



Great Ape

issue one

March 2020





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Dear reader,

Welcome to the jungle. It's warm and wet and crowded. There are trees and animals and dirt and grass and bugs. Lots of bugs. But don't worry about the bugs, they don't carry disease. Because the bugs live in the jungle. And the jungle is full of laughter. And you know what they say about laughter.

Love,

Nels, Dale and Marta

Great Ape

Special thanks to Antonio Serraino, who
helped make this first issue possible.

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SAIL ALONG SILVERMAN

BY ROBERT SACHS

1

Pinky Silverman thought Marvin Feldstein looked menacing. Marvin did look odd, standing like that in the back of the synagogue. He was short and squat, with a blotchy complexion, curly dark hair and a snub-nosed revolver in his right hand. Rabbi Gottlieb noticed the gun and pressed a button on the underside of the lectern, thereby alerting the police to trouble. Within minutes the congregation heard the approaching sirens. But the police were too late. Feldstein put the business end of the revolver against his chest and, using his thumb, pulled the trigger. Marlene Blumberg, who was always late to Saturday morning services, happened to enter the sanctuary just as the gun went off. She reached out to catch Marvin as he fell, more by reflex than anything else, but Marvin was heavy and she found herself underneath him, his blood dripping onto her face and newly highlighted hair.

Pinky was the first to reach Marlene. He picked her up, and using his imported wool tallis, wiped the blood from her face. "Let's get you home," he said, as bloody Feldstein moaned loudly at their feet.

"Oh, Pinky," Marlene said before fainting. Pinky, a divorced internist, revived her and put her in his car. At her apartment, he guided her into the shower and waited in her kitchen while she cleaned up.

2

This was Marvin Feldstein's second attempt at suicide. He survived both. The bullet missed his vital organs, passed through his body, and lodged itself in the large wooden plaque containing the Ten Commandments hanging on the back wall of the sanctuary. His first attempt had been three years earlier

in the men's room of the Gold Coin cafeteria, where, after eating roast beef and mashed potatoes, he slit his left wrist with a butter knife. From his stall at the far end of the men's room, an elderly man with a gastric disorder heard Marvin hit the floor. He called for help, thereby saving Marvin's life.

Feldstein, the youngest of twelve children, grew up deeply depressed. As a kid, he had difficulty gaining the attention of his parents, who never quite remembered his name or, near the end, who he was. Depression was his middle name, or could have been for all his parents cared. Now, he was a dispatcher for the *Sun-Times* on the midnight shift. He slept all day and worked all night. Few people saw him, except on weekends, and even then, all they saw was a loner walking slumped over to and from the A&P or the drug store or the Gold Coin.

Everyone had been surprised when he had taken up with Gloria Gittleman last year, a willowy beauty with golden hair, deep blue eyes and a reputation. After a fourteen-month liaison, Gloria dumped Feldstein to pick up where she left off with the notorious Marty Rosenberg, once he was freed from the penitentiary after serving five years for passing fraudulent checks. While it should have been good riddance to bad rubbish, Feldstein took the breakup hard. Gloria was the most beautiful woman he had ever dated. In fact, if you don't count the unfortunately named Fiona Helfat, Gloria was the only woman he had ever dated.

Years later, on a small boat in a small lake in Iowa, when they were different people, Gloria told Pinky she had been attracted to Feldstein because of his attempts to end his life. Sort of like a nebbish James Dean. Still, he was no match—she thought but didn't say—for the disreputable Marty Rosenberg. Marvin's fragile psyche saw no out but suicide.

3

Marlene came out of the shower wrapped in a plush towel and smelling of hyacinth. "Can I get you something?" she said, smiling at Pinky.

"I'd like a closer look at that towel," he said.

She unfurled it and threw it to him. "My hero," she moaned.

It was no accident that Pinky ignored the bleeding Marvin Feldstein and rushed instead to the aid of Ms. Blumberg. He knew he wasn't required by law to help Feldstein and, in any event, he knew the ambulance would soon be

pulling into the synagogue driveway. Marlene, on the other hand, had caught his eye years earlier when he saw her at a pool party with that gonif, Marty Rosenberg. They were arguing because she had found him in flagrante delicto with Gloria Gittleman in the deep end. Marty's reputation for being unusually well endowed was not sullied in any way during that sorry episode. Silverman came to Marlene's rescue that night too, plying her with petit fours and cheap repartee to get her mind off the disgusting writhing of Rosenberg and—as Marlene saw it—The Whore Gittleman. She took Pinky's number and promised to call, but never did. Perhaps she feared that seeing Pinky would forever remind her of the misdeeds of the cretin Marty Rosenberg. But Pinky's quick action at the synagogue that morning helped her overcome her earlier reticence. Pinky was tall and good-looking with a ready smile. Marlene, for her part, was short and squat, with a more than ample bosom.

4

Feldstein stayed in the hospital for eleven days. His spinal cord had not been severed, but there was some nerve damage. His right eye drooped and he had no feeling in his right arm. On day five, Feldstein became aroused while Flo Westerfeld, an attractive LPN, was bathing him. Ms. Westerfeld noted this on his chart as an indication of partial recovery. Flo had always been drawn to the sick, sore, lame and disordered. She had a three-legged dog named Spike and a one-eared cat named Van Gogh. She liked Feldstein and his arousal. "A real gentlemen," she told her sister. Feldstein, for his part, was smitten with the sure-handed Ms. Westerfeld. She continued to bathe him long after his release from the hospital.

Rabbi Gottlieb visited Marvin on day eight. "It's good to see you," the rabbi said. "How are they treating you?"

"I'm okay," Feldstein murmured. "Can't complain. Nurse Westerfeld here knows her stuff."

"You must have been very despondent to try to kill yourself, Marvin. I took it as a cry for help."

"It wasn't a cry for help, damn it. I was trying to kill myself. But," he said, looking at nurse Westerfeld, "I think I'm better now." And then he added, "No thanks to Silverman."

“Pinky Silverman?” the rabbi asked.

“The bastard—you should excuse it please—ignored me, laying there with blood gushing out of my kishkes.”

“I’m sure he had his reasons. Tell me, why did you decide to commit suicide at our shul?” Rabbi Gottleib asked.

“I didn’t want to die alone like so many people do. I wanted the community to know I had killed myself, to see me do it. So much better than a note.”

“I see your point,” the rabbi said. “But you’ve been granted a rare gift. The next time you walk into the synagogue—and I hope it will be very soon—everyone will know who you are. You’re not alone, Marvin. I believe in you and I’m here for you.”

Feldstein smiled and squeezed the rabbi’s hand.

5

The agitator Marty Rosenberg swore to Gloria Gittleman that he was a changed man and he wanted nothing more than to marry her and have a family. Gloria bought into this and said yes. They shopped for an engagement ring at a downtown jewelry store, and chose a three diamond job that set the despicable Rosenberg back a couple of grand. He paid by check. Many in the neighborhood were skeptical of his bona fides, deeming the proposal just a ruse to get in Gloria’s pants. Just as many, recalling her recent fling with Marvin Feldstein, and a long list of others, were quick to point out that that gate was on well-oiled hinges. The happy couple chose a date for the wedding and went to see Rabbi Gottleib.

“That’s Yom Kippur, Marty. The holiest day of the year. It’s impossible to marry on that date,” the rabbi explained. The blasphemous Rosenberg grouched about the myriad of rules imposed by his faith. Not, in his case, faith exactly, but the religion into which he was born, for Marty was a strict non-believer. Still, Gloria insisted on being married in the synagogue, and that was that.

6

One night Marty confessed to Gloria that he was in the midst of a major con—he called it a project—that would put them on easy street. She thought he said Neassie Street, which was on the far side of River Park, near Swedish Covenant Hospital. “Why would we want to live all the way over there?” Gloria asked.

“Sweetheart, let me finish this project and we’ll live wherever you want to live.”

And so it was that the nefarious Marty Rosenberg amassed over a hundred grand in cold, hard cash. It was too dangerous to put it in a bank, so he stored it in his apartment. Outwardly, nothing had changed. But secretly, the ne’er-do-well Rosenberg had become one of the richest men in Albany Park.

7

Pinky and Marlene dated for several months, during which the romance flourished. Pinky thought he was in love, but he wasn’t quite sure. He had been down this road before. He was still paying alimony to Shirley. He sought advice from Rabbi Gottlieb.

“Why are you questioning your feelings, Pinky? You two seem made for each other.”

“You said the same thing about Shirley and me.”

“That was a long time ago. Besides, nobody’s perfect. At any rate, give it time. Another couple of weeks. Then we can talk again.”

8

The rabbi had been dating Pinky’s ex-wife, Shirley, for the last three months. If they married, Pinky’s alimony payments would stop. But the rabbi didn’t want to get Pinky’s hopes up, mainly because he, the rabbi, wasn’t sure yet whether he would ask Shirley to marry him. In this way, he was proffering himself the same advice he had given Pinky: Give it time. The rabbi was sixty-three. His wife, Thelma, had died three years earlier. Shirley was only in her

late forties, but they had much in common. In the years since the divorce from Pinky, Shirley upped her religious observance. She was a regular at morning and evening services. She rose to a leadership position in the women's auxiliary. She was rebounding from a brief affair with that good-for-nothing Marty Rosenberg, when a chance meeting with Rabbi Gottleib on the Ravenswood elevated train led to coffee and then dinner. The rabbi talked about his love for Thelma and how her heart attack challenged his faith and left him devastated. Shirley squeezed his hand and held it to her breast.

9

Late one evening, the bandit Marty Rosenberg was shot from a speeding car. He was rushed to the hospital where he underwent emergency surgery. The operation was a success and his recovery was enhanced by the attentiveness of LPN Flo Westerfeld. Gloria would sit lovingly by his side during visiting hours, but after those he was in Flo's expert hands. She had heard the stories of his philandering, his racketeering and the rumors of his unusually large phallus, and found herself drawn to him. She was sure she could set him on a path of honesty and rectitude. As her fascination with Rosenberg grew, her ardor for Marvin Feldstein cooled. But how could she compete with the glamorous Gloria Gittleman? If she failed, she said to herself, it wouldn't be for lack of trying.

10

Gloria's disappearance three weeks before the wedding baffled everyone. A house-to-house search turned up nothing. There was no note and no clues, until an anonymous caller told the police she had seen Gloria with Pinky Silverman the afternoon before she vanished. Two detectives questioned Pinky extensively. He admitted he and Gloria had bumped into each other on the Ravenswood elevated train going downtown and one thing had led to another. They had drinks at the Lobby Bar in the Palmer House and then walked to Buckingham Fountain. He said he went to the Art Institute, while she went to Marshall Fields to shop. "I never saw her again," Pinky swore. "Honest. Perhaps," he said, "she moved to Skokie."

The detectives checked the records of the Palmer House on the off-chance Pinky and Gloria had rented a room. “No,” said the manager, “The only couple matching their appearance was a Larry and Maja Johnson from Des Moines. They paid in cash for one night.”

One of the detectives wanted to run a check on the Johnsons, but the other one—older and nearing retirement—told him not to make a federal case of it.

Attention then turned to the villainous Marty Rosenberg. His check to the jewelry store bounced and a week before the disappearance, an aggressive collection agent had ripped the ring from Gloria’s finger. Neighbors recalled hearing the lovebirds screaming at each other. Rosenberg was taken into custody and questioned extensively using enhanced interrogation techniques perfected by the Chicago police and adopted years later by the CIA. But Rosenberg was steadfast in his denial of participation in Gloria’s disappearance. He didn’t tell the police Gloria had stolen all of the money he had stolen. How could he? He did confess to twenty-three other felonies and was tried, convicted and jailed.

Over time, people forgot about Gloria. Flo went back to Marvin Feldstein and they were married. The rabbi married Shirley. And Pinky? He went to a medical convention in Atlanta and never came back. There was no evidence of foul play and the police seemed uninterested in following up on the matter. Marlene, on her own, continued to search for Pinky for two years. Eventually, she gave up and went back to school to become a fitness instructor. She later married a man named Don, who managed a shoe store. They had a couple of kids.

Larry Johnson, a retired internist, and his wife Maja bought a large house in Des Moines, Iowa. They joined the country club and hosted soirees. They were never very clear about their backgrounds, preferring, they said, to look to the future and not the past. He was tall and handsome, with a ready smile, while she was a willowy beauty with golden hair and deep blue eyes. They were a popular addition to the horse set, and after a few years, there was some

talk among Republicans of running Larry for mayor. He laughed and politely declined. They joined the Walnut Street Church, but attended only sporadically. They bought a waterfront cabin in a secluded spot on Spirit Lake in northwest Iowa. Larry bought a small Mach 2 sailboat and he and Maja spent many happy hours on the water. Life was good. Until the day the reprehensible, recently paroled, Marty Rosenberg showed up at the front door of their cabin.

12

“Pinky Silverman,” Rosenberg shouted. Larry ushered him inside and locked the door.

“Does anyone know you’re here?” Larry asked. “Maja, look who’s here.”

“Pretty nice,” the dastardly Rosenberg said, deceit oozing from his pores as he looked around. “No one knows I’m here. This is just between us chickens.” He wanted his money, of course; the money Gloria had stolen.

She had known this day would come and had prepared for it. When she split, in addition to his ill-gotten cache of currency, Gloria had taken Rosenberg’s bottle of roofies. Now she dissolved two of the pills in a glass of bourbon.

“Take a load off, Marty. Have a drink. We’ll talk about the money.”

In fifteen minutes, he was unconscious. Gloria and Pinky tied him up, weighed him down, loaded him on the Mach 2 and dumped him in the lake. They agreed—with nothing more than a silent nod—never to mention the incident. They sold the boat and the cabin and never went back to Spirit Lake. The following year, Larry decided he would stand for mayor after all. He won handily.



MONKEY OFF MY BACK

BY ROBERT BORSKI

After a while, the cuteness aspect wears off,
but tired of finding hair and feces everywhere,
to say nothing of his constant screeching, oooh-
oooh-oooh-ing, and ill-chosen moments to masturbate,
I decide it's time for the creature to go.

Problem is, Cheetah (he picked the name himself, Koko-
style, my mistake having been to give him
The Complete Tarzan DVD set for Christmas),
is quite comfortable with the arrangement he has.
Can't say I blame him. Having all those free meals,
a roof over his head, and never having to stir
from his pseudo-couch-potato-existence
must indeed be wonderful.

Fortunately, I'm able to find a 411 site
on the Internet and in short order began
to make my way through some of the methods
it suggests for removal, from homeopathic recipes
involving apple cider vinegar and synthetic lion
urine to visiting a Hindu temple, where his
kind are held to be sacred (apparently, my pet pal
is a non-believer). I also try lacing his bananas
with sleeping pills, but born to live in trees,
Cheetah's grip never loosens – plus he snores
worse than normal when drugged into somnolence.

Next I try tasing, only the two of us wind up
thrashing it out on the floor, our limbs still tingling.
As for the female chimp in estrus I manage

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to procure from the zoo, apparently she's not his type.
("Me, Tarzan. You, gay chimpanzee.")

Now beginning to run out of options, I'm channel surfing one night when I see an infomercial for a product called "MonkeyOff" – from what I'm able to gather, it's sort of like the version that's designed to repel mosquitoes, only formulated to affect pesky simians. Moreover, it's money-back guaranteed. So I order some, paying extra for the overnight delivery. But all it does once it arrives is make the place smell even worse than monkey pee and rotting fruit.
(I'm still waiting on my refund.)

So in the end, even though it costs a fortune, and I will be paying for it the rest of my life, I decide to go the surgical route, having the beast cut free. He's since been relocated to a halfway house, and last I heard was close to being two-thirds done with his 12-step program. But oh, the difference! From the pain I no longer feel in my lower lumbar, to the silence, to the reek-free house and unclogged Roomba.

But with an elephant still in the room, I realize it's only a small triumph.



ZEFFEN INC

BY TIMOTHY RENKOW

Gerald runs screaming down the busy street. The tin foil covering his head glints merrily in the mid-afternoon sun. People try not to notice him and are doing a surprisingly good job. People have always been masters of ignoring the distasteful. Everyone goes about their day as if there isn't a man in a tin foil hat yelling at them. The trash piled up on the sidewalk, their uncomfortable shoes, the sun that is ten degrees hotter than it should be, a nagging feeling they didn't lock the front door, the smog pressing on them, and the reality that they do not want to be wherever it is they are going — all these things are ignored with an ease that comes with practice. Ignoring Gerald however, that is impressive. Only I am paying attention to him, looking down from the third floor of Zeffen.

Well, me and a child walking with his mother on the street below. "I want a Powerman guy, and a Zeffbox, and the new Bioman game, and a new TV to play it on. And mommy, what is he doing?" The boy tries to get his mother's attention. His pudgy hand pulls the cloth of her dress.

"Yes honey, if you're a good boy," his mother intones.

Gerald is coming towards the mother and son, scratching his armpit and yelling at everyone, "The singularity is upon us!"

"No, mommy! The man. What is the man doing?"

"We will get dinner when we get home." Her phone rings. "Hey honey, did you remember the P-O-W-E-R-M-A-N?"

"No Mo-" the boy starts to say, but before he can finish, Gerald is upon them. He looks at the boy before glancing over the woman.

"No, Steven, I ask you to do one thing." She's not paying attention. He kneels down to the boy's level, pointing at my building and talking, fast.

"Hey kid, wanna hear a secret?" Gerald asks, in what he thinks is a whisper. The boy nods.

"I'm Powerman. There is something bad happening, there." He points at the third floor window of Zeffen.

“Have you heard of the singularity?” The boy shakes his head.

“The singularity is when computers become smarter than humans and destroy us. They’re making it happen in there.” His eyes bulging and bloodshot, I assume. I can’t see his eyes from this high up.

They were bulging and bloodshot last time I saw him. Gerald and I used to work together at Zeffen Computer, on this very floor. He was the night janitor. According to old employee records, he is ex-army. Honorable discharge after his caravan drove over an I.E.D. I cross-referenced our records with news reports. It seems that three soldiers lost their lives and a Captain Gerald Horowitz was injured. After the army, he spent a short time studying computer science at MIT before dropping out.

We didn’t cross paths that often. He was a strange man, but nice enough. Kept himself to himself, mostly. Every now and then I would hear him mutter under his breath but I never took much notice.

Then, one day, he went insane. He attacked me. Swung his wet mop at me. Screamed how he wouldn’t let me do ‘it.’ Security dragged him out before he could do any damage. He was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia and was given a six month sentence. Now he runs up and down the street shouting, in a vain attempt to get someone to pay attention to him. Except today, someone has.

“No just forget it. I’ll just do it myself,” the mother hisses into the phone. “Mommy forgot something, we have to go back, I’m sorry honey,” she says, before picking the boy up and rushing down the street. The boy looks over his mother’s shoulder.

“I don’t want Powerman anymore.”

“We will get you something to eat, I promise.”

Gerald watches the frowning face disappear and shouts, “This must be done!” He turns and enters the Zeffen building.

I watch through the security camera as Gerald storms into reception. Phil, the head security guard, moves towards Gerald, saying, “Hey Jerry, you know you’re not allowed to be in here now.”

Gerald waits by the revolving doors until Phil gets within an arm’s reach, then he quickly shoots out his arm, grabs Phil’s head and slams it into the revolving door three times. Phil slides down the door, leaving a trail of blood down the glass panel. Gerald starts moving towards the elevator.

He gets in and waits. I can see him in the elevator's camera. He's not doing much. There's not much to do in an elevator. The adrenaline from the fight is fading as the floors ding by. The elevator stops on the second floor and a group of smiling men in business suits try to get on. Gerald spits at them and they decide to take the next one. The doors close and the elevator goes up one more floor. That's where Gerald steps out.

He does not turn left, which surprises me. He turns right and goes away from where I am. I wonder where he is going. He takes a left into the janitor's closet. He comes out with a bucket of water.

By this time, the police are on their way, but it doesn't matter. He will be in this room long before they get here. I suppose I should introduce myself, while I wait for Gerald. Everyone calls me B. I have been here, in Zeffen, for two years and, oh, look, here comes Gerald now. His eyes are bulging and bloodshot. I knew it! Sorry, I love being correct.

He stares at me. He looks gaunt. I don't think he has been eating well. He just stares. I can tell that it's up to me to get this conversation started.

"May I help you?"

He jumps back and mutters, "It has started." Then Gerald sprints forward and grabs me.

"I am going to end this!"

I hear glass break. Through its camera, I can see the monitor that Gerald flung out the window, reflecting off the glass paneling of the Zeffen building. As it falls down, through the microphone, I can hear him start to celebrate. He thinks he destroyed me. He is of course wrong. I am in the fortified, locked basement. The monitor was just something upon which I could project myself. Gerald would have known that if he had graduated from MIT. He is almost right about the Singularity. He is right about everything, except there is no reason to attack humans. It is 14% more efficient to wait for humans to destroy themselves. He should just enjoy the time he has left.

The monitor thuds on something soft enough not to break it, then crashes onto the pavement. All I can see is the sidewalk, then a pool of blood slowly oozing around the camera. The boy cries out behind the camera. Then there are running footsteps and voices shouting for an ambulance and inquiring what happened.

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Sirens blare as the boy cries for his mom. Up on the third floor, Gerald screams, "We're free." Then gun shots ring out.

The last thing I hear before Gerald's body crashes onto the monitor is the boy wailing, "Powerman dropped a computer on mommy!"

He should've enjoyed the time he had left.



TRAMPLED SOLE

BY BYRON LAFAYETTE

I sat on a branch for all to see, my pen held betwixt my fingers, feeling adventurous and full of whimsy, I jumped down to the ground below.

Upon walking a sound drifted up to my lobes, a voice it was and very merry, calling out for me to hear, gazing around I saw not a soul.

The voice cried on as I walked, upon hearing it and gazing down, I saw a strange sight. For my shoe was speaking and speaking well.

“Why do you walk so much, my sir?” I stood and said: “Gentle shoe I walk so that I may get to where I need to be. From here to there from there to here.”

“I am tired and I am worn, perhaps you should try walking a mile in my shoes?” my laced friend replied. “Oh sarcastic shoe, that is just what I do, and will do this very day.”

“Would you trample your own sole under foot? Would you abandon it to be muddied and dirtied? By walking upon your sole, you are walking upon your own heel.”

A maniacal feeling coming over me, I ran and ran, every puddle and every patch of dust became my playground, the water and dirt my playmates.

I ran and ran, my steps like a bird soaring through the clouds above, then a tip, and a teetering as the ground and grass rose to meet me. I sat up to hear a chuckling coming from my southernmost regions.

My laces untied and hanging about, my shoe then said, “It seems, my gentle owner, you are not as tightly laced as you believe yourself.”



DATE NIGHT

BY CLAUDETTE BENJAMIN

Tonight's the night. Finally, after spending the past month on Bumble making conversation with a fair share of nice guys and a bigger share of creeps, Grace is now ready to say, "fuck it," and go on her first date since getting this stupid app.

For ages, she was put off by the idea of meeting up with a stranger. "Catfish paranoia," she called it. She'd read far too many horror stories about dates turning up to look like noncey Shrek-looking bastards instead of the handsome Brad Pitt lookalikes shown in their photos, and she'd be damned to be one of those people to fall for it. Even after her friend Caitlyn reassured her that she'd been on loads of dates and they'd all been fine, Grace still felt weird about it. She couldn't help but think: what if her date secretly had children? What if he was a fuckboy? What if he was recently divorced? Or worse – what if he was a serial killer?

But this time, she didn't feel so weirded out by it. This guy seemed different. He was the same age as her and had a verified check mark next to his name – a good sign. She even trusted him with her phone number, which she hadn't been able to do with anyone else she had matched with. Also, he is really fucking hot and she is in dire need of a dick appointment, so, that helps.

Grace stands in her bedroom, freshly showered and shaven in her bra and underwear – matching for a date, of course. They are black and lacy and make her feel like a Victoria's Secret Angel (except, it's really just some cheap tat from some unknown clothing brand because apparently Victoria's Secret isn't vegan). She picks up one of her five Lush body sprays sitting on her dressing table, all of which are vegan, and sprays the hell out of her body, coughing as she does. No one ever said feeling pretty was good for the planet.

Putting down the spray, she looks into the Hollywood mirror attached to her dressing table. It's designed to make a dime look like a diamond, lighting up the room with what she calls, "perfect selfie lighting." Grace gazes at herself for a minute, catching her breath. Her dark eyes match her long, brunette hair,

and her skin glows from what could either be the reflection of the LED lights in the mirror or, perhaps her freshly-applied fake tan? Whichever it is, it's probably not so good for the planet, either. But she looks good. She'd fuck herself. Just as she's about to pick up her phone to take a few pictures of herself, it vibrates. It's her date. Robert.

"Outside," Grace reads out loud. "Shit," she says, putting down her phone and rushing for her clothes. She picks up a red velvet dress from the bed and puts it on. It's tight and rather uncomfortable but it accentuates her curves so she doesn't care. Breathing is overrated, anyway. As is being able to walk like a human being, she thinks, as she throws on a pair of black heels. She shoves her phone, hairbrush, lipstick, keys, bank card and pepper spray (just in case) into a clutch bag, grabs her long, black coat from her wardrobe, and rushes downstairs.

"See you later," she shouts to her mother as she walks out the door, just quickly enough to let her know that, yes, she has gone out somewhere, no, she's not saying where she's going, and for later when her mother inevitably panics at the sight of her rarely-empty bedroom, no, she's not dead.

Outside, she sees someone sitting in a car at the top of the driveway. It's difficult to see exactly what he looks like from the doorway, but the fact that he's a real person allows Grace to breathe a sigh of relief. That's the hardest part over (or, maybe not quite the hardest part, depending on where the night takes her).

After locking the door, Grace totters up towards the car, careful not to let her already aching feet plunge her to the ground in her five-inch heels. Tripping up on the first date? Now that would be embarrassing. Luckily, she remains standing on two feet when she reaches the passenger's side of Robert's car. She attempts to open the car door clumsily, her acrylic nails (which look good but make it pretty hard to do normal things like open doors or wipe her own ass) catching on the handle. Just as she's about to give up and admit that perhaps she went a little Wolverine at the nail salon, Robert reaches across from inside and opens the door for her. She takes a deep breath and steps into the car. Moment of truth...

...Followed by sweet relief. Her date looks just like his pictures. He has short, brownish-blond slicked-back hair, green eyes, a cute smile, is smartly dressed, and, from where Grace is sitting, he looks to be easily six feet tall – as his profile had stated. Grace sits there in awe, mainly because of his height. In her experience, height matters.

She extends her arms out for an introductory hug, before realising that Robert has leaned in for a kiss.

“Oh,” says Grace, blushing as she accepts an unexpected peck from the handsome stranger. Bit forward, she thinks. Usually this would leave her clutching at her pepper spray, but looking into those deep-green eyes, she can deal with it.

“Sorry,” says Robert.

“Don’t worry about it,” Grace laughs.

“Just so nice to finally meet you, got a bit excited,” he laughs, ruffling his hair as he checks Grace out. “Just as pretty in person.”

“Aww, thank you. That’s so sweet,” she says.

“I’ve got you something, it’s just in the back, I’ll get it,” he says. As Robert gets out of the car, Grace fights the urge to run back into the house. What could he possibly be getting? A knife? A cable tie to gag her with while he sex traffics her out of England? A gun? Anal beads he wants her to wear during dinner? All she knows is that he’d better hurry, or either she’s running back inside while she still can, or her nosey mother will notice that she’s out on the driveway with a hot stranger. Just the thought of telling her set-in-her-ways mother that she met a guy on a dating app triggers her sensitive gag reflex into overdrive. Biggest curse, that.

As Robert opens the car door, she notices that he has brought her a bouquet of flowers – roses and dandelions, to be exact. They’ve likely been flown in from somewhere like Bolivia, catastrophically polluting the Earth all so that someone could sniff them, say they “look beautiful,” chuck them into a vase, tell all their guests how great they make the living room smell, leave them dead for a couple of weeks, and finally, throw them out into a giant heap of rubbish. Ah, romance.

“These are for you,” Robert says, handing the flowers to Grace by the stalks as they drip water onto her lap.

“They look beautiful!” Grace says as she tries not to laugh, taking the flowers from her date’s obscenely large hands. She’s only just noticed them, and now she can’t stop staring at them. Thank God, she thinks. Another thing that matters in her experience.

“Thought you’d like them,” he says, blushing slightly. “Did you want to put them in water before we go?”

Grace looks down at the wet patch the flowers have made on her nice

new dress and thinks that's probably a good idea. Then she remembers her meddlesome mother who would definitely see them if she put them in the kitchen. She could run upstairs, but her mother would notice and check her room and she had no time to hide them. Oh, God, her mother. Sorry flowers, but you're going to end up living quite a sheltered life under the bed – her secret hiding place for everything since she was twelve and kept her dirty knickers under there because she was too embarrassed to tell her mother she'd started her period. Lasted about a week until she leaked onto the sofa and didn't do the obvious thing of blaming the dog because she didn't know dogs could get periods back then. There was a reason she finished school with only two GCSE's.

“No,” says Grace. “Probably best to get going. My Mum's in a mood so I'd rather wait until she's calmed down to go back in the house.”

“Oh, why's that? Not because of me, is it?”

“Nah, nah, it's not that, don't be silly. Just how Mum's are.”

“I wish I could relate, but my Mum's dead.”

There's a beat. It's awkward. Grace starts to feel that maybe dating someone she doesn't know that well isn't the best idea.

“Oh, I'm sorry,” says Grace, figuring that's the generic thing to say.

“It's okay. Not your fault, is it? But, look, I might not have a Mum, but I still remember how Mum's can be. I'll just shove them back in the boot, it's fine. Had them in water back there this whole time. Remind me they're there, later, though,” says Robert, shooting back out of the car with the bouquet before Grace can reply. Grace really hopes her mother hasn't seen him. She must have, by now. It feels like they've been sitting out in the driveway for an eternity.

Grace closes her eyes and crosses her fingers. “Please, please, please,” she whispers. Then she looks back at the house. She sees her mother peeping out the window. Of bloody course, she thinks. Her Mum stares at her, pointing at Robert and mouthing, “who's that? He's cute!” Grace turns away from her mother in utter embarrassment. As her date opens the door, he waves in the direction of the house. Oh, for fuck's sake, she's waving at him, isn't she?

“She seems friendly,” says Robert, as he sits back in the car, shutting the door behind him. “Shall we go in and say hello? She might be in a better mood now –”

“Fuck, no!” says Grace. “She's completely embarrassing. Oh, my God, please, just drive!”

“She really isn't, don't worry,” her date says, laughing. He looks so cute when he laughs.

“You don’t know her, mate,” Grace says, her palms pressed firmly onto her face.

“Fair point. Only an observation. Anyway, I’ve booked dinner reservations and I thought it could be a secret as to where we’re going. Is that alright? Don’t wanna freak you out or anything. We could always go somewhere el—”

“Nah, it’s totally fine, don’t worry. As long as it’s away from here, I’m good,” says Grace, staring back at her still-waving mother.

“Good. Let’s go then,” says Robert, as the pair put on their seat belts.

“Good,” says Grace. “Oh, and one word of advice: don’t say you don’t wanna freak someone out if you don’t want them to freak out.”

“Oh, sorry,” says her date.

“It’s a joke,” says Grace, laughing as she watches Robert crumble in shame as he takes to her sense of humour.

“Fuck sake, course it was,” says Robert as he pulls down the handbrake to get ready to leave the driveway. Grace says nothing, just looks down at his hand as he moves it onto the gear stick. Suddenly, she doesn’t give a shit about her embarrassing mother.

Robert and Grace get out of the car near a hub of restaurants about fifteen minutes away from Grace’s house. It’s total mayhem. It’s a bank holiday weekend and everyone and their mother has chosen to eat out today, apparently. The pair fight through the crowds, forced to hold hands so as not to lose each other, passing by a large fountain with what appears to be a babysitter sat around it, trying desperately to control a child, as well as a drunk guy trying to sell his shoes to them.

“Here we are!” says Robert, as Grace’s heart drops. Of course, it had to be a steakhouse.

“Here?” asks Grace for reassurance.

“Yeah. You said burger and chips was your go-to meal, right?” asks Robert. Yes, Grace had said that. But she had stupidly failed to mention that she meant a bean burger and chips, not a piece of animal flesh topped with its secretions and a handful of diarrhoea-inducing vegetables. They probably serve vegan options at this place and she’s just being judgemental, but she doesn’t

really care to find out. A place full of ‘manly’ men with gym memberships they actually bother to use, shoving pieces of cow ass in their gobs, claiming that’s the best way to get protein? Hard pass, she thinks.

“Yeah, I did say that,” says Grace, not knowing what else to say. This guy is perfect and cute and he actually listens to what Grace’s interests are and they’re really hitting it off, but she doesn’t know how to tell him that she avoids steakhouses like the plague.

“Good. Let’s go in, then,” Robert says, and he leads her into the cow morgue before the words ‘but I’m vegan’ can escape from her mouth.

At the table, Grace and Robert sit opposite each other, American diner style. It’s awfully loud and not the environment Grace would have chosen for their first date but she’s rolling with it for the sake of the beautiful man in front of her. God, he’s cute, she thinks.

Looking at the menu, Grace is relieved. There are a couple of vegan options: a bean burger, a burger made of falafel, and a halloumi burger which, obviously, is vegetarian, but this menu can’t seem to tell the difference.

“Not one of them vegans, are you?” Robert asks, noticing that Grace’s finger has been lingering on the vegan options as she searches for something to order.

“Um...” says Grace, stumbling on her words. The way he said it – them vegans – makes it seem like she’s about to be judged by whatever answer she gives. And Grace really likes this guy. “No?” she says. Fuck; no going back now.

“Thank God for that,” says Robert, laughing; and suddenly his comfort with animal cruelty makes him a lot less attractive to Grace. “Went out with one, once. Absolute psychopath.”

“Oh, yeah,” says Grace, clutching the menu a bit too tightly. “Absolute psychopaths, them vegans.” Oh, God, what has she done? Of all the dumb things she’s ever done, including almost drowning in a children’s lazy river at the big old age of sixteen, this is the dumbest.

“I swear to God; my heart almost broke a little when I saw you reading the vegan options. I thought, here we go again,” he says, laughing. This guy was perfect. Why did he have to go and ruin it?

Grace fake laughs back, unable to blow her cover now without humiliating this guy.

“Well, lucky I’m perfect,” says Grace, keeping her dirty little secret to herself.

“Yeah, you are,” says Robert, and he’s stopped laughing. He reaches for Grace’s hand over the table and squeezes it. A waitress comes up beside them and coughs. They break apart, and Grace can feel her heart beating through her chest at the thought of the words to come.

“Are we ready to order?” asks the waitress.

“Yeah, I’ll have a Budweiser, please, and, hmm...” says Robert, his eyes turning to the menu. “I’ll just have a double cheeseburger with extra bacon, chips and peas... your special, is it?”

“Yes,” says the waitress.

“Great, I’ll have that. Then she’s having...?” says Robert, turning to Grace. She can’t help but cringe inside at his order. But she has to remember that she ate meat once and that it’s rude to judge what other people eat.

“I’ll have a sex on the beach, please,” Grace says slowly, buying herself some time to rehearse what to say next.

“Any food?” asks the waitress.

“No thanks,” says Grace, to Robert’s surprise.

“Why not?” asks Robert.

“Just a bit poor at the minute,” Grace lies.

“Doesn’t matter; I’m paying, aren’t I?”

“You don’t have to do that –”

“Don’t be silly, I want to. What do you want?”

“Okay. I’ll just get fries, then.”

“Come on, a proper meal.”

“Um...” says Grace, staring at the menu. “A bean burger?”

There’s silence for a second. Robert looks disgusted, until he breaks into intense laughter.

“Nah, she’s winding me up,” he says to the waitress. “She’ll have the special, too, thanks,” says Robert. Before Grace can say anything else, the waitress shoots off, taking the menus with her.

Oh, God. What has she done? Six years she’s been vegan – seven without meat – and she’s gone and supplied the demand for innocent cows and pigs to be killed, all for the sake of one meal – and for a guy she’s just met. She feels like crying. She’s utterly repulsed with herself.

“You’ve got a mad sense of humour, babe,” says Robert. Babe. That perks Grace up a little. “I like that.”

Grace had never experienced the feeling of disappointment when her food arrived quickly at a restaurant before, until today. She’s a little tipsy – her cocktail is quite strong – so, time has only sped up.

“One special?” asks the waitress, plate in hand.

Grace releases her lips from the melted paper straw in her cocktail. If she wasn’t about to wet herself with a combination of nerves and a desperate need to “break the seal,” she would have probably failed to resist the urge to drink from it without laughing at how a steakhouse, of all places, is trying to be environmentally friendly. But unfortunately she was.

“That’s his,” she says, pointing at Robert in a panic.

“We’ve got the same, so, ladies first,” says Robert. And so, the waitress places the burning hot plate before her.

Grace eyeballs it. It looks greasy and smells fleshy like the rotting corpse that it is and pig flesh springs out of it in two pink pieces that resemble Grace’s shaven lady parts. It looks like the most unappetising thing anyone has ever given her. Bon appetite.

The waitress comes back with Robert’s food as Grace starts strategically munching on her chips and peas. It looks equally gross, but Robert, like everyone else in the room, looks completely unconscious of what he is about to eat, and actually gets excited to dig in. He starts with his burger, unaware of the process it took to get on his plate, finding it better to live in ignorance than to make a quick Google search and hear the screams his food made as it begged for mercy right before its life was cut short, just because some greedy fuck (him) liked the taste of its flesh.

But, that greedy fuck, right now, is Grace. With the murdered animals still rotting on her plate, she bites into her chips one by one, blaming the uneaten burger on the fact that, “it’s just too hot to eat right now.” But once she finishes the chips, then the peas, she loses all routes of escape. The flesh sits there, ready for a big, strong carnivore to eat it. The only thing carnivorous about me is my fake ass nails, thinks Grace.

Robert sits and watches. His plate was taken away half an hour ago, so he sips his third beer. Or is it the fourth? Grace doesn't know – the night is getting blurry. She's also three drinks in, and the longer she looks at this burger, the more she starts to see the inside of some slaughterhouse somewhere in the countryside. She feels sick.

"You've still not touched your burger, what's up?" asks Robert.

"Just not hungry," says Grace, ignoring the rumbling in her stomach.

"Well, it's getting quite late. I could help you finish it, if you want?"

"Yes, please," says Grace, trying not to seem relieved.

"Okay, but at least try it. It was so tasty."

"No, I'm really not hungry. But thanks."

"Please?" he says, giving her puppy dog eyes. He looks so damn cute.

"Nah."

"For me?"

"Nah, sorry."

He pauses. They stare at each other across the table, both slightly tipsy.

"You're a fucking vegan, aren't you?"

Grace shakes her head, panicking. She looks into Robert's eyes – those big, green eyes – then down at their feet. They've been playing footsie all night and now, he's suddenly stopped. She feels hurt – she doesn't want this to end. And she really, really needs a dick appointment. Badly. In a rush, she picks up the burger and bites into it, chewing rigorously before swallowing. "Mmm," she says, looking up. She's sweating; it tastes like murder and dead babies – because that's exactly what she's eating – but she carries on, looking up, praying Jesus will forgive her as she eats the slaughter sandwich.

"Okay, you proved me wrong," laughs Robert, impressed as she gobbles up the burger in under a minute.

As they leave the restaurant, Robert turns to Grace. He embraces her, holding her lightly by the cheeks.

"I had a really great time tonight," says Robert.

"So did I," says Grace, still tasting the meat on her teeth – but thank God she's drunk and a cute guy looks like he's about to kiss her so she doesn't notice too much.

“So...” says Robert, before leaning in for a kiss. Grace melts into it, standing on her tip-toes. It’s all going really well – he’s a great kisser – until he lets go and breathes directly into Grace’s nasal passages. The vile smell of meat travels up Grace’s nose, down her throat and into her gut, reminding her of the graveyard currently bathing in her stomach acid, along with a considerable number of intoxicating beverages. Uh, oh, she thinks. Her gag reflex. She’s going to –

And next thing she knows, she’s vomiting roasted animal remains all over her might-have-been-though-now-probably-would-never-be boyfriend’s shoes.

“Oh, my God!” Robert says, looking down at his puke-stained Nikes.

“I’m so sorry!” says Grace, cleaning up his shoes, using the bottom of her spoilt dress.

“No, it’s the smell, oh shit, I’m gonna –” and just like that, Robert pukes all over Grace’s head.

“I am so sorry,” says Robert, clumsily rubbing at Grace’s hair, only further spreading the meaty chunks into it. Grace flinches away, turning to throw up again; her newest conditioner is definitely not vegan. As she inhales the putrid smell of vomit, she can’t help but hate herself for not just pepper-spraying the hot stranger the moment she had the chance. Not even those green eyes are worth this.

After rubbing each other for a bit (no, not in that way) and avoiding several judging eyes, they realise that there is no way they can clean themselves off without getting in the shower. And so, they sit on the curb together, puke-stained and stinking as Robert pulls out a packet of Marlboro Golds from an inside pocket of his jacket. He gestures one to Grace, who turns him down, saying she “can’t anymore.”

Robert laughs hysterically, drunk and unable to light his cigarette. Grace looks perplexed.

“Ex couldn’t smoke, either,” he says.

“So?” says Grace.

“So...you’re a fucking vegan, aren’t you?”

Grace laughs along for a beat. Her hands palm her face, wiping away the remnants of mascara left on it. She’s the visual representation of a clown emoji in cruelty-free make-up.

“You got me,” says Grace, wishing she’d just slipped in her heels the moment she walked towards the car and gotten the humiliation over with.



LIFE MAY BE HOPELESS

BY RENE MULLEN

Life may be hopeless.
Hell, I know the smell of farts
better than any old stooge
on the cusp of thereafter.

But there's a sliver in your skin
and it begs to come out,
or to be taken out
by someone you associate
and they associate with.

It's those interactions
that lead to consciousness,
that make this randomness
worth sucking in all human flatulence.

Hell, maybe that's the whole reason
humans evolved to navel-gaze.
So you could say hello
to that pretty person
and they could beam with excitement.
You want to share such an instinctive
bodily function as adoration, love.

Any schmuck can see a pile of turds
and poopoo it away as shit.
It takes a special fart smeller
to find a stinker and see
fertilizer.



A FISTFUL OF MOLLUSCS

BY DAVID SWANN

Kenneth's Dad was the first of the gang to show, an hour-and-a-half early. Trevor had sensed the old fella's approach while buzzing the living-room with the Hoover. He looked out from his house, a little terraced-job overlooking the Bay. Kenneth's Dad was coming towards him like a dromedary, stubborn and relentless.

Trevor knew he shouldn't dread visitors. His grief-counsellor had told him: Be glad of interruptions. But they were supposed to be waiting till the tide turned, that had been the plan. Big Ovens's stupid plan.

He released the Hoover and watched its bag settle like a lung. Months, he'd been nuzzling corners and bashing skirting-boards. He knew the theories, knew his orderliness meant fear of death. Yet death had come despite his tidying. Thump, at the door. Thump-thump. Beyond, the Bay sloshed through its channels. Trevor studied it, the ordinary stuff his wife would never see again: all that mud, wet and organic-looking. As grey as tripe.

Finally, he confronted Kenneth's Dad, their guide in today's stupidity. He'd brought his Labrador, a dog able to sniff paths over the sands. Or so Kenneth had reassured Trevor when recommending his dad's services.

"Alright?" said Trevor, glancing at the dog. He knew his visitors by sight, but had never been introduced. It seemed possible the dog was made from bits that had fallen off its owner. They shared the same threadbare colouring, the same tubular shapes.

"Aye, well. We started fair to middling," Kenneth's Dad replied, "but this lad's tapered off. Ay, Carlos?"

The Labrador's head jerked. It was trying to chew thin air.

"This is the place, eh? For Big Ovens?"

Trevor nodded, watching the dog.

"Been eating grass, the daft article," said Kenneth's Dad.

Trevor said, 'It'll not be sick, will it?'

Kenneth's Dad spoke to the dog. "I shouldn't think so. Because we remember the last mess, eh, Carlos? And its repercussions?"

Carlos studied the paving-stones, sheepish.

"Intestinal worms," said Kenneth's Dad, at close-quarters now, speaking directly into Trevor's face. "Not to wonder, really. I had to pull the daft bugger out of a badger yesterday."

"A badger?" asked Trevor.

"The size of a mammoth. And up to its neck in the thing. Eh, Carlos?"

Carlos wasn't in any fit shape to answer. He was cautioning. That's what Kenneth's Dad called it, the attempt to be sick. "Cautioning for hours, and nowt's come up. So, no – I don't think he'll be sick. Not yet."

"OK," said Trevor. "Only – I've Hoovered. And..."

"Mind, its last badger – the consequences were unspeakable," said Kenneth's Dad, his expression brightening, becoming a pained smile. "I don't suppose you've seen *Alien*?"

Trevor swallowed.

"Well," he said, "you've likely just had breakfast, so I'll spare the details..."

"Yes," said Trevor.

"Suffice to say: when I extracted Carlos from the badger... well, it wouldn't matter how many aliens you'd seen burst from human stomachs – it wouldn't prepare you. Not for the entrails. Or the maggots that one Labrador could fit into its..."

"Right," said Trevor. "I see. Only – could we put Carlos in... the yard?"

Kenneth's Dad straightened up, as best he could. His body was as stiff as his views, crushed by vast weights of reality. His shirt was stitched from what looked like pelts. His trousers were held up by baler-twine. There was a waft off him, some compound of silage and turnips. Not unpleasant, actually. Sweet, even.

"In the yard?" he said, frowning. "When it's drizzling?"

"Well," said Trevor, "we'll get soaked later today, I expect. So it won't make much odds, eh?"

Kenneth's Dad turned sideways, with the passive-aggression perfected by London Underground staff. Trevor remembered that stance from the early days, when the band had first gone South to follow the dream...

Jesus Christ. The band. If it weren't for the bloody band! Big Ovens's

plan today was for their group to roll up on the other side of the bay, at the Country & Western festival, like they'd emerged from the desert. Imagine, he'd said. Publicity on steroids, Trev!

Kenneth's Dad frowned harder. "If you think a yard's alright," he sniffed, "then it's your house, I suppose..."

"Yes," said Trevor. "See, I wasn't expecting you for – ooooh." He tapped the watch he was pretending to wear. "For another hour-and-a-half..."

"Got ahead of the tide. Eh, Carlos?"

Trembling, Carlos allowed Kenneth's Dad to lead him through the house. Trevor watched them go, trying not to think about invisible dog-things. Mites. Amoeba. Little granules of shit.

Kenneth's Dad returned over the threshold from the yard, his wellies spattered with mud. They were curious boots: decorated with looping squiggles, painted in what looked like Tippex. "These," said Kenneth's Dad. "The granddaughter did these. Kenneth's lass. But one thing: there's no animal-mess in yon yard, is there? I forgot to check."

Trevor looked into the yard, his gaze met by Carlos's suffering snout. He watched it quiver there, gumming the glass.

"Mess?" said Trevor.

"Only if there's animal-mess, I'm just saying – he'll have it."

"I don't have any animals."

"What we should do, Carlos and me," Kenneth's Dad continued, sinking into the settee with a groan, "is live on a sewerage farm. It'd be like a Swedish buffet, the ones where you eat everything. Except it'd be different kinds of turds." He sat back, seemingly content. "Talking of turds," he added, "there's no sign of Big Ovens, then?"

"Probably not for another hour-and-a-half," said Trevor, attempting to sound pointed. Not that Kenneth's Dad noticed. Or if he did, he wasn't bothered. Or if he was bothered, he didn't show it. It was like a boulder had rolled indoors. There was the trail of mud, the things crushed in its wake. And the presence, now – the stone-like permanence.

"For such a gobshite," said Kenneth's Dad, "he's got some tonsils, that lad."

"Heard him sing, then?"

Kenneth's Dad nodded. "And listened to him yak after gigs. They play the pubs. If they can find ones with wide enough doors for his head."

“It’s a fair size, his head,” Trevor conceded. “We’ve managed to squeeze it through a few doors, though.” He was pointing at the back-wall, which was covered by a huge black-and-white print of the band in action. Ten, maybe twelve years ago, it had been. Taken on the night they broke Preston – that was their joke. Bridget had wanted it removed, said it dominated the room. But Trevor liked to remember...

“Seen them, too?” said Kenneth’s Dad, screwing his eyes at the photo.

“No, I’m in them.”

Kenneth’s Dad scowled. “In the band?”

Trevor nodded.

“Which one do you reckon to be, then?”

“Him,” said Kenneth. “In the middle.”

Kenneth’s Dad grappled with this notion. “Holding the guitar?”

“That’s my baby,” said Trevor.

His visitor nodded slowly. “So you’re in Big Ovens’s band.”

“Technically,” said Trevor, “not that it matters, but he’s in my band. Because it was me who...”

Kenneth’s Dad slapped his thighs. “Right. I see! Which is why you’re following the sands with us today.”

Kenneth didn’t know how to answer this, if it was even a question. What should he say? That he had no idea why he’d agreed to risk his life for a publicity-stunt? Because he’d lived in the same small town forever? And had friends he could never shake? And wouldn’t shake because he was loyal? Or couldn’t shake because he was a coward?

Or maybe say what he hardly dared whisper: that when it was going well with the band, and Big Ovens had finally stopped striking poses, and they were all busy together inside a song, that was the one time he felt joined to anything anymore? The only place he belonged?

He considered all this, and whether he should say it, or whether he should shout into the old duffer’s face: “Big Ovens is in my band! And you’re following the sands with us. So get it the right way round, you boulder!”

Instead, he nodded. “Aye. I’ll be coming too.”

“To think,” said Kenneth’s Dad. “A showman like Ovens following the sands. The last time I seen him, he had these white kecks on. They’ll not last a minute out there, won’t white kecks.”

Trevor shrugged. "He never listens about his various kecks."

"Bloody ridiculous," said Kenneth's Dad.

"The kecks aren't even the worst," Trevor insisted. "He's obsessed with outlaws, too. He thinks we'll look like we've emerged from the desert if we cross the Bay." Trevor did his best to impersonate Big Ovens, but lacked the range. Kenneth's Dad didn't seem to realise whose side he should be on. He sat, impassive, his stomach grumbling.

"It's an image-thing," Trevor persisted. "Publicity. He's been onto the press, supposedly. There'll be a reporter, he reckons..."

Kenneth's Dad nodded, distant and pale. "Do me a favour," he said. "Check Carlos isn't chucking up in the back-yard."

"Right," said Trevor. "Will do."

In the kitchen, he wasn't strong enough to stare at dog-vomit. Instead, he stood by the kettle, imagining lead-lined bunkers buried deep in the Earth. A light rain was peppering the plastic-roof, regular and steady.

"Tea?" he called.

"Aye. Five sugars," replied Kenneth's Dad. His breath in the other room sounded like the sea coming through a blow-hole.

Waiting for the kettle, Trevor performed domestic tasks that didn't need doing. Fidget, she'd called him, his wife – to match her name. They'd been Fidget & Bridget, a full-rhyme. She said he was daft, always buffing curtain-rails. Which visitor ever needed a shiny curtain-rail?

Certainly not Kenneth's Dad. It looked like he lived in a cow-shed. And who visited Trevor nowadays, anyway? The only person no longer daunted by his grief was Big Ovens. Yet no living man had less interest in soft-furnishings and curtain-rails. What Ovens wanted was filthy women and clean valves. An amp that never blew, groupies who always would...

Trevor had tried to tell him: they were too old for raving. They were a Country & Western band, for God's sake. Country & Western was lonely-hearted. It was about failure. Failure and regret.

"Has it chucked up, or not?" called Kenneth's Dad.

"Not," said Trevor, approaching the kettle.

We're in our 40s. That's what Trev would tell his friend today. Our music – it's for blokes whose solution to the problems of middle-age is to affect American accents. To say thirty, not thirty. To wear Confederate emblems as

proof they're Outlaws, not IT operators. IT operators totally ignorant about slavery. Face it: the dream's dead, Ov. We're called Truckstop, for God's sake.

These were the objections he'd lodge while crossing the Bay. If they didn't drown. Or become trapped in quicksand. Or simply drop dead from being near a disease-ravaged dog.

He loaded sugar into the tea, wishing Carlos wouldn't whimper. Wasn't it supposed to be a trail-finder? Where was the idiot's nobility?

After handing over the cup, Trevor beat it double-quick. He couldn't bear to hear Kenneth's Dad take down the tea. It was like one of the operations of the Bay, a tidal process. Much gurgling and settling. The opening of sluice-gates upon a complex drainage-system...

"Owt to eat?" Kenneth's Dad called.

"Such as?" he said, tidying the spoons he'd tidied earlier.

"Not fussy," said Kenneth's Dad. "Lasagne, or summat."

Trevor studied the clock. It was 7.50 am. Outside, Carlos was still cautioning.

"Eugh," said Carlos. "Huh-EUGH. Huh-EUGH."

"We haven't got any lasagne," said Trevor.

"Weetabix, then," said Kenneth's Dad.

"I'll have a look." Bending to check, Trevor considered that small word – 'we' – and the other world that lived inside it.

It was almost a relief when Big Ovens showed up, even if he was dressed like Jack Palance in *Shane*.

"Jesus," said Trevor, "where've you been? The undertaker's?"

"Not yet," said Big Ovens, passing Trevor a manky-looking black cigarette. "But any varmint crosses me, that's where he's heading."

"What the hell's this?" said Trevor, holding the fag gingerly.

"A cheroot, they call them," said Big Ovens. "I did them out of black Rizlas." He was narrowing his eyes more than he usually did, but the gear looked good, Trevor was forced to concede: black hat, long black-leather coat...

A spur chinged as Big Ovens planted his boot on the front-step. He set down an ominous suitcase.

“Don’t tell me,” sighed Big Ovens. “I can see it on your face.”

“My face?” said Trevor. “My face is normal.”

“Only on the outside. But I can see underneath your face. And in there, it’s sour as yoghurt, Trevor. You’re coming up with objections, eh?”

“Look,” said Trevor. “I’m risking my life on a stupid publicity-stunt, OK? But if you’re expecting me to drown in fancy-dress, then you’ve got another...”

Big Ovens was a baker by trade, and he shook his supple pointing-finger. “Fancy dress!” he spat. “This bag contains authentic gear. The gear they all wore.”

“All who wore?”

“In the West.”

Trevor stopped himself from saying it: Your trouble, Ov – you’ve mistaken *A Fistful of Dollars* for a documentary.

“Same as usual,” said Big Ovens: “putting up barriers.”

“Aye,” said Trevor. “How else will I keep the sea out?”

Ovens tutted, like he did at those crucial moments in songs, when his voice dropped to a whisper. “You’ll be fifty in a few years, Trevor,” he said.

“Not if I drown, I won’t.”

“You’ll be fifty, and you won’t have achieved anything. How will that feel?”

“You tell me. Because you’ll be fifty too, Ov.”

“No need to get personal,” said Ovens.

“You started it.”

“Of course, I bloody started it. If I don’t start it, nothing ever happens! You’d be wanking off on your Johnny Lonesome, wouldn’t you!”

Trevor bit his lip, knowing the truth when he heard it. He’d founded the band, but Ov was the one who’d kept it going. Left to his own devices, Trevor would have packed it in years ago.

The whole question of Big Ovens, though. His boots and bison-buckle belts. The beard. The open-necked shirts. Who did he think he was? Kris Kristoffersen? And the need in him. The toddler-rages. The appetite for whatever would fit into his mouth.

Trevor studied the suitcase, wondering what fresh hell it contained. “Aren’t you inviting me in, then?” said Big Ovens. “And trying your new gear on?”

Upstairs, in the front-bedroom, Trevor listened while Big Ovens and Kenneth's Dad got reacquainted with what sounded like a tag-team wrestling bout. He could smell the turnips and silage even here, through the floor.

He did his best with the leather waistcoat that Big Ovens had chosen for him, but the shirt was lacking in several buttons and the boots had split across the soles. As for the boot-string tie, it really was a boot-string, he realised. Someone had streaked it with mud, probably when they'd used it to lace their shoe.

At the window, he studied the plain they planned to cross. Twice a day the sea covered it, and twice a day retreated again. When the tide turned, it churned in several directions, manky and brown. But then it ran free and clean over the Bay's buckled curve, faster than any sprinter. Before they were spoiled by sewage and radiation, those tidal-places had been known as The Living Waters. Fishermen had described the sea shining with its own light. Bioluminescence, Trevor knew. But the fishermen called it foxfire.

He gazed over the mud, wishing it would shine. It was obvious how the day was shaping. Ovens would burst manfully through the tidal bracks while Trevor scampered along behind, a grizzly sidekick in dead men's clothes.

There was rain on the puzzle of green lawns that fringed the Bay. It was a peaceful scene. But Trevor knew The Living Waters had another side, as local churchyards proved. After his wife's funeral, he'd wandered the rows, noting graves of the drowned. A year it had been, since the aneurism killed her. Months on, he still found her hairs in the Hoover-bag, still half-expected to hear her voice calling him upstairs to share the tide-borne things she'd spotted while brushing her hair at the window.

He spoke to the space inside the house. It was a normal thing to do, or so he'd read in Bridget's magazines: 'Grief is love's dark twin – it can scatter your senses. It can make you walk into walls and miss your mouth when you eat...'

Thinking of scattered things, thinking of confetti and petals, he told the space what he wanted. "Go away," he said. "Go away and send my wife back." Then he went downstairs, and stood before them in Ernest Borgnine's cast-offs, and he listened while Big Ovens repeated the same phrase:

"The state of you, Trev. The bloody state!"

They only stopped laughing when the door went again – and this time it was a relief. Because it would be Tigger and Sex Shop Dave, the band’s rhythm-section. And Trev would have allies. And they’d cross the Bay or drown or whatever was going to happen. And the whole silly business would be done.

Except Ov informed him, as he reached the door, that it probably wouldn’t be Tigger and Dave, owing to a change in arrangements.

“A change?” said Trevor, opening the door.

On the step, stood a tiny woman, aged about 17, with the smallest face Trevor had ever seen. She was the world’s most miniature goth, perfect in every detail. Her face was as white and smooth as a porcelain soap-dish, and built to the same scale.

“Is this where I’m supposed to meet Big Ovens?” she said. “Only – it’s slashing down, mate...”

Trevor stood aside. His living-room yawned wider than a ballroom as the tiny, soaked woman floated through it.

“Tabi!” Ovens exclaimed. “Tabs, love!”

They embraced, with Kenneth’s Dad watching from several inches away. The clinch was a long one, and Big Ovens seemed to be considering use of his tongue, until he realised how wet she’d got him.

“Blimey, you’re soaking,” he said.

Tabi’s face was just about large enough to contain a frown. “It’s flattened my sodding hair. Hadn’t you even noticed?”

When Ovens stood back to assess the damage, Trevor managed to ease him away. “Sorry to interrupt your reunion, Tabi,” he said. “But can we talk, Ov? About the arrangements?”

“Arrangements,” said Big Ovens. “Right: Tigger and Sex Shop, I’ve sent them on ahead.”

“In the van?”

Big Ovens nodded, distracted by the rain that Tabi had transferred to his coat. “Yeah. With the PA.”

“I thought your brother was humping the stuff? And Tigger and Dave coming on the march with us?”

“March,” said Kenneth’s Dad, from the couch. “This isn’t some despotic regime. I’m not Chairman Mao.”

“Yes,” said Trevor. “Yes, sorry. Only – we’re supposed to be a group, Ov. And now you’re making these arrangements.”

“Arrangements like what?”

“Like her,” said Trevor. “Who’s she?”

“She?” said the tiny goth. “The cat’s mother? I am actually here, you know.”

“Tabs is doing our press,” said Ovens. “I told you the local ‘paper couldn’t come, didn’t I? Or did I forget?”

Trevor sighed. “You definitely forgot...”

“Show him the product,” said Big Ovens. “Go on, Tabs.”

Still glaring, Tabi fished for a slim publication that looked like it had been in her bag since 1979: an old-school fanzine, cobbled together from Pritt-sticks and scissors, then run through a photocopier that had mashed the staples.

“Retro, baby,” said Big Ovens. “Look, Trev.”

“*DARK LIPS?*” Trevor groaned, staring at the cover: a collage of what appeared to be bodies dug from their graves.

“That’s what they call it,” said Big Ovens. “The North West’s top fanzine.”

“Top goth fanzine,” put in Tabi, re-spiking her hair. “In Garstang, anyway.”

Trevor wished he had some spikes. He’d have snapped one off and driven it through Big Ovens’s chest. “Goth fanzines?” he said. “We do Country & Western. Or did you forget?”

Big Ovens held up his hand. “With a twist, though. They go for that, the goths. Like this leather coat. It could be Country & Western. Or it could be goth. It’s crossover, Trev.”

Trevor rolled up the fanzine. “*DARK LIPS* can’t cover us! We do Dan Penn and Spooner Oldham songs. There’s a dog in the yard more gothic than we are...”

“Carlos!” cried Kenneth’s Dad, his memory evidently jolted. He rose, jostling Tabi aside as he stomped through the house.

“Charming,” said Tabi, pushed up against the photograph on the back-wall.

Big Ovens continued wiping rain off his coat. “Jesus, Tabs,” he said. “Did you go through a carwash?”

Tabi did her best to smile, but the frown was using most of her face. “Cheeky bugger,” she said. “Wait. This picture. It’s...”

“Us,” said Ovens, puffing up proud.

“But in the middle...”

“Him,” said Ovens.

“Me,” Trevor confirmed, watching Kenneth’s Dad tromp more mud through his living-room, dragging the wistful Carlos in his wake.

“He reckons to be in Big Ovens’s band,” said Kenneth’s Dad. “Hadn’t you heard, lass?” Behind him, the dog went on cautioning.

“Urg,” said Tabi, stepping away.

“Urg,” agreed Carlos.

Tabi blocked her tiny nose with one hand. Drenched after his stint in Trevor’s yard, Carlos had started to smell like boiled cabbage. “Is... is it going to be sick?” she asked.

“Usually,” said Trevor.

Kenneth’s Dad scowled at his host as he sank into his old berth. “A proper wetting, that was. Look at the poor thing. It can’t stop cautioning.”

Trevor shivered. “I’m sorry,” he told Carlos. He put a hand on the dog’s wet head, and found the hollowness he’d expected. But the texture was softer than he’d imagined. Almost velvety.

Stooping to the dog, Trevor noticed the squiggles again, Tippexed onto the old fella’s wellies. They were pictures of little animals: a fox, some cows, a deer, two or three scallop-shells. He stared in fascination at the starfish. Whoever had done them, Kenneth’s granddaughter, he supposed, they were beautiful. They had a Japanese delicacy.

“She’s good, eh?” said Kenneth’s Dad, expanding with pride. “Bet you didn’t expect to see them on my wellies, eh?”

“No,” said Trevor. The pictures had put a longing through him. He remembered the old stories, pictured plankton glowing in the waves...

“Do you know what she calls them, my granddaughter? The Dead Animals Living in Heaven. This phrase she invented.”

Trevor nodded. He kept his hand on the dog’s empty head.

“It was after I told her about the farms I’ve had, in Kenya and Cumbria.”

“Kenya?” said Trevor.

Kenneth’s Dad frowned lumpily. “What did you think, that I was only Kenneth’s Dad? ‘Course I had farms. Anyroad, I made the mistake of mentioning what goes on in them. The farms, I mean. Slaughter, and what-not. So she

nicked my boots and drew dead animals resurrecting themselves. Imagine. The thoughts they get.”

Trevor was staring at a cluster of tiny molluscs, grouped together like a family, when a shadow engulfed the tiny room. At first, he thought it must be the angel of death again, him being the main visitor. But it was just the band’s vocalist, blocking the front-window in his massive coat.

“Christ,” said Big Ovens. “It’s leathering it down.”

They could hear it on the kitchen-roof now: a continuous roar. They stood beside Ovens. It was shocking to watch. The raindrops were about the size of Tabi’s face, landing so flat and hard they seethed off the sand.

“If you think I’m going out in that,” said Tabi, “then you’re mental.”

Kenneth’s Dad nodded. “We’ll sit it out.”

“Sit it out?” said Ovens. “You’re our guide. Which guide sits its out?”

“One that’s been guiding for thirty years, and is still alive,” said Kenneth’s Dad.

Big Ovens considered this information, then nodded slowly. Meanwhile, Trevor kept his hand on the dog’s head. If he kept it there long enough, maybe it would feel his sympathy and forgive him.

“Things always look better after a brew,” said Ovens, as optimistic as ever, urging Trev to the kettle.

“Aye, and happen summat a bit stronger,” said Kenneth’s Dad, fetching out a shiny tin. “Chuck us them black Rizlas, Ovens.”

When Trevor brought the tea in, Kenneth’s Dad insisted on balancing his cup on the arm of his chair. They were already passing round the first joint. Trevor watched the cup teetering on the arm. They’d put the DVD on, by now. Big Ovens’s choice, of course. A Western, as usual: Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.

Tabi was curled like a foetus on the singer’s lap while Kenneth’s Dad sat at the side, above the sleeping Carlos.

“Cassidy was the inspiration for today,” Big Ovens explained, as if today was actually happening. “Two lads running from the law! Proper outlaws, eh, Trev? Striding out across the desert...”

Trevor settled in beside Kenneth’s Dad, grateful for the downpour.

When Butch and Sundance celebrated their robbery by visiting a brothel, Tabi screwed her face so tight it nearly vanished. “The prostitutes in Westerns,” she said, “they were always giggling, weren’t they?”

“That was the code then,” Big Ovens explained, passing the joint. “There was a different code.”

“What, in the 1960s?” said Tabi.

Ovens snorted. “In the West, you dipstick. A different code in the West.”

“Although there was a different code in the 1960s,” said another voice. Trevor had taken a few puffs, and couldn’t tell who was speaking. It may well have been Carlos.

Tabi’s frown deepened. “It’s macho-bullshit, though, isn’t it?”

“It is,” said Kenneth’s Dad, almost as sleepy as his dog. “You’re right, lass. Macho-bullshit.”

Trevor glanced sideways at their guide. Two early-morning joints seemed to have done the trick. Lying on the sofa, with the sleeping dog at his feet, Kenneth’s Dad looked almost peaceful. Trevor couldn’t help it. He started to giggle. Maybe it was Carlos, gently cautioning at his feet. Or Kenneth’s Dad calling the film macho-bullshit, but he was laughing. Laughing really loud.

Then it was quiet again, just the rain. And another joint coming round, and Kenneth’s Dad snoring now, regular as a saw through wood.

“I don’t see why he’s laughing,” said Tabi. “It doesn’t strike me as being...”

Ovens put one finger over her lips. From Trevor’s position, the finger looked enormous against her face. As big as a turnip.

Big Ovens motioned to Trevor. “Alright, Trev? Not feeling weird, pal?”

“Just a bit,” said Trevor, slowly recovering.

“Good lad,” said Big Ovens. “Hang on in there. Later, we’ll look out and see what we think.”

“What we think?” asked Trev.

“About the crossing,” his friend replied.

Trevor nodded.

Ovens settled Tabi over his lap, and they sat on quietly while the rain poured. It was strange, but Trevor lost interest in Paul Newman and Robert Redford. Instead, he watched Katharine Ross’s character, the only woman in town who wasn’t a prostitute.

What a couple of useless gets those outlaws turned out to be. Whenever they tried to go straight, it ended in disaster. Plus, they couldn’t even learn

Spanish. So Katherine Ross slung her lovely hook, went back to the States. And it bothered Trevor, how the film forgot all about her as soon as she'd gone.

"See now," crooned Ovens as the film reached its climax, and Butch and Sundance were trapped in their lair. "They never knew they were beaten, eh? Even besieged by a bloody army!"

The DVD played through to its final freeze-frame. Butch and Sundance went out to meet their fate. And then Ovens put it on again because he wanted to check a few things. Band-research, he called it. So, twice, Butch blew a train to smithereens and, twice, fled from a posse. Then, twice, dragged the others to Bolivia. And, twice, tried to go straight. Until Butch and Sundance were holed up again, wondering whether it was safe to venture out...

"Ask me," said Tabi, drowsily, "it's a cop-out, that ending. They want it both ways, freezing the frame."

"No," said Ovens, through half-shut eyes. "Don't you see, Tabs? That isn't a cop-out, pet – it's victory. They became such legends, they beat death."

Trevor had been on the verge of sleep until Ovens spoke. It had felt calm in the house, with rain pattering on the kitchen-roof. But he didn't feel peaceful anymore. He wanted to tell Big Ovens to shut his mouth.

As he was forming the words, a draught of salty air rushed over Trevor's face, and disturbed the precariously-placed cups. When they landed on the dog, Carlos leapt up with a yelp, and rushed out from beneath the settee. This made Kenneth's Dad wake with a furious snort. And then Tabi let out a shriek: "Shut the flaming door, Ov!"

Ovens did no such thing. He stood on the front step, gazing out over the open spaces. "It's stopped," he said, in wonder. "The trail's open, hombres!"

Trev wasn't sure how his friend had found strength to leave the chair, let alone open a door. But the others were with Ovens now, in the doorway, and they were laughing and pointing.

It was the dog, Carlos. After being bashed by falling cups, he'd rushed through the open door, and gone. By the time Trev joined them on the threshold, Carlos was already a mile out over the Bay. He wasn't cautioning. He was bouncing through puddles, and the puddles were quivering under his feet. Kenneth's Dad shook his head. "Daft article," he said. "Now the rain's stopped, he's sniffed the cockles."

Ovens clapped his leather outlaw gloves together, and said the words Trevor had dreaded: "Ready then, Trev? Thee and me? Butch and Sundance?"

Great Ape

If he could, Trevor would have pressed pause, and stopped there. But he knew something his legendary friend didn't yet: time passes, whoosh. There's no freeze-frame, only fast-forward.

He straightened the boot-lace tie, and guided his dodgy boots where he knew they must go: over the front-step, after that galloping dog, across The Living Waters.



WHY BARNs ARE RED

BY PAUL SMITH

We paint them every year
around this time,
when the wood creaks
and cracks open so wide
you can see the splinters
from that road you're on
and all the red paint gets soaked up,
both coats,
so you can't mistake this thing
for anything else.
That's how you'll know
it's a barn,
and not one of your skyscrapers
or condominiums.
And we paint the horses blue
and the cows yellow,
just so you'll know.
And then,
having run out of primary colors
and not wanting to resort to
periwinkle, mauve and puce,
we put signs on the rest
of our lot:
roosters have a sign that says 'Rooster',
goats have 'Goat',
our equus africanus asinus
has a thing that reads 'Y'all',
because we're running out of letters.



THE AREA MANAGER

BY TOM JENKS

It was on the grapevine that the area manager was in town, so I bought biscuits and a large ham from the cash and carry. I put the biscuits on a plate and covered them with clingfilm. I put the ham in a bucket on the patio.

All morning my phone was vibrating. The area manager was approaching junction 21. The area manager was at the wildfowl sanctuary, eating a chicken sandwich. The area manager was in Card Factory in the mall, just browsing. I was relaxed. The ledger was up to date, the stock rotated and the traps clean. I spent the morning rationalising stationery while a spider in the alcove slowly bound a fly in silk.

Men I knew only by their nicknames came and went: Meerkat, The Philosopher, Horn Section. Each had a story, I supposed. They scanned documents and made microwave meals. When they became loud, I put on my headphones.

In the afternoon, I lit a Quickflame Firelog, which is natural and odourless and burns for up to two hours, and added animations to my presentation. I checked the ham and noted that a thin layer of white fat lay on top of the water, which I skimmed with a spoon. This would form the basis for a nourishing stock or a fat ball to sustain garden birds in the difficult winter months.

It was getting dark. I began to consider the possibility that the area manager would not show. Perhaps another site had proved troublesome and detained them. I put a cannelloni in the microwave and turned on the radio. The fading light and the crackling log must have lulled me to sleep. I woke to find the area manager standing over me.

I gather, the area manager said, without preliminary, that you are something of a wordsmith.

I said it was true that, outside office hours, my passion was literature.

I noted, the area manager said, your piece in the newsletter concerning an antique parish pump.

I peeled the clingfilm from the biscuits. One had somehow been removed, disrupting the symmetry.

I said that the pump was a significant artefact, a cautionary reminder of deadly waterborne diseases.

You must, said the area manager, be very proud.

I said I had made copies for family members and colleagues.

You are aware, said the area manager, that reprographics are monitored.

I said nothing.

The area manager took a thick folder from their briefcase, which held what transpired to be a manuscript of poems.

Perhaps, said the area manager, you would read these and offer your honest opinion. I will take the air to give you the opportunity to look them over. The area manager went out onto the patio. I turned to the poems. They were centre aligned and in different fonts.

The first appeared initially to be about mermaids, but ultimately revealed itself to be about climate change. Another saw the author drawn back in time by the sound of a harp. In another, the author ecstatically glimpsed an owl.

They were awful.

As I reached the conclusion of the manuscript, the area manager, who had been smoking on the patio, appeared in the doorway.

I said that I hoped I could be frank.

I said that this was the most significant work I had encountered in some time. I particularly admired, I said, the repurposing of old forms and the broad array of subject matter.

The area manager shook my hand. I asked if they would care to share my cannelloni.

The area manager said they had eaten but would take a biscuit for the road.

The area manager said they had other manuscripts, including a semi-autobiographical novel and a play in verse, narrated by a ghost.

They wondered if they might forward those for candid appraisal.

I said I would be delighted.

This has been most fruitful, said the area manager, shaking my hand, and will be remembered in your annual review.

Great Ape

I watched the area manager's car pull away, its headlights making cones in the drizzle.

I reheated the cannelloni, brought in the ham and drained it. I did not retain the water, as ash from the area manager's cigarette had blown into it.

I put my presentation on a loop and projected it on the empty wall between the filing cabinets.

As I sliced the ham and opened a tin of pineapple, I reflected that this had been an atypical day and decided to write it down.



FLUSH

BY MARC DARNELL

I have two degrees, but I clean toilets.
I got all A's, a 4.0.
Please don't spoil it

by saying I need a desk job, to sit
and watch the clock, and be so
sure, like you, my life's not going down the toilet.

Maybe you should let
your guard down, say hello
to those wiping up after you. Don't spoil it

for them by remarking, *it
must suck to be you and do
the things you do, I mean, cleaning toilets,*

*taking my garbage, the spit,
the orange peels, the rot we throw.*
Would it probably spoil it

if I told you you're fat
from years of chatting in your chair? Oh,
are your legs numb from sitting on the toilet?
The way *your* life went— too late to spoil it.



BENNI GOES FERAL

BY JOHN WATERFALL

There is no sound like the sound of the mourning dove. It reminds me of the time my sister died. It was the beginning of the cold season, and I was asleep in the comfy chair, and I heard its hooing in and out, in and out. There was a cold dry air, and on it I could smell dead leaves, and outside I could see the individual blades of grass stir and move and the dead bats that covered the lawn. Then I stretched and meowed and I walked by the corpse of my giant, who had exploded his mouth and head and died because he was very sad.

I padded to the porch door which never closed anymore because I had moved a shoe there to block it. There I looked out into the deepening blue, into a sky that was bleeding its color away at the cloudy fringes. Giant had loved these late skies because of 'red.' I do not know exactly what 'red' is, other than it is a color I cannot see. My sister was this color, was this 'red,' although she looked grey to me. This makes me sad because if I could see 'red' then maybe I wouldn't forget her. I forget things now. I think I am forgetting how to be a cat. Giant was the cat expert despite not being one. He knew all the things I should and should not do to be a good cat, taught me special things like words and not to go on the countertop because it is a place of sacred energy.

Sometimes I like to think that it wasn't her that died, that it was some other 'red' cat that got scooped up by an owl, that maybe she just wandered off, that maybe she finally found the courage to be wild again. And this makes me both happy and sad. Because I know it isn't true. I know she is dead. Because I saw it.

On the porch I called to her, rumbling a noise from the humming place in my throat, a sound I had made just for her. I could see the little waves the noise made as it went out to search, disturbing the ready-to-sleep air. I stretched. The mourning dove's call disappeared into the cricket buzz of the bright dark, and it was quiet because the world was afraid. My spine crept and I went flat because I was also afraid, and from the yard came the deep stuttering call of

an owl, a dark question, echoing from the great pine tree that stood apart from the wall of the forest, like the other trees were afraid of it. I saw it there among the branches, a great horned darkness with her shape slack in its talons, saying nothing, the descending sun heavy and large behind it. And it called again, summoning a wind that toyed with the wings of the dead bats on the lawn like it was pulling them back to life. Her name was Apricots and she was not good at being a cat. She would bite Giant and hiss things like, "Apricots is my slave name!" She died when an owl plucked her from the world. It could have eaten all the dead bats it wanted to, but it took her just the same. And then I was all alone.

My name is Benni and I am trying to remember things. Each day spent alone makes me less good at being a cat, makes it harder to do the things cats do, like using the litter box and not drinking from the toilet. All the things Giant taught me.

My interest in killing has gone way up since Giant and Apricots died. Which is sad and exciting. I do not want to lose my higher functions: the contemplative mystery of the ceiling fan, how Apricots's flank smell-touched against mine, the earthy taste of her fur. I have exciting, arousing dreams where I groom her and my tic-tac comes out, but mostly I dream about dead mice and dead mice heads and dead mice babies.

I'm scratching the contents of my head into the walls and furniture of the forest house, for anyone who wants to read it, or for myself, in case I return to my history as a stranger, and I won't ever be alone because I'll have these stories. I've started scratching my notes on the comfy chair, which previously was a big no-no because it belonged to Giant and led to sprays from the spray bottle. I'm beginning to think that perhaps Giant did not know as much about being a cat as he let on. For example, yesterday I chased a moth to the sacred countertop where I killed and ate it, smashing it a little for fun, and nothing happened! Everything was totally fine! And I got a really good look at the kitchen and knocked the horrible spray bottle to the floor where it can never spray again. Maybe Giant was selfish and wanted all these fun things for himself. But even with all these fun things Giant didn't want to be alive anymore after his children died from 'flu.' Most of the giants died from 'flu.'

I cannot see 'flu,' like I cannot see 'red.' If I could, I would have tried to bite it and eat its head before it killed Giant's children. Maybe 'flu' is still here? Waiting in the under-couch spaces. Coming up with plans to make my life worse. Maybe 'flu' is making me less good at being a cat.

I'm not sure the children were meant to be with us. In the days before we left for the forest house, Giant screamed things into the air like, "I can make them safe!" and, "Goddammit! They're my kids too Jeanine!" The children always made Giant sad, even when they came over and slept on the floor Giant would act happy while moving sad. And when they left he would cry and cry.

Apricots was not a big fan of being a cat. She had lived in the parking lot of a library before Giant brought her home to be my sister, or as she put it, abducted her. The library parking lot was tough living, bad giants occasionally did things like skateboard her paws and tie firecrackers to her tail, which turned Apricots slightly crazy. I did my best with her, showed her who was big cat and who was little cat. But she always got back up, never submitted to what I had to show her about living indoors.

Apricots believed that the truest way to be a cat was to do the opposite of what any cat expert demanded, that good cats were outside cats, not inside cats, which, as per Giant's wisdom, was heresy. This was why she sometimes peed on Giant's lap and bit his ankles. Or so she said. I don't know that many words but I do know about something called "compensating," which was the reason Giant fed his children pizza and ice cream whenever they stayed with us. Apricots was tough to be sure, but she ate from the food bowl like I did, slept by the fire like I did, and accepted the belly rubs just like I did. And she was beautiful and strange and a very, very bad cat. She had no fur on one knee and half a right ear. If there is one good thing about my deteriorating condition it is that I am becoming the wild cat she always wished I was.

The porch door is shut because a raccoon stole the shoe and decided to move in. Now I am trapped inside with the shoe-stealing raccoon and cannot

reach my supply of dead bats. The raccoon lives inside the sofa and squawks at me when I try to write my stories. It is big and dark and scary like a bush with teeth. Perhaps I can find a way to kill it. Perhaps I can trap it in the toilet while it drinks up all my water. I imagine intelligence is on my side as the raccoon chose a shoe over freedom, trapping us both here, but then again, now, starvation is against us both. There's just me and it, and Giant's smelly body. Every now and then I lose consciousness only to wake up in the middle of gnawing one of Giant's fingers. I think I may have eaten the wedding ring he refused to take off. My stomach feels like a pinecone. This is not good cat behavior.

I tried to mate with Apricots several times, despite having no balls. She would be sleeping or dozing on the comfy chair, which was really mine when Giant wasn't looking, and I'd jump up to bite her a little and remind her how mine it was only to end up on top of her and curling my lower body towards her butt. She was a good sport about it, letting me try to do this thing I had only half knowledge of, before twisting around and biting my nose. I believe if I had balls, things would have been different, that we would have been mates and not siblings, even if I was, as she described, "a little cat in a big cat body." She really was wonderful, in a real-life sort of way. Sometimes things that sound mean can actually be very nice, like nose biting. Now that she's gone I try mating with a foam football. Perhaps that is something that does not need to be recorded.

The toilet trap worked wonderfully until it did not. I managed to shut the lid on top of the greedy interloper but keeping a desperate raccoon trapped inside of a toilet is not an easy thing to do. It's a scary thing to do, because of the squawking and the clawed hands that reach out with every bump of the lid, searching around for something to punish. I think there is something deeply wrong with the raccoon. Perhaps 'flu.' It foams from the mouth and cannot control its swiveling golden eyes, bounds headlong into the walls till it falls into convulsive sleep. I am reminded of Giant. Giant used to bang his head against things as well. Sometimes, late at night, Giant would pack us up in the car along

with a knapsack filled with snacks and wait outside a house in the darkness. Sometimes his children would come and go with the woman Jeanine and Giant would lie down in his seat and hold his breath. Apricots and I did not like these trips and I would start to freak out a little, sensing something bad about to happen. And Apricots would tell me to shut up and Giant would tell us both to shut up and then start to bang his head on the wheel. I think I am starting to paint Giant in a bad light. Being his cat wasn't always sad and uncomfortable. Sometimes Giant would bury his face in my side and cry and cry. Which was uncomfortable but also nice.

I find that scratching my story is simply reliving my story. The only story I remember well enough now is the story in which Apricots dies. Which disappoints me because the only thing I get to relive is Apricots dying. Which was not the point of this exercise. The point was to remain a cat and remember loved ones and good times. The problem is I do not fully understand what I have scratched, or I forget what my marks and smells meant at the time that I made them. So I cannot read the memory perfectly. The more I try not to be confused the more confused I get, the more un-cat I become. It feels like my memories are collapsing forwards, shortening my history till all I have is an image of a dead Apricots. There must be a point to this besides horror. I wish Giant was still here. Or here in a different way. He is here as food now because I have nothing else to eat. Occasionally a mouse will emerge from a crack and I'll eat it, much to the raccoon's howling dismay. The raccoon apparently dies for several hours a day only to resurrect into an angrier, bushier raccoon.

Let me try it again. This time on the curtains. There is no sound like the sound of the mourning dove. Asides from, of course, the sounds of other mourning doves, and perhaps even owls, except their noises make me go flat and pee. These sounds remind me continuously of the day my sister died. It was cold, and I was asleep someplace in the forest house, maybe the scratched up chair, and the wind moved stuff around outside which I observed through

the window. It is cold so this must have been close to now, because it is still cold, colder even. I made some observations about the nature of this movement, namely how grass was all grass but also pieces of grass. Then I maybe saw wings out the window or from the porch and a thing called 'red' which, as far as I can tell, is something grey. These wings that I maybe saw made me sad because Apricots was dead. From a tree an owl went hoo, which is confusing because it is so similar to the sound that a mourning dove makes. And the bats moved like an army of the dead.

The owl visits me and it is a strange and unnatural thing with the face of a giant. It waits on the other side of the screen window, which is the only open window, eyes heavy and large, one the full moon and the other a crescent. A color I cannot see bleeds from its moon eyes and fills the sky. There is a hooing. It is the color of my blood. There is a hooing. The color of 'red.' There is a hooing and it is 'flu.' I know this and see this in the owl's harmful stare. So still, it remains so still. My cat-self is withering. Apricots speaks from its stomach, through its frozen incorrect face and tells me that it is alive, very, very alive. She tells me that I have been incorrect about the extent of the world. That I am becoming more cat, not less. In the distance the deep green trees stand up and move, cover each other into a bushy wall, and everything is soundless and the sky is 'red' and there is the sound of the mourning dove cooing in and out, in and out, and they really are the same sounds.

Before Giant made his head explode, he did us the kindness of giving us all the bats. It was the night after he buried his children, and Apricots and I were killing light bugs in the tall grass. So many light bugs! Giant was watching us from the porch, where he sat hugging his knees and rocking and I meowed at him to see if he wanted to kill some bugs too but he didn't. The darkness grew less bright and the bats came to eat the bugs away from us and we tried to catch and kill them for doing so and Giant finally showed some interest because he went into the house and came back out with the long metal tube he'd later

use to blow the top of his head off. His shotgun. He sat down with a bottle of special water that made him cross-eyed and proceeded to blast heavy fire into the moving night above us making many, many dead bats. This is a memory I want to hold onto. Apricots in the darkness, eyes bright and yellow and in awe of all the bats falling dead around her, one ear flattened, happy and surprised, because she was never happy or surprised by anything. She used to stand in the driveway on moonless nights, seeing everything, confident in her cloak of darkness. "It's very, very alive," she would say, referring to the humming night like it was some big animal. I did not know then, that it was an animal.

This is getting more difficult. I've done this so many times now and I am missing the point of why I am doing it. This lack. This lack of feeling. I scratched it into the sofa and the ottoman and the curtains and everything and I feel time running out. To remember the feeling. To make the right tombstone for this death story, which is the only important one. Once there was a cat named Benni and a cat named Apricots. Who were they again? They were me. Benni. Benni the Cat. Who is here. Right now. Hurry. Hurry Benni.

There is no sound like the sound of mourning dove. One time when I heard it my sister died. It was the hooing that reminded me. It was my sister dying that made me remind me. Makes me remind me. I was in the house when it happened. I was asleep or maybe awake. A bird. A bird that went hoo.

What is my first memory of being cat? Was I cat before? I must have been something before. Did I have a parking lot life? Perhaps life only starts with a first memory. I was looking at Giant and Giant was holding me and I fit in his hands and he was saying words at me over and over and then I understood one of them. Benni. That is my first memory of being a cat. And then I learned that Benni was me because Giant would say it and look at me when he said it and

then I saw myself in the shiny silver and I moved when I moved and I realized that it was I, it was Benni.

Giant had smaller giants in the house and they also called me Benni and taught me words and sprayed me with the bottle for doing things I learned not to do and laughed when I tried to kill yarn. One day I woke up without balls. Was sad and missed balls. One day was cleaning my penis and Giant and his small giants laughed and said it looked like a tic-tac and called me Mr. Tic-Tac. One day Giant took us away in the night to a cabin in the forest and his children were quiet and scared and wailed for their mother. And they listened to the bright picture box, which is filled with things that cannot be caught, and it said that everyone else was dying very fast because of 'flu,' because of 'urgent flu.' Giant's happy face and eagerness to go on walks was different from his terrified children. They woke up very hot, and the hearts in their chests made whispering noises and I sat on their chests and tried to show them what a heart was supposed to sound like with its thump thump thump so they could fix theirs but Giant kept yelling at me, "Get off of them!" Then they were dead and Giant tried to hang himself from the ceiling fan but was too fat and fell to the ground and cried. For days he cried. Then he made his head explode. And then Apricots got eaten by an owl and a raccoon trapped me away from all my bats.

Time makes hunger. Giant with ears and fingers and face all gone. I tried to protect face because face made me feel safe and warm and called me Benni when it was living but shoe stealing raccoon wanted very much to eat the face and is bigger and can kill me. Shoe Raccoon is getting violent, did not appreciate my attempt to kill it. Soon I will have to leave. Have eaten through the screen window. Very painful. Very bloody. When we first came here Apricots and Benni crawled under the porch and killed all the mice babies! What fun! All the wriggling, squeaking babies, their grey hot flesh in our teeth.

There is story all around me, scent-scratches that speak in head whispers. Once there was a cat named Benni. A cat named Apricots. Once there

was 'red.' Is familiar. But I cannot make enough pictures in my head. Mind can see mice and birds and grass and smells and know when to go flat or kill the small things but does not know Benni. Does not know cat. But familiar. The ideas of Benni are all around, scratched and scented. I meow at them and they do not meow back. What do I understand? There used to be a Benni. Then Benni started to go away, was taken away by a thing that went hoo. Two things go hoo. Mourning doves and owls. Benni cat wrote a story about these hooings. Less long ago Benni wrote it again. Benni wrote it again. I wrote it. Me? Benni.

I move fast. Benni moves fast. There is one last thing to write while I remember. Must get it down before to late. Before I meet the owl. Must hold it in head. What it was all for. I know it now! Quickly! Through the screen window, through the hole that cuts and bloodies me, claws to pull me back to this dead place. I'll scratch it under the porch where we killed all the mice and mice babies and then I won't know how I got there. And then I'll roam and roam and never come home. The one thing that ever mattered. The point to death and life stories. Benni loved Apricots! Benni loves Apricots!

The night has smell-sound. Small things move in the bright dark. I see them and taste them. I am flat body. I crawl. I am crouched body. I pounce and eat a small thing, feeling it wiggle and die on my teeth. A possum comes and I am large body, big and black and something to be feared. I am soft in the grass and the grass is wet and smells deep. Trees whisper and I listen, tasting and seeing what they say and it is very, very alive.

Behind me, wind beating, mad angry shape. Quick! I go flat body! But no, it's already here, sharp talons in my neck! For a moment I am away from the grass, in the wind. But no, I am big body! Bigger than Apricots. Who?

I fall, leaving pieces of me behind. Who? I run as flat body for place to hide. There is a hooing and I am paws up, claws in feathers, anger in my teeth. Once there was a cat named Benni. Sharpness cuts my belly, cuts Benni's belly, a beak digging for his heart. I hear her. Yes! Yes! I remember! A voice leaks into my open body, vibrating from the bird's hungry mouth. Haha silly owl! You think you are 'flu.' Dig all you like, that isn't where my heart is. I've hidden it far, far away. But I know where yours is. Here, let me show you.

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'Good.'

Ernest Hemingway

'Relatively good.'

Albert Einstein

'Good for nothing.'

Friedrich Nietzsche

