"Hah, it was, wasn't it?"

She moved the box of cereal out of my view of her face.

"You're so damn beautiful," I said.

She blushed a little, smiled a little, and put her spoon into her mouth. Even the sound of her chewing made me happy. I let myself get lost in my own mindless observations of her spoon going without effort into her mouth, like God created her to be the perfect representation of someone eating. If Cezanne could paint moving pictures, his masterpiece would be her.

"Raaaawwwwr!"

Geni's eyes darted for the window. A mean looking, malnourished, black cat jumped into the house. Claws out, it tore through our sofa and screamed.

KILL IT.

We both turned to each other like we'd been through this before but it felt fresh. It felt new and terrifying. The voice rattled the windows and shook our pictures off the shelves.

"Did you just say something?" I asked.

"I thought you did."

We both knew neither of us had said a damn word.

The cat inched over to our table hissing. Dried blood coated its eyes and foam dried up around its mouth. With bared teeth, the cat lunged at my leg.

KILL IT.

The tingling was back. Geni got out of her chair, picked it up over her head, and threw it at the cat. But the cat was nimble. It darted into five directions at once. It was a black fog of movement – untraceable, but everywhere and nowhere.

I was calm. I stalked the cat as it tore black holes through our house. My focus was sharp but I had nothing to kill this thing with.

Geni was screaming. Not a scared, hopeless, pathetic scream but one with demonic passion as she broke the chair into pieces with her hands. She stood up, eyes empty, with a piece of splintered wood in each hand. Her breathing was heavy – short gasps. Without looking at me, she passed me a piece of wood.

"Don't fuck this up," she said. I nodded.

It barely registered that her voice was three octaves lower and in harmony with the white noise that descended into my thoughts.

KILL IT.

The cat was hiding under our bed, scared and violent. Its eyes stared into us with human-like communication. The cat knew death was on its way but like any creature worth its evolutionary history, it fought

inevitability. It hissed and pawed with claws out at the air as we stalked forward.

I got onto my hands and knees. As soon as I did that, the cat swiped its claws across my face. I stood up. The blood was flowing, sure, but it felt as refreshing as a dip into the lake. I was an animal strengthened by my missteps and pain. My tongue lapped up my own blood. Geni stared into me, shaking her head.

"Don't fuck this up," she said again. I nodded.

KILL IT.

She was on one side of the bed, I was on the opposite. I grabbed the mattress and threw it into the air. It wasn't my own strength.

IT'S THE BLOOD.

The cat's fur stood up and it scrambled into Geni's walk-in closet. Geni, with her weapon raised into the air, stalked close behind.

Each one of my steps were reverberating bass drums in my skull. My eyes rolled back into my head, my tongue tensed like steel. The white noise took over.

Geni lifted her piece of chair into the air and swung hard.

"Raaawwwr!"

The cat ran out of the closet and into the kitchen. Its eyes rested on the carpet.

NOT ENOUGH.

KILL IT.

Our bodies turned for the kitchen in a procession. The cat lost all its fight but in its mouth was what it came for; the crow. Even without eyes, the cat's bleeding sockets stared into ours and the distortion and screaming in my brain got louder.

KILL IT.

Geni marched forward and swung. The cat was thrust toward the wall, gasping and blind, squirming and unaware of my final blow.

GOOD.

The white noise faded. Our weapons fell to the floor. We looked at each other. A feeling of rejuvenation came over me. Every nerve in my body was on fire and every muscle was relaxed.

"What a mess," Geni said to me.

"I know," I said.

We walked back to the table. Geni stood; her chair was nothing more than a pile of splinters.

"I'll get another one on my way home from work," I said, mouth full of raisin bran.

"I can get it," she said. "I think I'm the one who broke it."

"How did it break, anyway?"

We both shrugged and continued to eat, gawking at each other as if we just fell in love.

A man's voice wafted through our window.

"Hello? Hello?" he asked. "I'm looking for my cat."

He was a dirty man with a white beard stained with soot and gutter water. His eyes were yellow and bloodshot. He smiled. The few teeth left in his mouth wouldn't be there long.

"I mean you no inconvenience, folks," he said as he leaned through the window. His dirty fingers left marks on our window sill. "I'm just looking for my cat and perhaps a bite to eat."

"Sure! Sure!" Geni said. "Come around to the front door!" I stared at the grime he was leaving on our window.

"Thank you so kindly, miss," the bum said, "I mean you no nuisance."

Geni unlocked the door. Just like a cartoon hobo, he had his hat in his hands and his gaze downcast at the floor.

KILL IT.

Geni slammed the door and locked it. I felt my vision go in and out of blackness like a strobe light. My eyes were locked on the trail of dirt this bum was leaving all over everything he set foot on.

"Woah, woah," the man said, "I'm sure sorry if I've caused you upset!"

But it just sounded like baby talk to me. The white noise was back, my own cold blood on my face began to flow again. His eyes were unbelieving, unknowing, like a stupid animal.

KILL IT.

"I was just looking for my cat, folks!"

Geni trance-walked to our room and then came back out with a Louisville Slugger. She played softball after work. It could have used some nails. She threw it to me. I caught it, still staring this bum in the face. I swung a good swing but the bum stood there like it wasn't his first time his head was a baseball.

His chin quivered as his eyes welled with tears.

"Please, please, folks. Please. I've got a mama and papa long dead. I got a family somewhere. Please, please, let me go in peace." He lurched forward and fell into me with a hug.

"I know it don't seem so good, mister, but I don't wanna die."

He slobbered into my chest and the tingling disintegrated. I was back on earth. One look at the baseball bat in my hand and I was crying, too.

"I'm sorry," I said.

Geni was wailing and banging her head against the floor.

"What is happening?" she said over and over again but it wasn't too long until –

KILL IT.

we snapped out of it. A deafening soundlessness rested in between my ears and there was that pathetic hobo snotting all over my shirt. I looked at the windowsill and the black grime he left all over it. I tightened my clench on the bat.

His eyes were confused, still totally unbelieving of his fate.

"I was just looking for my cat."

He was just looking for his cat.

KILL IT.

Time fast forwarded and my bat met his skull hundreds times before his body jerked around like a dying fish.

His eyes stayed open, still in disbelief, like an animal.

GOOD.

The white noise was gone.

Geni was screaming and sobbing into the fibers of our carpet. I was shaking, shivering cold, until the urge to vomit overcame me.

She crawled to me, clutched me in her arms. We rocked together as we came to terms with the shock.

"Why, why, why?" she kept asking until her words became nothing more than a drone and finally nothing at all but white noise.

She grabbed my face and made me stare into her eyes. Dumb, unbelieving eyes. Like an animal.



Whack!

Detective Lou Tenant's knuckles crashed into the Mule's teeth. The Mule looked down at them on the floor, then back at Detective Tenant and grinned a bloody, near toothless, smile.

"Say something, you little shit!"

The Mule stared, expression blank and vacant. He turned his head away in advance of another punch.

"This fucker doesn't even scream!" Lou shook his fist, pained from its ineffectiveness, and took off the towel he had wrapped around his knuckles.

"I think he's a mute. And he's deaf," Detective Ennis said from behind the darkness of the corner. He sat in silence watching Lou's method unravel. "I know sign language."

Lou looked through him. He heard what Ennis had said but he wished he hadn't.

"Yeah?" Lou said. "So do I! My knuckles are bleeding I know it so damn well."

Ennis got up and signed some questions like

What is your name? How do you feel?

The Mule looked at him almost as confused as if he were speaking.

"Maybe he speaks Spanish sign language," Lou said.

Que es su nombre? Como estas?

Still nothing. It was no use.

"My sign language worked better."

"Lou, Jesus Christ, he doesn't even scream. Doesn't that bother you?"

"Not in the least. Get out of my way."

Lou shoved Ennis aside, picked the knuckle-towel off of the floor, wrung it out, and wrapped it around his right fist again. Lou liked to inflict pain, damn the results. If interrogations went nowhere, Lou was happy.

Lou backhanded the Mule and punched him in the nose. The Mule kept grinning.

"No one will cry any tears for these guys. They come across the border, assholes filled with drugs, sell them to suburban white kids, and all of the sudden these kids have pink eye. It's an epidemic, Detective," Lou said and grunted a little laugh as he kept working on the Mule's face.

"This guy," Lou continued. "He can speak. He's just a fucking drug mule who's too well trained to say a god damn word."

"Lou... Jesus Christ, man. Al Qaeda breaks easier than this guy. This guy can't speak. He can't hear. He has no words for anything in his head."

"Spare me the bleeding heart pussy stuff," Lou said.

"He's probably from a small village where nobody is deaf and he never learned how to speak or communicate in any way."

Lou turned away from the Mule who was bound to his chair, bleeding, bruised, and sweating but, for some reason, still grinning like an idiot.

"Get off this sob story, bullshit," Lou said. "I'm sick of protocol. I'm sick of bullshit."

"When his lawyer gets here, we're fucked."

"What's he going to say to the lawyer? The lawyer will have to beat the shit out of him to represent him! Leave the room if you're not a fan of what I'm doing here."

Detective Ennis shut up and sat back in the dark corner of the interrogation room. He watched, but only to cover his own ass at this point.

"Not another word about this fucking mute!" Tenant said as he turned back to the sculpture of flesh he was remolding. "You're going to fucking talk."

The Mule looked through Tenant, he wasn't grinning anymore. He just stared at the emptiness behind Lou's eyes.

Whack!

Lou grabbed the legs of the Mule's chair and threw it over. He hopped onto the Mule's chest and straddled him as he choked him.

"Talk! You son of a bitch! Talk!"

The Mule stared into Lou's eyes, steely cold, with no words in his head to describe his hatred. Lou was crazy too and stared right back. He stared at the bloody corners of what used to be the Mule's mouth. Then it happened.

The skin flaps where the Mule's lips had been punched off moved. Lou stared at them, waiting for words to emerge.

Fuck you, they said, punctuated with blood.

Lou turned to Ennis.

"Did you hear that? Did you hear what this druggie said!?"
"I didn't hear a god damn thing," Ennis said. "You oughta get a

hold of yourself. You're going to kill him."

Fuck you, you pussy. You American pig.

"Keep talking, you son of a bitch!" Lou's hands revisited their grip around the Mule's neck.

Kill me, motherfucker.

"Lou!" Ennis yelled. "He's not saying a damn thing! He's a fucking mute!"

"Fuck you!" Lou yelled and tightened his grip.

You cock sucker. You son of a bitch.

Lou stared into the Mule's eyes until the Mule let out his last breath. He didn't notice Ennis trying to tear the two apart. He didn't notice Ennis screaming for him to stop. He stared into the Mule's eyes until everything behind them was gone. Until the wordless defiance behind them had burned out.

Your wife is a whore. I know every curve and flab of her body, you pig. I've counted her bruises. I've kissed her black eyes. I fucked her real good.

"He won't shut the fuck up!" Lou yelled and punched the dead man in the face.

But there was nothing but the echo of the Mule's blood-choked gasping in the room.

You can't kill me.

"He wouldn't shut up," Lou said.

"Lou! You son of a bitch! What the fuck do we do now?"

Lou snapped out of it. He unwrapped the towel from around his knuckles and dropped it on the Mule's still opened eyes. They reminded him of his wife.

"I don't know," Lou paused. "You're a good cop, you'll figure it out. I gotta get home early and make sure my wife ain't sucking anybody's dick. Surprise her with flowers, you know," he said and walked out of the room.





Ffffwip p'tut-p'tut, fffffffwip p'tut-p'tut

The folks of Goldtown pointed and laughed at Old Charlie as he rode in on the saddle they'd sent as a peace offering to their warring neighbor town of Damnsville.

He rode into Goldtown triumphant. His eyes fixed straight ahead – cold, mean, accepting of fate.

He smiled and waved as if their jeering didn't bother him one bit.

Ffffffwip p'tut-p'tut, ffffffffffwip p'tut-p'tut

"Them's damned idiots in Damnsville bought it! Can you believe that? They rode into town thinking they'd be peace! Bunch of crosseyed, hairless, dumb asses!"

"Heh-heh," Old Charlie smiled and coughed, "heh-heh, fuckers."

Old Charlie and the town council sat around the Puttering Quiver with whiskey in their glasses and cigars on their lips. The room was smoky and although it was full, it was quiet. Damnsville, their town, had been at war for longer than anyone could even remember. There was no beginning to the killing, it just was. It was as obvious as the universe: the beginning ain't that important. The important is that it's there and had always been there and will be there as long as anyone at that table was alive.

And just like the universe, this war'd kill you and not give a damn.

"Gotta do something 'bout them son' bitches out in Goldtown," Turlock, the youngest council member there, said. He spit some tobacco and took another puff of his cigar.

"This is all we ever meet about, ain't we got real problems to discuss? Ain't the people elected us for real problem solving like, where in the hell did all these buzzards come from an' where in the hell did the comfort ladies we sent for get lost along the way? China ain't as far as the book learners say, y'know," Peter said.

"Those problems work themselves out," Old Charlie said. He got up from the table and hitched up his pants. "My boot is dirty. See that? That's mud and manure. I s'pose I could leave it there and let it grow and smell but then my boots'd have no traction. I'd slip on dry ground, see what I'm saying?"

The council nodded their heads but their eyes betrayed a vacancy of their minds.

"What I'm saying is that there'll always be comfort ladies whether they be the ones we send for or they just wander in over after

they hear how much gold we think we'll get next year. But Goldtown is mud. You gotta keep scraping them off your boot lest you slip and trip and break your dick. You get what I'm saying now? You break your dick and those comfort ladies can't do anything with it."

"Ahhhh..." the council said.

"That's what I like about you Old Charlie," Turlock said, "You think with your head. We're damn lucky to have a sheriff like you!"

The saloon doors burst open. A boy came through them dragging a wooden crate behind him.

"Hey! I knows that kid! He was my family til his family up and moved to Goddamn Goldtown! Let's cut his ears off!" Turlock said.

"He's but a boy." Old Charlie shoved Turlock back down to his chair. "You can't cut the messengers ears off anyways. Then they can't hear the message you need to send back."

"Always thinking two steps ahead of me," Turlock said to himself. "I'll never be half the sheriff you half-are."

The boy was covered in sweat and his shirt was threadbare. He was caked in mud.

"What's the deal here, boy?" Old Charlie asked. "Goldtown ain't but ten miles away."

"Shut up and open the package," the boy said. "I don't talk to no damnies!" He spit at Old Charlie's boots.

"Just like the snooty sons of bitches that birthed him. The shit don't fall too far from the asshole," Turlock said.

Old Charlie waved his hand in the air to tell everyone to shut up.
"He ain't but a boy, full of all the dumb pride that comes with

being a boy." He turned back to the boy. "What's in that crate of yours?"

"As much as my daddy protested, Sheriff Schiefer said it was time for peace so he had the finest wood worker and the best saddle maker in all the territories fashion up a peace offering. I don't know why. My daddy said there was a reason he left Damnsville far behind but I guess the sheriff is the sheriff for an altogether just as wise reason."

Old Charlie turned to the council at the table and nodded his head with a smile.

"Pour this kid a drink. He speaks with assuredness. We should honor that at least."

Peter brought the boy a glass. The boy refused.

"I don't drink the piss water y'all call whiskey."

Turlock got up from his seat and drew his gun.

"I'm tired of all the damned backtalk coming out of that prepubescent turd's mouth!"

Old Charlie didn't turn to face Turlock. Speaking was enough.

"Turlock, you set yourself down. This boy brings peace. You can't welcome peace with a loaded gun."

A smile came upon the boy's face, the biggest shit-eating grin anyone had ever seen.

"If y'all truly want peace with your superiors over in Goldtown, Old Charlie here has to ride his best horse into town next week on this saddle. Then and only then will we know that peace is desired between both our towns and this war with no beginning and no end will finally end," the boy said.

"Well, this boy surely can talk," Peter said. "Probably end up one day as a politician. A fat and fine mayor or something. Maybe even president!"

"We'll mull this over, boy," Charlie said. "You'll get your answer in a week."

The boy tipped his hat at the council, spit damn close to Old Charlie's boots again, turned and left.

Old Charlie turned to the council.

"Turlock and Peter, get this fucking thing opened. It better be a gold plated saddle or something."

Charlie took a seat at the table while Turlock and Peter took hammers to the wooden box. Charlie poured himself some whiskey and lit another cigar. He kicked his feet up on the table and watched.

Once all the hay was moved out of the way, it was there. Sure, the saddle was gold plated just as Old Charlie had hoped but there was something else.

"Looks like a wooden cucumber!" Peter said. "How the hell you s'posed to sit on that with that thing bouncing around?"

Turlock slapped Peter across the face.

"You fuckin' imbecile! You're not s'posed to sit around it. You're s'posed to sit on it."

"I ain't ever seen a seat like this," Peter said.

The saddle sat on the ground. It was gold plated and the seat was made of fine leather. Any rider would know this was made by a master craftsman. But in the middle of all that artistry, was a bouncy wooden cylinder connected to the saddle by a creaking bed spring.

"What'd you s'pose this means?" Peter asked Old Charlie.

"It means I drop my pants and ride this thing into town."

"You can't be serious. This is war, Sheriff!" Turlock said.

Old Charlie closed his eyes and shook his head.

"Do you know how old I am? I've been coughing my lungs out for the better part of the past ten years. I've had two sons killed in this war that I don't even know why we continue fighting. They killed my dog last time. I don't have anything left but my orphan grandson."

Turlock slammed his fist into the table.

"This ain't a peace saddle, this is a fuck you saddle! When you ride it, they's fucking you!"

"I'm no cretin," Old Charlie said, "but this is the only way. We can end this once and for all."

"I reckon Old Charlie's drawn hisself up a good plan," Peter said.

"Here's what we'll do," Charlie said.

The men sat back down at the table.

"Pop-pop," Timmy said as Old Charlie entered the house, "Where have you been?"

"Now, Timmy, you know it ain't right asking all manner of questions to an elder."

"Pop-pop," Timmy said.

"Yes, what is it?"

Old Charlie started taking off his boots. They were caked in mud. He'd need to clean them before he rode the peace saddle into Goldtown.

"Why do we keep fighting Goldtown?"

"Because they hate us."

"But why do they hate us?"

"Because we hate them."

"But, Pop-pop, why?"

Old Charlie lit candles around the kitchen and took a seat next to Timmy.

"Listen, sometimes it's just that simple. They hate us, so we hate them. We hate them, so they hate us. There ain't an efficient way to look back and figure out who started this mess. This mess is just what we were born in and who are we to change the place the good Lord saw fit to put us?"

"I'm hungry," Timmy said.

"It's as if you ain't even listening to me. It's dark out. You'll eat tomorrow. Now go to bed."

"All the dynamite strapped on around Sweet Bess?"

Old Charlie looked as good as a corpse in a coffin. His face was clean shaven, his mustache greased up. He wore a dancing suit, good for keeping the ladies interested, and his boots were shining clean.

"All set, boss," Turlock said and handed him a match.

"Remember, you're aiming for the sheriff."

Old Charlie unbuckled his belt and took off his pants. He was fit for a casket from the waist up and fit for a whore house down.

"You'll take care of little Timmy, won't you?"

Turlock nodded.

"Sure will."

Old Charlie hopped on the saddle.

Fffffffffffffwip

He wriggled a bit until he was as comfortable as he could be and struck his spur to the Sweet Bess's ribs. They were off.

Ffffffffwip p'tut, p'tut, ffffffffffffffwip p'tut p'tut

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Ffffffwip p'tut-p'tut, ffffffffffwip p'tut-p'tut

"Them's damned idiots in Damnsville bought it! Can you believe that? They rode into town thinking they'd be peace! Bunch of crosseyed, hairless, dumb asses!"

"Heh-heh," Old Charlie smiled and coughed, "heh-heh, fuckers." He spotted the sheriff clutching his belly and turning red from laughing so hard.

"Sheriff Schiefer," he said. "Do we have peace?"

Schiefer didn't answer. He was damn near suffocated.

"Well, I oughta have a smoke then. You want one?" Old Charlie held out his hand but Schiefer couldn't accept or deny. He was choking on his merriment.

Old Charlie struck his match against his boots, lifted it to his cigarette, and the whole town square blew to Hell. There were body parts all over the place. Schiefer was surely dead and Old Charlie, too, but the boy who'd brought over the peace saddle sat between two severed limbs and stared at the peace saddle.

It was gold and shimmering in the sun. It was made by a master craftsman. It was still completely intact.

Ffffffffwip p'tut p'tut

What was left of Old Charlie's ass cheeks dangled around the top of the wooden cylinder. The boy stared at them with pure hate. The war would rage on, that was for sure. As long as this boy was there to stare at the peace saddle amongst all those he had known, the war would be on. It might be delayed awhile but it'd be back. It always was.

And no one'd be ever able to answer how it all started but somewhere near the middle of it was a man named Old Charlie and the peace saddle that was intended to fuck him, fucking them.



Andrew Hilbert lives and works in Austin, TX. He is the author of *Death Thing*, published by Double Life Press and the winner of the Austin Chronicle's Best of Austin 2015 for an author reading. His next novel, *Invasion of the Weirdos*, is forthcoming from Double Life Press.

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