



# Spiral

Volume 1, Issue 1  
Spring 2008

# Spiral

*Volume 1, Issue 1*  
*Spring 2008*

An Oberlin College Publication

The faeries dance in the woodland,  
 The faeries dance in the glen,  
 The faeries dance on the grasslands,  
 And tomorrow they dance again.

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## Letter from the Editor

As the editor in chief, I would like to welcome you to the first issue of *Spiral*.

“What is *Spiral*?” you ask? *Spiral* is a new literary and arts magazine. “Another lit mag!” you exclaim. Why yes. We’re a magazine for genre-fiction. What is genre-fiction? Well, it includes science-fiction and fantasy, romance and erotica, mystery and horror. While “genre-fiction” is an umbrella term, we consider it to include anything that goes beyond the traditional bounds of literature.

This magazine is only a teaser, a taste of what we hope it will become. We do not profess to have covered all bounds of genre in this episode. Nor range of material. (We are sadly lacking in the visual arts department, we admit!) We hope to accept prose, poetry, plays, essays, photography, drawings, or anything else that can be printed on paper.

Additionally, we accept literature of any length (if it is too long to fit in one issue, we will work with you to find appropriately dramatic intermission points, and publish across several issues.) We also accept serial tales and collections.

But all of this depends on you! If you’re reading this, you are probably interested in genre-fiction. If you have anything that falls into any of these categories, we’d love to see it. Submit as much or as little as you like, in as many forms as you like. We can only continue to publish if we have material; so please send us your works!

—**Bryn A. McDonald**  
Editor-in-Chief

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## Phoenix Guidance

by Bryn A. McDonald

She's running through the field now. The rain's let up, but her hair is still damp, dripping limply around her face. Her little black dress is waterlogged, stuck to her skin. Her high-heeled shoes clatter together as she holds their straps in her hand as she runs. The sun is making a hazy splash of sunset light as it disappears under the rain clouds.

If she would look up she might see a rainbow; but she doesn't. She keeps running through the field which hides brightly-colored wildflowers. She steps over these when she can. That's why she doesn't look up; she's looking for wildflowers.

She's running away from her thoughts, away from her frustration. When she runs, nothing matters. She's running for the sake of something new. The rush of evening wind brushes away anything that was wrong. Away go her thoughts of a ruined evening, of hopes dashed.

She glances ahead, briefly. She doesn't want to fall. She glances ahead and sees a man, lying on the ground in the field.

She can't see all of him—only from his knees to his elbows. He's lying on his back, twirling a feather between two fingers; back and forth, he rolls it.

She stops running and realizes how much noise she had been making. He must have heard her.

"Will you come talk to me?" his hidden head asks. He sounds young, the same age as her. She likes his voice. She thinks it sounds like water rushing over rocks, because it is light and accented with deep-voiced vowels. She hesitates. Don't talk to strangers, they say. You never know until you try, she says.

She steps up to him. Her bare feet rustle the plants. She can see him now. He continues to twirl the feather as she walks to his side. He has a long, oval face with long, dark blonde hair. The feather

stops twirling and he looks up at her. His eyes are dark. Mahogany brown, from the reflecting light of the sun, or so she tells herself.

"I'm Alex." He doesn't hold out a hand or smile. He is not frowning, but not smiling. Relaxed. Reposed. She likes those words.

He looks calm: one arm under his head, the other on his stomach, twirling the feather; his ankles are crossed.

"I'm Sarah."

He smiles. "Hello, Sarah."

He looks her up and down in a way that makes her think he is looking through her to her personality. She returns the favor, though she doesn't know what she is looking for.

He's wearing a tight brown band shirt. She doesn't know the band. Black jeans with a leather belt. Running shoes with the Nike symbol on the side. They don't match. One is pale blue and the other is gray.

He tucks the feather behind his ear. She wants to laugh because it sticks up, making him look like a rabbit. He smiles. He sits up slightly, leaning on his elbows; an earring swings loosely from his right ear. He shifts to the side, pats the crushed spot that he just moved from.

He says, "You can sit down."

She decides she likes him.

She sits, letting her shoes drop from her hand. She stretches her legs out in front of her. She tugs down the skirt of her black dress and crosses her ankles, like he does.

He is watching her; she sees him looking at her face. He smiles and looks back at his feet.

"Where're you from, Sarah?"

"Around." She never stays in one place too long. She can't ever find a place that makes her happy, makes her want to stay there. Except this field. She moves, but never too far from this field.

His head turns quickly to look at her. She realizes he must think she is holding back from him. She wonders if he thinks she doesn't trust him. She thinks she makes her face blank, like his already is. She thinks that hers is open and blank.

He smiles at her and turns his head again to look at his feet. The teardrop earring in his ear sways gently. "I'm from the house at the

other end of the field."

She thinks he is trying to win her trust. "Oh," she says, interested but unsure of how to make conversation.

He sighs and lays down on his back. His face seems less open now— he's disappointed. He takes the feather from behind his ear and starts twirling it again.

She sighs and looks at her own feet. They are cold and they hurt. She remembers why she never liked heels. She remembers why she was wearing heels—she was trying to find a reason to stay. Maybe he can be her reason to stay. But she has pushed him away. She doesn't want to push him away.

"Where did you get that feather?" she makes herself ask. She wonders if this is the right way to start talking. She looks at him from the side of her eye. She doesn't move her head.

"It's from an angel," he says. His voice is quiet, but happy.

She smiles. She likes this.

"And your earring?" she asks.

He tells her that it's the key to another world. He is the keeper, he says.

She smiles and tells him he isn't very good keeper. "Now you've told me all about the world! They won't want you to be the keeper any more."

"Yes," he whispers conspiratorially. "But I know you won't tell."

He puts the feather in her hand. His touch is gentle and soft. The feather touches her palm with a shock of electricity. She gasps and feels as if he's given her the key to heaven.

"Now you owe me something," he tells her. "I need a secret of yours."

She thinks of the field. The one they are sitting in, talking to each other. "I don't have any interesting secrets," she says instead of what she was thinking. "I'm not creative enough to come up with a story like yours."

He laughs and replies that this is nonsense. Everyone has some secret. He pauses and wonders aloud whether she is too embarrassed to tell him hers. She blushes, squeezing the feather too tightly.

She tells him of her need to move. To never stay in one place.

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How each house grows dull to her, and she moves. Away from the black and white building. She tells him of her love of the field. How she once chased a butterfly into the middle of it. When she first found it. She tells him all the silly thoughts she had about why she loves coming here.

He smiles and listens. Not interrupting, not moving.

When she is done he talks softly about the house at the end of the field. About its past and about its color. About its connection to the field and to other things.

They talk until the sun goes down and its leftover light disappears. They are left sitting in the field of grass and wildflowers, no longer brightly-colored. Now they're colored dimly by the light of only stars. Slowly the moon shows up above them.

They lie on the ground and watch it. She falls asleep with his arm around her shoulder.

The sun is rising, making a brighter splash of light than the sunset did, but less colorful. The light filters through tall trees bordering the field. As the sun gets brighter, she wakes up.

He is already awake, standing and looking down at her. He bends down to kiss her forehead; she smiles gently in her half-awake haze. He waves goodbye and walks toward the other end of the field.

The sunlight gets heavier, and his outline gets fainter, faster than he is walking. The day gets brighter and brighter as he slowly fades away.

She wakes up again, not knowing she had fallen asleep. When she wakes up, she is alone again. She is alone, left with the pressure of his kiss on her forehead.

Faintly, the echo of dreamed music plays softly. Harps and drums with flutes and lutes. She wonders how she knew the names of so many different instruments. But in dreams, all things make sense.

She holds her arm above her face and looks out across the field. The tops of the plants sway slowly in the morning breeze.

She smiles and braids the white feather into her hair. This time she'll find a house to stay in. She'll find the house at the end of the field, she vows. She'll live in that house. Somehow.

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Leaving the high-heeled shoes behind, she starts running again. Her little black dress is crumpled and wrinkled around her body. Her braided hair bobs in delayed time to her running steps. Running through the dew-wet grass. Running past the once more brightly-colored wildflowers.

## Summoner

by Matthew Castleman

He stepped out of a door in the very fabric of space, slipping from one temporal realm to another as a mere human might slip into water. He shone with the dark radiance of a being whose soul almost extended beyond the bounds of his body, flickering and shimmering as the reflection of the moon on a choppy sea, or the sun on a rippling lake. His presence filled the room with a palpable chill, a sapping feeling that gave one the impression of having the very warmth of one's flesh tapped into. He moved his eyes over the small room and its sole inhabitant with a look of the kind of easy, calm arrogance that bespeaks complete comfort with and certainty of one's superiority.

"I am Khervalas," he began, in a booming but strangely wispy baritone, "Demon Lord of the Eighth Plane of Darkwalkers, born beneath the red glare of Tur's Star on the first day of the final fall of Nether Earth, sired by Thervalas the Last King of Nether Earth and his Queen, the Dark Lady Rulrann. I am Leader of the First Cohort of the Fallen, Lord and Master of the Black Swarm Kuruk'Engar that sweeps across the dark places of the world, Slayer of the Tyrant Nelzhur, and of the Dark Gods of the Ancients, at whose very name the Endless Voids tremble and shudder with fear. Thou hast summoned me, great sorceress, and I am here at thy heed. What is thy bidding?" His last words echoed faintly, chillingly, through the room, and he nodded his head, poised for an answer.

"A demon lord?" said Edna Clark, 45, wiping her hands on her apron and looking inquisitively at the strange being in her kitchen. "I was trying to make a blackberry pie."

"A bl-" began Lord Khervalas. "Let me see that." She handed him her recipe card, which he looked over carefully. He sighed exasperatedly. "It asks for two teaspoons of salt. You must have put in two tablespoons."

"Ohh, I see. Thank you, sir. Sorry to bother you."

"Don't worry yourself, it happens all the time." He sighed again, with more of a wistful tone than an annoyed one. "Is there anything you need done while I'm here?"

"Well, the roof does need re-shingling."

"I'll get right to it." The crackling being of dark energies transported himself out of the room, leaving a thin wisp of smoke.

"Teaspoons," she repeated to herself. "You never know how a recipe'll turn out if you don't get it just right."



## As therefore in *Filtration*,

we must lay the *drawing side* of the *Filter*, as low or lower, then the *superficies of Water*, from whence it draws, else it hath not power to bring up any thing; so we must search as such *Knowledge*, deep as the *ancients Fountain*, ere we shall be able to draw any water out of their wells. †

by Stephen Burrows

And then I realized the ink was stiff  
in these yellowed turgid tomes, a shadow  
of the water that had gone from it.  
Even symbols that feel like life  
don't tumble off the pages into me.  
These half-drunk mugs of tea are in my way:  
too long these flavors, steeped in our dry water,  
have tried to inspire me. The books, though,  
mention an ancient well, hidden  
among reeds, past the twisted rotten tree  
and the shale beach, and my notes write  
across the walls and ceiling and the small window  
in the corner until I have to buy candles. Now I pace  
past moss-bearded boulders while puddles seep  
in my steps, and the wind dashes coarse  
on this pond where the green marbled depths  
ought to plummet among the cattail reeds. Subtle  
I reach between the water and find  
only slate bottom-rocks like dragon-back scales.

† Prologema to Elias Ashmole's English translation of Arthur Dee's "Fasciculus Chemicus"

## The Phoenix

by Edward Allen Underhill

**B**ig man. Brown, bald, with hairy hands clasped around a newspaper. Sitting and scribbling at the crosswords behind a little desk, jammed in a corner of the dark alley beside the entrance. His red face stands out in the glow of his cigarette. He looks up at sees . . . *Oh, what's this?* A skinny street urchin. Here comes trouble.

Trouble advances calmly.

"What do you want?" grunts the man of brawn.

"I want to get into this club."

"Sure, you do. You hardly look old enough to be out of diapers. What makes you think I'll let you in here?"

Brawn-man is highly suspicious. You can read his thoughts like an open book: Just look at this runt! Skin the color of braised almonds. Built like a horsewhip. Eyes as black as any demon's heart. Hair that looks like a balloon was rubbed on it a little too long.

No bosom to speak of.

"You might want to reconsider." Producing a nice shiny badge from my pocket. Complete with mysterious symbols and an ID number. "Unless, of course, you want to spend the rest of the night dozing in a cesspool."

The beady eyes squint at the badge. The face turns purple. He spits out his cigarette and stomps on it with enough force to squash a brick. "What kinds of jokes is that organization hiring these days?" he mutters, and waves me past.

Ha, ha. If he knew better, he wouldn't still be sitting snorting to himself behind that tiny desk. I could put his brain in a splint. Just last week in the local casino I beat up a guy bigger than this lump, and then I was only armed with a ping-pong paddle and a rubber band. Maybe he should start reading that newspaper instead of just puzzling himself over the crosswords.

Not that there'd be anything to read. According to the papers, nothing ever happens around here. The I.S.S.P. doesn't want people to panic.

Can't think about that now. My badge might have gotten me past the heap of muscle sitting at the door, but that won't work from here on. I'm walking into The Jealous Angel, and I'm pretty sure I'll be the smallest person here.

I should be taller. I'm sure I should be able to be nineteen without having to wear platform combat boots just to compete with countertops.

Pausing a moment on the threshold. I'm stepping in from the twilight, but the gauzy red and gold lights throw strange shadows that make the club seem even darker. Inside, gently swaying bodies clad in leather and sequins. The muddle of a dozen different perfumes is enough to send your senses reeling, even without the added bite of coffee and marijuana smoke. A heavy, thumping beat vibrates the floor. You can practically see the glasses hop on the bar counter.

I've never been much for sequins . . . or perfume, for that matter. No one bats an eyelash when I step into the club.

Pause one more moment to stuff my stake a little further up the sleeve of my leather jacket. Then I'm headed for the stairs. There's no way I'll see over the heads of anyone down here. Looking down from the balcony, I'll have a better view, not to mention clearer breathing space.

A pudgy fellow with a face that's one big pimple tries to look up my skirt as I climb the spiraling iron stairway. Out from the coat pocket comes my pocketknife. One casual flick of the blade and he's changed his mind. Scampering back toward the bar. That's right. Go get yourself a mirror, Pimpleface, if you really want something to stare at.

Another step, and I'm up on the second level. Looks more like a catwalk than a balcony. From here I've got a perfect view of the ridiculous flailing going on below. Call that dancing? Chimpanzees could do better.

Someone taps my shoulder.

*Naagghbb!* Whirling around. The stake's out of my sleeve, in my

hand . . . "Hah!" Stomp on a boot, elbow in the gut, my arm pinning a broad chest up against the nearest wall . . .

Wait a minute. Look up past the chest, past the broad shoulders, up to an alarmed face topped by wavy blond hair that looks like it's spent a lot of time in the salon.

Adam.

The stake goes back in my sleeve. On goes the glare. "You sure do enjoy lurking. You shouldn't sneak up on people like that."

He brushes off his red satin shirt. "A little jumpy, Leora?"

A little jumpy? Understatement of the year.

Not that I'm going to tell him that.

"The eighties called. They want their shirt back."

"Very funny." He leans his elbows on the railing beside me. "I could make a comment about your wardrobe choices, too, but I'm not going to. Why are you so jumpy?"

"This guy I'm after." (Grudgingly.)

"I didn't know you were on duty tonight."

"I'm not." (If I were, I wouldn't be anywhere near this place, trust me.) "But I spotted somebody familiar."

Adam glances down at me. "Gabriel's back?"

How did he—? Nod. Not much I can say at this point. He guessed. And any minute now he'll bring up how I botched up my last big job . . .

"I haven't seen him here."

Double-take. Did he really just miss the cue to tease? He's stupider than I gave him credit for. "How do you know?"

Sly grin. "I lurk."

Ha, ha. Remind me to stitch up my sides. "Well, in that case, I'll be leaving."

Adam grabs my sleeve. "I've got the rest of the night off." (Shrug.) "I'll help you look for him." (Dashing grin.) "Off the record."

Well, that's sweet. "I'm not marrying you."

His grin turns to a scowl. He lets go of my sleeve. "You love bursting bubbles."

"Only yours. Are you still coming or not?"

"I'm coming." Sigh. He looks me up and down. "Platform com-

bat boots really don't go with pink summer dresses, Leora."

"Shut up."

Starting down the stairs, Adam jogging to catch up. "Also, I want my coat back."

"We all have things we want, Adam." Giving the jacket sleeves a nice luxurious tug over my hands. "I'll return this jacket when you return my silver dagger."

"For the last time, I didn't steal your stupid dagger!"

"Sure, Adam." We slip past the undulating dancers and out the back door. "And my next bowel movement will turn to gold. Anything's possible."

As usual, a few hopeful girls trail after Adam, out into the alley. Can't blame them. Golden-haired, blue-eyed, broad-shouldered . . . He looks like Saint George, straight off a stained-glass window. Tonight, though, Saint George turns and pins them with a glare to curdle new milk. They scuttle back inside the club.

The smells of perfume and smoke and sweat fade behind us as we start up the narrow, slimy alley toward the streetlights at the end. Warm, sticky air. Smell of rotting garbage. Smell of car exhaust rolling off the freeway. And one fly that's on the fast road to hell if it so much as sets foot on my bottom lip again.

*Clomp, clomp.* Our footfalls ring on the cobbled sidewalk. Tramping along the river that divides the East District from the West District. On the other side of the muddy water, the West District rears up in proud rows of luxurious apartments, glimmering in the wash of lights. It almost never feels like night in the West District. If it's dark, you can't see all those evil burglars who have never actually threatened any house over there. But that's the district: Home of the rich and paranoid.

On our side of the river, the East District sprawls over uneven, rocky ground, tier upon tier of rusted apartments buildings with barred windows. Only the occasional streetlight illuminates the sidewalks around here.

Damn fly.

"Any idea where we should head first?"

Huh? Oh. "Not really. I don't know where Gabriel might go."

Adam's swaggering along beside me, looking as cool and col-

lected as ever, flicking the blue jewel dangling from one ear. "Any idea why he's back?"

Adam's not fooling me. I can't see his head turn, but I'm sure his eyes are flicking back and forth across the wide shadowy street, grilling every stray candy wrapper that might be plotting an ambush.

Shrug, Leora. Can't look like it matters. "You know, unfinished business. There's this whole grudge thing."

Adam looks down his long nose at me. Don't even try. You won't find any answers here.

He nods. "Right. You tried to kill him. Swords were involved, no?"

A sudden, cold memory. That dark, scarred face, eyes glinting like orange fire. Glittering sword slicing down from nowhere. Knees giving way. No pain . . . at first. Just a huge blow. A huge, blunt blow . . .

And the taste. The bitter taste of bile in my mouth.

"He tried to kill me first." (It comes out sharp.)

Adam looks away, over my head to the river, like I'm not even there. Like he has more important things to see. What else is new?

Pompous dough-head. He's tricked me. He's tricked me into spending time with him! Imbecile. I've got to stop falling for that. Adam sighs. Eyes swivel over my head back to the sidewalk in front of us. "We should try the Phoenix."

"The Phoenix?" (Remind me of *that* place, will you?)

Long look from Adam. "That's where Gabriel turned up last time."

"Well, maybe he won't go there again. Maybe . . . maybe he's got bad memories."

Adam raises an eyebrow.

Don't look at me like that! It *could* be true, you know. I have bad memories.

Adam shrugs. "If you want to stay here, I won't stop you."

"I'm coming, I'm coming."

He turns off the sidewalk, glances around (you'd hear a car coming a mile away in this deathly quiet, but you never know what's lurking around the East District), and leads the way across the

street.

“One request, Adam.” (Dodging a puddle of . . . what is that? Vomit?) “Let’s try to avoid the alleys.”

He grins. “Are you sure you don’t want me to call in some back-up? Would five incredibly large, muscular I.S.S.P. men holding rocket launchers make you feel better?”

Oh, stuff it, bog-brain.

“I could do without them, but if they’d keep you from wetting yourself at the first sign of trouble, then I’m all for it.”

Adam’s brows snap together. That’s got him ticked. “Ladies first,” he grunts, holding out a hand.

And off we go, down a narrow cobbled street, barely wider than an alley itself. Corroded iron apartments rearing overhead. Even if the moon was out, it’d still be dark in these streets. But tonight it’s cloudy. The air smells like rain.

And something else. Dead, rotting cat in the gutter, covered with flies. Oh, God. Don’t look, Leora. Ugh, I’m going to be sick . . .

Close my eyes, just to shut it out . . .

*Thwap.*

What the—? Opening my eyes. I’ve run straight into Adam’s arm. What’s his arm doing there?

“Shh!” He presses a finger to my lips.

Oh, great, Adam. Couldn’t you wait until we got past the dead cat to hear something?

*Thunk.*

What was that? Pulling one hand inside my sleeve. I’ve got to get my stake . . . where is it? Slippery fingers, slippery wood . . .

A quick soft *swish* of metal on metal. Adam, flicking out a pocketknife. What does he think he’s going to do with that? Cut vegetables?

Where the hell is my stake?

A shape, appearing from the shadows. Human? Long black coat, heavy leather boots. A silver glint—a belt buckle. A silver belt buckle. Wait a minute . . . it’s . . .

It’s shaped like a skull.

“I would say ‘good evening,’ but it strikes me as terribly cli-

chéd.”

I know that voice. It’s been months since I heard it.

Oh, God. I can’t move. My blood’s frozen. My stake! No! Slipping through my sweaty fingers . . . right out of my jacket sleeve . . . *clunk*. Useless at my feet.

The bald head turns. The shadowy face looks up. Pale, raked by red scars, a blue spider-web tattoo around one eye.

Not human. Not human at all.

A long, slow smile with a glint of gold. “Hello, my dear Leora.” (Practically a hiss.) “Remember me?”

Do I remember you? Could I ever forget?

Can’t speak. My tongue won’t move.

Gabriel. Oh, God. He’s going to kill me. He’s going to kill both of us.

Adam’s hand on my back. Bringing me back to earth. Wait . . . the pressure . . . what’s he doing?

“Hah!”

Help! Stumbling away, crashing over several garbage bins, into the rusted wall. What happened? Adam . . . Adam pushed me! Pigswill! I’ll . . . I’ll . . .

*Thwack.* The sound of fist on bone . . . a shout . . . What’s going on? I’ve got to get up. I’ve got to see what’s happening!

Push myself up on hands and knees, peer over an overturned garbage can . . .

Two flashes of silver. Thin, tiny blades. Two thin knives. Adam attacks, so fast you can barely see him move. Leaps forward, practically on top of Gabriel.

He’s fighting! What the hell is he thinking?

Gabriel’s too quick for him. One blow, hard across the face. One knife goes flying. Adam collapses on one knee . . . Look out! The pale spidery hand snatches up my stake from the ground, drives it forward . . . Adam rolls, just in time.

Idiot. He’s going to get himself killed.

Have to do something. Have to *move*.

“Naaahhh!” A body, flying through the air, crashing, hard, into the wall. Adam.

Stop! Stop! I can’t hear . . . can’t hear anything . . . noise, just

noise in my ears . . . I have to move. Have to help Adam . . .

Shivering, hunkered down behind the fallen garbage bin, clinging to the slick cobblestones, hands against my ears. Stop the roaring! Face wet . . . tears . . .

Shuddering . . . gasping . . . waiting . . . waiting until I can move. Waiting until the world stops screaming . . .

Silence.

The noise is gone. Fingers, tangled in my hair, taking them away from my ears . . . nothing. What happened? Peeling my body from the cement. Sticky, slimy, muddy knees, muddy dress.

Have to stand up. One hand, flat against the cold metal garbage can. Slowly, slowly. Peering up, over the bin, into the street . . .

Nothing. Overturned garbage bins, that's all. Where's Adam? Where's Gabriel? What happened?

Oh, God. Gabriel.

What if Gabriel killed Adam?

No. No, he didn't. There would be a body. They're both gone.

He's toying with me. Gabriel's toying with me, the same as last time. Last time it was only a threat. Now he's got someone . . . he's got Adam, and I can't do anything. My hands are shaking. Thinking of his face . . . the scars . . . the sword . . . the pain . . .

Stop it. You've got to *think*, Leora. Think about what to do. Call for backup! You can have a whole team here. They can help you. The big muscular men with bazookas . . .

They wouldn't get here for an hour. More than an hour. Don't have the time.

It doesn't matter. This is my fight.

I have to do something.

*Splat. Splat. Splat-splat.* Oh, hell. Wouldn't you know it? The city turneth into standing water and the sewers into water springs. I've said it before and I'll say it again. My guardian angel has a mean sense of humor.

Here comes the rain. Slithering down my neck, down my back. Damp strands of hair sticking to my forehead, my neck. Pulling my hands inside the sleeves of my jacket—Adam's jacket. Wrapping it around me, tighter.

I can't stand this.

Looking around. My stake's gone. Doesn't matter. I've got to get to the Phoenix before Gabriel really turns psycho and strings Adam's guts around the place like Christmas lights.

That stinking, pestiferous pus-bag. I'm going to kill that reptile. He thinks he can get away with anything he wants? Not this time. This time it's different.

Picking up a jog . . . a run . . . down the narrow street. Whoops! Jump over a pile of compost. Stumble . . . *splash!* Puddle of muddy water, splattering my legs. Keep going.

Of course Gabriel's going to the Phoenix. He wants to finish this. It's not enough that he got away. He wants to kill me because he didn't manage it last time. He wants me to come looking for him. He knows where I'll look.

Skidding out into a roundabout. *Whoops!* Dodge that car! Careening to one side, and the sleek metal body shoots past me, blaring the horn.

Where am I? Corner of Roman and Chrisanti. I'm getting there. The Phoenix isn't far away. Lucky, too, because Gabriel had a head start.

Curse this rain. I'm soaked to the skin, freezing cold, and the humidity sure isn't doing wonders for my hair.

Have to keep going. Have to hurry. Down Chrisanti, two blocks, sharp right . . . look out! Jump the homeless guy sleeping in the gutter. He doesn't even snuffle. If he doesn't find someplace safer, he's going to be dead in a week. Pounding down another narrow, uneven street. There! A shortcut, if I can just scale that fence . . . Slippery fingers on rusty metal . . . Pull! Scrambling, scabbling . . . I'm up! Up and over and down in the alley on the other side. Sound of cats fighting in the dumpster. Wail of a distant siren. The police, still fighting a losing battle against this district. Somebody's probably been murdered. It'll be on Adam's desk tomorrow.

If he's alive tomorrow . . . Have to move faster!

*Booom.* Distant rumble of thunder. Streak of lightning. Turn a corner. Another streak, illuminating . . .

The Phoenix.

It used to be a bed and breakfast, back when the East District wasn't a cesspit. It's been there for as long as I can remember . . .

Adam said once that it was fifty years old. It looks more like a hundred. It's been abandoned for ages. Three teetering stories, gabled roof, peeling pastel paint. Most of the windows are broken. One flapping curtain billows through the highest window. The chimney's collapsed—a pile of gray bricks litters the cobbled street. That's new. It was still standing last time I was here. It had a crow's nest on top.

I'm shaking again.

He's in there. I can't hear anything, but I can tell. A ball of ice just dropped into my stomach.

Stepping forward, right up to the porch. The railing's falling apart. Grab hold of one of the supports. Pull . . . pull . . .

*Snap.* Yes! Breaking it across my knee. It's not much, but it's wooden and it's got a pointy end.

Stepping up on the porch, jumping a sinkhole to the front door. Hell in a handcart. My heart's going to jump right out of my chest. Lean my shoulder against the door. Put some weight into it, Leora! Push!

Ouch! Rotting wood shouldn't be this hard. He must have something blocking the door on the inside. The windows are all boarded up on this floor, too. Gabriel was ready.

Time for Plan B.

Take a step back. Think. Think *through* the wall. *Through* the wall . . .

Wind up, spin, foot lashes out . . .

*BAM.* Through the wall. The rotting wood crumbles inward. It's been eaten from the inside. Hardly more than dust now. The hole is easily big enough for me to get through.

Duck, step through. Fingers tight around my stake. I certainly announced myself. But nobody's here to greet me. What's Gabriel up to?

Time to move fast. I don't care who hears me. Running, through the dining room, past the long table. It looks better than the rest of this place. It's still got a stained lace tablecloth over it.

Down the hall. Wait! Stop! Skidding to a halt. The bathroom door's closed. Shh! Straining my ears . . . Yes! The sound of quiet cursing.

Ha. Grabbing the doorknob . . . wrenching . . . It's locked. From the outside. If there's a latch on the inside, then Gabriel must have broken it.

Right. Pocketknife time.

Out with the tiny screwdriver. Wedging it carefully into the keyhole. These old skeleton key locks. They're so simple.

*Click.* Done! Twisting the knob, pulling the door open. Face to face with . . .

Adam.

Saint George is staring at me with—I don't believe it—a disgusting, grubby toothbrush in one hand.

"Leora? What are you doing here?"

"What does it look like I'm doing, stupid? I'm rescuing you!"

"Rescuing me?" The blue eyes flare. The saintly brow snaps into a frown. "I was doing just fine, for your information."

"Oh, yes, I'm sure you were getting on great with your . . . You weren't brushing your teeth with that thing were you?"

"I was making use of my surroundings."

Stop spouting the handbooks, maggot-bag, I've read them already. "Look, do you want to get out of here? Or should I just lock you up again and see if you can escape with that toothbrush before the big scary monster comes back?"

"Shut up." Out he comes, dropping the toothbrush to the floor.

Time to go.

Adam's voice in my ear as we start down the hall. "What have you got with you?"

Hold up the makeshift stake.

"What, that's it?"

Glare. "What did you expect? Big muscular men with rocket launchers?"

"You'll get in trouble with headquarters. You shouldn't have come alone. You should have at least called the I.S.S.P."

Oh, that's done it. You iron-gutted, bladder-brained, loud-mouthed, soulless, arrogant dough-head! "So that's what this is about, huh? You would have preferred I didn't come? You wanted to get out all by yourself instead of being rescued by a girl?"

"Or wait for reinforcements in the morning."

"In the *morning*? Wake up and smell the imminent violence, Adam! Gabriel would have had your intestines drying on the porch by morning!"

"It wasn't safe for you to come by yourself. It wasn't smart either. You played right into Gabriel's hands."

Oh, right. So I'm just a fool. I'm a complete cuss-head who doesn't know what she's doing, and who gets pushed around like a wheelbarrow. Well, thanks very much, Adam, that's really encouraging.

Throwing down my stake. Getting right in his face, on tiptoe so we're almost even. "Not safe, huh? Not smart? You think you could take me? Wanna try? Huh? Come on, look me in the eye when I'm talking to you!"

He's staring over my shoulder. Why won't you look at me, maggot-bag?

Wait a second . . .

Sinking down on my heels. Turning around slowly . . .

There stands Gabriel, arms folded across his chest, baring his teeth in a sardonic grin. His pale skin looks like parchment stretched over his bones. The scars look like ink. "I'm sorry." Calm as ever. "Am I interrupting?"

Quick! Elbow Adam in the stomach. "Oof!" Have to keep him from doing something stupid again. Give him a hard push, while he's bent over. Propelling us both backward into the kitchen. Slam the door . . . which keeps going, straight through the doorway and into the hall. Damn those rusted-out hinges!

*Wham.* Smack into Gabriel. He stumbles backward, surprised. He didn't know this place was that decrepit either.

"Get down!" Pulling Adam behind the counter in the middle of the room. My stake's on the floor in the hall. Terrific.

Looking up. Drawers. Above my head.

Adam, grasping my arm, pulling me down on the floor beside him.

"Leora . . ." Hushed voice, earnest gaze. Pure man of marble. "We might not have much time left . . . There's something . . . there's something I've got to ask you."

He's very close. Too close. "Yes, Adam?"

"Can I have my coat back?"

"What?" (Moron! Dungheap!) "Our last moments? And that's all you have to say to me?"

His head thuds back against the cabinet. "Leora, for once, could we just please die without all this bickering?"

Crash. The kitchen door flies over our heads, splintering against the opposite wall.

Adam tries to get up. Not you, pus-bag! Pushing him back down. Scrambling up myself. If Adam stands up, he'll be a walking target in that ridiculous red shirt.

Ducking low, rounding the corner, pulling at one of the drawers. It's open. Pop up for a minute, above the level of the countertop, peek in the drawer . . .

Measuring cups. Damn.

"Leora, my love." Gabriel, stalking through the kitchen doorway. "I really think it's time we just fight and get it over with." Pause. "No, that's too complicated. How about I just kill you?"

On to the next drawer. An eggbeater . . . a steak knife . . . no good.

"I promise I'll make it painless. Just a quick snap of the neck. You won't feel a thing."

And the next. Empty.

Right.

Tense, ready . . . go! Fling myself across the kitchen to the cabinet against the wall. Gabriel moves at the same instant.

The rustle of his long jacket. A smooth metal knob in my fingers. Pull! Wrench the drawer open.

A hand on my throat. Pulling me up. Feet dangling above the floor. Gasp. Cough.

Gabriel's bloodshot eyes, boring into my own, inches away. A hiss through rotten teeth. "Any last words?"

Dragging in a breath. "Fork."

Gabriel blinks. Frowns. Opens his mouth . . . and looks down. Staring in amazement at the fork buried in his chest. The blank stare turns to a curling grin. The grin turns back to me. "You forget, my dear. Metal can't hurt me."

"You forget, demon." Spitting out the words around the hand compressing my windpipe. "It's called *silverware*."

The hand loosens. The eyes stare in horror at the black blood leaking around the fork.

I'm falling. Collapsing on the ground. Rolling out of the way.

The fork begins to smoke. Gabriel screams. It shakes the foundation of the house, rings in my ears . . . an inhuman scream that rattles the bones, going on and on without a breath . . .

And then dying away . . . the hiss of smoke and fire . . . a rain of ashes, as Gabriel disappears in a cloud of dust.

*Clunk.* The cold sound of blackened, melted silver hitting the floor.

My breathing. My drumming heart. The sound of soft footsteps. Adam, standing above me, reaching down. His fingers curl around my hand and he gently pulls me to my feet. I'm shaking. God, I can't stop.

The Phoenix feels like a crypt. Silence, death. Ringing hollow footsteps as we walk through the halls, back to the entryway, and climb out through the hole I kicked in the wall. Clambering off the porch, back out into the muddy street.

The rain's stopped.

The moonlight makes Adam's shirt shimmer. He swallows and opens his mouth . . . and closes it again.

It's hard to get a grip on the sleeve of my jacket. My fingers are shaking. Shrug my shoulders, and the jacket slips off them easily. It's so big.

Holding it out to Adam.

He raises his eyebrows.

Can't meet his eyes. Staring stubbornly at the ground. "It's yours."

He grins, takes the jacket, and leans down, resting his forehead against mine. "I stole your dagger."

## Untitled

by Frances Visintainer

Mine, again, A life that was seized-  
Sharp, sharp, a tuning fork driven through your heart.  
Your blood is mine.

Thirsty? I thought so. And you drink,  
This brew of mine, my child, will bind you to a thought.  
Twisted, twisting, my fingers through the strings,  
Your puppet-hair tilts your opinions.  
This and that, here and back,

Do not think, do not!  
No pain of yours is real, no job, no freedom to break.  
You were mine to begin with,  
A lovely pet, a child's play.  
And in this, there is a beauty.

Destroyed by fire, fire, your wooden limbs?  
They burn. Burn and crack and ultimately bloom,  
with sparks and unending rounds of iron.  
Your blood is spilt, a shame. How pretty, see? See it there, how  
you've poured it into everything.

And that everything is nothing, it will not hold.  
Your life is mine, mine.  
Your heart beats a cadence that aches sweetly through me, a taste  
of flesh,  
A touch, a kiss.



# Noir 1

by Matthew Castleman

**I** thought I was so damn special.  
You probably would've too if you were a loser chump like me, under the circumstances.

It was a sopping wet Wednesday night, and I was breathing the fumes of a watery rye in the back corner of a broken-down dive with holes in the ceiling you could stargaze through. I was a week out of a job that I'd hated anyway, with no future employment in sight, staring down the silenced barrel of debt.

The few sad, sorry heads that weren't too full of cheap gin to move lifted up and took notice when an old buddy of mine sauntered in. What he was doing in a dump like this I had no clue. He ordered a drink, tossed a pair of bills on the bar like they were pocket lint, and walked over to my table.

"Benny."

"Hey, Rick. What the hell brings you here?"

"As a matter of fact, I was looking for you." I looked up at his oiled hair and well-polished teeth. He was obviously doing well for himself.

"Looking for me? Listen, I appreciate your thinkin' of me, but if you're after the pleasure of my company I gotta warn you, I'm not in an entertaining mood." I took a deep breath. Been a while since I'd said that many words in a row. He leaned in.

"I've got something to improve your mood. A job."

The room, which had been rocking around like a ship in a gale, seemed to have found calmer waters. My vision cleared.

"Go on." He sipped at his drink.

"It's a one-time thing, but you'll get enough out of it to coast on for a while. Take a walk with me."

\*\*\*

Rick Simms had grown up in this city with me, and before the boom started a few years ago he'd gotten out of the slums by making some new friends out of town. Those friends worked for a sizable mob and he was apparently just the new talent they'd been looking for. Can't say I've ever held his profession against him. I've seen the way that those up top use their perfectly legal clout to spit-roast those beneath them. If the only way to avoid that was to say to hell with the law, to hell with it.

"All right. My ears're open." Rick cast a brief glow on the lonely alleys of a forgotten neighborhood with a match, lighting a cigarette.

"My associates are interested in setting up business in the city. However, there's a local group that's pretty well running things. We're going to have a little gift for them to smooth things over and avoid hostilities." He took a long, hard drag, the kind taken by a man who once had to savor every little bit of pleasure life allotted him, but now had the resources to burn through them like fuses and toss them away, never doubting that more were always there for him. "There's going to be a meet tomorrow. Two cars, one from each party, will meet under the St. Avery Bridge." Nice shady spot, down by the waterfront. Not many lights or curious eyes around. "There'll be a fancy little briefcase full of cash, and you're gonna give it to 'em."

"And why would anybody want me to do this?" Rick sighed.

"I'll be straight with you, Benny. My bosses are concerned that something'll go wrong and they want someone expendable to be the carrier. They're just being paranoid, though. The other group wants things to go smooth just like we do."

He flicked the last snub of his cigarette away, and it fizzled momentarily in a puddle dyed a sickly green by engine oil.

"All right." Rick turned to face me, smiling.

"Atta boy. Meet me at the Thompson Inn tomorrow at two. We'll get you ready." I nodded.

"I'll be there."

He patted my shoulder and walked off. I looked around nervously. Agreeing to take part in a mob bribe doesn't do much to

help your jitters. I didn't sleep; kept feeling like a police boot was about to bid my door frame goodnight. But that splintering wood sound never came. I was excited in spite of my fear.

Thought I was so damn special.

I met Rick at the hotel the next day. A half-decent place near downtown, pretty low profile. He took me to room 214, where three men were waiting.

"This is my old friend Benny," Rick said. "He's a good guy. Treat him nice for me." He turned to me. "I'd love to stick around for the meet, but unfortunately I have business elsewhere. Don't worry, pal. You'll do great." He nodded to his friends and closed the door behind him on his way out.

I looked over the room. Seemed to be the group's base of operations in the city for the time being. The desk had a pile of well-worn binders on it and there were papers scattered around. Some decorations that clearly weren't hotel grade had been brought in. There was even a group picture of the syndicate's higher-ups. You gotta have some serious gall to have things like that out in the open.

One of the men was a stereotype all drawn up: Big, bald, square nose, grey suit, and a look on his face somewhere between smug amusement and cold business. Another looked like his crony. Unremarkable and small. The third guy looked pretty eccentric. A brambly mass of grey curls sat atop his oddly-cocked head, complete with glasses thicker than my shoe soles. He had a weird little box on his lap.

"Welcome to our little home," said the big man.

The meeting went quickly. The big man summed up the job using few words, with good reason. I had a simple task and I didn't need – or want – to know too much of the background. After he briefed me there was one more thing. Turned out the odd guy with the box – I forget his name; Tools McBucket or something, one of those dopey aliases mob specialists give themselves – was a disguise artist. The big man said that since I didn't want to go into organized crime as a career, it might be best if nobody who attended the meet would recognize me if they saw me again. The makeup wasn't much – some darkening of the skin, thicker eyebrows, a little shape to the nose and a thin goatee – but I had to hand it to what's-his-face, the

guy knew how to effect subtle change.

My breathing got shallower as the car neared the bridge. It was me, the big man, his crony and a driver who smoked yellow cigars that made it even harder to breathe than it already was. We drove quietly along side streets and darkened roads in a smooth purple V8 with dim lights. The windshields looked thicker than usual – probably bulletproof.

I was tapping my hand against my thigh to roughly the rhythm of the drum intro to Sing, Sing, Sing, trying to avoid humming any number of indistinct tunes along with it. Between my feet was a black leather briefcase with sides smoother than glass. I didn't know how much cash was in it, but considering how much the case itself must've cost I imagined it was a lot more than most people I knew had ever seen.

After an hour we finally drove slowly between shabby rows of cinderblock and cement buildings towards an area that had once been part of the rail yards. Flickering street lamps shot weak yellowish pools onto the dark, cracked pavement. The men's hands moved instinctively to their lapels, their eyes scanning the streets, letting their nerves show. At least I wasn't the only nervous person in the car.

The St. Avery Bridge was a wide, rusty heap of steel and stone that served as an overpass, carrying a road along above the abandoned train tracks below. It was still in use, but this area didn't get much traffic, so it was a pretty safe spot for this kind of thing. I knew a little bit about the group we were meeting. It had started as a secret society of sorts that the biggest businessmen of the city formed when the boom hit to help protect one another from nonlocal competition. Pretty quick it'd become a powerful force dedicated solely to keeping its own members in good places. I guess they figured if anyone was going to run rackets and intimidate citizens in this town it was going to be them. Same as it always is. A bunch of rich sops get together to keep their money away from anyone who might actually need it. Most people called the group the 'old guard.'

We spent four hour-long minutes waiting before a flawlessly

black town car with shaded windows glided out of the shadows and came to a stop under the other side of the bridge. For a moment there was no movement as the two cars sized each other up. Then the other car's passenger door opened quietly and a man with thin, close-cut hair in a well-tailored navy blue suit got out. He was followed by another man, dressed the same, from the back seat. The driver stayed in the car. I looked at the big man, who nodded. He, his man and I got out.

I tried to keep my knees from shaking themselves off my legs and kept the briefcase tucked under my arm. The big man motioned for me to go as one of the suits stepped forward. This was it. All I had to do to get my life going and maybe make it mean something was walk twenty feet and hand a guy a briefcase. The quiet of the city outskirts surrounded me, and the bridge blocked out the sky. I started walking slowly. All eyes were on me, and if I didn't play it cool things could go south real fast. There's something about a situation like that. When it's dark, silent, and tense. There's a giant spider web connecting everyone, no one daring to budge lest they send a tremor through it and attract unwanted attention. When something changes in that situation, you can almost sense it before it happens. The two suited men shifted uneasily and I paused slightly. Then the driver's door opened silently and the black-clad driver got out. His companions were too focused on me to notice. I didn't pay him much mind either until I saw his face. It was Rick.

I must've had a hundred thoughts at once when I realized it was him. Unfortunately I didn't get out so much as a whisper before he coolly and quickly pulled a chromed .45 from behind his back, lined the barrel up with my forehead and, without a moment's hesitation, pulled the trigger. He was a good shot. I was dead before the sound hit my ears.

Now ordinarily someone in my position wouldn't really be able to tell you what happened next, being on the ground with a tunnel the width of a dime in my frontal lobe, having not so much shuffled as taken a running dive off the mortal coil. But that's the thing about being a narrator, I guess. Maybe if you're one someday you'll see for yourself.

Before I even hit the ground, the big man and his lackey had

their own heat out. Muzzle flashes and bangs turned the St. Avery Bridge into a Wagnerian finale. The suits got perforated before they'd unsnapped their holsters. Rick gave a quick nod to the big man, got back in the car and tore off into the night.

You may be wondering why these things happened. I certainly would've if I'd been alive to think about it. Pretty simple, really. Rick's mob buddies wanted a snoop inside the old guard to help them move into the city. He, being a native, was an obvious choice. He started driving for them years back, gathering little scraps of information that passengers let slip out.

When it came time for his real bosses to start moving in, they acted like they were doing it diplomatically by offering that gift. Their real plan had to do with the retirement of one of their higher-ups. Harry Coletti wanted out of the whole game after a distinguished twenty years of service. His bosses agreed to secretly get him to England with a whole new identity and life to look forward to. The only trick was finding a way to tie off his present life and identity. If I'd taken a closer look at that group photo in the hotel room I might've noticed that I was a dead ringer for him. A bit darker skin, thicker eyebrows, a little facial hair... you get the idea.

So the big bosses tell the old guard that peaceful relations matter so much to them that they'll send Harry Coletti himself to personally hand their boys the cash. And the old guard are savvy; they got cameras in all their cars to they could get the real story on how their deals went down. But you can always turn an advantage your way, and Rick did that by asking to be the driver for the meet. Here's what the camera saw: 'Harry Coletti' gets out of his car, walks forward and is shot, unprovoked, by one of the men on the other side, who are back out of the camera's picture. Coletti's men retaliate, clearly in defense. Then the car speeds away as the driver takes off.

Rick races home after the big man fires a couple harmless shots through the back windows and tells his bosses that one of their suit boys snapped. Now the old guard is facing a mob war and it's apparently their fault, and their responsibility to make apologies and appeasements for both fouling a deal and assassinating a high-pro-

file mob boss. I have a funeral full of people I've never met, and a woman wearing blood-shade lipstick and rouge under widow's black puts on an Olivier-inspired performance before catching a cab to join her very live husband on the 5:30 to Heathrow. Old friends are the best, ain't they?

## One of Many Tales in the Lives of Captain Marie Bahan:

“When Bahan Got Marked,” or “When Wolf Came Back”

by Alyssa Zullinger

**M**y name is Captain Marie Bahan. Mm-hmm. That's what my parents named me the day I was born. They called me Captain; everyone else called me Marie. I didn't really like either. These days, though, I usually get called “Captain Bahan.” Because ever since the government – or should I say the millitants, it was really the volunteer layman who made it possible – went and got the last of the paper records converted by hand to digital, I've been listed as Cpt. Marie Bahan. I didn't argue – rank is a valuable thing to have around here, especially among my kind.

The night before that morning I went to the hospital – yeah, I'm gonna tell you the real story about that – I was pissed. See, none of us had seen Therese in a few months, and that night I found out why, finally, through the grapevine. A few months before, she'd collapsed in public, fainted or something, and some strangers had brought her to Hospital, and Hospital had contacted her *parents*. That's why none of us had heard anything about where she was at. Those months, she was lying in a cot hooked up to machines, getting worse and worse in that *clean* place, and now she was lying in Hospital dying.

Not a lot of people around here would have understood the gravity and the sickeningness of the situation. And as it was, I was the only one who could intervene. And that was fine with me. That night, I prepared, fuming – and in the morning, I was calm, on the outside. Inside, I was sharp like a red-heated knife.

I dressed in my second-best captain uniform, my dark hair in a tight knot, and took the subway to Hospital, where I stared a few

people down to wait in line for an audience with the President of Hospital.

We're pretty lucky in this city. Where everything is split pretty half and half between the Atheists and Christians – the population, conversions, the law – our Hospital is predominantly Atheist, and its President is an Atheist, which was going to help me. But while the Atheist majority in Hospital means that sick people actually get good, logical medicine, and are mostly left alone about their *quiet* beliefs, it still utterly *sucks* for other reasons.

"Misses Guylin?" they called the woman in front of me. I moved up to the front of the line and watched the woman go through the metal detector. The metal detector was fortunately not going to be a problem for me – I had figured out implements made of other materials. If they had had an X-ray machine, though, I would have been screwed.

"Captain Bahan?" they called. I nodded and came forward through the metal detector, wincing at the high-pitched noise. A woman motioned me through into the room ahead, where I found the President of Hospital, a skinny man with thin black hair. He was sixty, but he looked fifty until you looked really close. I sat in the chair facing him, and the elevation of his own large chair had the knees of his crossed legs at my eye level. I resented having to look upwards to his face.

"President," I said, bowing my head appropriately. "I am Captain Marie Bahan. I'm here because I want to visit Therese Candice. She's in terminal." I spoke steadily, but let some of my anger through.

The President typed some things into the small computer beside him. "Why do you need to see me... ah. Her parents have specifically requested that only family be allowed to see her."

"Sir. Therese is an adult, and considers herself estranged from her parents, although I suspect she hasn't been conscious enough to say so," I told him. "I am a close friend of hers. I know things about her it would be inappropriate to tell you. I think I am the reason," I said, beginning my somewhat lie, "that they do not want anyone else to see her. See, her parents are Christian, but she is Atheist." The truth is that she was neither, and chose to call herself Atheist

rather than Christian only so her parents would realize she wasn't their kind, straight out. But I meant to appeal to the President's own Atheist identity. I said, "I was the one who convinced her about Atheism. And her parents really don't like that... or, well, other aspects of our relationship." I met his eyes. "Please allow me to see her. I didn't even know where she was for months –"

"Alright," said the President. "Go ahead." He signed a piece of paper and handed it to me. "Be quick about it."

I took the paper, smiling and thanking him, and left through the side door into the halls of Hospital. A man flagged me down as soon as I entered.

"What's in your bag?" he asked. "We can't have people bringing in weird stuff, is all," he explained when I looked surprised. "It's happened a few times lately. You wouldn't believe some of the stuff people try to get through to the patients!" He was an Atheist.

"Just snack food," I said, showing him the big pack of sour cream and onion potato chips on the top of my bag. "Only for me, of course," I added. "I have a long day ahead of me."

"Alright," he said, grinning. "That's not very healthy for you, though, you know."

"I take my vitamins," I told him, and went on my way.

Therese was on the seventh floor – the elevator got there quick enough to leave me a bit queasy. Wandering through the sterile white hallways past nurses and visitors and what have you, made me remember why I hate this Hospital so much. I don't know about other hospitals, but... This one is *clean*, in the sense of the word that bounces back and forth between the Atheists and Christians and gets all confused. I want to try and explain it. To begin with, there is supposed to be no religion in Hospital, despite the Christians – prayer has to be confined to rooms. So they somehow push a lack of spiritual energy in the halls, and in a lot of the rooms, and it made me feel very cold and isolated. Another thing about Hospital is how *ordered* and *structured* the Atheists make it. Every room and hallway is separate – everything is partitioned off. I finally realized what made all this possible once I got to Therese's room and closed myself inside.

She had a room to herself. She was on a cot, a lump under some

white blankets, surrounded by murmuring machines. I only saw her face once I stood beside her. She was pale and thinned, and the energy there was *wrong*. She was weak, but she was heavily shielded energetically, so much so that she was cut off from everything outside her. She was being shielded from the outside, I realized, and it had to be a Christian energeticist. The energeticist, seeing what anyone could see if they looked at her the right way and closely enough, had believed her possessed and had tried to exorcise whatever was in there.

Fortunately, I was here to bring it – *him* – back.

“Don’t worry,” I told Therese. “We’re not gonna let you waste away here.”

I began by turning on and placing four electric candles at the corners of the room. “First of all,” I said, “these are going to have to do for lit candles, because I can’t have the smoke detectors going off.” Then I turned off the lights.

Before I did anything else, I was going to have to open Therese back up. I stood talking to her, speaking of random things, of gossip from my life and of things that were going on in the city. While I talked, I examined the shape of the energy and carefully moved the whole shield construct from around Therese to around a bouquet of pink and yellow flowers that had been left on the shelf behind her. It was just like her, right then – still alive, but slowly dying. The energeticist wouldn’t notice a difference.

I sat down next to my bag facing the length of Therese’s bed, in the third of the room on one side that was open, although tight, space. First, I pried the wide plastic serving plate out of my bag and placed it on the floor. Then I pulled out the sour cream and onion potato chips, which I had brought because I knew *he* liked them, and shook them bit by bit onto the plate. While I did that, I murmured: “Wolf, I summon you. Please come here.” I shifted up to Therese and plucked a hair off her head, a symbol of her body, and dropped it onto the scattered chips. “Therese is here, and open again. You may return to her. Please return to her.” Then I placed a handful of bandaids on the side of the dish, to represent Therese’s current needs. “Therese is sick. She is dying. Please help heal her.”

Finally, I removed a small, writhing black bag, and a sharp

knife made of bone. I grabbed inside the bag and wrested out the pigeon, pinned it struggling down on top of the crunching chips and the strand of hair, and drove the knife as hard and quick as I could through its neck. “Your traditional sacrifice. Life given. Recognize me,” I told him. I wiped my hands off thoroughly on the inside of my bag, fixing my eyes on the bloody potato chips. “Wolf. I beseech you come here now, for Therese.”

I sat there, my eyes closed, continuing to transform my intent into energy, hoping Wolf would hear me.

I felt the man reach the door, as aware of the surrounding energy as I was at that moment, but I moved only enough to face him with open eyes as he burst in. He was dressed as a nurse. I knew immediately from his personal energy that he was an energeticist – that in the few moments he stood there silent, he was taking in the entire shape of the energy of the room – and therefore probably a Christian.

He flicked on the lights, making me squint, and slammed the door behind him.

“What the *fuck* are you doing in here?” he demanded.

I stared at him dumbly. What lie would he have believed? He knew the weird energy in the room had originated from me. He was probably only a moment away from calling witchcraft on me, and I was about to get myself lynched – not legally, of course, the Atheists prevent that, but –

“I don’t want her to die,” I said finally. I wanted to show him tears, but instead I was just pale. “I just...I thought this might help.”

“Pagan rituals aren’t going to help anyone,” he said in a low, chilling tone.

“It’s pagan?” I said, staring at the bloody pigeon. “I didn’t know... I just found it in a book...”

“It is.”

“Do you mean to tell me I’ve done the work of the devil? I didn’t mean – I just don’t want her to die – “

“Hey - calm down. If you didn’t mean it... It’ll be fine. I’ll get this cleaned up,” he told me. “And then, would you mind staying to have a word with me?”

“Okay,” I said softly. And I had to keep a smirk from creeping onto my face, because while he dumped the plate of sacrifices into the trash, yanked off his gloves, and tied the trash bag up, a wave of energy brushed by me and then him from the cot behind me, energy that had broken into the physical world and felt like electricity rather than vague potentness. It was hot and cold at the same time, like particles of molten metal paired with the cold of deepest rage.

“Did you feel that?” I said. I have never been able to resist the opportunity to make someone uncomfortable, especially the sort of person who thinks I’m a devil worshipper.

“What?” the Christian nurse said, his eyes widening some. I knew he’d felt it.

“Like hot and cold electricity. Er... maybe I’m just imagining things. Sorry.”

“Damn your devil summoning,” he muttered. He felt scared, and I felt giddy. I realized I’d been taking in too much energy. I did my best to stop without really changing my current shields in front of the energeticist I was lying to.

“Do you mean I actually – I didn’t mean –” I tried to translate my giddiness into anxiety.

“Now, don’t tell her prayer would have been a better solution,” said Therese’s voice. I turned around to see her body sitting on the edge of the bed, knees taugt, face angry with the slightest hint of a smirk. It was Wolf. I’m not a color synesthete, I can never actually see him when he’s riding her, but I know when it’s Wolf who’s speaking. I winked at him, then backed away.

“Demon!” the Christian barked, and tugged his necklace cross out from behind his scrubs.

“Because, the sense I get of it is, your ‘God’? Not going to do these girls any favors. That’s where I come in. And I’m not a ‘demon’, I’m a *god*. It seems this woman has... *accidentally* summoned me back.”

“I already banished you once, demon,” said the nurse.

“No. I’ve never seen you before. You just kept me *out*,” he growled.

“Therese?” I put in. “You’re fooling, right? Tell me you’re fooling. You don’t even believe in demons. You were telling me you

thought it was nice this was an Atheist dominant Hospital.”

“Yeah... Just fooling,” Wolf said with Therese’s voice box. “It’s because I’m so happy to have gotten better. Let’s get out of here already, Marie!”

“Alright,” I nodded gamely.

“Neither of you are leaving this room until I exorcise the demon,” the Christian energeticist said, standing in front of the door. “It’s clear you’re both under the influence of the devil, and I’m not letting that evil seep out into the rest of Hospital – Gah! How dare you bring something like this into such a *clean* place!” he exclaimed softly.

“Let’s get into the hallway,” I said to Wolf.

“Sure.” He grabbed the nurse’s arms and moved him away from the door. The nurse stumbled aside, shocked at the unexpected strength of the frail woman who’d been dying on the cot just a few minutes before.

I swung the door open and exited, Wolf following quickly, and I called to anyone I could see: “Help! This nurse has gone *fanatic*! He’s *trying to exorcise my sick friend*! Help!”

Hahaha. It was lovely. They restrained him straight away, and me and Wolf went running for the elevator.

As I was running away, I heard the nurse call out, “Check the video! That woman – that captain’s – been summoning demons in that room!”

And as I ran out of the Hospital, I knew I was fucked.

“They’ve got me on video,” I told Wolf.

“I want to get Therese out of here.”

“I know. I don’t know where they keep video stuff, anyway.”

We whooshed down seven stories in the elevator and high tailed it out of Hospital.

The next day, I received fines for bringing Unapproved Materials into Hospital, and for administering Unapproved Alternative Treatments on a patient. That meant I was on their lists. I was still registered as an Atheist/Ag, but they knew I was neither Atheist nor Christian.

And that’s how I got marked.

Wolf said he could only help with some of Therese’s recovery.

Me and our friends were going to have to tend to her until she got better – which she was going to.

The night after I got the fines, Weaver came to me in a dream.

“This is going to be a problem,” she said.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Are you going to move cities?” she asked.

“No,” I replied. “They still hardly know anything.”

“Good.”

## The Warbler

by Stephen Burrows

For tea and may,  
For sea and jay,  
The Warbler warbles on along -  
Along a way  
Of gravel stray,  
In search of everlasting song.

How profits he,  
This spirit free?  
This Warbler wand'ring here?  
In liberty,  
it seems to me,  
he takes his wages dear.

Such liberty!  
Not wage, but fee!  
A burden for a whole life long.  
Beneath a tree  
Or rocky lee  
Is home for he who sings a song.

Yet such a home!  
'Tis Nature's own -  
A bower built of bush and tree.  
All worldly loam  
is his to roam -  
Who would not wish such liberty?



## A Good Doctor

by Aries Indenbaum

The room was not entirely sterile, although it smelled awful enough to be clean. In between patients, Doctor Christopher Jenner sprayed the cooling vents with industrial-strength antibacterial, the scent spreading through the room. Within the vents, insects drowned in the cool green fluid. Months ago, the Doctor had pushed the examination table into the corner below the vents; the coolest, cleanest spot available. Purely coincidentally, the bed then covered the area of carpet where Patient Dubois hemorrhaged months ago.

If a patient could smell past the anti-bacterial, she would detect a vague odor of rot and blood. Happily, Patient Leslie Chen had a poor sense of smell. Thus handicapped, and further distracted by the growing pain in her womb, Patient Chen didn't realize that the room was not as clean as it was supposed to be. There was a splash of something off-white on the wall, rather close to the biohazard wastes dump and Doctor Jenner's framed degree. The degree - Doctor of Medicine - looked strangely thin, the font bleeding a bit into the paper, though the frame looked rather hardy. Onto the chair where Patient Dubois eventually expired, Chen folded her business casual attire: pink blouse and grey trousers, the crease still preserved. She'd put her wedding band in her purse, in the little pocket with her house key.

Now sitting on the examination bed, Patient Chen held the flesh below her distended stomach, as though the baby inside was trying to birth itself out of her bellybutton. She looked down constantly these days, her neck strained, waiting for the little thing to be born. Slowly, a drop of sweat gathered under her lip. These days, she sweated constantly, even when her husband Michael forced her to take long baths in icy cold water. Her mouth ached for water, but she felt hesitant to disturb the doctor as he read her pulse.

His otherwise bland face was divided by a set of thin lips that stretched a bit past where they were meant to end. Because of their size, she assumed, they set into a small frown, making him look contemplative, as if he were always driving on a crowded, but fast-moving highway. His eyes were small, framed by long eyebrows. He looked at her a moment, catching her examining gaze. She looked down, to watch his clipboard. Doctor Jenner's fingers, scribbling away, were oddly elegant, his nails perfectly clean and cut to the flesh.

Before she asked, he handed her a small glass from the tap. "Thank you," she said, though the water was brackish and tinted brown.

Doctor Jenner looked at her, taking in the waifish arms, limp hair, bent back and damp forehead. Through the antiseptic, he could smell her underarms. Most of her body, save the large curve of her belly, hid under the flimsy folds of the hospital robe.

"Open your mouth, please," he asked.

Jenner nearly winced. Terrible inflammation lurked behind her perfect teeth, her throat resembling that of a tubercular.

"Do you have morning sickness?"

She shrugged. "I'd just call it sickness," her voice barely betrayed an accent, the easy twang of the lower Midwest. "I become ill about 4 times a day, at a minimum." Her face, he noticed, was pleasingly symmetrical.

Jenner scribbled something meaningless in his chart, and looked over his almost-illegible notations on her case. Lack of weight gain, persistent fever, frequent illness, yellow thick nails, abdominal cramping. He didn't know why - perhaps some women were just not meant to bear children.

"We'll need to abort," said Doctor Jenner, very quietly. Patient Chen did not acknowledge it.

As the Doctor asked about her diet, job, lifestyle and history, Leslie Chen realized how deeply Michael permeated her life. During her pregnancy, he had started to worship her, to care for her tenderly, to comb her thin hair and massage her shoulders while she heaved at the toilet. As she lost weight, he cooked her elaborate meals. At night, he kicked off the sheets and lowered the thermo-

stat to make her more comfortable. Even as she barely found the strength to stand, he called her beautiful. He composed lullabies for his future son, and sang them to her, as she trembled in pain. Leslie Chen remembered one of his little songs and started to sing it. The Doctor saw her hands trembling.

"I'll prep you up now, if that's alright," Jenner said, realizing how mature this fetus was, and how unsteady the mother.

Patient Chen became very still, though the sweat continued to drip down her face, as if she were lifting an incredible load. Michael's lullaby played in her head.

"Do I need to pay extra for anesthesia?" she asked.

"Complimentary for the first timers," he said.

Doctor Jenner sat in his office with his favorite charts, to reassure him before he did the abortion. He flipped through the charts quickly, just to get a snapshot of each case: a menopausal woman who swallowed condoms. A pre-teen girl who covered her tiny nipples with glue. Teenaged boy with advanced cellulitis due to coating his acne with honey and toothpaste. Fetish model who insisted on toe reshaping to expand her career to "specialty" boots. Body modification junkie begging for a surgical attachment of a fish fin to the top of his skull. Abused children with broken arms and ribs, brought in by their abusive parents. Rapists looking for STI tests. Immigrants with compromised immune systems. Pregnant pre-teens. Shaking drug users of all races, ages and stages of withdrawal. And then, the hundreds of sad fucks who couldn't afford insurance but needed kidney transplants, heart surgery, pain medications, antibiotics and even a simple physical. He didn't remember their names, but he remembered their charts.

Hurt, pathetic people. People who couldn't go to a hospital, to tell the receptionist, the triage nurse, the primary nurse, the primary doctor and the specialist what had happened, because they couldn't pay for the right to talk to any of these people. People who took the taxi to his office after they got mugged because they couldn't afford an ambulance. People who went to the free clinics for their childhood vaccinations and got measles when the clinics closed.

Abortions were the bread and butter of his operation.

He walked out of his office to his secretary's room, his fingers clenching a cigarette. Cheryl, his secretary, typed out an order form. She sat in perfect posture, her hair falling straight and even over her bare, slim shoulders. Given the overhang of the desk, none of his patients saw that her knees ended in stumps.

"Hey, boss," she said, her voice sweet, "I'm going to order more Duvatine, is there anything we're low on?"

Jenner tapped the unlit cigarette against her desk, "More bandaging... any of the stuff for you?"

Two years before, Cheryl had noticed the strange lack of sensation she felt in her fingers and toes during the wintertime had followed her into summer. She fought to keep balance when she wore her high heels, and eventually gave up, after a few nasty falls.

Inside of her sneakers, Cheryl's toes lost feeling, followed by her ankles and her feet. As her nerves deadened, she didn't realize when she smashed her toes or stepped on one of the thousands of thumb-tacks that littered the floor of the auto shop, where she was a receptionist. Her boss often mentioned that he hired her for her tits, but kept her for her typing.

At the clinic, the heavy-eyed nurse said she had diabetes, though her weight and sugar were normal. She gave her little orange pills, big yellow capsules and told her to get insurance, if she still could.

She couldn't.

Before anyone, Cheryl could smell her legs rotting. She waited for the wounds to burn or itch, but they didn't, except from the glances and sniggers of others. It didn't hurt her at all. But the shop lost customers, too revolted by her smell to notice her tits and typing, Cheryl quit, days after her 33rd birthday. She made one of the mechanics drive her home.

Safe in her apartment, she stripped of her business casual skirt and blouse and hobbled around her house naked, feeling like an old, battered soldier. In the mornings, she covered her shapeless feet with wrappings of tissue paper to fit them into her battered Nikes, like a small present wrapped in a large box. She fell often, especially walking up and down the stairs to her apartment. At the grocery store, she sometimes told young, hopeless men that she hurt her legs in a soccer game or a car accident. They drove her home and some-

times, they fucked her, if they didn't realize that she didn't have feet. One of them, a smart one, told her about Doctor Jenner, his face flush with pity and lust.

"I think we're good on everything. A little more Lidocain would be lovely, but only if you're alright with that."

Jenner frowned tenderly, the expression his face naturally sunk into. "Of course," he waved his hand, "that's a given."

When she met Jenner, she asked him to amputate her feet. A chop-job. Jenner had shaken his head, after staring at the remains of her feet with his slight, persistent frown. He stared into her face. Her eyes, he noticed, were very even, though her mouth opened more towards the right. Her pores were clean, and she showered everyday, remarkable, given her condition. She was 10 years younger than he, and still quite lovely.

"*You have Aparte's Syndrome,*" he had explained. "*It's like leprosy, but not contagious.*"

She had three years left, he explained, showing her photos of the advanced phase Aparte patients, their faces discolored and bodies broken. "*Rather like zombies,*" he had remarked casually. Jenner told her that the deadness would continue through her whole body—from her fingers to her shoulders, from her already-useless shins to her thighs and pelvis, and eventually, up her torso to her face. When he said "*face,*" he had put his hand on her cheek and held it there. She wasn't going to cry.

"*So what can I do?*" she asked.

"*Do you need a job?*" he asked.

She made a good secretary.

Each night, Jenner checked her pulse and her sensations, taking a bit of flesh off her limbs if necessary, cleaning out any wounds she received. He was tender with the peroxide and Betadine, gently dabbing the cotton balls against the jagged holes in her skin. When he sawed away at her shins, he hummed an odd melody, his eyebrows pushing his eyes tight in vital concentration. At night, he picked her up and put her in her wheelchair, so she could wheel to her new home, a block from his office. Cheryl sometimes closed her eyes when she went home, to dream of him walking arm and arm with her.

Before Cheryl, Jenner hired temps who he fired as soon as they began to nag him. The temps, with long shaved legs under a short skirt, would bother him to eat lunch, to clean his hands after each patient, to pay his parking tickets, to report rapists to the police and to wash his hair every morning. They didn't understand. He didn't need base femininity in a place of reason. He needed someone solid and practical. And they didn't need to have legs.

"Hey, doc," she said, "did Mr. Walker have a white ink tattoo on his shoulder? A kite?"

"Yeah. Big one, long tail," Doctor Jenner remembered pulling a bullet out of the tail of the kite.

"He's wanted, if I'm right. He shot up a CVS, the one on Cullver and Parks."

That CVS had shitty service, Jenner thought. "Anyone die?"

"One of the clerks got hurt, but nothing bad."

Hopefully Bob Young, the pharmacist for that branch, would still be game to honor his questionably-legal prescriptions. "So Bob's okay?"

Cheryl smirked. "I figured you'd ask. I called him when you were in with Chen. He's fine, and said not to worry."

"He's a good man."

"Sounds like someone else I know," Cheryl said, smiling at him.

Jenner wondered how she smiled so easily. "Chen's probably out now," he said to himself. He looked at the unlit cigarette clutched between his fingers.

"Later, then," Cheryl said, catching his glance before returning her gaze to the order form. She was a good secretary.

Unlike the unfortunately scented examination room, the OR was built like a large freezer. The walls, ceiling and floor included, were concrete; easy to hose and bleach; a small drain collected the variety of liquids that splattered onto the walls. In the center of the room lay a workman's table, covered by the strongest plastic sheeting he could find, where Patient Chen lay, slipping into unconsciousness. Her arms, caught in the grip of anesthesia, clutched the arms of her bed. Her body still, she no longer sweat constantly, and

her hair, once limp, now looked glossy. The drug was already in her system, killing the fetus from within. Her face was serene, and the small acne scars by her hairline did not take away from that loveliness.

He paused. It was odd to have a woman in the OR who was not gripped by some sexually transmitted disaster or awfully unattractive. From the slightness of her body, he felt a bit of helplessness. The anesthesia technique he used combined REM sleep paralysis with a light sedative, making the process safer and less labor intensive. Rather than closely monitoring Chen's pulse, Jenner could chat with Cheryl, or, for the bigger patients, take a short cigarette break. The patient would reach paralysis within a few minutes. After that stillness took effect, nothing could wake Patient Leslie Chen.

As she slept, the Doctor palpated Patient Chen's swollen belly. He let his gloved fingers continue down her body. Her thighs lacked the fat associated with pregnancy, her body slim. The bulge of her quadriceps had maintained, as had the tautness of the connective tissues between her pelvis and her legs. He slipped one of his elongated fingers in the folds of her. Examining.

He spread her limp legs and stroked the inside of her, listening to her heartbeat with his stethoscope, clutched in his left hand. Her heart was steady, her eyes fluttering. He withdrew his hand, wiping his index and middle finger on the wax paper covering the bed. His face was expressionless.

"You're really lovely," he said to Patient Chen.

As the doctor aborted her child, Leslie Chen dreamed.

She was selling cigarettes at the airport, in a little booth near Gate 12, international to Houston. Behind her, the airplanes roared, huffing and whirring to escape the bustle, the stench of the airport. Leslie waited, with her little packs of Sweetie Cigarettes and Strong Man Lighters, just downwind of a Cinnabun, the smell of frosting coating the air with a dewy sweetness Leslie found unpleasant.

As Gate 12 opened, a rush of businessmen walked towards her, and each one inexplicably needed a Sweetie. And they were talking to her, and she knew every word, but they kept overlapping, like a mashed-up song with too many samples. Sweetie Cigarettes in their

mouths, they hung around her, blowing words into her face:

"I'd like to try to take you where the flavor is-"

"You put your lips together and blow-"

"They're almost as pretty as you are-"

"Pick me up and smoke me sometime-"

"I want you to give me more-"

But then they started to blow more and more smoke in her face and the sweet smell made her feel ill. Where was Michael? As she handed out the cigarettes, her hands shook. All this smoke would be bad for the baby, she thought. They started yelling at her, because she wasn't handing out the Sweetie Cigarettes fast enough. Shut up, they screamed. They tossed dollar bills at her, but when they struck her, they felt as heavy as stones. A man in a grey hat pushed her and she fell onto the clean tile, the cigarettes and lighters scattering everywhere. Another man kneeled beside her and shoved his money into her shirt, and another man grabbed her legs, and a third had his cigarette above her face and she could feel the heat on her cheek and he pressed it in and she screamed and screamed.

And she woke up.

Her eyes opened, but she did not see the hole in her stomach that Doctor Jenner was trying to stitch up: the hole that kept bleeding. The Doctor was holding her hand, talking to her, though his words were indistinct. His voice was a low buzz in her ears, like the purr of a car's motor. Maybe he was humming.

"Please hold still, Leslie," she made out, his voice a bit feverish. Was it cooler here? As she tried to sit, her shoulders wailed in pain, an odd contrast to her inability to feel her torso. She sweated, hearing her heart scream and she held her breath.

Leslie Chen reached for her belly and her baby and felt a cold ripping inside of her.

"Shit," Jenner said.

When he entered Cheryl's room, his face twisted into harsh lines, his mouth open in a snarl. She stopped typing, surprised with his rare show of emotion.

"There anyone in?" he said

"Nope. Quiet as she goes, Dr. J," she replied, rather giddy. Be-

fore lunch, Cheryl always felt a bit silly.

“Great. I’m gonna take a smoke.” He swept out the emergency exit, whose alarm had broken long ago.

Cheryl wished she could follow, even though Jenner probably wanted some space. She took out the Chen file, a slim brown folder and put it next to the shredder.

In the Examining Room, Leslie’s cell phone sang a little melody, but went unanswered.

Michael Chen frowned, wondering what kind of wrap to bring home for his wife. He hoped that Leslie would like tomatoes and cheese.

Doctor Jenner tried to piece it together from the vacant lot. He sucked his air through the cigarette, furiously, as if he were trying to gulp a soda through a straw. The wind blew the smoke away from him, though it did nothing to the deep smog settling over the city. He heard there was a sunny day predicted in about a week; perhaps he would let Cheryl take a day off for it, to wheel around Rhapsody Lake. He could manage the place for a tad, just himself. Cheryl saw so little sun. Not that there was a lot of sun to see.

He supposed that was why the Baptists painted their doors bright red, the cross outlined in white. A small crowd was shuffling through those doors, their voices lowing greetings, their fine shoes making clip-clop noises on the pavement, like the tap of hooves going to a slaughterhouse. One of the faithful caught sight of the doctor, and waved, his face twisted in a bright grin. Jenner, taking a puff, waved his hand slightly. If anyone ever got hurt in church, the minister ran over to Jenner’s office and demanded help, in the name of neighborly charity. Neighbors, of course, served each other free of charge.

When he was a child, his family never attended church except when his grandmother died. Christopher Jenner remembered standing next to his father in the pews, trying not to scratch his armpit, where his black cardigan bulged unpleasantly. Jenner looked at his father’s hands, stuffed into his pockets, resolutely avoiding the Bible in the pew shelf. As a plastic surgeon, his father was very careful as

to where he placed his hands. No touching dirty things.

As the choir stood to sing, a man at the end of the pew fell into the aisle, heaving. The singers cut off, as if some cosmic power had finally found the mute switch.

“Is there a doctor here?” the pastor intoned. Jenner’s father stood absolutely still. Christopher’s mother whispered something to him. Christopher climbed onto the pew to watch the man gasp for air for long, long minutes. It takes a long time to die, he realized. He liked watching the struggle.

That was the last time he’d been inside of a church.

Doctor Jenner took a puff of his cigarette and thought about Leslie Chen.

She had hemorrhaged, which may have been his fault, though his incisions were as perfect as he could make. Perhaps she’d died from the heart problem, coupled with blood thinners. The fetus had been remarkably grown, possibly the oldest he’d ever done, though clearly misshapen. Maybe she was allergic to the abortion drug. Maybe she just wanted to die.

At his office, his father put up a wall of his success cases, but at home, in his private room, he posted a wall of failure. The older Jenner had placed his son there when he had Time Out. On the wall rested the name and photos of each dead and ruined patient. During one long Time Out, Jenner memorized the names of 15 failures. Jenner had always wondered what had happened. Wendy Foston, with her blue-eyes and small mouth – was she dead? Francine Evergrant, in her 60’s, her hair thinning – had his father made her facelift too tight? Was she unsatisfied with her modifications, or was she deceased?

He always thought his father knew what had gone wrong, and these were the reminders of what not to do, like the rules in the box of a board game. But maybe he didn’t, maybe these were questions for Jenner’s father, as much as for Jenner himself. He decided to take a photo of Leslie Chen before he moved her to the freezer.

Jenner and Cheryl got rid of Leslie’s things that night, includ-

ing all of her clothes and the money in her wallet. Cheryl tossed her cell phone into the garbage and bought some new books for the waiting room.

Two days later, Michael Chen waited in Jenner's office. Jenner didn't recognize him, but knew something was wrong.

Ms. Alleford, with her terrible diabetes, waddled into the room. "How much, Cheryl?" she asked, reaching for her wallet.

"Fifty!" the secretary said cheerfully. Her tits wobbled a little, Jenner noticed.

When Dr. Jenner stood into the waiting room, Michael Chen stood up, raised his gun and calmly asked, "Take me to my wife."

The doctor was quiet. "This way," he said.

Ms. Alleford let out a small scream.

Jenner lead Mr. Chen to the door by the OR, the little door where all the cold came from. He opened the door to a deep freezer. Michael smelled his wife, through the cold and death. It was enough.

Mike Chen pushed the doctor hard, knocking him to the floor. "Spread out your arms and legs," he said. The doctor did as he was told. He'd heard about something like this happening to Dr. Robertson after he botched a heart transplant. But Robertson was a pediatrician and bad things happened to incapable pediatricians. Chen frisked him, taking away his extra scalpel. Chen walked in front of Jenner, his shoes next to the doctor's face. The floor was freezing.

Chen tapped Jenner's hand with the tip of his shoe and started to blather. "He just needed a little more time, a few more months. I built him a nursery, you know? A little crib, a few trucks..." As Chen continued to describe his fatherhood fantasy, Jenner debated jerking his hands into his sleeves. The hands of a surgeon, his father described as the most precious thing on earth. Chen lowered his shoe onto the doctor's index finger and pressed it into the cold floor.

Keeping the gun pointed at Jenner's head, Chen pressed very hard on the nail with his solid, leather shoes. Trying to avoid thinking of the pain involved, or the significance, the doctor tried to pinpoint Chen's accent while Chen mocked his body, heritage and the

circumstances of his parent's marriage. He was born in the west somewhere, but the exact state was tricky- Washington? Oregon? Montana? Somewhere with all those big trees. The doctor had visited Montana when he was very young and his parents were in their adventuring phase. They were so happy then, hiking, kayaking and biking around preserves, owning their little practice together. His parents never aged, not visibly. Chen broke Jenner's index finger. He screamed, just a little.

Staring at his assailant, Jenner wondered where the Chens met. Maybe at church, or a bar, or in high school in the marching band. Maybe Leslie played alto sax and Michel played tuba, and they fell in love while strutting around a football field, playing God Bless America. Jenner could see how Michael Chen would be attractive to mousy Leslie. He wasn't so much bigger than her, but he was so much stronger. Michael Chen placed his shoe on Dr. Jenner's middle finger.

"What do you want," the doctor asked.

Chen broke his third finger. Jenner felt blood rushing to his head and a surge of terrible warmth in his hand. He choked back a scream. Hands have more nerves than other parts of the body. On the pain scale, he would circle a 7.

When he was little, and fell off his bike, Jenner's parents showed him the chart to measure pain with the smiley and frowney faces. He had circled a 9, absolutely positive that the crushing agony in his knee was just short of death. His Dad had talked him down to a 7 as his Mom washed his abrasions out with hydrogen peroxide and smeared Neosporin over the area. They made a good team. The Jenners had met at a plastic surgeon's conference, escaping a meeting on the ethics of liposuction to have more intimate discussion in a hotel room. At their wedding, they vowed to keep the other young in mind and body. They never aged, and little Christopher Jenner thought it was magic. When he was older, he got better at understanding that Mom's ageless face was less mobile than it used to be, and Dad's slim figure was not entirely natural. They would go to the attic some days and when they came down, they had bruises for the next few days, but a strange youth that simmered over their faces and bodies.

Chen cocked his pistol, and blew a hole through Christopher Jenner's hand. The doctor heard a scream.

No one aged. They just died.

"Stop it," said a female voice from around the corner. Her voice was sweet.

"Les?" Chen whispered.

Cheryl wheeled into the room. "Put the gun away, Mr. Chen."

She held a pistol, but Chen ignored it. He stared at the stumps at the ends of the beautiful woman's legs. "Jesus, what did he do...?" Chen pointed the gun at Jenner's head.

Cheryl shot Michael Chen in the face.

Chen fell against the freezer, his face spurting onto the floor and Doctor Jenner. The Doctor lay on the ground, feeling the widower's blood spatter onto him.

Shit.

"Are you alright?"

"Am I?" He spread out his hand and examined where the bullet had shot- the skin between his thumb and pointer finger. "Nothing. Nothing lost."

Cheryl felt a bit of pressure in her chest release. It was okay, she thought. It would be okay.

"Garbage time?" he said, eyes bright with shock.

"We'll need to splint them, okay, Doctor J?" she said.

He nodded.

Cheryl wheeled to one of the cabinets and pulled out finger splints, a roll of gauze and a Neosporin derivative. He lifted his hand onto her lap, his fingers hanging limp.

He gripped his other hand around the end of her leg as she shoved his fingers into splints. Cheryl remembered the finger-breaking trend a few years ago when gamers mutilated their hands to make themselves more compatible to game controllers. Of course, nothing healed correctly, so Dr. Jenner had bought (and used) an incredible amount of finger splints.

After she finished carefully wrapping gauze around the bleeding section of his hand, he stood, still a bit woozy. Need to prep the bodies, he commanded himself.

"I put the "Closed" sign up before I came over. And I told Ms.

Alleford not to worry," Cheryl reported, as she flipped up one of the tables.

She gets the day off, Jenner thought, as she lined the garbage pail with new plastic, and brought out the materials for organ storage. At the same time, Jenner lifted Chen onto the table, prepping him for harvest.

As Jenner gripped the blade in his non-dominant hand, he realized how difficult this process would be. Like the wobbling blade of a beginning ice skater, the scalpel wavered a bit too forcefully across the flatness of Michael Chen's torso. He could still cut, but not too clean or straight.

"Do you want me to hold your hand still?" Cheryl asked.

He nodded. She rolled to the other side of the table and supported his hand, as if he was a child learning to write.

It took a long time, to cut and extract liver, pancreas and both kidneys. Jenner examined the remains of the hollowed out man. Cheryl was a good shot; the bullet popping a hole the size of a bottle cap on Chen's forehead.

The trouble was, they didn't have their own incinerator, which made disposal more complex. Before taking bodies to the incinerator at the understaffed, overfilled clinic, they needed to take some precautions: destruction of face, teeth and hands. They needed to be anonymous and unidentifiable, the muscle peeled off their faces, teeth split and fingerprints burned away. When they were busy, he left it to Cheryl, as she took a long time, but did a perfectly adequate job.

"I can do it," Cheryl said, her hand on the scalpel.

Like a cheap manicurist, Cheryl quickly sliced off Chen's fingertips, Jenner's eyes fixated on her cuts, honed after years of typing. She wheeled herself to the table and grabbed the hammer. She brought it down on Chen's face and skull, with all her force. She sat at a poor angle, but Cheryl put her back and shoulders into it, her breath coming in short heaves. His face made a soft thump with each of her strikes.

Despite the chill of the room, both Jenner and Cheryl were sweating.

As she dumped the flesh into the bucket, the face cleared of any

identifying tissue, Jenner wondered if he should mention the small splatter of blood on her cheek.

She grinned at him, her face wet with perspiration. "Was that good, Doctor?"

"That was great."

He watched her hands carefully dividing the remains in various buckets. Her nails poked the glove upwards, revealing more of the musculature of her fingers. He hoped she would never lose feeling in them, that they would stay strong.



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