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Bessie Anne's Post-Apocalyptic Teashop

by Kirsty Logan

The rubble hadn't even been cleared when the first old lady knocked on the door of the teashop. There was dust on her hat and she was only wearing one shoe, but her radiation burns weren't weeping, which was a relief to the staff.

The bombs had fallen on a Sunday – the teashop's busiest day – so the whole staff was present. The chef had been standing next to a window, and had gone straight up in smoke. Three of the waitresses were in the basement, struggling with a particularly large order of scones; these scones would soon save their lives. The teashop had previously been an antiques shop specialising in militia: the owner had bomb-proofed the basement, sure that an attack was imminent. He died of a heart attack two years before he was proven right. His widow sold the military badges and tarnished guns, then started selling tea and cake instead: she perished quickly, having stepped outside for a cigarette a moment before the attack. The three waitresses survived a week of fallout by eating the entire order of scones.

When they finally climbed the stairs they discovered the dishwasher and one other waitress, who had survived by sheltering under the bodies of the customers, nibbling on the odd finger. The five staff joined forces to put the bodies in the kitchen with the ashes of the chef.

Dust clouded the windows of the teashop, but the silence outside told them that it wouldn't be a pretty sight, so they stayed inside.

A week later, the first old lady arrived looking for tea and cake. She'd come every lunchtime before the bombs fell, so as soon as she dug her way out of her house, she resumed her routine. There was no menu to offer her, of course. No sandwiches, no coffee. There were some crumbling teabags, and water could be warmed in the sun when it broke through the smeared windows. This was the closest they could get to tea, but it was enough for the ladies of Bessie Ann's.

And there were ladies – plural. The bell hanging over the door was soon ringing a dozen times a day. Every regular customer, once they'd escaped from their homes, came straight to the teashop. Some were missing extremities – even a limb or two – but they were sure they'd feel better after a wee bit of cake. So the waitresses mixed brick dust and the clumpy out-of-date milk with the ashes of the chef. They fashioned them into lumps and baked them in the sunlight. Afternoon tea was served. The chat continued much as before: who was courting whom, which children were university-bound, whose dogs made the biggest mess on the neighbours' lawns. The gossip was largely invented, as most of these people were now dust; but that didn't matter. When the ladies left, they were careful to leave a coin or two on the broken boards they used as a table. No-one wants to be thought stingy, and the service was exceptional, considering.

One day the rubble would be cleared, but for now they had tea and cake. Sort of.

Persephone Reflects

by J.L. Williams

I often get confused. Are these the white
petals of daisies or butterfly wings?
I get confused, not because I cannot see but because
signs point in both directions.

Death was more *beautiful*
than anyone remembers and it was Sex and Death at once and
not only sex but the end of my girlhood so,
at once it was Sex and Death and the End, the end

of a place where all signs pointed in one direction.

Here there are butterflies, petals, words flutter in dark light.
All appears negative, bluish and orange around the edge.
Caught between love for the Light and love of the Dark
I get confused, as if in two places at once, I shine darkly.

Image

by J.L. Williams

To wake, to describe music, she thinks
“This is so moving it feels as if
something is coming loose in me.”

To wake from the ship she drags
from canal to canal over wet cement,
fag in her mouth, her husband and lover dead.

To wake from her stood at the late cart,
a dark man selling candy or a pill with syrup inside.
Some woman of the night leans by and says,
“Darling, if you knew what happened
when I took that last,” as she swallows the sweet, sweet...

To wake in the glass canal light of an empty street,
worn grain of the wood of the deck on my cheek;
the doors of an empty city float by
as if in a dream, her life caught
between my mind’s eye and the careless lip of reality.

Oracle

by J.L. Williams

The photos are lost but he tells her of one with the light
slanting in rays through slats of old wood in the souk.
How much of her life will never be his and still
sunsets descend on medinas inside her bottomless...

Fatidic train windows in which she sees her reflection.
Why is it that light in so many countries behaves
in this unoriginal way, hoisting her face
like a flag over distant lands that she does not own?

“What can be lost in death?” he inquires at Delphi,
if it will be sleep, falling with her in his arms,
a dream like a painting through which she crosses a field
toward a river, stops as the clouds break, turns...

Snap Shots

by Helen Sedgwick

We were dancing to *I will survive*. I kid you not. Thriving and writhing through the night
in boot cut jeans and bright T-shirts. Arms caught in flashes of jerky motions, huggings
and jumpings and fluids everywhere. The eighties in the nineties in a night club with a
spinning silver ball and a couple having sex atop the speaker; my friend's mate's
flatmate's classmate from way back when, you know, shagging. And there's a girl in a
Cindy skirt who's peeling off her strappy top and bouncy flouncy flying into our little
circle. The stepping back we do is just a reflex, couldn't help it, and besides she's up and
crawling up and along my friend's boyfriend's jeans, and I'm kinda liking it, the flashing,
you know, in the strobe light. The way the picture changes every time I look, my friend
caught there in a series of sparkly still snap shots.

Frozen in waves of movement.

But later, years later, when I'm told they rang and rang and rang, I see another snap shot:
Her phone unanswered in the hall. And when I'm told there were doctors and parents
and police, shouting her name as they broke down her door, I see another snap shot:
The stillness of the stairs. But then they found her cold in bed with blood running in her
eyes and staining red her white snowman pyjamas. And now I can't make the lights flash
anymore.

All the Balloons

by Helen Sedgwick

The road leading to the gates was greyish in its grandeur, but busy. They were being buffeted by sounds and screeches, the excitement clashing with remnants of the night before. But see there, across the grass, lying flat and limp like skins of things once full now empty. Chloe saying that the tiger one reminds her of a rug in her dad's father's house, and Liam smiling because of her funny way of saying it. Prickly still, but not as much. Then, whirring, flames jumping out and up and warming the air. Chloe pointing, the first one's about to go, look! And the cheer went up in waves. Another and another, but Liam, still clinging on, was staring at the griffin flapping impotently on the ground. So she slipped her hand into his and he looked up despite himself, and saw gold red dragons and champagne bottles, giants and hobbits and hot-air balloons, rising up and up and replacing the sky with a collage of extraordinary colour.

Calle Agla

by Micaela Maftei

I was living in an apartment in Barcelona at the time, right at the very top of a building on a side street. It was really an alley, but they all persisted in treating it as though it was a main thoroughfare. The apartment wasn't mine and I wasn't even paying rent on it, I was only loaning it from a girl I had come to know over the past summer. I was teaching English to very young children in a small town in the west of Spain and, after my assignment ended, I knocked shyly on her door to ask if she had been serious when she had offered me the place earlier on in the summer. She was also teaching English, but to older men who wanted to use it to make money. It was hard for her, and very stressful, and she was unhappy about this because she had planned to teach English overseas as a way of recovering from two heavy years of medical school in the States. The men she taught seemed to think that after every class they were prepared to sail to North America and move into a big house with an actress wife and every afternoon when they went home to their widening wives in their regular beds they were made to see the impossibility of their desires and it made them dislike her. As they began to be certain that there was no chance of any of them sleeping with her, they disliked her even more.

She was an American girl named Rebecca and she had long bluntly cut brown hair that hung to the middle of her waist. Even on the hottest days she did not put it up. We knew each other in the casually intimate way one knows one's presumed countrymen in foreign places. We went to a lot of the same bars. She was frequently accompanied by different Spanish young men whereas I was more often alone with a book. We would talk once in a while if we ran into each other at the market or on the street, and it was on one of these occasions that I expressed my desire to stop in Barcelona for a week or so before I flew home.

"I have a place there," she told me.

"You do?"

"Sort of," she said. She explained that it had been her great-uncle's, who had died only a few years ago. Her family had kept it and rented it for some time and when she came to Spain she had lived there for a number of weeks before taking this job and leaving it in the care of some friends as a summer sub-let. Now she was deciding whether

she wanted to go back to it or if once again her family should rent it out. They had an agent who took care of matters like finding the potential renters. Despite the trouble she was having with her job she didn't think she wanted to leave yet and so the apartment remained empty until she found out her immediate plans.

"You could stay there."

"Is anyone living there now?" I asked.

"No. They shouldn't be. It's mine from the first of the month."

The first of the month was the very next day and it was three weeks until my job ended. In that moment I decided very surely that I would ask her to use her place when I left.

The children I taught were all between the ages of three and five. They were teaching me far more Spanish than I was teaching them English and I was pleased to have acquired such a mutually beneficial post. We spent most of our time pretending to be adults, shopping in an invisible grocery store so that they would learn the names of foods, or decorating a house to go over domestic words. Once in a while, when I felt restless, we would go to the imaginary travel agency and discuss foreign lands in terms I found wonderfully relaxing and optimistic.

"Greenland is cold. The people wear many coats."

"Italy is long. There is much good food there."

"Australia has kangaroos. They carry their babies inside a pocket on the front of their bodies and their Christmases never have snow."

From their chatter I picked up enough Spanish to be able to live happily alone and I thought I would never have a job so lovely again.

On my last day they brought me presents which made me nervous and happy and embarrassed and I longed to touch them all and stroke their smooth silky heads and kiss their fat and well-fed cheeks. It was a small place where I lived, where there wasn't much to do as a baby child but run around and get sun and eat food so fresh it sighed when you bit into it. For a few days after it ended I stayed in bed late and then ate something, very slowly, before walking around the market and drinking a coffee in the early afternoons. This was a nice schedule but one I couldn't keep up, so before a week had passed I went to her door and knocked on it, biting my lips with apprehension.

When she opened the door, she was wearing shorts and a very tiny tank top because of the heat, but most shockingly, her hair was twisted up on the top of her head. It made her look about five feet taller and for a second I couldn't catch my breath, I was so surprised.

"Hi," she said, neither pleasantly nor unpleasantly. I managed to whisper something in reply and then cleared my throat.

"I'm leaving tomorrow," I told her, which was neither a truth nor a lie since I would leave as soon as she said I could have the place and I had no train ticket yet.

"Do you want the key?" she asked me. I was confused that it could be this simple.

"Is it ok? Do you mind?"

She shrugged her shoulders and walked into her apartment, leaving me holding the door. I stayed still, fully prepared to deal with this kind of brusqueness if it meant a place to stay. After a minute I heard her call out to me that I should come inside and I realized I had been expected to follow her. Her apartment was dim because of the heat, and with the blinds down it was nice and cool. In the middle of the living room she had a fold-out couch that was a mess of sheets and pillows. There was a man asleep in them, his naked brown shoulders as contoured and relaxed as the mounds of cotton. Most of

his face was covered by a pillow so he could have been awake and simply not moving. I counted slowly by threes to keep myself from blushing.

Rebecca came out of the kitchen with the key in one hand and a piece of paper in the other. She tore the paper in half.

“This is the address of the place,” she said, indicating one half, “and this is where you can mail the key to me when you’re done.”

“Ok. Should I.....pay you.....anything?” I asked her. She looked at me without seeming to see my face.

“No,” she said. “Don’t be silly.” And then even though she must have known we would never see each other again, she turned her back to me and stripped off her top and began to climb into the folded out couch bed.

“Thank you,” I mumbled, and ran out.

The next morning I bought a train ticket and I rode into Barcelona lonesome and sad at the same time.

It was the end of summer, where the days were fetid with heat but the nights provided some relief. It was still insupportable to wear any sleeves or long pants outdoors in the day, but in the middle of the nights there was the promise of coming coolness that kept people going.

Her apartment was lovely and big. It was close to the most densely populated tourist strip in the city and the noise made from the people bent on selling junk to other people that didn’t know better got maddening between eleven and one in the morning. The apartment was at the top of six flights of stairs and my thighs were burning even though there was very little extra weight on my body. The rooms were dusky and secret even though I knew there had been people living here as recently as a month ago. When I put my things down I smelled the sheets and they seemed so inviting that I didn’t change them even though I had no idea what had gone on in them before I got there. My favorite thing about the whole place was outside the apartment’s front door. There was only one other apartment on this top floor and we were all alone. On the ceiling, right above the center of the open staircase, was a huge pulley made of heavy black metal. I liked to watch it while I climbed the stairs, staring up above my head and imagining thick whipping ropes that were inched up slowly to lift an antique dresser or a piano, voices calling out in Spanish to watch the walls as a bed floated upwards towards its new home.

The first night I got there I had been traveling for a few hours with a heavy pack in the insane heat but as soon as I took a shower and put on a new shirt I felt like I had just woken up ten minutes ago. So I locked the door with a sense of property and I walked down the six flights of stairs while I listened to my footsteps speaking to each other. I could feel the luring heat and noise of hundreds of tourists a few streets away, so I started walking in the opposite direction, patting my hair with my hands to make sure it didn’t dry too frizzed out. I ended up walking for over an hour, not because I couldn’t find anywhere to stop, but because it was so nice to move without carrying, to walk without arriving, to watch without concluding. It was a bit after eleven and just getting pleasant out when I walked into a bar because I felt like drinking a few glasses of beer. The walls were deep reddish orange and it was streaming hot in there. Everyone was talking softly with what sounded like unspoken motives and smiling at each other meaningfully. The air was thick with a very distinct but unnamable odour. I got the hilarious and shocking sense of being inside an enormous vagina. I had to push my hands over my mouth to make sure I didn’t honk out laughing.

I had brought my book and I took it out to read once I was on the second glass but after a few pages I felt like everyone was looking at me with some sort of pity and

interest, like an animal in the zoo playing with some garbage thrown in by visitors. So I put the book away smoothly and only pretended that I was waiting for someone, attractively bored.

Often when you are waiting for someone they will come along even after you stop expecting it. Markus walked in and sat down at my table with hardly any hesitation, which appalled me, but also made my illusion true and so I said nothing. He smiled in a way someone must have once told him looked confident. When I was silent for nearly a minute, he stood up and went to the bar to buy a glass of beer, leaving his bag on the chair opposite mine so that I wouldn't get any silly ideas about running away.

Markus was a German, but he was the kind of mongrel that irresponsibly globe-trotting parents create, so he spoke every language but Russian with a terrible accent. He had spent his school years in Moscow and he disliked it intensely. When he spoke to me in Spanish I understood about one fifth of what he said and yet I found myself nodding like a puppet, curious what it was I was agreeing with.

"Ah. American English," he said. I had actually been born while my mother was in Peru but there was no time or need for that story. So I just shrugged my shoulders.

"The erotic desire is very great in this city, no?" he asked me.

"Mine?" I asked stupidly.

He grinned. "Mine," he said, and it was impossible to tell if he was imitating me or giving the correct answer. He told me about his day, which had involved many grotesque positions on the ground of one of the many small squares, taking pictures for a book a friend was having published.

"How will it be published if the photos are not taken already?" I asked him, genuinely interested.

"Yes, a travel book. The photos, colour," he answered.

"But you can only publish something finished. Or almost finished."

"Yes. The friend."

I didn't want to embarrass him or myself any more, so I just smiled again. He asked me where I was staying. I bit the insides of my cheeks hard to keep my face from turning bright red. Looking down into my empty beer glass I gave him the address of Rebecca's apartment. He opened his mouth wide enough to yodel and actually got off his chair to bend before me on one knee. Some of the people in the bar looked up and then looked down at him. I thought I would start crying of shame and contemplated making a run for it. My drinks were paid for.

"Is perfect!" he screeched.

"What is? Please, stand up."

He reluctantly got back into his chair. The building was perfect, he said in his horrible English. He knew it well.

"A lover, yes, I have a lover alive in there. Alive?" he asked. I said I hoped she was alive. "Or he," I hurried to add and then clenched my toes in my shoes at how verbally clumsy I could possibly be. He laughed at me and said, "and now, she is.....Oregon! Ha!"

He described the street perfectly and then he began to praise the pulley on the ceiling. I was smiling broadly and nodding. He picked up his bag and held out his hand.

"One picture," he begged.

"What, now? No. Oh no." I said, actually pressing myself down onto the chair in case my body got up to do his bidding.

"No no no no no. In the house. The stairs. Yes?" He wanted to take pictures in the building and he wanted me to let him in presumably. I didn't think Rebecca would approve of this. But then I thought about it again and realized she would maybe have

suggested it herself. He wasn't a big man, and if I got screaming mad, I thought my chances were pretty good that he would run. It had been quite some time since I had taken a stupid risk. He looked ready to get on his knees again, and I was concerned about this, so I stood up and tried to act stern.

"You must be very quiet. People are sleeping," I instructed, even though I had no idea who even lived there and hadn't, of course, even slept there yet. He waved his arms like some sort of deranged child and started to unzip his bag, possibly to ease my mind. It was, in fact, filled with photographic equipment. I waved him away.

"Ok, ok. One picture. That's it," I said, wondering what kind of a book this could possibly be, and deciding it was probably imaginary. He tried to leave money on the table for my drinks and I had to explain slowly that they were paid for. For one wild second he seemed about to give the money to me, but I put my hands quickly into the pockets of my jeans to prevent this.

We left the bar and right away he was walking much too close to me. We hadn't even reached the end of the block before he kissed me deep into my mouth. The act was not surprising but the timing was and I almost choked into his mouth. This seemed to please him. While he held the back of my neck with one hand, dragged down by the weight of the camera bag, he gripped my ass so ferociously and suddenly with his other hand that I jumped into the air. I bit his tongue in a blindness of shock. This seemed to positively delight him and he released me and actually clapped his hands with glee.

"The need!" he declared incomprehensibly. I saw he was as harmless as a child and I laughed a little bit which encouraged his joy. There was, yet, something lying at the bottom of his eyes which told me he was no fool. I saw an instant picture of myself in the very near future, so fast I thought it hadn't happened, my cheek lying on the soft wornness of the bed sheets, his hands lifting my lower body high in the air, the breeze finally the perfect temperature against naked skin. The flash of image came with a sound effect, a sharply indrawn breath let out in a sigh, my own throat making the noises. I looked at Markus as he swung the camera bag and put two of his fingers into one of my belt loops and, for the second or third time in my life, recalled with some small level of understanding my father's habit of saying that sometimes the world needs to be seen to be believed.

Glaciation

by James Fountain

The clouds of this starless night cloak thought,
Obscure the tread of tireless pacing amongst dreams,
In the sun of meagre spacing, of buildings
Traced against the skyline, the mind reaches
A momentary peace, a fossilization of emotion,
While you in the far flung twinkling of Sirius appear.

To the shoreline racing seagulls, you motor through
This night, a tide of trembling feeling envelops
The senses, a glacial erosion creates a carving
In your country, hollows out a space where I once was,
Bringing a freedom, a lowland exposure yearned for,
And the stratosphere crouches, waiting to be filled.

To The Stained Glass Sky

by James Fountain

To the stained glass sky
whose panes break and fall about me.

To the bottle of whiskey
which intended oblivion for me.

To the neglected back garden
I shall never again attend to.

To the market research company
I built for myself, but now undo.

To the wife I had once
who up and left me quite sensibly.

To the blade before me
jagging into my fingers gently.

To the stained glass sky
whose panes break and fall about me.

The Old Days

by James Fountain

While lacing your shoe, you're
Tracing your past, the hand on
The door handle remembers the
Hand on the steering wheel that
Wandered through wonderful
Country with a lady you loved,
Her hand on your face is yours
As you shave now, remembered
Glaze of irises reflected in your
Own gaze, the haze of steely
Blue eyes pouring through.

Little Sparrow in the Snow

by Maria di Mario

It came from the north, swirling down the country on a gentle wind, the first Ada had ever seen. Only once before in living memory had it snowed in that part of the country; the night of Ava's birth. She knew the story well, her mother was fond of recounting it when she was in a nostalgic mood. Repetition had carved it into something fixed and immovable, her voice rising and falling in the same places, the order of the words unvarying, a song with no room for improvisation. "The first flake fell at the moment my waters broke, little sparrow, and by the time you came from between my legs the world was wrapped in a pale shroud. Everyone else in the village was outside, marvelling at the white flakes that swirled down from a heavy grey sky, blinking against the gale. You sobbed along with the wind for hours, little sparrow, and I despaired of ever taming the storm in your heart." Later, after Ava married, her mother would add on a final line, "until Tomas tamed it for me." Then laughter would rasp from her aged throat, scratching the air.

But Ava did not feel tamed that morning, as she stood outside her house, face lifted to the sky, wind stirring the soft feathers of hair that lay against her cheeks. The snowflakes landed on her face, cool and gentle against her skin, melting into droplets of water that ran down her neck and inside her blouse. Her skin was cold, but she did not feel chilled. The wildness of the wind, pushing against her body, warmed her somehow. She stood out there for hours, still as a statue, the snow settling through her hair and in the folds of her clothing, until Tomas arrived home from work. He hurried her inside and put her in front of the fire, complaining about the lack of dinner, changing her clothes, towelling her hair, while she sat, unresisting. The wind had blown the steadiness from her heart and the slowness from her mind, but she could feel them creeping back with the warmth of the fire. The heat of their bed, later that night, suffocated her; as Tomas kneaded her flesh with his rough hands, his lips hot on her throat, her skin longed for the cool touch of the snow that whirled outside the window. Her hair lay in damp feathers against the back of her neck, and the wind sang to her all night long.

The next day Ava waited for an hour after Tomas left for work, and then went out herself. The ground was softened with snow, the edges of everything blurred, a landscape of purity and perfection. She took a few steps through it. The sight of her black boots against the pale ground displeased her, and so she took them off and left them by the side of the path. It was cold, but exhilaratingly so, and the north wind was again blowing through her, trembling at her heart, setting her free. She walked down the lane behind their house, past the factory, past the school, past the supermarket. The white of the buildings looked dirty against the pale sky, heavy with snow. Flakes began to fall just as she reached the river. The flurries of white filled her vision, she could feel their movement catching at her limbs, trying to pull her into their dance. Spiralling, twisting, drifting, floating, she opened her mouth to catch them, tried to grab them with her hands. Her bare feet were deliciously cold, the skin on her face and hands seemed more alive than the rest of her, snow settling through the soft feathers of her hair. She began to take off her clothes, piece by piece, dropping them on the ground beside her where they were quickly covered. She had a sense of rightness, of belonging, a feeling of homecoming and at the same time of release. She wheeled and dipped and spun with the snow for hours, until she fell, exhausted, and even then it caught her in soft and white embrace, and lay a blanket over her, and covered her, and kept her safe.

They didn't find her until three days later, when the snows began to melt away. She was next to the swollen brown torrent of the river, a little heap of muddied limbs and feathers, bones jutting through her white skin, eyes staring straight up to the sky, a smile on her face.

Go Forth and Prosper

by Amy Burns

My given name is Beth Day. I'm a recovering bride-a-holic. Because of a legally binding pastime called marriage, I've been Beth Collier, Beth Alexander, and Beth Maupin. Because of a legal antidote called divorce, I'm now Beth Day again. In order to reclaim a name, it's necessary to go to a courthouse armed with every notarized, self-referential document and picture ID possible. The powers that be aren't as worried with identity fraud as they are with the flexing of officious muscles. They like to watch people squirm.

Be prepared, even if you bring a driver's license, birth certificate, university diploma, elementary school report card, vaccination schedule, fishing permit, validated parking ticket, insurance policy and the latest copy of your mobile phone bill, a second trip to the courthouse will be required to complete the process. They'll think of something you've forgotten and if they can't think of anything, the computer system will mysteriously 'go down'.

Now that I'm back to whomsoever I was before I took-up marrying, I think I'll stay single. Paperwork 'does' something to me. Even going to the dentist for a root canal can lead to forms requiring information about previous employers, previous addresses, previous spouses' social security numbers and dates of birth. I couldn't remember their birthdays when I was married to them! But, for the sake of things like root canals, I make something up.

When I was still at university, Professor Graves introduced me as one of his brightest students but, unfortunately, one of his laziest. I was wounded by the comment especially since I was shooting for something in the neighbourhood of tortured genius. I stopped going to his class, citing the fact that Detective Fiction wouldn't count toward my major. I had more than enough electives to graduate. In fact, my undergraduate education was entirely composed of electives including but not limited to: Lapidary, Basket Weaving, Landscapes of British Modernity, Topics in Slavic Languages. Tick. Go forth and prosper!

The afternoon my professor introduced me as both bright and lazy, we were at K-Mart. It was almost Christmas and the place was packed with people buying cheap toys. I was there with two girls from work. At the time, I worked in a laboratory where it was my responsibility to scrape rabbit intestines and run electrophoresis gels, separating protein molecules and deoxyribonucleic acid. I didn't know much beyond that. I didn't even really *know* that. I also cleaned out refrigerators, catalogued scientific journals, screwed postgraduate students and walked back and forth along University Boulevard to classrooms of higher education where I learned about people who are dead and practices that are no longer practiced, in theory. It was the happiest time of my life.

The girls and I were at K-Mart to buy Christmas gifts for the homeless. Our boss had watched a news feature about the Jimmy Wayne Homeless Shelter for Men and,

during the program, he had an attack of conscience. He told us to buy socks, travel-sized toothpaste, mouthwash, and deodorant.

When I heard the Professor Graves say my name, I was up front messing around with the vending machines. When I was a little girl, my hands were small enough to reach inside the machines and trip the anti-theft mechanism, thus enabling me to set free little plastic capsules containing rubber balls, stickers, rub-on tattoos, plastic rings or sea monkeys. I wanted to see if I could still do it. I could. This is what I was doing when I heard him say, Happy Beth Day!

I thought that was very clever.

I'm not a fan of clever.

He said, I'd like for you to meet my wife.

The wife looked like a juiced-up pixie. He said she made organic-cotton, antique doll clothes. I asked how she managed the 'antique' part and she said she dipped them in all-natural tea and other things. I laughed. She didn't. She said something about the plastic balls I was holding and how petroleum products were killing the earth. I assured her that my list of crimes was long but that I'd never produced a petroleum ball and that, if it made her feel any better, I'd stolen the ones I was holding.

After graduation, I had my share of mind-numbing jobs. They involved serving lunch to ladies that split a house salad, minding a desk while middle managers minded me and selling plus sized pant suits. Eventually I landed a job with corporate America as my proud sponsor. This left me on the brink of suicide and facing a huge dry cleaning bill. I worked there for ten years during which time my obsessive compulsive nature took firm root and, at the expense of my mental, emotional and physical health, I began climbing the ladder of success. While my career flourished so did my addiction to antipsychotic, antidepressant and anti-anxiety prescription drugs. It was a medicinal cocktail that would have put a horse down.

When I was at my very worst, before I officially told everybody that I was having a nervous breakdown, before I quit my old job, before I kicked my drug addiction... I was at my very best. This isn't as much of a contradiction as one might think. I was removing pieces of my own flesh, sleeping less than three hours a night and involved in four automobile accidents within the span of three months. I also worked fourteen hour days, got a promotion at work, got a substantial raise, got married ('I do' number three) and got a PhD.

When I tell people about that time in my life, they don't believe it. They don't believe I could've been successful and that fucked up. To those people who don't believe it I say, try.

Quitting drugs isn't as hard as some people make it out to be. Try this:

Become addicted to prescription medication. This isn't difficult. In the United States they hand the stuff out like jellybeans at Easter. Even if you don't go as far as I did, which is to have a complete nervous breakdown, just visit the doctor complaining of some minor disillusionment (in theory, nothing that could be corrected with cosmetic surgery). Once you've secured a prescription (or better yet, several prescriptions) and have been taking the medication(s) long enough to weather the initial side-effects like insomnia, migraines, nausea, blurred vision, dry mouth, and unexpected, explosive anal leakage (as if there is any other kind), a love-hate bond will develop. I suggest allowing this relationship to blossom/fester for at least a year.

Quit your job. Corporate America is legally obligated to continue to provide insurance, albeit at absolutely astronomical premiums, to employees who decide to terminate employment. They call it a Cobra Continuation Plan. It lasts for six months.

When those six months are up, you've no more insurance. The countdown is on. You're well on the way to recovery.

Once you've gone all 'wing and a prayer', deplete whatever funds you've managed to squirrel away to pay for your prescription medication as long as possible. In my case, it wasn't possible long.

Apply the following liberally: Pride and Sloth.

Pride: Refuse to go on government assistance.

Sloth: Refuse to get another job providing insurance (you're screwed anyway with a documented, pre-existing condition).

You might consider a life of crime to support your habit, in which case, reapply Sloth. Turns out, my professor was right about me being lazy.

Being lazy saved my life.

Withdrawal symptoms are harsh.

Once I was done with the gnashing of teeth, rending of flesh, nausea and hallucinations, things were peachy keen. I met up with an old friend who introduced me to a new friend who was so impressed with my knowledge of Basket Weaving and Topics in Slavic Languages, that he gave me a job. It was an incredible job. That is how I ended up living in Tokyo with the Bingham.

The Bingham were something to behold, real marketing geniuses. No overheads, inventory issues, shipping costs or danger of copyright infringement. *They* were the product. *America* was the brand.

Japanese corporations paid Martin and Rachel Bingham more money for a four hour motivational seminar than the average American family made in four years. That doesn't include living expenses and perks. There were plenty of perks. The Bingham were quick to point out that they gave plenty in return.

There was nothing tangible about what the Bingham gave in return but, nonetheless, it was wildly popular.

Martin Bingham played professional football until he broke his back in a car accident. He took-up sports casting. He invested well. He bought part of a steel mill in Venezuela. He got top dollar on the public speaking circuit. He developed a line of motivational DVDs, posters, refrigerator magnets and coffee mugs. He sold them using late night infomercial television. He became rich.

Martin Bingham met Rachel Sutherland.

Rachel Sutherland was always rich. She had an Ivy League education and I imagine she was taught to play hopscotch with a dictionary balanced on her head. She had a way of finishing people's sentences that made them forget what they were trying to say.

Martin and Rachel got married and started their game. They were extremely successful at selling ideas to people. They were extremely successful at selling image. They had a group of catch phrases called *Our Little Secrets*. One of them read: A false sense of confidence never hurt anybody. Nobody has to know.

They had a baby and named her Hannah.

The Bingham made a lot of money in the United States and then they took their act on the road.

While in Japan we were treated with constant extravagance. We were escorted from engagement to engagement by limousines. Our suites were always decorated with fresh flowers. There were dinner parties. Most of the time Hannah and I would end up finding somewhere to hide and watch people.

I became quite attached to Hannah. It hurt me to leave her.

Hannah was eleven years old.

Three days before the Bingham saw to it that I was deported from Japan, we were all at a party in Shinagawa having a good old time. The host, a Bingham fanatic by the name of Jackie Kobayashi, told me about his eight year old daughter, Etsu, and some problems he was having with her. I was barely listening until he said he could really use somebody like me on his team. He said that he would double whatever the Bingham were paying me to baby-sit Hannah if I would consider baby-sitting Etsu. I said, you've got to be kidding! I've got a PhD.

Jackie Kobayashi said, okay, okay... he would triple whatever they were paying me.

Turns out I am a high-priced baby-sitter.

Less than fifteen minutes later, I found Hannah lurching against the wall of the Kobayashi's 1,200 square foot bathroom. I managed to pull a Barbie doll head from her windpipe. I held her in my lap like a baby while she cried. She told me they left the United States because Martin (that's what she called her father) couldn't keep his hands out of her friends' panties. They gave three families money to keep quiet.

As far as I know, nobody from those three families reported Martin to the police. And no, I didn't report him either.

When they showed me the video tape, I knew I was well and truly fucked.

The Bingham were represented by a crew of attorneys. I was seated at the end of a long wooden table by myself. The see-saw was tilting. A screen scrolled from the ceiling. I resisted the urge to say, Action!

The tape had no sound. It had been edited. It was grainy. It was black and white. It showed Hannah. It showed me. We were in the fancy 1,200 square foot bathroom at Kobayashi's house. It showed me straddling her. It showed her dress riding up over her hips. It showed me down over her mouth. It showed me holding her afterwards.

It didn't show the phlegm soaked Barbie doll head I pulled from her windpipe and, without the benefit of sound, you couldn't hear Hannah's confession about Martin.

I told them that all of this could be cleared up with a single conversation with Hannah.

They said, the tape speaks for itself.

I said, the tape says nothing.

They decided to show mercy. They deported me instead of putting me in prison until such time as I could be hanged.

I said, ask Hannah. They said, Hannah has been through enough.

I agreed.

During the holidays, I got a family photo Christmas card from the Bingham. I was surprised they had any Yuletide wishes for me. Hannah had signed her name under the pre-printed line which read: Believe in Miracles and Miracles Will Believe in You! Happy Holidays, The Bingham. I thought for a long time before I cashed the enclosed check.

I used to like to say: When I was at my worst, I was at my very best.

Trailers

by Alex Singerman

WANTED:
Definition
of Poetic
Requirements

*

SMALL PRINT

not worth reading

*

Have you laughed today?

heh huh huh

Watch Out!

*

Look Out: Soapbox Cleaning
in Progress

*

NO CLAIMS BONUS!

*

Meals on Wheels
– the Ciceronean triad –
you what?

Does it accelerate?
It seems to accelerate
for me. A pause

which gives every
word you're tripping
along these monosyllables

*

"Much
Slower"

*

Second-hand
vehicle: widely
recycled.

Extract from a novel, Save Our Souls

by Sue Reid Sexton

A few hours later Manda and Francesca arrived home.

“Dotty!” Dotty wasn’t home but Manda didn’t know that yet.

“Ivan!” Ivan wasn’t home either, another thing their mother didn’t know.

“Goodness,” Manda muttered, more to herself than to five year-old Francesca who was prising open Dotty’s biscuit packet as quietly as she could so that she wouldn’t have to share them. “I told her to come straight home so I can get ready. Where is she? Always thinking of herself ...”

Manda, their mother, had been looking for a pot to clean in amongst the debris in the kitchen. Instead she found a black plastic electrical object with a red light flashing on the front.

“What’s this?” she whispered, as if it is a bomb that might go off.

“It’s the bottom of the phone,” said Francesca through her crumbs.

“Don’t eat biscuits before dinner,” said Manda. “Why is this light flashing?”

“There’s a message.”

“A message?”

“Yes, a message.”

“Who from?”

Francesca sighed and looked at her mother.

Manda didn’t feel ready for messages. She’d had a long exhilarating day and was confused by returning to the cold light of motherhood so soon. She caught a glimpse of herself in the darkening window. Her hair was astray, but that wasn’t new, and her face was flushed, but perhaps that was the heat in there, and rushing home with Francesca.

“I didn’t know we had messages. Does your Dad know about this?”

“It was him who bought it. The messages are usually from him.”

“Really? What do they say?”

“They say, ‘miss you pumpkin’ and stuff and ‘hi kids’ and ‘happy birthday Ivan’. Just stuff. Sometimes he sings.”

“Sings? What does he sing?”

“Um ...” Francesca thought. She put down the packet of biscuits and kicked a carry out carton under the table. “Y ..M..C..A” she sang and threw her arms about in a flurry. “We’re going to stay in the Y..M..C..A.”

“Right, fine, I see,” said Manda waving her own hands to stop her.

“He showed me last time he was home.”

“Good for him.”

“And there’s three at least from the school. Bye!” Francesca grabbed the biscuits and ran up the stairs.

“Three what? Three messages? From ...? Don’t eat before dinner!” But Francesca was half way up the stairs already.

There was a strange brown lump just inside Dotty’s biscuit packet. Francesca was on her favourite spot at the top of the stairs when she found it. It was a soft golden colour, brown and gold at the same time and it smelled funny, a bit like Ivan’s white shirts after he’d been at work. Ivan was her big and only brother. He was nineteen and Francesca was his favourite sister. Francesca sniffed this golden lump. It was roughly square but it had tooth marks on one side. She put her own teeth to it and bit off a piece. It rolled around in her mouth for a minute, some of it sticking in her teeth and then she

spat it out so that it dribbled down her blue school jumper. She threw the lump down the stairs with a clatter. Maggie the cat streaked over and licked it.

“Stop chucking stuff about!” said Manda from the kitchen. She put the phone base down. She’d decided not to listen to the messages.

“Poo!” said Francesca under her breath. “Cat jobby!”

But it wasn’t cat jobby. It was Dotty’s secret stash of hash and some of it was still stuck between Francesca’s teeth.

Francesca shoved another biscuit into her mouth to take away the taste of cat poo which somehow just wouldn’t go.

“Ivan!” shouted Manda.

“Not here!” said Francesca.

“Damn!” said Manda.

“Miss Winnaker says it’s rude to say ‘damn’.”

“How does she know? She’s probably never said ‘damn’ in her life!”

Manda was saying damn a lot. Lately she’d been saying ‘fuck’ and ‘bugger’ too. She’d said these words for as long as she can remember, which sometimes didn’t seem very long, but she’d been saying them more often now and sometimes in front of the children.

Francesca was stung and confused. She’d had five biscuits by then so she went into her room, the same room she shared with Dotty, and hid the rest under her pillow, leaving a small trail of crumbs across the holding bay that was Dotty’s habitual bed. Ten minutes later when Francesca’s mother called her for tea she was feeling strangely hungry and wolfed the sausages and beans from her plate. Manda cleared a space on a counter and chopped an apple for her for afters.

Suddenly the phone rang.

Manda and Francesca flew out of the kitchen and chased into every other room in the house in search of the phone. The base was ringing but the handset had gone. While they were in Ivan’s tiny box room a man’s voice on the base in the kitchen said:

“...for Mrs Dash ...a passport ... driving to licence ...prove she’s not Manda?”

Manda wasn’t sure she’d heard right and thought it was her husband Cal having a laugh, not that he was very funny those days, and Francesca was in the holding bay stuffing biscuits into her mouth like there was no tomorrow.

Tomorrow, thought Manda. What would happen tomorrow? And what would happen that night if Dotty didn’t come home soon?

She pulled the notebook out of her jacket pocket. In the front of this notebook were the household accounts, or the beginnings of the household accounts. Half a page of numbers and question marks hung there with ‘E’ for electric and ‘G’ for gas and other letters which didn’t make sense to her any more. Further in was a portrait of her by the great artist Francesca. She had huge hands and feet, stick legs and arms, staring round eyes and eyelashes that curled into her hair line. She was running, her pointed knees facing west, a shock of hair blown backwards by her flight towards a door. “I LUV MI MUM” was scrawled behind her in Francesca’s best five-year-old hand-writing.

Manda licked her pencil and wrote in the back of the book, ignoring the scoring out she had put there in the morning. She paused in front of the mirrored cupboards in her room to count. She was counting the hours and the minutes that she had been away that day. How long had she been free? Francesca was late up that morning. Six hours minus a few minutes for the shopping and a few more for the post office, plus ... what? She made a rough estimate and scribbled the figure down. She totalled this in the weekly column, then the monthly, then the grand total. Beautiful figures that grew as time went on, telling her she was having a life.

“Chess? Francesca darling?”

Silence. She was on the bottom step by the kitchen. Francesca was on her bed staring at the floral mattress poking through the broken underside of the top bunk.

“Francesca? Chessy?”

No reply. Manda went back into her room and searched for something eye-catching to wear to the pub.

Francesca’s tongue was poking about trying to get the cat poo out of her teeth. She had rolled onto the holding bay that was her sister’s bed and was trying to dislodge the strange lump with biscuits. These were the most delicious biscuits she had ever tasted. She stopped long enough to peer at the package. Di-ges-tive. She made a mental note to tell her mum to get more. She poked again with her tongue. She could feel it and taste it but it just wouldn’t go.

Manda thought she’d have to see what clothes the Dotty had. Perhaps there would be something loose enough to cover her extra bits.

She stood at the girls’ bedroom door and sighed. Something really had to be done. The top bunk had been broken for ages, shit, since Christmas, and it was October, nearly Christmas again. And some day they’d get a cupboard for all these clothes, except the girls would never use it, unlike Ivan who was very tidy.

And then she saw Francesca. She had a packet of biscuits in one hand and the head of her Guy in the other. She was fast asleep in the warm place that Dotty had left an hour or so earlier. Crumbs dusted her face like a five o’clock shadow.

“Poor lamb,” said Manda. “Poor wee darling.” It was hard work being at school and Francesca was a hard worker. Manda left her there, gently covering her with a coat. Francesca wouldn’t relinquish either the biscuits or the Guy. Manda retreated downstairs and continued to search for clothes, forgetting why she went upstairs.

Two hours later she was standing at the kitchen window gazing at herself when Dotty’s face appeared where her own should have been. It took her a moment to realise. Her hands, which were resting in a sink full of woolly jumpers, flew up to her mouth throwing soap suds across her black satin top. (It wasn’t really a top, it was a lace petticoat over a black tee shirt. It was all she could find.)

“Why didn’t you answer the phone?” yelled Dotty flinging open the back door. She kicked a carry out box across the floor. It bounced off a cupboard and spilled black bean sauce across the lino.

“Where on earth have you been? I should have left an hour ago,” said Manda.

“Didn’t you get the message?”

“What message?”

“For you to prove I’m not you.”

“Well, everybody knows you’re not me. What are you ...?”

“Why did you have to give me such a stupid name?”

“God, must I apologise again?”

“Yes, you bloody must!”

“Sorry! I’m sorry. I’m really sorry.” Manda really was sorry. She was sorry for being too young and stupid when Dotty was born and for having a liking for pointillist paintings twenty-two years earlier when she was naming Dorothy Dotty.

“Not good enough. Nowhere near. Where’s Ivan?”

“I don’t know. Working, I suppose.”

“When’s Dad coming home?”

“Don’t know. Where’s the Calendar?”

They stood, backs to the counter, surveying the shambles that was their kitchen. The Calendar was not on the wall where it should have been and was not protruding from any of the piles anywhere else. Manda bit her lip. Dotty knew, really, that she was

too old to shake her head and be angry with her Mum, but she was. What on earth was Manda doing all day? She closed her eyes.

“Where’s my biscuits?” she said, throwing towels on the floor.

“What biscuits?” said Manda.

“Where’s Francesca?” said Dotty, putting two and two together.

“Francesca?”

“Yes, where *is* she?”

Francesca was eating the most delicious sweets in the world. Her friends were all giving her theirs, mix-ups and jelly tots, Freddie Frogs and Bazooka Joes, but Francesca was sweet enough and redistributed these offerings amongst the massing crowd of adoring friends. She did not want to be woken by her sister who was shaking her and shaking her. She did not want to speak to Dotty even if she pried open her fingers and emptied all the biscuits into the holding bay. She wanted to fly with all the other children up to the great sweetie shop in the sky.

But her magic carpet was lumpy and sagged as it carried her down the stairs and into the car and all the way to the hospital.

Big Hustler

by Kelly Sinclair

It was Anna who decided we should set up a lemonade stand. My stepsister, five years older and wiser, explained that to earn you must sell.

"It's all about profits and dividing," Anna said. We were in her bedroom, a place I was rarely allowed. Her sheets were tangled and her comforter was stained. She took a shoebox from underneath her bed and emptied it on the floor. "Since I know how, I'll do the dividing."

She started sorting through used golf tees. Some of them were broken in half, others still had dirt and grass clinging to them. Displaced lint and dust from the bottom of the box floated in the air. A bit of it stuck to one of Anna's eyebrows.

"Depending on how much you do, I'll decide your profits. Understand?"

I knew Anna would end up doing most of the work. I would do the talking. I nodded my head and inched backwards towards her nightstand. There was a chocolate bar and a pair of dangly earrings lying next to the reading lamp. Anna looked up.

"Yours aren't even pierced, Jess." She tucked her hair behind her ears. I did the same, shrugged my shoulders.

Anna was always getting new things. Gifts from Tom. My mom said she was spoiled. I thought about telling this to Anna, decided against it.

"You can't pay me with those," I said, pointing at the tees.

It was July, the middle of long summer days and slow summer heat. The time of year when our dog ran away and returned days later, emptied and fulfilled. We lived in a townhouse on the edge of an aging country club and the golf course bordered our back patio door. When it rained, bare patches of grass turned into mud that smelled of sewage. Neither of us had school and we spent the mornings watching cartoons, the afternoons walking to the corner store for ice cream and soda. At night we stole balls left behind on

the driving range, freezing and then cracking them open with a hammer to see what was inside. We peeled away layers of rubber threads wound around another, smaller ball that made liquid noises after it thawed. I wanted to crack that one open, too. Anna always said it was a bad idea. "I'm in charge and I said no. You don't have to know everything."

There was no point in arguing. It only brought out Anna's temper. My mom told me once that Anna was so angry because her mom had run away with a Texan. I would be upset if my mom lived in a place with tumbleweeds and cheerleaders and *Walker, Texas Ranger*. I thought Walker was an idiot. He wore a cowboy hat and pretended he knew karate. Anna was really better off here.

The day of our lemonade sale, my mom was getting ready to waitress for a wedding at the club and Tom would be off to the tracks after breakfast. Anna and I set up a card table and folding chairs on the lawn. My mom made two pitchers of juice, filling them with ice cubes and chilling them in the fridge. She put one of the jugs on the top shelf and said we weren't to touch it.

"This is for grown-up people," she said.

Tom was sitting at the kitchen table. There was a folded booklet next to a plate of half-eaten eggs and bacon. He grunted occasionally.

"It's all about the odds," he said.

I was across from him, hunched over a poster board and going over Anna's pencilled "Lemonade for YOU!" in permanent marker.

Anna was still outside, making sure our setup was just right. "Advertising and placement are key," she had explained, sending me inside to work on the sign.

Tom grunted again. "But stats only get you so far."

I didn't understand what he meant. "Sometimes you just gotta get a good eyeful of the mare and that's enough to see it's a winner." He winked at my mom. She gave him a disapproving look, but I saw her tilt down her chin and smile.

"Tom," she tutted. She refilled the ice trays and put them in the freezer, then picked up her purse from the counter and blew kisses at us. "See you later," she said. "Won't be back until late."

I heard the front door open and shut, the keys turning in the lock.

Anna came inside. Tom twisted in his chair. "Whaddya think of picking a horse? Any horse you want. Just come and circle the name. I'll bring you the winnings."

"That's okay," she said.

Tom laughed to himself, looking back down at his booklet. "'Big Hustler.' That sounds like a good one."

I'd finished tracing and stood up to show Anna the poster. She had her back turned and was stacking plastic cups to bring outside. I put down the sign and stood on my toes to look over Tom's shoulder.

"Maybe Jess can pick one out. Might be worth a new dress. Something pretty."

Anna dropped the cups and pushed me aside. "I wanna pick one," she said.

The last time I had a new dress, everything went wrong. I'd modelled it the day before Easter in the living room. It was white with a netted petticoat that made it flounce when I walked. There were faux-roses pinned at the waist and a pink ribbon tied into a bow at the back.

"Very pretty. Pretty little filly," Tom said. Updown, downup look. "Delicious."

My mom beamed at me. "Now maybe you'll start dressing more girly instead of running around like a boy." She looked at Anna, that look that I knew meant trouble. The hard look. The *you'd-better-listen-and-quick* look.

Anna had refused to let my mom buy her an Easter dress even though it was a Gesture of Goodwill. She'd screamed and thrown the dress my mom had chosen for her on the ground, stamping on it with her foot. We'd left the store, my mom holding my hand tightly, her face too red and mouth too small. Anna trailed behind.

"I don't do dresses." She had been sitting on the edge of the couch, looking down at her hands.

"Hmph," he'd said. "Little girls are supposed to wear dresses. It teaches them to be women."

"Hmph," mom had said, crossing her arms.

Then, later, after we'd dug out all the candy from our Easter baskets, the clingy pastel plastic threads trailed all over the house, after my dress was laid out on the bed, the morning sun making it look even more like a fairy-tale dress, a princess dress, after I had taken my bath and my mom had curled my hair into little corkscrews, after I put on my white tights (shiny shoes to match), only then did I notice that the rosebuds had been torn away. I picked up the dress and the flowers fell to the floor. The seam in back was torn wide open, the fabric ripped in zigzags.

I didn't speak to Anna for a week.

Outside it was hot and still. The ice in the pitcher had already melted and Anna and I had finished off most of the lemonade ourselves. I was cross-legged underneath the table, the red and white chequered cloth filtering the sunlight, keeping me cool. Anna had changed into cut-offs and had her legs stretched out in front of her.

"Some help you are," she said.

I stuck my head out. "No one's here anyway." I crawled from underneath the table and flopped on my back into the grass. "Anna?"

"Yeah."

"How come you don't have a mom?"

"Don't be an idiot," she said. "You know I do."

"How come she isn't here then?"

"That's not the way life works."

I rolled over and propped my head on my hands. "Tom says real life means you hafta walk away with the Better Deal."

Anna was quiet. I turned over on my back again, wishing that there were clouds so I could guess their shapes.

"We need more lemonade," Anna said, getting up to go into the house.

The last time I'd heard anything about Anna's mom was when we'd been sitting on the landing at the top of the stairs. We could see through the railings into the living room. My mom and Tom had their backs to us, watching the television.

"She's busy down there screwing around with her *pimp*." She shook her head. "And not even looking after her own flesh-and-blood. It's absolutely disgusting." She took a sip from her wine glass. "Let's just hope the apple falls far from *that* tree."

Tom nodded. His eyes were still on the television set. Tiny ant-men were running around on the field. Anna had explained second base once, but I didn't see what that had to do with baseball. He yelled at the screen, "Goddamn ump, wouldn't even know your asshole from the inside of your head."

"For God sakes. Jess will hear you."

He'd leaned over and jiggled my mom's breasts.

"Tom," she'd giggled.

I'd hugged Anna and whispered in her ear, "Is Walker, Texas Ranger a pimp?" She'd pushed me away and tiptoed back to her room, latching the door silently behind her.

Something wet and sticky splashed onto my forehead. I sat up, ready to scream at Anna.

"Thought you might need some cooling off," Trevor said. Trevor lived two doors down. He was ten, two years older than me. Lemonade was dripping from my face and hair. "You're gonna have to pay for that," I said.

"Why?" Trevor sniggered. "I didn't drink any."

Anna was still inside. It was just as well. When the other kids from the neighbourhood came around, Anna made me talk to them. She would stand behind me, her arms crossed over her chest. Some of the others thought Anna was mute. Trevor had once thrown a rock at me, grazing my elbow. Anna hadn't ever said a word. She'd grabbed Trevor's fleeing neck and had kicked him from behind in the nuts.

Since then, Trevor never bothered me unless Anna was inside.

"Is your sister a lesbo or something?" Trevor asked. He walked around the table and kicked one of the legs. "I bet you're just like her."

I didn't know what a lesbo was. "She's not really my sister."

Trevor laughed and covered his mouth with his hands. He doubled over and then lifted one arm and pointed. I looked behind me. Anna was standing there, holding the other pitcher of lemonade.

"Fuck. Off. Trevor," she said. He straightened up, his mouth open, and I saw all the silver fillings in the bottom row of his teeth. He closed his mouth, opened it again as if to speak but stuttered instead. He turned and ran away, looking backwards once.

"I didn't mean it," I said.

Anna set the pitcher on the table and poured herself a cup.

"That's the grown-up lemonade."

She looked into it for a moment and then took a swallow. "So what?"

"You can't drink that. My mom said so."

"Who cares what your stupid mom says? She's totally clueless, anyway."

I wanted to say something back, to stick up for my mom, but I felt bad about what I'd said to Trevor. "You still shouldn't drink it."

"Shut up, Jess. You're just as clueless as she is."

I crossed my arms and pouted at her. It was true. She wasn't really my sister.

"You're just a spoiled brat. Tom gives you everything you want and you don't care about anyone or anything," I yelled. "I'm glad you're not my for-real sister."

Anna chugged the lemonade and then threw the cup on the grass. Her eyes glazed over and she took a step towards me.

"Why don't you just go away? Disappear?" She grabbed my arm, twisting and rubbing it until it burned red.

Our television set was massive. Deep and cavernous and cool. The wooden console extended all the way to the floor, and the back panel had been removed by some long-ago repairman and never replaced. I was still small enough to slip into the belly of it, wedging myself underneath the rounded tail of the screen and the siding. I was curled up, the full light of day illuminating the sheathed wires and copper and unknowable things.

Anna had discovered most of my hiding spots, but I was sure she didn't know about this one. For hours I heard her opening and closing doors. I heard her calling my name in the house, out on the golf course, in the street. Once she was so close I could hear her breathing. "Jess, please come out," she whined, "Please."

Finally the house grew quiet and the light coming through the windows dimmed.

The front door slammed shut. I jumped and banged my head, unsure of where I was. I held my breath, worried that my last secret hiding place had been discovered. I heard Tom cough and clear phlegm from his throat. The *clink* of metal as he threw his keys on the coffee table. The *swoosh* of air as he sat in his recliner. The TV clicked on. The insides buzzed and crackled. Blue light from the screen filtered through. I tried to make myself smaller, worried about the nest of wires. This was the time to be careful. The time to be quiet. Tom usually called for us when he came home. He would be looking soon.

The 6 o'clock news. Time for the weather. (Mostly sunny skies, the possibility of rain later in the week. Heat throughout) Laughter. A brief silence before the next story. (Puppies stuck in a drain. All rescued and expected to make a full recovery.)

I didn't hear Anna come in the room.

"You're supposed to be watching Jess," Tom said.

"She's just up in her room. She threw up."

"She'll be fine. C'mon over here and sit on my lap."

"Maybe I should check on her."

"I've had a hard day," Tom said in a quiet voice. "Come and sit on Daddy's lap."

The volume on the TV got louder for commercials. (An ad for Tide.) Zipper unzipping. (Removing stains was easier than ever.)

"Good girl," Tom sighed.