

Semaphore Magazine

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Warning: I've been asked to warn for adult themes, so here we are. Kevin Brown's "Invisible Bullets" is the offender out of this lot, so those of delicate sensibilities, beware!

INTRODUCTION

The New Year has brought in some changes for Semaphore, both inside and outside the issues themselves. Firstly - in fact, so very firstly that it preceded the New Year by some time - is the new domain name and website. The old site is still getting a few hits a day, and if that doesn't dry up soon I may end up deleting the entire Freewebs site and replacing it with a link to the new place. The new site features our updated and streamlined Submissions guidelines (for example, having never published any of the comics submitted to us, we are no longer offering to publish them at all); a link to the Semaphore Log (more on that later); and a new Guest Book for leaving your comments about the magazine.

As ever, if anything seems glitchy or broken on the main site, please do let me know. You can even tell me in the Guest Book, now!

The *Semaphore Log* is the magazine's new blog, which will play host to news of any updates (major or minor) to the site, mugshot interviews with our recurrent authors, and occasional mumblings on whatever's caught my attention on that particular day. It can be found at http://semaphore_log.livejournal.com. You shouldn't need a LiveJournal account to comment there, although it does make it easier to keep track of who's who. **Coming Soon:** an interview with veteran *Semaphore* author Kate Smith, and, for those who are interested, a list of pseudo-statistics to do with our submissions and acceptances history. Warning: this last one may contain maths, if I can manage it.

Finally, there will from now on be new restrictions to the content of Semaphore's quarterly issues. Until now, the number of pieces of writing per issue has been completely dependent on the whims of its editors, with the result that while our first issue contained eleven pieces, the latest only featured five. Under these new restrictions, each issue of Semaphore will contain a near-standardised contents page: either six short stories, or five short stories and several poems.

~

This issue's cover, by the wonderful [Dracanta](#), was not the picture I intended to feature on our first 2009 issue. Last year, I contacted an artist who went by the internet pseudonym Hakubaiku, and arranged with her that she would be Semaphore's first 2009 cover artist. Tragically, Hakubaiku was killed in a car accident on January 27th. The picture below is the one we had been planning to use for this month's cover; now let it stand as a memorial of a wonderful, talented artist whose life was cut too short, too soon.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Marie Hodgkinson'. The signature is stylized and cursive.

Marie Hodgkinson

COURTSHIP, CUTLETS AND A BARROW FULL OF DUNG

By Joanna Galbraith

William wooed Adeline with beef shanks, lamb scrags and kangaroo tails. Whole rabbits and pigs' ears. Clodes of beef and gristly sausages which hung flaccid and pale from lengths of brown string. An unconventional courtship ritual, even by Rogan's stretched standards, but one that William swore was destined to succeed.

The cuts were delivered by horse and cart every Thursday morning. Wrapped in butchers' paper, tied with jute twine. Sometimes blood seeped onto the paper, leaving stains in the shape of undiscovered continents, attracting flies in whirring, ravenous droves.

Often there was a note.

Playful at times - pinned to a cut of kangaroo rump: *Am hoppin' to see you soon.* Other times more heartfelt - scrawled across a bundle of chicken necks: *Warm yourself with soup.*

The wooing was unorthodox, even for Rogan, and as a result many of the townsfolk became aggrieved. Bound by traditions as deep and as unending as the grooves in their skin, they found William's actions unpalatable, indefensible and utterly insulting.

Why couldn't he woo like the rest of them did?

Like the rest of them had?

You couldn't just rebuke a tradition because you thought it foolish and outdated. You couldn't in a town like Rogan anyway.

Not without consequences.

But William felt different. It was time the townsfolk were challenged. Challenged to rethink their most treasured of traditions:

Dung'n

The art of wooing of women with

one hundred pounds of

fresh horse manure.

Dung'n, as it was affectionately known, had been the calling card for the young men of Rogan for over eighty years. Begun at the dawn of the town's formation, it started when Ned Farelly, a young farmhand from Scrubbers Lane, developed a fevered crush on a prominent landowner's daughter.

A pretty girl with fire-blue eyes, she had smiled at him as he passed her by. Unable to forget the slightest part of her cherry-red lips and the wolfish pounce of her gaze, he had burned for days knowing she was beyond his keep as long as his pockets bled dust instead of gold.

Finally, one evening, when he could bear it no more, he decided to fill in the front of her door with fresh, fuming horse dung he had mucked out from the stables. Toiling through the night with a soaring, wetted brow, he was determined to keep his fancy from getting out (and perhaps, just as shrewdly, others from getting in) until he returned a man of great fortune.

Alas for young Ned, such a day never came.

He was dead before the week was out. Killed by a tram while crossing the street; such a pedestrian death for someone so freshly cut. The coroner's report

recorded 'death by misfortune.' He had found his fortune, it seemed, but not the one he had hoped for.

Buried in the town churchyard. His older brother wore his boots; the younger took his shovel. Gone he was but not forgotten, for the tradition of *Dung'n* was conceived not long after.

At first the men piled high, just as he had so diligently done; building feculent fortresses to imprison their sweethearts. The promise of fortune swiftly forgotten, they simply waited until their captives said yes. But as the years passed the mounds grew less. Piling was hard work, thankless as well. It was much easier to leave a small, torrid heap at your sweetheart's door as a statement of your intention. A demonstrated willingness to get one's hands dirty for the woman you loved or in the inelegant words of local tramp, Billy Felario, "a readiness for the shit that came along with marriage."

To William, however, the practice of *Dung'n* was ridiculous. William wanted to woo Adeline in a way that showed he was a worthy provider. Someone who could take care of her. Especially in times such as they were. The depression in full choke, unemployment high, suicide rates even higher, the distant cluster of war clouds looming. Women, he reasoned, would much rather have woken up and found a side of rump leaning on their door step than a steaming mound of Cloppy's best.

But the townsfolk were adamant. William had to be stopped. What Rogan needed right now were solid, hardworking types. What it didn't need was thinkers; however practical their thoughts might be. If they allowed a thinker to bend even just one tradition, whatever might they think of bending next?

The Sunday Toast Tradition, perhaps?

This much-revered tradition was almost as old as *Dung'n*. It had been introduced to facilitate Sunday trading in the public houses of Rogan: a straightforward practice requiring simply that God be toasted first when the bar doors swung open. A delicate compromise that had functioned satisfactorily for over

seventy years but in the hands of a rouser like William it might easily degenerate. Granted he might start by simply stretching the toast to include the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary but then gradually, insipidly over time he would encourage its decay until nothing would remain but a cheer for spirits and for virgins as well. No, he had to be stopped before he really got started.

~

William planned to propose to Adeline with a special delivery of lamb chump chops:

Be my lamb chop.

He wrote it on top of the parcel and handed it to his best mate, Laddy McDonald, the only son of Rogan's most respected grocer. William knew that Laddy's father would never have approved of his son's involvement, particularly as Laddy was a fourth generation *Dung'n* offspring and his father was one of its most ardent supporters. But Laddy had access to his father's recently acquired Chevrolet truck. Perfect for delivering fresh cuts of meat before the sun yellowed the fat and the botflies laid siege.

Laddy, himself, was delighted to be involved. An ugly sort, more neck than head really, he knew that he had little chance of scoring himself. Helping out William would be the next best thing - a taste of acceptance without the bitter tang of rejection.

~

Adeline was sixth on the McDonald's delivery route.

A small weekly crate for Adeline's mother and a proposal for her daughter wrapped up in brown paper.

Laddy knocked on the front door but nobody answered. He knocked once again and still no one came. Normally he would have left the crate on the stairs but William had asked that he deliver it by hand. Just to be certain. Just to be sure.

“Ms Duffy,” Laddy called out. Then, “Adeline, it’s Laddy.”

Finally, a voice answered. A voice strangely curdled.

He followed it around the side of the house where he found young Adeline almost immediately, swearing purple and blue at a patch of long grass down near the sleep-out.

She stopped her bent cussing as soon as she saw him.

“Look,” she said, thrusting her head towards the grass. “It has eyes for my prize chickens.”

Laddy looked to the grass and there amongst the blades, as black as pit coal, coiled a splay-tongued snake with a penchant for yard fowl.

Now Laddy was a vegetable man. He knew when an ear of corn had heard too much or a side of peas was fit to split but chickens were foreign to him, as foreign as women. He rubbed his head vigorously, stalling for time. Should he rescue the chickens or go straight for the snake?

The chickens looked fierce, or so he thought, such thin, beaky faces and gnarly red feet. Perhaps the snake would be easier as there was only the one.

He rolled up his sleeves and spat in the soil. Then, grabbing a fallen tree branch he lunged at the snake, only to find himself being fairly bitten on his left pinkie so he squealed like a startled pig. Adeline squealed too. Then, collecting her senses (for she was not a woman normally prone to such squealing) she started snipping at the snake with the secateurs in her hand.

But eventually it was Laddy, who freed himself of its viperous fangs; flinging it through the air like a length of hangman’s noose so it landed on the corrugated roof of the sleep-out nearby.

~

Poor Laddy!

His finger bled badly. Pain scorched down his left arm. He uttered a dozen *Hail Marys* and then collapsed to the ground.

“The poison, she’ll be coursing up my veins. Straight to me pounding heart,” he said.

And the quicker his heart pounded, he reckoned, the quicker it would get him.

Adeline knew that Laddy was right. If she didn’t act swiftly he’d be dead before noon.

She grabbed the axe lying next to the woodpile and sharpened it roughly with a rock on the ground. Then, lifting the axe high above her head, she took one lusty swing and lopped off his spent finger taking its trembling neighbour as well.

Laddy roared in agony. He swore in agony too. Soon the chickens joined his cries; clucking profanities, shedding their feathers in fear. Only Adeline remained calm. Steady-handed and sure. Carefully retrieving the two fingers from the ground nearby and wrapping them together in a blue cotton scarf, which she unravelled from her head in a single, deft stroke.

“We must get you to the hospital,” she said, putting the scarf in her skirt pocket; the two fingers crossed over as if for good luck. “I’ll drive your father’s truck, if you just tell me how.”

Laddy nodded limply. There was no other choice. His father could kill him later if he lived long enough to explain.

~

Laddy survived the ordeal although his two fingers did not. His father was furious. Not so much at Adeline, who doctors said had saved his son’s life with her sharp-witted thinking. No. He was angry at William and at Laddy too. What had the fool been thinking, using the family delivery service to aid that nefarious William Locke and his *Dung’n* rebellion?

“It might have been William’s idea to raise two fingers at *Dung’n*,” he hissed. “But it looks, silly boy, like you’ve paid with your own.”

Laddy’s mother was more forgiving and insisted that her son’s fingers be given a proper burial in consecrated ground. Whatever the folly that had caused their demise she fervently felt his fingers deserved to be with Jesus. She asked Father Patrick if this might be possible, reminding him of a precedent he had set just last spring. Roberto Garbaldi’s leg buried in a cello case. “Such a lovely service,” so many folk had said.

Father Patrick agreed, how could he not? Besides, church numbers were low. A funeral for fingers might even bring in the gawkers. He could corner them afterwards; offer them cake with salvation.

~

The whole town attended the service plus a few curious outsiders, lured by the promise of a feast after the ceremony. A feast, it had been rumoured, that would involve four proper courses. Nothing bite-sized or in the shape of an hors d’oeuvre. Nothing that could reasonably be referred to as ‘finger food’. Something Laddy’s mother had been most keen to avoid.

~

The ceremony itself was a simple occasion. Held in the church graveyard, shasta daisies in full bloom. Not a single white wisp hung in the pellucid blue sky.

William spoke at the ceremony though Mrs McDonald had requested that he not. Laddy had insisted. They were his fingers after all. William was his best mate. He knew his fingers more than most.

William, unfamiliar with eulogising lopped fingers, had recruited Father Patrick to assist in the task of preparing a speech. Fortunately, Father Patrick found some obscure biblical references about the sanctity of fingers (or something of that ilk) and William was able to recall the time Laddy’s two fingers had been part of the

winning hand that caught the closing cricket ball at the *Alby Brown Memorial Cup* in the summer of 1929.

No one cried during the ceremony, though Mrs McDonald dabbed her eyes and Laddy felt a lump at the base of his throat. Indeed, it was only as Laddy's fingers were being lowered to the earth in a *Log Cabin Flaxed Gold Leaf Cavendish* cigarette box (Laddy's favourite brand) that Mrs McDonald's grief became audible for the very first time. Flashing her sodden eyes directly at William she spoke low and furious, spitting out her consonants.

"No one should ever have to bury their son, not even a part of him. Why couldn't you have just wooed like a normal Rogan man? Like Ned Farelly did, God rest his poor soul."

She glanced across to Ned's grave, sitting stone-faced, observing. The attending crowd glanced with her, surreptitiously crossing their hearts. (Nobody liked to use their fingers too brazenly given the whole purpose of the occasion.)

"Now our son has only a stump," she continued, thrusting Laddy's hand into William's reddening face. "A stump in the place that a ring finger should be. Who will want him now, you tell me that."

"Yes, who will want him now," chorused the town in almost rehearsed disapproval.

William shrugged his shoulders though not dismissively so. He knew a man with eight fingers was worth less than ten strong. But what could he say? It was clear that the whole town blamed him for what had happened to Laddy. There was no point in suggesting that Laddy might still have gone to Adeline's aid even without his lamb chump parcel and his proposal wrapped in jute twine. And there was no point in defending his rejection of *Dung'n* either. Especially with local legend Ned Farelly, less than four grave lengths away.

Unsure of what to do next, William stood still, eyes rooted to the ground. He'd fight his corner later; he was very sure of that, but for now he would submit and reverently so.

Laddy, however, reacted rather differently. He couldn't help but speak out.

"Quite frankly," he said, somewhat buoyantly for a person who had just been the subject of a partial entombment. "I'm actually quite relieved that William wooed Adeline with raw meat and not clods of dung like you folk seem to want."

The crowd stared at Laddy as if he had suddenly gone mad.

"He's missing two fingers," they whispered to each other.

"Bound to drive him a bit bonkers."

"Make his tongue go all queer."

But Laddy was serious and he knew he wasn't mad. He might have lost two fingers. He hadn't lost his mind.

"I mean what if she hadn't got used to those raw, bloody cuts," he challenged the entire mob, eyeing each one of them straight on. "Why I can even remember her once saying, just as a joke, that sometimes William's deliveries still came with a pulse."

The crowds exchanged glances, a few even nodded in agreement. They'd all encountered butcher's cuts so fresh they still beat.

"What on earth are you saying, boy?" Laddy's father said shakily. Shocked, as he was, by his son's sudden certitude.

"What I'm saying my dear father, no disrespect intended, is if she hadn't got so used to such a raw, bloody sight she might not have had the guts to chop off me fingers. She'd just have chucked loads of dung at me because that's all she'd have known and well, if she'd just chucked loads of dung at me you know where I'd be."

The boy nodded sombrely down to the turned earth, where his boxed fingers now lay, crossed over in peace.

The crowd started mumbling to each other, dissecting what they'd just heard. Could it be that Laddy was right and William's unconventional wooing tactics had indeed saved his life? They looked towards Mr McDonald for guidance in the matter. A known traditionalist in the town and a dogged defender of *Dung'n*, he was also Laddy's father; he must surely know what was right.

Mr McDonald turned to his wife and gave her arm a tight squeeze. Then, looking straight at William, he proffered the lad the slightest of nods to show he'd understood Laddy's words and all they implied.

He might never appreciate why William had seen fit to challenge *Dung'n* but even he, its staunchest defender, could see the limits to its charm. And perhaps after all, he conceded to the crowd, even in a small town like Rogan there was space for the new to coexist alongside the old - like carriages did with cars and baker's loaves did with sliced bread.

~

Of course, it took some time for the town to adapt to the notion that it was possible for a woman to be wooed in more than one way. There were still some who insisted on *Dung'n* their women but others began delivering gifts of a more practical nature. Informally referred to as '*fingering*' in honour of Laddy's sacrifice (though the name never took off amongst the lady folk at least), it delighted Rogan's business community to find their wares in demand.

Indeed, by the time William's own son had reached courting age himself (for William had married Adeline that following spring) the practice of wooing women with gifts and not dung was as commonplace as electricity, running water and rotary clothes lines.

Though, of course, William now had his own rigidly defined ideas as to what gifts were appropriate when it came to wooing one's love.

Shouting out the door as his son walked the drive, carrying a bunch of bright dahlias in a sheaf of pink paper. "What's wrong with a pound of good mince or a fist full of liver?"

But his son paid him no heed, just as his mother had suggested.

"Don't you worry, my sweet," she called out from behind William. "He's just being traditional. He'll mellow over time."

BOMBSHELL

By Kate Smith

Foreseeing the future isn't his talent but in this instance Zac Kincaid can see how the evening will wind up.

He can even see who's going to kick it all off.

She's across the room, talking to the hip-hop brunette behind the bar, one of those wicked girl talk sessions likely to shrivel a man if he's fool enough to listen in. That's if he can focus past the fascination of *her*. She's a flame, calling moths, and they're all too willing to answer.

If they can work up the nerve.

The blonde is so clearly a challenge.

The teasing crisscrossing ties of her black top showcase her lean back and the tantalising indentation of her spine invites exploration from the dip of her waist all the way up to the crazy spikes and tufts of honey hair.

Zac recognises a disaster waiting to happen when he sees it, so he keeps his distance. He sips his coffee, savouring the flavour as it crests his palate, rich and intense with a true kick.

Rather like Blondie's laugh as it curls through the room, drawing the eye. Her head tips back, bar lights shining on the strong bones of her face, the arch of her throat. She simply glows, as though she has a deal with the sunshine, blazing with life and fire. She burns. It's in the way she moves.

That's noticeable, even here. Compelling, even here in Reagan's Luck, with the preternatural just a scratch below the surface, running rampant in all their wild beauty and style.

With a wall at his back, Zac settles more comfortably in the bentwood chair. He idly rotates the almost empty latte glass as though he really can see the future in the dregs of foam. That's sleight of hand. He's really watching through his lashes, taking the pulse of the room, sharp indigo gaze picking out features for a moment of assessment before glossing on.

There are many features worth lingering over. The way the light reflects in vertical pupils, or the extra growl in the bass voice to the left; a glitter of mail or maybe scale as a hand gestures; the limber, almost boneless dancers; tattoos that shift independent of their wearers; overlong teeth as *something* sings along to the music.

It's music with a mood, and the guitarist is in the mood for speed, picking out a ripple of notes, sending them soaring above the melody licking out, hot and sweet, heating things up even more.

Across the room, the blonde sways with the beat, lithe and golden.

From a shadowy table right in the corner a man flows upright, chair thumping into the wall. His features hint at a Celtic heritage, a dark one. He might be one of the warrior princes of the sinister faery court, under exile and one step ahead of Fate.

Zac salutes him with his glass. "Aiming for the moon."

"Maybe." The warrior's voice is a purr, velvety rough. "Maybe not. But while I'm reaching for the moon I might fall for that one bright particular star."

Knots of people unravel before him, giving way to power and night and lethal ease, as he zeroes in on the blonde.

"Five," Zac whispers, setting his glass down.

The warrior's hand maps a beguiling curve, his head dipping to Blondie's ear, lips to lobe and whispering.

"Four."

Blondie swivels on her stool, brows rising, sceptical, as she gives the warrior the slow once over. His hand strokes up, along her spine, cups her shoulder. She shrugs him off, turns away.

"Three."

It's the moment the guy on the next stool has been waiting for, a chance to step in, be the hero, defend the little lady.

Zac winces. "Two."

The little lady objects, poking her wannabe saviour in the chest, leaning in, puncturing his ego with jabs of her tongue, while the dark one folds his arms and smirks over her shoulder.

"One."

The wannabe hero bristles. He can't lose face in front of his buddies. The blonde snarls, throws up her hands in disgust, while the dark warrior bumps the hero aside, a little nudge, and that's good, that's a target.

"Boom."

Then things get blurry as the blonde explodes.

It's pure Holly H. Kincaid in action.

It's also the diversion Zac needs. He has Valkyrie K Starbrights to plant, and notice to avoid, so what better time than when all hell is breaking loose?

As to the ideal hiding place . . .

Well, the furniture's out. Zac leans right as a chair scoots by, slamming into the wall, birthing splinters from both. A whirring noise has his head whipping round

but it's only the shutters coming down to cover the bar, saving the consumables from damage. Staff pick their positions and signal bets with quick hand gestures while the band rocks out Rose Tattoo's *Bad Boy For Love*.

There's a tinkling smash as the nearest light surrenders and Zac slides to avoid the shards of glass. The deepening gloom is a gift, cloaking his movements. His night vision is good, but others here have better. His hand dips to a pocket, comes back with a fistful of ball bearings, sticky to the touch with a metallic bristle. A flick of his wrist sends the metal spheres soaring to the ceiling where the burrs bite, clinging to beams and plaster. Impact trips the triggers and they track, data flowing to the reader in Zac's other hand. He slips it into a hip pocket and moves, applying an elbow or knee when he has to clear a path through the sprawling, all-for-one kind of brawl.



Just another night at Reagan's Luck, which the house band highlights with a swing into *Taking Care of Business*.

Zac shakes his head and keeps going, heading for the exit, ruthlessly shouldering out into the cool night where a lattice of stars holds the sky in place.

One of those stars falls, streaking towards the ocean. There might be a splash but it's lost beneath the roil and tumble which spits out the blonde invitation to riot.

She glitters, breathless, bouncing in her combat boots. "Let's do that again."

Three beats later, the warrior prince strolls round the corner in a swirl of darkness. "I can't take you two anywhere."

"She started it." Zac points to his twin.

"Admirably, too."

“Just keep on admiring,” Holly H recommends, bumping out her hip, a six-foot bundle of leather, silk and attitude.

“Always,” Cash vows smoothly. He aims bright eyes at Zac. “So. Why did I just make a move on Hol?”

Zac shrugs. “Beats me.” He ducks, capturing his twin’s fist before her knuckles kiss his nose. “Okay, comedy break over. Because there’s a blood sucking soul thief, able to shape shift to that of its victims so the only way we can identify and capture it is by isolating its energy signature. Which is where these little darlings come out to play.” He passes a handful of Starbrights to Cash.

The metal spheres chime as Cash jingles the slight weight. “Diego’s been busy.”

“With a little help from Tiff.” Zac digs the palm-size reader from his pocket and checks the screen. It sparkles, each point of light representing an energy signature above normal, and there are many. He grins, slow and sure. “Now all we have to do is wait.”

Patience may be a virtue but it’s a hard one to hold on to with ACDC’s *You Shook Me All Night Long* and the occasional howl echoing into the night, keeping the adrenaline flowing. Holly H paces, leggy strides and quick turns, while Cash, so cool, extends his arm and sights down his sleeve until he can hold the moon in his hand. And close his fist.

Hot and cold, bright and dark . . .

Zac frowns at Holly H, giving into speculation. She returns it with interest.

“Blood sucking, soul stealing, shape shifting,” Cash murmurs. “That’s stacking the deck a bit high.”

“Overkill,” Holly H suggests, dryly.

“That, too.” Cash releases his hold on the moon. “What kind of soul thief?”

Zac tilts the reader towards the light spilling from the bar. “The kind that traded its own and regretted it so much it goes on to take others because the howling depth within is unbearable. And while the sundered soul burns with memories and emotions, the pain of it paints over everything before. Each new pain is bright enough to overshadow the accumulating old. Which means the souls burn out faster, and it needs to kill more often or the more powerful.”

“Messy,” Cash diagnoses, keeping an eye on Holly H as she prowls through the shadows.

“Exactly,” Zac agrees. “No one likes these things but as long as they play by the rules of sanctuary –”

“Which you’ve blithely bypassed.”

“Everyone’s stuck,” Zac continues. “Until a high enough blood price is placed on its head, and someone decides the price is worth the risk.”

“Someone like you.”

Zac huffs out his breath in a display of offence. “I know, I know... you’d have done it for free, but I have to pay my stylist and keep Hol in breakfast muffins somehow.”

“Hope you’re paying for a quick escape because there are many who’d object to your means.” Cash nods towards the building where the alpha types are still revelling in the chance to slip the leash on their hunting instincts.

“What? And miss the chance to see who’d object on the basis that if they had nothing to hide they wouldn’t bother?” Zac’s grin falls away. “By the time the target leaves the bounds, it’s too late. It could be using any one of a hundred identities, plus you’ve got a body at your feet. Some of which have been ascribed to others, further clouding the trail.”

“That raises an interesting point.” Cash reaches out, snares Holly H’s arm and reels her in, holding tighter when she struggles. “Why here?”

Zac shrugs smoothly. "It's a potent kind of place. Situate a nightspot at the intersection of space, time and energy lines, declare it a safe haven, and they will come. All those delicious blood types, plus some seriously vintage souls, wrapped up in very pretty packages. How could any monster that considers itself a connoisseur pass up Reagan's Luck? It's a veritable chocolate assortment, all soft centres, no nuts."

Holly H glares, balefire blue, and grinds a heel on Cash's toes. "Pretty much the equivalent of hanging out a sign saying *good eats: come and get it.*"

"Spark a brawl to stir up all those energies and heighten emotions to the point where your vampire can't think clearly, and is struck by an overwhelming urge to feed," Cash summarises. Wariness infuses his stance, a slight shifting of muscles tensing towards an exit strategy. "What's the rest of the plan?"

"Even a monster isn't going to lose it enough to feed in the open," Zac claims. "It will want to do the deed in private, if only because it won't want to share. Pattern says it will be seeking the closest darkest spot. Which happens to be right here. Then—" A ping from his palm interrupts. Zac glances down, spots the one brighter spark amid the rest. "Looks like we've got a winner."

"And then?" Cash demands.

"*Shhhhh.*" Holly H elbows him into silence as silhouettes escape the front door and become the wannabe gallant all snugly with the bar-keeping brunette.

They shimmer with heat in the cool night, the heat of mutual adrenaline highs. It's in the roughness of voices losing the ability to shape actual words as aggression and passion seek outlets, in the pulse that throbs with the beat of battle still, in the aiming of teeth for the tender skin of the throat.

Something snaps.

Light flares as Reagan's Luck goes nova. Screams shred the night as the photosensitive within the club react to the blaze of brilliance flooding out to push back the boundaries of the dim and dark . . .

And incidentally extending the safe haven's limits. The Lore dictates that anything within range of the lights from inside remains subject to the law.

"Would you look at that," Zac marvels. "I'd say that's violating sanctuary. With a vengeance."

"Instant death penalty." Holly H bares her own teeth and taps a purple fingernail against the medallion riding her belt. "Luckily, we're right here to enforce it."

The kiss of fang to skin is not so unusual in these parts, but the intent is off the charts. In the revelation of brightness, the tableau of vampire and victim becomes a struggle as reality catches up to the victim. He tries to shove free but the vampire holds fast, sinks her claws in a little, drawing blood.

The tang of it swirls on the air, a taint of copper and red.

The vampire's attention shifts as it sniffs.

It's enough of a distraction for the victim to wrench himself free and stumble backwards three paces. He slaps his hands over the grooves in his skin as best he can, eyes taking on a panicky glaze. Oh, yes, he's about to do something stupidly heroic, like open his mouth and yell for backup.

Cash raises a finger and his silver ring shimmers. "Trust me on this, you don't want to be here." It's his Dark Lord voice, soft and silky, as effective as hellfire on baby skin.

The man swallows and retreats behind a slamming door.

Prey deprivation does not make a happy vampire. This one lunges after the blood spoor but the light emanating from within is blinding and it spins away, shielding a face that frays at the edges, regressing to an earlier shape.

Maybe it's the original.

Whoever and whatever, it sheds the curves of the brunette barkeeper like yesterday's socks and straightens into solid and malignant male.

"Huh." Zac rubs his jaw. "Interesting."

The vampire flexes its hands and its claws clack like icicles. "Is it? We rather think you do not know the meaning of the word. We can change that. We will make you scream until your lungs burst for want of air, your vocal cords will rub themselves to shreds, and your soul will weep for surcease. That will be very interesting."

"Are you done?" Zac raise a cynical brow. "You have the right to come along quietly or the right to do this hard way. I'm guessing you'll pick the second option."

The vampire laughs, the sound full of bones rubbing together, sloughing rotting flesh. "We are going to enjoy you."

"Promises, promises," Holly H jeers as she takes one small step back.

Out of the light.

The vampire *moves* before her foot touches ground. A shift toward neutral territory is all it takes to flip the switch, igniting an unholy brew of hunger, anger and stress. It lunges, claws leading and fangs glinting with razor promise for the strongest energy source.

Holly H falls back, two steps further into the dark, and to the cool hard ground.

The vampire knocks Zac aside and he tumbles neatly, rolling from a shoulder landing to his feet even as Cash steps in and sends the Starbrights flying to cling in a rain of high-tech steel to the vampire's back

Zac thumbs the reader and the Starbrights shine, freezing the vampire where it is, half over the brutally clear demarcation line between sanctuary and free-for-all.

“What is it about you that attracts the wrong guys?” Cash asks, pulling Holly H to her feet and picking leaves from her hair.

Holly H sweeps the strap of her top back to her shoulder. “In my defence, that wasn’t a guy when I met it.”

“As for you . . .” Cash frowns at Zac. “Using your sister as bait?”

Zac blinks. “Well, yeah.”

“Fine.” Cash surrenders in the face of identical incredulous expressions. “You of course have a plan for this bit, right?” He stabs an index finger towards the vampire.

Its skin ripples, hinting at things churning underneath, trying to shift. Crimson bleeds from its eyes, staining the corona of light courtesy of the Starbrights that it wears like a coat and an awful noise leaks from its mouth, a rasping kind of panting.

Zac scratches his head. “Actually, we’re winging this bit.”

Cash groans.

“Hey, we ran out of time for field tests,” Holly H says, squinting down the inside of her shirt. She squirms until she can extract the leaf tickling her belly button.

“Also the no-survivors thing means we worked with a lot of theory and speculation,” Zac adds. “Pretty much in the dark.”

Cash spreads his arms wide in a sorcerer’s gesture and his coat swirls, summoning shadows to cloak him in intrigue. “So shed a little light on the subject.”

“I thought you’d never ask.” Zac fires up the Starbrights.

Tick.

Tick . . .

Boom.

It's flying body parts all over again, but this time they land with gobby splatters and chunky stains, a hissing of bile and venom, as the explosion of light burns the dark away.

So bright it burns . . . star light, so bright. As bright as generosity, dazzling as true love, warmer than laughter, and it sieves out the remnants of raggedy souls and renders them up to the embrace of the velvet night before winking out.

Cash lowers a shielding forearm and coughs on the acrid smoke wisping about. "I really can't take you two anywhere."

Zac slings his arm around Holly H's shoulder. "Think of it as the blonde bombshell effect."

INVISIBLE BULLETS

By Kevin Brown

Standing naked and blood-speckled in the living room, War says, "Let's not everyone lose focus here." He scans the shattered lamps and overturned coffee table, holds up his nub, and says, "For real, anyone seen my arm?"

The Goth guy War hit is rolling around on the floor, trying to work his mouth shut. He's missing a chunk of tongue and his jaw is no doubt broken, because when he screams, "*Oh God!*" it comes out, "*Owwr Gawwr!*"

Ten minutes ago, before the fight broke out, whoever's house this is was only wrecked from the party. You had overflowed ashtrays, tables buried under bottles and cups. Soggy carpet where people had spilled drinks or pissed in the corners. The smell of weed was everywhere, smoke hanging in tattered clouds, breaking in swirls whenever people passed through it. Some shitty country-rap song thumped and twanged on the sound system.

I was on the loveseat with Jessica Something, bird-finger deep into a new relationship. My eyes closed, trying to get my tongue into Jessica's lungs. Stopping only to take drink from whatever it was I was drinking.

And War, he was doing his thing, improvising insults and dropping jokes on an expanding crowd gathered around him.

"Know what you get you mix country and rap?" he was yelling over the music. "You get *CRAP!*"

No matter what the joke, for War, everyone laughed. Ate it up like Prozac. Standing in front of them, his prosthetic arm held out with the graphite hand

gripping a cup of E&J, he looked like a king speaking to the court. His fan-shaped chest and capped shoulders, abs like latex stretched over shower tile, he could have been a General or a prophet.

He could have been a god.

What he is, though – at least what he wants to be *now* – is a stand-up comedian.

With my eyes still closed, this Jessica's hips started moving, rubbing against me out of rhythm with the music. I was grabbing her waist to slow her down, get her in sync with the beats, when the voices got louder. Threatening. When the atmosphere shifted the way it always does when shit's about to go down.

Sort of the chaos before the storm.

I wiped my hand on the cushion and stood up. Knowing what was about to happen, my insides went helium light, muscles rising off the bones. Organs floating around, bumping off each other.

The Goth guy, his coal black hair slicked back and shiny, his pale face and black lips, he was yelling at War, "You're not funny." With a couple of other pasty-faced fuckers standing around him, he laughed and yelled, "So sit down, bitch."

And smiling, War grabbed his balls, shook them, and said, "There's enough hair here to keep a yeti warm." Unsnapping his arm and tossing it to the side, he said, "So who you calling bitch?"

One shot was all it took. It was the jawbreaker. Tell the truth, it's not really this guy's fault. He just couldn't see what he was walking into.

After the first blow, the other pasty-faces went for War, and the wall of bodies began to shift and jerk. Then, all the drunks jumped in, swinging at anything in front of them. I tore through the crowd, throwing haymakers, kicking, pulling hair. Bottles were shattering everywhere.

Naked and one-armed, War dropped a guy with a palm to the face. I saw that the back of his head was split open and wet, blood webbing down his back. Around his throat. Someone somewhere caught me in the nose and my eyes went teary.

After getting my vision back, I made it to War, wrapped him up, and started pulling him out. Looking back at me, a gash over his left eye, glass in his hair, he said, "I'm tired." Spitting a mouthful of blood down his chest, he said, "This party sucks."

~

Nineteen years, eight months, and twenty-one days ago, War was almost killed for the first time. Three months later, he was born.

His mother, she was always strung out on prescription pills and vodka. Because having a baby fucked with her habits, at six months thick she decided to have him "privately" terminated. The procedure was botched and, three months later, he came out sans left arm from high bicep down.

During labour, his mother died of internal haemorrhaging. Call it karma or irony. Even revenge. I say it was his first "fuck you" to a world that didn't want him.

He was named Warren, after the Warren County Memorial Hospital.

Seventeen years later – to the day – he killed his old man with his fake arm in a fight. His father had kicked the shit out of him his whole life.

This was the first time War fought back.

It was ruled self-defence and, until his eighteenth birthday, he was put into a foster home, the same one I'd lived in since I can't remember.

How I ended up in foster care, it's not so interesting. My parents, one day they just up and dropped me off. There were no beatings or death. They signed the papers and walked away. Saved their energy.

For years, I watched kids come and go. Get dropped off and picked up. Given away, then given away.

One family's junk is another family's treasure.

The first time I saw War, he was sitting on the porch, slamming his fake fist into the concrete steps. The knuckles were chipped and flaked. The graphite peeled back in slivers. Not looking up, he said, "It itches."

"It can't itch," I told him. "It's like, *gone*."

Slamming it back down and twisting, he said, "Wherever that fucker's at, it's itching."

~

In the living room, white powder dust from the busted walls is back-flipping in the air. War brushes glass from his hair and shakes his head. His torso is a collage of scars: rough grated skin like an orange peeling on his chest. Bubble shaped burn marks from his father's cigars. A hundred and fifty-stitch scar that centipedes under his floating ribs like a fossilized lizard tail, ending in a purple fleshy point.

He scratches his bare ass. Thing with War is, he's at a party, in thirty minutes he'll be naked. "The skin is the clothes for the soul," he always tells everyone, slipping his shirt over his head. Give it another hour or so, five others – guys and girls – have usually joined him.

I'm leaning against the wall, my head tilted back, with my jacket sleeve crammed inside my nostrils. What's left of the fight, mostly clumsy shoving and drunken yelling's spilled out in the front yard.

After a few minutes of kicking broken bottles and cushions around, War finds his limb under the flipped couch. He slides it on and slips the harness strap over his shoulder. I tongue an empty socket in my gums and say, "You didn't happen to see a tooth over there?"

And he says, "Top one or bottom?"

Outside, a bottle bursts against the side of the house.

War turns his back to me, looks over his shoulder with the strap in his hand, and says, "Snap this, would you?"

"*Owwr Gawwr!*" the Goth guy says, still rolling around on the floor.

"I'm not a doctor," War says, "but he may be due for some sort of medical assistance."

I snap the leather strap and tuck it under. He squats down, over the Goth guy, and says all loud, "I think your jaw's broken in one or two important places." Patting the guy on the shoulder, War's hands are trembling. He says, "I'm sorry this happened," and stands.

I ask him where his clothes are.

Scratching his head, he says, "I barely found my arm."

I look around, flipping shit back and forth, tossing junk to the side. "Where's your pants?" I say, jacket sleeve still wadded in my nose. All nasal, I take a drink of an overturned beer and say, "I told you, if you're gonna fight, get dressed first."

"Know what they call—no—what you get when you mix country and rap?" he says, and outside someone yells, "*Cops!*"

"Shit," I say, and he says, "Nope. But that's close."

~

Being the oldest two in the home, me and War started hanging out. Watching movies and getting in fights. Drinking. War, he'd drink anything, and lots of it—Vick's cough suppressant. Hairspray filtered through loaves of bread. "Long as it stings and gets me to sing," he said.

I'd tell him what I could remember about my folks. How my mom might've had freckles. How my dad might've had hairy knuckles. He'd tell me about his old man. About different girlfriends he'd had.

Before he decided to be a comedian, he'd wanted to be a stunt man. Then, a tattoo artist. Then, a porn star.

But what he wanted to be when I first met him was a great speaker and leader. Write an inspirational book called, *Love You Some You*, where each chapter would deal with specific issues. And it would jump up the bestseller list, because these books, he said, they're emotional heroin. Around the world, everyone's jonesing to be motivated. To be shown the way. Saved.

People need to hear they have a real problem. They need to know it can be fixed.

Suffering from depression? See Ch. 4.

Abused as a child? See Ch. 8.

Marital problems due to financial stress? See Ch. 13.

After, he said, he'd make the rounds to the talk shows: Leno, Oprah, Larry King Live. He'd be received with standing ovations. All these teary eyed believers thanking him for showing them – for \$24.95 – what they already know. "Helping people who only think they need help," he said, "is still helping."

He told me I could be some type of ghost writer. Maybe organize and outline the book chapters.

And I said, "What's something like that pay?"

On the front porch, sitting on the railing with me on the top step, all the kids from the home would be spread out on the front yard. His arms opened wide, his voice rising, he'd tell everyone what they wanted to hear. What they needed to hear.

Anxious to get new parents? See Ch. 3.

Feel something's missing? See Introduction.

Before long, the whole block was spread out in the yard. Nodding their heads. Biting their lips. Some crying.

Day after day, I watched War move the crowd, hoist their problems onto his shoulders. Elevate them. Enough time, he'd either lead them to their own personal enlightenment, or have them drinking grape Flavour-Aid from a paper cup.

At night, he'd exercise in his room. Between inhales and exhales, he'd rattle off ideas that I'd jot down in spiral notebooks. Doing one-arm push-ups, he said, We're all of us in the middle of war, every second of every day. He'd exhale and say, "We move through life with invisible bullets whizzing by our heads." There's always someone murdered in that very same alley we took yesterday. There's always a twelve-car pile up on the freeway seconds after we exit.

And if that wound would've been just two inches to the right . . .

If that cop hadn't ticketed us for no seatbelt just minutes before . . .

If we'd taken another three steps backwards . . .

Doing tricep presses, his shirt collar bibbed with sweat, War said, "At any given moment, we're all just two inches to the right from tragedy."

Scrawling this out, I'd be thinking about my parents. How maybe they were just pushing me out of the line of fire. Maybe giving me away was them saving my life. Diving on a grenade. Sacrificing their creation for the better me.

Confused about why your parents gave you away? See Ch. 1.

And War kept going. "Problem is," he'd say, I'd write, "most times we die, it's to get home ten minutes faster."

We die for too many cocktails.

We die for another rush. A few more thrills.

Pumping out a final repetition, spit stringing from his lips, he said, I wrote, “We die for a six second orgasm.”

My folks, after doing some searching I found out they went to China a short time after leaving me. These saviours of my life, these non-guardian angels, they moved to some small place I can't spell, some tiny village I can't even pronounce, and that it's one day and two hours ahead of our time zone. That later, they had another child – a son – they kept.

Thinking it over, my plan was to scrape some money together, catch a plane to Where ever, China, and find them. Just knock on the door, show them how their sacrifice paid off. I pictured it happening, six arms V'd out and waiting. Tears zipping down their faces. The mother and father and brother from half a globe away. Reunited.

One night, drunk and watching *Master of the Flying Guillotine*, I told War my plan. “You could go too. Be a leader in China,” I said. “They like that kind of thing over there.”

And he took a shot of Cherry Vick's and said, “Why's it looking back always fucks up our looking forward?” Grabbing my shoulder and squeezing, he said, “We're brothers, right?” Taking another drink, he said, “Follow in their footsteps and save your energy.”

Wishing your parents loved you? See Title.

“We are what we are,” he said, and unsnapped his arm, laying it across his lap. On TV, the one-armed boxer was battling the blind assassin. “Christ was meant for His cross,” he told me. Snatching his arm up and swinging it like a sword, he said, “Sometimes, when the nails are in the wrist, you just have to hang.”

~

With the cops sliding through the front door, War grabs a fifth of Early Times. We tear out the back and break running toward a field behind the house. He's barefoot and naked and still outrunning me.

Behind us, there's muffled voices and movement. I look over my shoulder at the blue police flashers ricocheting off the house. Flickering in the sky.

Still looking back, I slam into something and pop the ground in a thud. "The fuck?" I say, and look over at War. He's on the ground too, holding his bottle in the air. He gets up, and there's a black stitch-work of gashes in his chest. Looking out at the field, he says, "Barb wire fence." He hops over and says, "You're drunk, those fuckers come out of nowhere."

My chest throbs and I touch it. In the moonlight, my fingertips come away black and wet. "Gonna fuck around and get lock jaw," I say, and think *Owwr Gawwr!* Wincing, I slip through the wire.

He's standing on the other side, staring at the dark woods arcing behind the field. He points and says, "You see that man over there?"

I look. "I don't see anybody," I say.

Grimacing, he turns the bottle up, bubbles the liquor a few times, and says, "Me neither."

We jog on at a steady pace, War staring at the woods. The field is littered with silhouetted bales of hay and cows. The wet weeds slap and grab at my pants legs. "Might oughta stop a sec," I tell him. "I just know I'm gonna puke."

He says, "Over there," and points toward a cluster of hay bales in the centre of the field. A few cows are circled around it, their necks outstretched, mouths tearing straws from the sides. As we get closer, they scatter.

War hops up in stride, the liquor sloshing. I crawl up, hands and knees, and puke over the side. After a few minutes, I sit up, my stomach inflating, then flattening. Inflated, then flat. Blue flashers are still snapping at the sky, and flashlight beams whip around like out of sync strobe lights behind the house. I ask War if he needs my jacket.

With his back toward me, he shakes his head "no."

"You're bleeding pretty bad," I tell him.

He touches his chest and says, "Nah." Holding his fingers up in the moonlight, he says, "Not all this is mine." He tilts his head back, takes a drink, still staring at the woods. Slowly, the cows begin to surround the bales again, ripping and grinding the hay in their jaws.

He reaches out and pets a black cow's twitching ear.

We sit a few minutes, listening to the snorts and grunts from the cattle. Hearing the distant voices at the house. The flashlight beams are still waving around the back yard, and I lay back and stare at the sky.

"How's about a joke," I say.

He sits a second, takes a drink, and without looking, says, "Why'd the man get a tattoo of a hundred dollar bill on his dick?"

"Don't know."

He stretches his neck, staring at the woods. He takes another drink and says, "He likes to play with his money, watch his money grow, and his wife'll blow a hundred in a second."

I laugh a little and say, "You so screwed that up."

Looking back toward the house, the flashlight beams are closer, near the edge of the field. "Think that Goth guy's gonna press charges," I say.

He nods, his jaw tightening, and says, "He should." Still staring at the woods, he cocks his head, smiles, and waves. I follow his eyes, but no one's there.

In the field, the lights are moving closer. "Wouldn't bet on it," I tell him, still watching him, "but those cops seem to be coming this way."

He nods again. "Don't matter."

"The fuck it don't," I say. I say, "Why don't it?"

“Because I’m not gonna be here.”

“Where you gonna be?”

He points at the black wall of trees in front of him and says, “There.”

And I say, “You’re gonna hide in the woods.”

“Not hide,” he says. “Live.”

The lights are halfway to us now. “What about being a stand-up and all?” I say, “Stand-ups don’t live in the woods.”

“I’ll tell jokes to the squirrels,” he says, and his hands seem to be trembling. His voice cracks and he says, “Probably a better crowd, anyway.” He takes a drink and says, “I’ll live in one of those hollowed out trees and eat berries. You know, like that book, *My Side of the Mountain*?”

I spit at a cow’s head and sit up. The cops are closer, silhouettes behind their lights and yelling something, and I know we’re screwed. “War, you read that book in like, the seventh grade or whatever. It’s for kids.”

He bubbles the bottle until it’s empty, his throat pumping. Tossing it in the weeds, he scratches the black cow’s ear again, and says, “Yeah, the good books always stay with you.”

The police, they surround the cluster of bales, yelling, “*Get down from there!*” Screaming something else I can’t hear. They shine lights in our faces, and I notice for the first time War’s sunken cheeks, the red veins webbed in his eyes. He’s crying, the tears mixing with the blood on his face and worming down. He doesn’t blink, just stares out at the horseshoed wall of trees.

“So,” he says, not looking. “You going with me?”

The cops’ voices, they’re saying it’s the last time we’ll be told. They’re screaming something about the count of three, and I think about my mom and dad, a

day and two hours away. My family of the future, with their arms V'd out. Maybe giving me to the world. Maybe welcoming me home.

I look at my friend beside me. My brother.

And I know I'm going to China.

I scoot beside War, stare out at the woods and, with a beam of light blinding me, say, "Try and stop me."



DICK WHITTINGTON'S BLUES

By Grant Stone

It was the cigarette lighter that got to him in the end. He could see it now, lying on the coffee table in their flat, two tube stops away and impossible to retrieve. Richard stood on the Hammersmith platform as the winter sun streamed through the glass ceiling and passengers shouldered by him wondering if, finally, he was going to cry. He blinked and the moment passed. A cat was staring at him from the other side of the tracks, but apart from that he was alone. Richard adjusted the straps on his backpack and walked towards the stairs. There were worse things to do.

Sarah had convinced him to give up smoking. She'd done it before they had met, and it had probably been as painless as everything else seemed to be for her. He'd kept the lighter. Sentimental reasons.

He bought a pack of Holiday at a kiosk near the exit.

~

"No pets."

The face peering from above the chain was gnarled as a walnut.

Richard smiled. "That's not going to be a problem."

The man on the other side of the door continued to stare. A hank of grey hair fell over an eye. A small dog barked somewhere inside. Finally the door closed and he heard the shift-clatter of the chain being removed. The old man came no higher than Richard's shoulder. He leaned like a question mark.

"It's upstairs." The man turned and walked up the hall. The wallpaper was

deeply textured: a burnished orange straight from a seventies sitcom. The carpet was deep brown shag. The stairs creaked under the man's slight frame, more when Richard started to climb. When they reached the landing he heard the rumble of a train pulling out of Hammersmith station. The whole house seemed to shake and the man paused and sniffed the air like a wild animal before a thunderstorm.

The room was small but not bare. Richard wished it was. The walls were the same orange as the downstairs hallway; mercifully the floor was bare wood. A bed with a stifflingly thick pink coverlet; the roof angled into the wall no more than three feet above the pillows. He'd have to be careful getting up. Near the door was a reasonable picture window. Richard peered out to the roof, the miniscule, ill-tended garden and the train tracks beyond. Luckily, the window let in a lot of light- he could tell the single bulb hanging from the ceiling, tassels shimmering under its pink shade, would give him a solid headache.

The landlord smacked his lips. "One hundred-fifty pounds a week."

Richard said, "I'll take it."

~

"Whittington?"

"No. *Worthington*."

The receptionist arched an eyebrow and tapped a few more keys. "I've got an appointment for *Whittington*, with Mr. Romney. But that was twenty minutes ago."

It hadn't even started yet and Richard was pretty sure the interview was already over. The receptionist looked over his shoulder at the empty room.

"*Worthington*?"

Richard nodded.

Mr. Romney ("call me Rom", he'd said, handshake like a vice) walked him back

to reception ten minutes later. He shook Richard's hand again and told him he'd let him know, in a voice that Richard knew meant *no*.

By the time he got back to the station his new suit was drenched. The train was packed. He leaned against the door as steam rose from his jacket.

A cat was watching him as he spilled out the train at Hammersmith with the rest of the passengers. It looked like the same cat as yesterday –same grey and black fur, same white patch under its chin like a bib.

When he reached the corner of his street he stood, stunned.

He'd walked right past it for days without noticing.

On the corner of his street was a jazz bar.

Several tables, though only one chair, sat outside, puddles of rain pooling on every surface. It was too dark inside to see anything through the windows. The unlit fluorescent tubing above the door read *Neko's*.

Richard jingled the coins in his pocket. He could cover this month's rent, and next, but that was it. Then again, he'd had a spectacularly unsuccessful day.

He waited inside the door while his eyes adjusted. Eventually he made out the edge of the bar, tables, a stage set up with a microphone stand and a small amplifier. A quiet piano solo played from expensive-sounding speakers. The place seemed to be deserted. He took a seat at the bar. "Hello?" he called.

A muffled thump came from a door at the back of the room. A few seconds later a Japanese man emerged, wiping his hands with a towel. He saw Richard and grinned.

"Good afternoon. What can I get you?"

Richard didn't have the energy to decide. "What's good?"

~

The sake, as it turned out, was very good. "Quick, quick," the bartender had said, giving him a warmed cup, motioning with his hands for Richard to drink it all. Before he put the cup down another was waiting for him.

The bartender's name was Kit, except he wasn't the bartender. He owned the place, with his wife. "She is away at the moment, unfortunately," Kit said, then muttered something Richard could not make out.

"Is it always this quiet?" Richard asked.

Kit shrugged. "It's still early. Wait until happy hour."

Thirty minutes later the door creaked open. Before it closed, Richard made out the shabby silhouette of a Japanese businessman, unshaven and tired. He yawned and rubbed his hand across his ample belly, then made for the seat next to Richard at the bar.

"See," Kit said, "happy hour."

~

If the businessman had told Richard his name he was damned if he could remember it now. He spoke to Kit in rapid Japanese and Kit translated sporadically. Normally, this linguistic exclusion would bother him, but after the day - and the sake, he was content to relax in the hum of unparsable conversation. The businessman stared at Richard meaningfully.

"He wants to know what you do," Kit called from under the far end of the bar where he was riffling through a stack of CDs.

"Tell him I'm, um, kind of between jobs at the moment."

Kit found the CD he was after and fed it into what was either a piece of modern art or a very expensive Bang & Olufsen. An urgent Miles Davis track began to play. Kit returned to his customers and translated, then said, "That's too bad. Down on your luck?" At this, and without translation, the businessman laughed.

"I thought he couldn't speak English," Richard said.

"Down on my luck," the businessman sang, "Send lawyers, guns and money," and now Kit joined in too, "*the shit has hit the fan!*" The two of them collapsed in a fit of giggles.

The businessman whispered something. "London is not a good city if you're out of luck," Kit translated.

Richard snorted. "True. But where am I going to find some?"

"Cats!" The businessman said. Kit hissed something under his breath and for an instant it looked like he was going to leap across the bar and strangle the man. Richard blinked; Kit's face was open and friendly once more.

Kit shrugged, "Sometimes good luck just turns up."

Time passed, but Richard didn't know how much. The businessman's shirt had lost its buttons and now his sweaty belly hung over his belt. Richard was pretty sure he hadn't been wearing that straw hat or those wooden geta sandals before. He looked again. Black leather shoes. No hat. Buttons in place.

Richard decided it was time to go.

~

"It's over, Mum."

Richard sat in the open window, one leg dangling. He balanced the mobile phone on his shoulder and pulled another cigarette from the pack. He could hear whispers- his mother passing the details to his dad. Behind that, their television. The accents of the newsreaders sounded strange to him. He lit the cigarette.

His mother sighed. "I just don't understand it," she said, "Sarah's perfect for you. She even got you to stop smoking."

Richard exhaled. "I know, mum. These things just happen, you know?"

"I can't talk to you now. I'm too upset. Here, talk to your father." The phone clattered on the table. He heard his father's favorite chair squeak and his footsteps down the hall.

"What's this bloody nonsense about you and Sarah?"

Richard smiled, in spite of himself. "Hi Dad. Yeah. Sad but true."

Silence followed. They'd never been particularly close. "Well, what about everything else? Got a job yet?"

"Not yet, but I'm getting there. It's not the easiest thing to start again in a different country. I'm going to interviews every day." Somehow, it was much easier to lie to his father when he was half a world away.

"Well. Look after yourself. And why don't you go talk to the girl, eh? Your mother's worried sick."

"Bye, dad."

He hung up and tossed the phone onto the bed. It was, technically, freezing, the sun only just risen, but the cigarette warmed him a little. He liked looking down at Hammersmith station, the sunlight glinting off the tracks as they curved out of sight.

Something moved at the edge of his vision. A cat was walking across the roof towards him. Not just any cat - Richard recognized the grey and black fur, the white bib. It walked along the spine of the roof sure-footed, green eyes fixed on Peter. They were three floors up- how did she get up here?

She wrapped herself around Richard's leg and purred, and he reached down and stroked the back of her neck.

~

The phone woke him and he fumbled for it, checking the time while he put on his glasses. One minute past nine. He'd overslept, although it had been the best

sleep he'd had since leaving Sarah and their flat. The cat, sleeping at the foot of his bed, raised her head inquisitively.

“Ah, Whittington. Rom here. Just wanted to let you know you've got the job. See you tomorrow? Excellent. Must away!”

The phone disconnected before he could either thank Romney or correct him on his name.

Near the foot of the bed was a small cupboard. Well, a small *door*: Richard had peered inside and seen a space that ran the length of the roof. He'd placed a particularly ugly sweater inside.

“That's for you,” he said to the cat, “thing is, you're not really supposed to be here. But as long as you stay out of sight you should be fine.” He placed her, purring, on the sweater, then closed the door mostly shut.

As he walked downstairs he could hear a radio and the sound of something sizzling in the kitchen. “Bye Mr. White,” he called, and pulled the front door closed behind him. It was a cold, but clear winter day. The bar was, unsurprisingly, closed.

Hammersmith high street was heaving. If tomorrow was to be his first day of work, he figured he'd better make the most of his last day of freedom. Hands in his jacket pockets, he jumped from the platform into the open door of a waiting tube car. His boots crunched on the bottom of the carriage and he grinned at the faces turned in his direction. It was going to be a good day.

Piccadilly, Westminster, The Tower. The tourist traps. He'd been in London four months already but hadn't found the time. Well, that wasn't entirely true. The first few weeks they had been sleeping on a friend's floor, holding on to each pound as if it were a diamond; they had savings but the difference between the New Zealand Dollar and the Pound was immense. Then Sarah had found work, and they'd gone from famine to feast. But her hours were crushing and she'd lay on the couch all weekend, exhausted. It didn't feel right to see the sights without her, especially on her money.

At noon he stood in the middle of Blackfriars bridge looking out across the Thames and felt like he had nothing but possibility ahead. But then he thought of Sarah, sitting at her desk, skipping lunch again. He stuffed the remains of his sandwich back into a trash can and walked back to the station.

~

The week was a blur. All of a sudden he had to *think*, after months of sleeping late and watching Richard and Judy all morning. He was asleep by eight every night.

The cat seemed content in its new home in the cupboard. She came and went through the bedroom window. Richard still didn't know how she got to the roof - walking around the back of the house one morning revealed nothing except an old, dripping drainpipe that could barely support its own weight.

By Friday night he was shattered. He waved off his new workmates' requests to go out drinking; next time, he promised, when he wasn't so tired. He hung up his coat and opened a small parcel of cat food; she looked up as he placed the saucer, filched from the kitchen, on the floor. But now he found himself restless and full of energy. After a few minutes he put his coat back on.

~

"Hey Kit!"

Neko's was, unsurprisingly, empty. Richard took his seat. He kept his coat on, and shivered regardless. Kit appeared, coming backwards through the kitchen doors. He banged a tray of clean glasses on the bar.

"Hey, what's with the cold? Heater on the blink?"

Kit looked harried. "Something like that. I hope it will be repaired soon," he said, his breath misting. "Still, nothing warms like sake!" He rubbed his hands together and placed a ceramic decanter on the bar. He poured sake into two wooden boxes, offered one to Richard with both hands and said "Campai!"

He felt warmer as soon as the sake slid down his throat. But something was wrong – the taste was different, harsher, than he recalled from the previous week. Kit downed his and grimaced. “Very sorry,” he said, “I am experiencing, ah, *supply problems* with my usual distributor. This sake is not very good.”

Richard shrugged. “It's OK. Better than nothing. How about some music?”

“Of course.” Kit shuffled to the corner of the bar, where a cheap portable CD player sat like a rotund frog. Sonny Rollins sounded weak and tinny.

Kit poured another sake for Richard, but not himself. Hunched behind the bar, Richard thought he was the very picture of misery. He looked older than before.

“No happy hour tonight?”

Kit shrugged without looking up. “No. He has returned to Osaka.”

“Oh. Shame. I liked him.”

Kit muttered something under his breath and Richard could tell it wasn't complimentary. He decided against testing his luck by asking Kit who Happy Hour actually was.

His phone rang just as he'd finally warmed up enough to take off his coat.

“Hello?” Sarah's voice was barely audible above the mangled jazz and static. Richard waved at Kit and stepped outside to find better reception.

Sarah sounded like she'd been crying. “Hey. I just . . .”

Richard's heart was beating faster than a Max Roach solo.

“I was thinking maybe we- you-, um. Do you want to come over?”

He didn't go back inside for his coat.

~

Sarah was impressed. She leaned back in her seat as the waiter cleared the last

of their meal. "You've done really well," she said. "I hope it's not because you're shot of me."

Richard was, he hoped, playing it cool, though his heart was still hammering. "I've just come into some good luck is all." He closed his eyes. She was going to ask him to move back in, he was sure of that now. He saw himself on the tube, all his possessions packed into a newly-purchased suitcase. The commute to work would be a little longer, but that didn't bother him. He'd take her to Neko's, he thought, introduce her to Kit, tell him that he'd finally found some luck...

She laughed. "Richard Worthington. Just like Dick Whittington, came to London to make his fortune." She leaned across the table and placed her hand on his arm. "Our fortune."

"You're the second person this week to call me that. I . . ."

Her forehead creased. "What's wrong?"

For a long time Richard said nothing, just sat, agape, running it over in his mind. It was ridiculous, insane. But the more he thought about it the more he knew it was true.

"Thank you for a lovely evening," he said, "but I really have to go."

"What's so important this time of night?" she called as he opened the door.

He said, "I have to go and talk to my cat."

~

"Um."

He started to speak, but no words came. This was stupid. He sat cross-legged on the bed. The cat was curled in a ball on the floor, ignoring him.

"I think I've figured it out," he said. "This week has been great. First the job and now Sarah. I'm a lucky guy. But--"

There were two things, really. He felt stupid talking to the cat. But worse than that, he worried he was right.

“But it's not *my* luck, is it? It's you.”

The cat lifted her head and regarded him with green eyes.

“It really isn't my luck. It's Kit's.” He swallowed. “And I've got no right to it.”

He cracked the window open wider. The night was still - the last train had gone.

“Go on,” he said. “Go back to him.”

For a long time the cat simply stared. Then she nodded, jumped off the bed, padded toward the window and leapt to the ledge. Richard stroked her head, *for luck*, he thought, and smiled. Then she jumped out on to the roof, tail held high.

Richard lay on the bed, arms laced behind his head and thought about Dick Whittington, who had come to London to make his fortune and did - even became lord Mayor. Although the way the panto had it, Whittington was irrelevant. All the cleverness, all the ambition, all the *luck*, came from his cat. He thought about another way that story could have ended: Dick Whittington, abandoned by his remarkable companion, roaming the streets, mayoral robes in tatters, chains of office long ago melted down and sold for food.

Eventually he fell into a dreamless sleep.

~

The message light on his phone was flashing. He hadn't heard a thing. It was Romney, breathing heavily.

“Richard. I'm really sorry to tell you this, but there have been a few, um, problems. I'm afraid there are going to be some, ah, redundancies-” there was a noise that sounded almost exactly like a man crashing into an unnoticed garbage can in a dirty Soho alleyway, “- and, um, that includes you.” He could hear dogs

barking and someone shouting angrily in Russian. "Like I said, I really am sorry. Wish things had worked out differently. Got to run." There was another crash and the phone disconnected.

He called Sarah. The conversation didn't start too badly, considering. She accepted his apology for the night before.

"I understand if you don't want to move back in straight away," she said, "Take your time. You're still getting used to that new job of yours."

He winced. "Yeah. About that," he said.

She hung up.

~

His job was gone, he'd lost Sarah – *again*, and he hadn't yet had breakfast. When he stepped outside he was greeted by an unseasonably brilliant blue sky. It was the middle of winter, but people were going to be taking their shirts off in Hyde Park today. No chance he'd be paid for his week's work. He was worse off than when he first moved in to the flat.

Neko's looked much improved. Someone had cleaned the windows and the tables and chairs outside looked like they'd been repainted. He'd have to be even more careful with his money, now. Rent was due in a couple of weeks.

Still, though.

He went inside.

The interior was completely changed. Yesterday this had been a dark and squalid dive. Now it was a wine bar, all white and stainless steel and halogen lights on rails. Classical music played. Richard looked up, trying to locate the speakers. He couldn't be sure, but it felt like the ceiling was higher.

"Good morning," chirped a girl behind the bar.

"I'm um . . . is Kit here?" He said, suddenly feeling stupid.

The girl motioned for him to sit and disappeared into the back.

He tugged his rugby shirt down over his jeans. He felt seriously underdressed. The place was packed, even at this early hour – happy, formally dressed diners at every table, harried waitresses flitting like hummingbirds.

A tall, Japanese woman appeared. She wore an elegant grey pantsuit, with a white shirt and Richard realised he'd never understood the meaning of the phrase 'swept into the room' until now. She looked at Richard with familiar green eyes.

"You are looking for my husband?"

After a while, he realised he hadn't said anything. "Yes. Um. Yes." He offered his hand. "Richard Worthington. Pleased to meet you."

She looked at his hand, and smiled, but didn't take it.

"He is away. I don't expect him back for quite some time." She blinked, slowly, and Richard was nearly lost in her green eyes. She did not offer to pass on a message. He was being dismissed.

"OK. Um, hang on-" he fumbled in his pocket and pulled out a collection of coins and notes. He slammed them on the bar without looking at them. "Kit's been very kind to me just recently, and he never let me pay for a drink. This should cover everything." Now he did look down at the bar, at the crumple of twenty pound notes, far more than he'd intended. But it was too late to do anything about it now. She scooped the money up and the bar was once again perfectly empty.

"Thank you," she said.

"OK, um," Richard said, then thought better of it and turned to leave.

"Richard."

He turned back.

She produced his coat from behind the bar and handed it to him. "Thank you for *your* hospitality. Good luck." She raised her right hand, fingers curved in a wave.

Something caught his eye as he rounded the corner. A row of metal trash cans, the one farthest from him tipped on its side, shining in the sun. First he saw a red tail. Then it emerged backwards from the trash can. A fox, although nothing like the other mangy urban foxes he'd seen. Its coat was a deep, burnished red. In its mouth it held what appeared to be the remnants of a broken sake bottle. He recognised the harried look it gave him.

“Hey Kit,” Richard said, “Hope you're not in too much trouble.”

The fox jumped over the cans and disappeared through a hole in the fence.

He didn't have anywhere to go, but it really was a remarkably nice day. Perhaps he'd go to Hyde Park and join everyone else, take his shirt off and get all sunburned. All of London lay before him. The streets weren't paved with gold, but in a city where cats and foxes lived, well, not *happily*, but together, more or less, anything could happen. He'd find his own luck. Things could be worse.



SCALES

By Lindsay Dubler

The green scab on Chrisy's elbow was bigger. She could tell. She squinted in the mirror, her elbow so close to the glass that it threatened to smudge the immaculate surface.

Yes, definitely bigger.

Perhaps it was a mole, she thought later, on her way to the doctor's office. But then again she had never heard of a green mole. She pushed the bridge of her glasses up her greasy nose, carefully manoeuvred her way into the car lot, and parked her blue Lincoln. Though only 23, she preferred to drive old luxury. It was like being the captain of your own schooner. The clinic doors greeted her with an air-conditioned whoosh and she stood in the doorway for a moment, relishing her moment of entrance and the consistent ping-pinging sound of the bell, signalling that yet another patient had arrived.

"Ms. Lane? You'll have to have a seat," the receptionist said after a cursory glance in her direction. Chrisy sat down on the squeaky chair, her chair, and stared at the balding man across from her. The wrinkles on his forehead were deeply creased as he scowled into his newspaper. Bad news. Always bad news.

Chrisy began to nibble on the end of her black tail. She called it her tail, but it was just a few strands of hair that she had become quite fond of mouthing during boring occasions or ones of anxiety. Was it possible to have green cancer? She supposed so. Any day now she was sure to die. But until then she didn't mind coming here to the office. It was comforting. Comforting to be surrounded by people who might one day save her life.

“Chrisy?” A nurse called her name. Chrisy jumped to her feet with a surge of enthusiasm. The nurse’s eyebrows contracted in disapproval. She looked like the angry hawks that circled barren fields in the Mid-West. Always searching. Chrisy chewed some more hair.

“We’ll just put you back in room 12, okay?”

Sure.

“Sure,” Chrisy said. They always put her in room 12. Every time she came here. It was like being a celebrity and having your own seat at the best table. Chrisy smiled. The nurse's name tag gleamed under the fluorescent lighting: Lou-Lou, embossed in black lettering. A badge of good health. A badge of success. Chrisy had wanted to be a nurse. Until she discovered that being a nurse meant being in continuous proximity to blood, urine, and faeces. She fainted her first day in nursing school. Accounting was safer.

The nurse wrapped the familiar sleeve around her arm and Chrisy felt a surge of giddiness as it squeezed her arm.

“Your blood pressure is a little high. Have you been eating a lot of salt?” Lou-Lou asked, peering into Chrisy’s face. Chrisy knew she was checking her pupils. Young people and their drugs. But no, there had never been cocaine. Chrisy was too unpopular in high school to score drugs. Not that she would have. She knew the pesticides they sprayed on marijuana gave you cancer and that “uppers” made holes in your brain. She shuddered.

“Not really,” Chrisy said. Lou-Lou frowned and wrote something on the chart. The chart. Chrisy’s chart was thick and littered with yellow sticky notes.

“Wait here, the doctor will be in shortly.”

Chrisy stood and walked to the large poster splayed on the right hand wall. It was a STD poster, with vivid photographs of herpes, syphilis, and gonorrhoea. It was a good thing Chrisy was a virgin. Safe from disease. Safe from open sores on

your private parts. She wished they would put nicer pictures in her room of celebrity. Chrisy opened one of the glass containers on the desk and stole a q-tip. She always took one q-tip. It was a souvenir of her constant brush with illnesses that could only be masking her ultimate fate: death.

The doctor knocked and stepped in without waiting for a reply. Chrisy jumped back from the poster looking guilty. They were the only genitals she had ever seen except for her own.

"Chrisy, hello," Dr. Burman said. He didn't look happy to see her. He never did. She had been seen in his office exactly 324 and a half times. Chrisy enjoyed counting each visit. Almost as though she had accomplished something.

"Hello, Dr. Burman. Look," Chrisy said, sticking her elbow in his face. He grimaced and peered at it through his spectacles.

"Looks like a mole."

"But its green," Chrisy said. Dr. Burman sighed and grabbed a medi-scope. He aimed the bright light onto the green spot. Chrisy thought it looked shiny. Dr. Burman scowled.

"Looks like a mole maybe. Probably some kind of skin condition. Maybe psoriasis. Do you see a gynaecologist, Chrisy?" he asked.

Chrisy stared at him.

"I've never had sex."

"I see. Well, you should probably make an appointment nonetheless. You're 23 now. Never too early to screen for –" he paused.

"Screen for what?" Chrisy said with a wide smile.

"Just a routine check up is all," he said.

Chrisy stared at Dr. Burman. He scribbled a prescription on his pad and made a note in her chart.

“You start applying this cream and make an appointment for next week. I’m sure it’s nothing.”

“It’s always something,” Chrisy said with a small smile.

Dr. Burman frowned.

~

The mole grew overnight.

The next morning Chrisy awoke to find her entire elbow was now covered with an iridescent green film. She stroked it. It was smooth and cool. Like snake skin. In the sunshine the skin cast angular reflections against the plain walls of her apartment.

Mr. Bits meowed loudly at her bedroom door. It was 11 AM. But Chrisy was not worried about time; she had been fired a week ago for putting two zeros where only one was needed. Accounting was safer but there was no room for extra zeros.

“Oh Mr. Bits, you have plenty of food in your bowl,” Chrisy said. She opened the door and looked down at the fluffy black cat. He hissed at her and ran away.

“Well, that was rude,” she called after him. There was no one else to hear her in the tiny one-bedroom apartment. Mr. Bits hid under the couch.

~

It was Wednesday. Chrisy was thirsty. She reclined her feet on her small Ikea table and squinted at the classifieds. Seeing nothing of related interest she dropped the newspaper on the floor and thought about the cashier at the market. She had stared at Chrisy’s elbow the entire time. Chrisy wondered if the spreading patches of green were making her dehydrated. Maybe she had contracted a rare form of herpes. Maybe they would name it after her. She thought of the suspicious green sheen of the public pool water. She smiled faintly and began to hum “Lazy Days,” stroking her elbow with the tip of her index finger.

She was out of cream.

~

Her eyes were yellow. She was certain she had heard of yellow eyes being attributed to some very scary--some very fatal-- disease. Toxicity of the liver perhaps. Her Uncle died of Cirrhosis but he always smelled bad and stroked Chrisy on the butt. Chrisy's mom said he was a bad man.

Though in her old life she would have gleefully rushed to her copy of the thick Physician Reference Guide and begin looking up the symptoms to an endless list of possible diseases, she felt no pressing need to any more. In fact, she felt wonderful. For the first time in her life, Chrisy knew she was not going to die of some mysterious illness. For once she was going to live.

In the mirror her pupils had become black slits in a sea of dark yellow. Chrisy thought her eyes were pretty. More exciting than her boring brown eyes had been. She watched the Colbert Report on television and smiled as his white teeth dazzled beneath the studio lights.

~

On Monday she heard the answering machine click on and the familiar voice of Dr. Burman.

"Chrisy? Chrisy, it's Dr. Burman. You haven't been here in over a week." He paused, as though to dwell on the frequency of her visits. "Please call me. I'd like to have another look at that mole." Chrisy smiled.

How sweet of him to call.

The green scales had spread all over her body and she was now encased in a shiny, reflective skin; a new skin more familiar than her old one had ever been. She spent many hours in front of the mirror, sliding her fresh green fingertips across her abdomen. She no longer needed Dr. Burman. She no longer needed her celebrity.

Chrisy lay down on the carpet, scratching the crevices of her body against the coarse fibres. Tiny flakes of peeling skin floated into the air, revealing inch by inch the vibrant emerald skin that lay beneath it. Chrisy rested her chin on the ground and stared across the small square of her living room. She could see every piece of lint and speck of dust. Under her couch she could see Mr. Bits. He hissed at her.

On Friday she ate him.

~

“Chrisy? Chrisy?” Someone was pounding on the door. The sound echoed through the small apartment.

Chrisy hadn't told anyone she had been fired. Collecting unemployment was enough to keep her satisfied but her second check was now stacked upon her first. Un-cashed. Unwanted. When her mother called from Atlanta, Chrisy let the machine pick up. When her sister called from London, Chrisy disconnected the phone. Instead of answering the door, she coiled her elongating tail around herself and waited.

Mr. Bigee had come to collect the rent. He had been here last week too. He rapped the front door with his thick knuckles and frowned. The front of the apartment was unkempt. Chrisy's red geraniums were crisp; neglected and dying. He wondered if she was dead. The last resident had died of a stroke. But she had also been 84 years old. It had taken weeks to get the stink out. Chrisy was much too young. For a moment he wondered if she would show him her breasts again. It had been a long time ago and he had since kept his distance. They had been nice breasts but his wife had an equally nice grip on his balls. He shuddered and decided to go home, where it was safe. But then he saw the newspapers stacked on her doormat.

Mr. Bigee came back the next day with his set of master keys, jingling them in his pocket nervously. He nudged the door open with the toe of his shiny black shoe. All the lights were off and the shades were pulled. As he stepped inside, he had to squint in the darkness. His bulbous body shuddered as he made out tufts of black

fur littering the hallway. Broken plates crunched beneath his shoes as he walked through the kitchen. Dishes had been pulled from their cabinets and lay smashed on the linoleum. There were also dark pools of-- something on the carpet. In the air he could smell something damp and stale, like the recesses of a dark cave.

“Chrisy?” His heart pounded in his ears as he crossed the living room.

From behind the couch Chrisy could smell his fear coalescing in the warm air of her apartment. She could hear his blood pulsing through stiffening arteries. Mr. Bigee was in an advanced stage of heart disease. But that was okay.

On Sunday, Chrisy ate Mr. Bigee.



LAST ORDERS

By Stuart Sharp

“So,” Ruiz tried, “this guy walks into a bar at the end of the world . . .”

“And then he walked straight back out again. On account of it being *closed*.”

It seemed that Andy the barman wasn't going to budge. He was already wiping down the bar, and would probably start stacking chairs in a moment. He looked like a proper landlord should, which was to say that he was approximately double Ruiz's size, with a beer gut he could have balanced pints on, and a bald head that looked like he polished it as often as the bar. In contrast, Ruiz looked how he always looked; neat, precise, careful. From the lines of his suit to the tips of his carefully polished shoes, he didn't look like the sort of guy whose last wish on Earth would be to have a drink.

“But you can't be closed.” Ruiz pointed out. “It's not even six yet. What will your brewery think of you closing this early?”

The big landlord appeared to give this some thought.

“Brew my own, don't I? As for my other suppliers, sod 'em. What are they going to do? Sue me tomorrow? “s the end of the world. I can close early if I want.”

Some dim, and largely outvoted, part of Ruiz's brain had to agree with that. If it was the end of the world, then tomorrow didn't really matter. You should just do what you wanted. The trouble was, Ruiz had taken stock of the things he really wanted in this moment, and had been quite surprised when one of *The Spitting Duck's* perfectly brewed dark ales came top of the list. His phone started to ring. Julia. Ruiz turned it off.

It was strange really that the end of the world should turn out to be so... sudden. If you'd asked him a year ago, Ruiz would probably have laughed, but if you'd got him to take the idea seriously, he'd probably have talked about meteors predicted months in advance, or some slow ripping apart of the world over even longer. He wouldn't have even thought of suggesting that an alien ship might have shown up in orbit two hours ago, announced that they were destroying everything, and asked if two minutes past six local time was convenient. It just didn't make sense.

But that, as far as he could see, was exactly what had happened. One minute working on the markets, the next with his computer screen filled by a grey, and surprisingly cute, alien face. And not just his computer either. Every computer in the office. Every TV. Every device capable of showing the picture anywhere. It had taken another hour for the TV news to announce that yes... it appeared to be real, and no... there didn't seem to be anything anyone could do about it.

So here he was, five minutes to six and counting, trying to order one last pint in a pub he went into with Julia every weekend anyway. Not that there would be any more weekends with Julia. Maybe he should have taken that call. But no. It was the end of the world. Time to be selfish, and do what *he* wanted to for a change.

"Look," Ruiz said, "it's just one pint. Just one. You don't even have to be here while I drink it. Just pour it and get on with what you were doing."

"Yeah, you say that. But what about once I've done that?" Andy demanded. "It'll be "ooh just one more" and I'll never get finished."

"It won't be." Ruiz promised. "Besides, by the time I finish this one, there won't be *time* for a second pint, will there?"

"Won't be time for much else either. You see this place?" Andy waved a hand at the interior of *The Spitting Duck*. It was empty. "Everyone else decided they'd rather be at home with their families. Even the alkies did. So why are you here?"

"I just wanted a pint, that's all," Ruiz countered.

“Haven’t you got a home to go to? I know I do. My Myrtle is upstairs waiting for me. Figured we’d see this out together.”

“And will that help?” Ruiz found himself asking. “I mean, I just couldn’t see the point of sitting there with... someone, waiting for the end. It’s not like you can do anything about it. On the other hand, your beer, that might be *worth* the end of the world.”

Andy the landlord gave him a long look.

“You’re a strange bloke. So what, I’ve got to sit here and watch you drink your last pint?”

“Like I said,” Ruiz countered, “just pour it. If you want to get off to Myrtle after that, fair enough.”

“And leave you alone with the till?”

“End of the world, remember? As in “nothing left to spend money on”. There wouldn’t be much point in stealing from you.” Ruiz reached into his jacket and pulled out a tenner, putting it on the bar. “Go on. Have something yourself while you’re at it.”

“I’d better not,” Andy said, but started to pull a pint automatically. While he did it, Ruiz could just imagine the taste. It would be perfect, liquid gold that would be the last thing his taste buds would ever touch. Andy poured it slowly on the angle before finishing it off and putting it carefully on the bar to settle. Gently, cloudiness gave way to a deep brown clarity. Ruiz forced himself to wait. He wanted this to be perfect.

“Why the *Spitting Duck*, anyway?” he asked.

“What?”

“*The Spitting Duck*? It just seems an odd name for a pub.”

Andy the barman did his best not to look embarrassed, and failed.

“Well, it’s with the hunting round here. It was supposed to be the *sitting* duck, but the bloody sign writer couldn’t read my writing, and then I’d spent the money on it. Bit late to change it now.” He waited a moment longer. “You going to drink that or stare at it?”

“Drink it,” Ruiz said, unable to keep the eagerness out of his voice. This was it. The one perfect moment before the world ended. He anticipated the taste as his hand closed around the glass, lifting it to his lips. It would be exquisite, would taste...

Like beer.

Good beer, admittedly. Possibly even great beer. But still beer, nonetheless. Ruiz took another sip, to see whether his sense of taste would burst into a sudden explosion with the knowledge that this would be the last thing he’d taste, and another. He kept sipping, until there was nothing left of the pint. It took a while. All that time, Andy the barman just stared at him.

“I thought you were heading upstairs to your wife,” Ruiz pointed out.

“I was going to, but I wanted to know... what was it like?”

“Oh, wonderful,” Ruiz lied. “Perfect in... Andy?”

“If you’re about to ask me for another, I’m going to tell you to get stuffed.”

“No, no, nothing like that. Just... is that clock right?” He stared at the big, glass fronted thing hanging above the bar, which had the hour hand pointing to the six, as it should, but the minute hand pointing firmly to three minutes past the hour.

“Of course it’s right. Wouldn’t want to go over on time... oh.” The big man paused, staring at it. “Well, maybe it takes time to happen.”

They kept staring at it. When the hand clicked along another minute, the hum of the pub’s TV joined it. Since neither of them had switched it on, Ruiz and Andy weren’t particularly surprised to find themselves staring at an alien face.

“People of Earth,” the little grey thing announced. “Thank you for your cooperation. You may have noticed that your world has not been destroyed. That, I’m afraid, was my little subterfuge. I am what you would call a... psychologist? Yes, that seems to be the word.”

The thing suddenly looked rather less cute to Ruiz.

“Your reactions,” it continued, “have provided valuable data on responses to sudden Armageddon scenarios among primitive peoples. Your world was just too good to pass up. There may even be a paper in it somewhere.”

It rearranged a cluster of crystals by its right hand, and Ruiz found himself thinking of it nervously shuffling papers.

“I apologise for any inconvenience, but if you *will* make yourselves so perfect for this sort of psychological testing...” The creature seemed to recall that it was probably talking to quite an angry audience. “Naturally, your world will be sent a copy of the paper once it’s published. Farewell.”

With that, the TV flicked off.

The two men looked from the TV to the empty pint and back. They stayed like that for almost a minute. Andy spoke first.

“Same again?” he asked.

Ruiz thought about the taste of that last pint. Then he thought about the mobile phone in his pocket with its missed call.

“No.” he said. “I think I’d better be getting home.”

ARTISTIC CREDITS

This issue's cover was created by the lovely Dracanta. More of her work can be found on her Deviant Art portfolio at <http://dracanta.deviantart.com/>

Page 18: "Piano Fire," by princepoo; <http://princepoo.deviantart.com/>

Page 37: "Pictures remind me," by miss-meow-x; <http://miss-meow-x.deviantart.com/>

Page 52: "Black Cat" by Jez92; <http://jez92.deviantart.com/>

Page 59: "Lizard Rex" by xobeohs; <http://xobeohs.deviantart.com/>

Thanks to all of this issue's artists for providing these great illustrations for our stories. You guys are the best!