

MID LVL MAG



Supply
Chain

**Mid-Level
Management
Literary
Magazine**

Presents
SUPPLY CHAIN

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Letter Home

Mom,

I don't really know why I'm writing to you. I guess I'm just feeling sort of lost right now. I know we weren't good last time we saw each other. I'm sorry about that. I don't want you to be mad at me anymore. Maybe when you read this, you will give me a call.

It's hard right now, but you know that. I'm really trying to get a new job, something with better hours and benefits. The warehouse is so hard. I'm just exhausted by the end of every shift. I don't think I'm out of shape. I know I've lost weight since starting there, but still, you'd think I'd build up some more stamina or something. At least I'm getting the early shift now. Working 'til 2am was rough. Now that I'm writing to you about it, I think I'll stick out for a while longer there. I don't know if I can afford to try and find something else right now. My rent is going up next month and I don't want to have to start over with something else with that hanging over my head.

You'll be happy to know I'm still working on my art. I've gotten into collage lately. I came across an account on Instagram that had all this fantastic stuff, all of it from old magazines from the 70's and 80's and it was just so inspiring. I'm looking at buy nothing groups and craigslist to find stuff people are giving away to use. I've also been able to get tons of magazines from used bookstores. No one wants old National Geographic issues anymore, so that means more for me :) I've posted a few on my profile. I don't know if you've seen them, but when you get a chance, I'd love to have your feedback.

I hope your leg has gotten better since your accident. I know you didn't want anyone to know, but Jesse couldn't keep quiet about it and told me. I can only imagine how painful a fall that must have been. Has your insurance covered everything? Please let me know when you write back.

I love you,

-B

Daniel J Flosi

PINK SLIME / BAD LIGHT

Not long out of high school, you find yourself here,
on the Raw Lunchables Stuff Line B. Where conveyor
belt brings raw meat straight out of the mixing vat,
tumbled with spices (proprietary)
to be stuffed into six-foot-long casing. Inevitably
there is excess. it's here that you, armed
with high-powered hose and white plastic snow shovel,
spray the dredge from the catch tray. Sludge slaps
the tiled floor, then you scrape the piles,
with a particular kind of slosh each time you do.
Steam fills the process room and condensation drips
from the metal of the machines. You breathe
raw meat and chemical solution and feel a little further
from the burdens of child support. Byproduct,
gristle and slag, worm unceasingly into the catch tray.
Recycled light spills over the pneumatic pistons,
figures shadow the wall like a photo relief of ex-employees
and you make your mark before you're out the door.
On the drive home, beneath 4 am light,
smoke billows in a mountain around the city.
You smoke a cigarette in the car, windows not even cracked.

It occurs to you then that it's not about what you believe in anymore, not like it was in school, no now it's always about what's right in front of your face, and still, even then, you don't know if you believe in it.

Daniel J Flosi

*While driving a rental Tesla under big
beautiful blue sky we learn about the plight of
contract workers in the Democratic Republic
of the Congo*

Pulled from muddy banks broad shouldered carp as big as human child
He couldn't breathe down there under so many bloated bellies
Mouth gaping as wide as tunnel begging for the return of the river's soft uvula
If you see an empty mirror it means nobody's looking kid
Sophisticated these sophistries
Eyes clotted with sediment cornered and stretching for sight of home
You won't be going home tonight
Look around baked earth means empty pockets
Shoreline choked with tree roots exposes countless other dancing fish
This outcropping stays the cobalt river from flood
Watch the watchdog follow ant crumbs deep into the inner city of Kinshasa
& come out the other end of Netherlands
It wasn't long ago; a minute, an hour, a century when someone's ancestors tore into this ground
As hands in a loaf of bread and left the crumbs to sprout city and citizen

Devon Neal

*The Houseboat (Manufacturing) Capital of
the World*

Their arms are trembling assembly beams,
their hands fleshy socket wrenches beading with blood,
their sweat the first seaspray on the hull.

Days end with a ringing stamp on a manila card
and a rattling drive in a multicolored car.
They scrutinize pay stubs in dimly-lit kitchens—

stones on the coast of a craft-studded sea.

Liz Lydic

Pharm As The Eye Can See

The final print is gorgeous. It will be excellent in both the desktop and mobile versions of the website. I have to give it to Stryker Advertising; they cost an arm and a leg but we pay them for imagination, something we jokingly say we have none of. That's how it should be, we say: *We're in Pharmaceuticals; who wants us to be clever?* We could never have come up with 'Optimum Fusion': even with its beautiful simplicity, it's just not within our realm. I literally laughed out loud when, in an early whiteboarding session, Cort said "It's like we're creating a new age for the new age, isn't it?" I was glad when Cort was put on my team, because he was genuinely a great leader and influencer for the junior associates, but when it came to him sharing his big ideas, I cringed. We had a lot to do to impress Erik, the new Chief Marketing Officer. It had been talked about for so long: Apt Health finally becoming hip and more relevant, but hiring a CMO was the first palatable and tangible evidence coming from the top. I was thrilled for this chance to not only work with Erik but to share some of the concepts I'd been thinking about for years. By the time he arrived, I'd had my resume out at several other big companies in a fit of frustration for the slow progress Apt Health was making in keeping up with the times.

It was Greta, though, that turned out to be the biggest, most important part of my professional and personal success on the Fusion campaign. For years, I'd sensed the competition between us in the Strategy Division, both young career women climbing up that ol' corporate ladder. Her experience working internationally meant a *huge* leg up not only in global marketing initiatives, but also because some of her projects had been exactly what we were tasked with at Apt Health: innovating archaic products and practices for a new generation (in so many words). She was fearless because she'd *been there, done that*. I expected a battle when we partnered on the operations of the digital portion of the campaign, but instead, she and I gelled. We riffed and inspired and made some of the *biggest* contributions to the final AuxRise blueprint. I honestly don't remember exactly which of us had had the light bulb moment in a session where we veered off our direct assignment, spit-balling every idea that came to us, but it was from us that the *entire* concept of introducing CBD-based products in the Pacific Northwest region stores was born. I love that we made it into the final pushout. It was, quite honestly, a brilliant moment of my career.

The top dogs from Stryker rubbed me the wrong way as total mansplainers ("Kim, I'm not sure if you're familiar with ...") was one of their very favorite ways to start a dialogue with me), but they helped us hone in - via research, surveys, boots-on-the-ground data acquisition - on our target audience in this campaign. *The next generation of health guardians, for whom self-care is number one on the to-do list*. Despite the risk in sounding whiny, it's pretty likely that it was the willingness of Greta and me to being open and honest about the burden on

females in the millennium that jump-started the patronizing of the faux-hawk sweater-vest-wearers. But, who cares? This is *honestly* one of the bravest strategies I have ever seen at this corporate level from a company that could have *easily* missed the boat. I'm not going to lie: first, Diadem Pharmacy is seriously behind, and I often thank God that I didn't take that gig back in 1995; and second, I am *slightly* aware of the likeness to Bodeva with our overuse of the word 'Flourishment' in our campaign, but we are not a healthcare organization, so there's that.

Our biggest hurdle in launching this campaign is one we should have spent more time with. I can see that now. We were so trigger-and-video-and-catch-phrase happy with our marketing initiative and ideas that we maybe *should* have worked more closely with Human Resources on how we would onboard pharmacists into one of the *biggest*, most crucial parts of the approach: elevating their roles as whole health advocates. (I particularly love the part of the press release that states that we are *thrilled to take the consumer and pharmacist relationship to the next level of trust.*). Should we be worried about the pharmacist labor unions yet? Yeah, kind of. Do we *also* know that there is a group of hungry, ready-to-endorse-essential-oils millennials chomping at the bit from pharmacy tech school to take on any open position? Hell, yes. And, if there *is* a concern, maybe I'll volunteer myself to lead the efforts in training. Maybe it will be me who will oversee the pharmacists in the eighteen states where we have retail stores. And maybe one of those fresh faces could use a little guidance and mentorship from someone like myself: someone who can serve as a

personal chaperone into Apt Health's envisioned future.

The pharmacy employee area of Apt Health Store #01653 in Lebanon, Indiana was actually just the stockroom, with half of one of its walls dedicated to four single lockers, two chairs recycled from old blood pressure machine self-checks, and a wobbly folding table with a microwave. Peter remained neutral at the inconvenience of holding yet another staff meeting in the small space. Every time Apt Health rolled out a new product line, or prior to flu season, or whenever there was a new prescription gimmick they were trying, Peter had to rally the troops and get them up to speed. Often, he himself was not up to speed. When he first started with Apt Health, there were more in-person trainings for managers like him. Regularly, he would travel to headquarters, or a bigwig would come to each branch to offer the information. Cutting corners meant that now Peter was responsible to prime himself, mostly via webinars and DVD recordings, which arrived in the mail in anonymous-looking white envelopes. He then had to pass along the initiatives to his employees, hoping he properly understood what he had watched on screen.

Steve held up the glossy flyer that had been inserted in the left hand side of the folder distributed by Peter. **Come On In....To the New Apt Health**, it was titled. Then: *Introducing the new Apt Health, where our pharmacists are ready to bring customers the*

optimum fusion of care. Steve continued to read about the projected roles of pharmacists in this multi-store overhaul. He leaned over to Cyndi, his co-worker of the last eleven years.

“I don’t know anything about essential oils,” he whispered, continuing to rifle through the paperwork.

“Apparently, they teach us.” She was just as confused as Steve about what Peter was presenting, but she couldn’t let that on. *The big boy will have to work hard for once in life,* she thought. *I’ll learn the oils first.*

Peter began with a brief explanation of how ‘the new Apt Health’ would help keep the company in better (“No, *stronger*”) competition with Diadem and Jorner. Then he explained that one of the ‘key’ parts of the strategy was to lean on pharmacists, who would be featured more predominantly. Cyndi made a note to ask Steve privately about the word ‘predominantly.’ Peter continued. As more stores implemented the AuxRise initiative, some would add positions called Cosmetics Concierges, some would stock organic skin products aimed at eco-conscious clientele, and others would work toward the companywide mission to become an ‘oasis of self-care.’ Cyndi clicked her tongue in disapproval and Peter briefly stopped talking to look at her with what she thought of as ‘the nonsense eyebrow check.’

Steve raised his hand. “Do I need to learn how to provide massage therapy?” Cyndi looked away, embarrassed by the pitch of his voice. *This huge boy, he’s not even paying attention to what’s really being said. He’s just thinking non-real things, things that are not*

possible. Pay attention! Listen, don't talk yet! Eleven years of this and Cyndi should have known by now what would set Steve into a tailspin of anxiety and implausible situations. She thought that if Steve were her son, she could whip him into shape. In some ways, he was like her son. She scolded him when he needed to be scolded, when he panicked and acted too young. In turn, he taught her things about the American world that she assumed a son would do, if she'd ever married and raised a family, neither of which were an option in this country or back home in the Philippines, not at her age.

“No, Steve, massage therapy is not included in the AuxRise Evolution strategy. The pharmacist component is focused on -” Peter read from the press release in his manager training packet, “*taking the consumer and pharmacist relationship to the next level of trust.*” So, massage therapy is *not* necessarily part of the Apt Health experience of everyday routines.” Steve raised his hand again. “Yes, Steve?” Peter breathed out on the name.

“But, essential oils are *also* not part of the everyday routine, and it says here that we will offer that. It also says we need to learn how to use iPads and a new app, and I just want to point out that we just got a new P.O.S. system and I don't know about learning all this new stuff at the same time. Will I have to work overtime?”

Cyndi saw the panic in Steve's eyes as they widened. His feathered blonde hair shook as he spoke quickly. She knew any second now he'd start wiping his nose out of habit. *Soon he'll start to stink from sweat*, she thought. One of the worst parts of working with Steve was that he towered over her, and she was always at a physical disadvantage. She thought of Fay Wray

and King Kong from an old movie and wondered if Fay caught whiffs of King's armpits. He continued. "I don't know anything about cruelty free and non-GMO products! I know *our* products and where all the things are. I don't know if I can learn a new set of inventory. Also, I don't know where we are going to *store* all these new things." He was skimming the paper, sausage hands gripping and crinkling the press release, and Cyndi thought about how she'd have to make copies of her packet for when Steve annihilated his past the point of use. "And, 'whole health,'" Steve continued, "what does *that* mean?"

He continued to search for terms that he could worry about. Peter continued to try to calm Steve's nerves but Cyndi knew it was useless. She looked closer at the paper to try to find the exact phrases about training so she could repeat them over and over to Steve like a lullaby, to calm the boy. But her eyes landed on something in the training cover page, like a nugget of gold. *'Pharmacists are special: they are the brave and knowledgeable links between community members and their best lives. Their faithful place in the wellness system offers them a prime opportunity to make a difference to customers. It's their time to emerge as ambassadors of health, and we are pleased to unleash their power through the Aux Rise program, as we partner in the company's Optimum Future, together.'*

Cyndi's stomach dropped and began to dance with jitters. She suddenly saw herself, in one year, standing at the entrance of Apt Health Store #01653, a healer, a superstar; her power totally, completely unleashed. She saw a light shining around her at the pharmacy register. AuxRise was the ultimate opportunity: a chance to finally live the full American dream and

become something incredible. She raised her hand to ask Peter when the training would start.

Pamela Annas

*To The Tenure Candidate
and His/Her/Their Department*

I am pleased to concur
with the expected unanimous yes
of your department, your fragment
of the bureaucracy into which
our university has devolved,
that Dr. X should be allowed
to proceed toward the eventual
paradise of permanency. I believe
that she has progressed satisfactorily
in all the ways that matter to us
in this crucial tenure review.

In thirty single spaced pages
you have repeated what the candidate said
in his twenty-page personal statement,
puffing up the sentences in packing foam
of letters from external reviews. Yes,
they have a global reputation
and have published in all the right journals,

peer-reviewed of course. A book manuscript
is being read at this very moment by an elite press!
She prowls the cutting edge of her field, machete
hacking the weeds and brambles of ignorance.

This brings us to their teaching.

Our students at this public university,
who will have to work for a living
and raise their children in erratic weather,
need the skills to sieve truth from spin.

As do we, pondering these paragraphs,
these numerical charts on his pedagogy.

We turn to the six years of student evaluations,
the syllabi, the assignments, the statement
of teaching philosophy, looking for problems,
promise, patterns. I am happy to report
that our teachers are still terrific
and their students know it and say it.

Two dozen letters from former pupils,
now at prestigious graduate programs
or laboring in the trenches at our local high schools,
detail the dedication—

the tough love paper comments,
the long conferences, the in-class comedy
(your grim look of late gave us no clue
you were so funny!),

the sequenced assignments,
the gradual unpacking of the subject
from impenetrable to clear transparent glass.

So far your candidate is batting a thousand.
But as you know, the candidate must attain excellence
in at least two categories
and no less than “strong” ever.

Ever. So we come to service.

Are they Mother Teresa?

Well, no. But he has served on committees
and chaired a time or two.

Her opinion has been sought by NPR,
I heard it on the drive into school.

It’s listed on their 12-page CV along with a lecture
to art lovers at the MFA.

Naturally there are letters in the file
which say her presence on committee X
made all the difference, and he promises
to be a good citizen forever.

At last we come to Institutional Need.

Do we need this person in order to go on breathing?
According to their file, she fills a crucial transnational space
in the department’s coverage of its multifaceted field
and contributes in some fashion to our already decent

ethnic, gender, racial, transgender, and international demographic. We expect him to grow old and tired with us, so age is not an issue.

Assuming that the several levels beyond our own concur, agree and ratify our decision, we welcome you to the diminishing country of lifetime employment. You are now qualified for a large raise and may take a sabbatical to recover from chronic anxiety disorder and to begin your next book/gallery show/grant-funded project. Remember, review for promotion to Full Professor is only a few years away.

Concurringly yours,

Pamela, Ph.D.

Associate Dean, College of Liberal Arts

Jennifer Saunders

Winter Solstice With Desmoid Tumor

Disruptions to the supply chain delay delivery
of my son's Sorafenib, and we're down
to a day-and-a-half worth of meds
even though we called in the refill
with a week's worth of pills in the pack.

Now it's December twenty-third;
the year, tilting towards light.
The doctor's office is closed tomorrow.
We've let our son run out of chemo
for the holidays.

We haven't trimmed the tree,
and the LEGO we ordered is delayed.
We're waiting for the doctor to call.
We're waiting for the delivery truck.
We're waiting for the next MRI—
hoping for a little less light,
a little more shadow.

Note: Desmoid tumors are very rare non-malignant tumors. Although non-malignant, they can be locally aggressive and the treatments used to halt or slow their growth include chemotherapies used for malignancies. Sorafenib is one such drug.

Kent Kosack

CLIF Bars at Campland

Russell is grateful for the imagination he developed paddling around Campland's parking lot. They serve him well as he ushers in the New Year with two broken legs in a hospital in Hackensack, New Jersey. He ignores the pain and the gray Garden State winter skyline out his window as his bed becomes a kayak on a canal in the Netherlands, the metal side rails morph into the thigh rests of a bright orange kayak, his crushed legs in casts now are safely tucked inside its bow. Narrow Dutch Baroque houses manifest alongside the canal. Purple and yellow tulips erupt out of little boxes beneath the tall and skinny windows. Look! There, running towards the culvert to open the lock, a beautiful blonde woman who looks enough like his ex-wife Sandra to tug his heart strings but not enough to snap them, waves and smiles as if she knows him.

And then Bill bursts in.

The pain in Russell's legs surges. His manager at Campland has tracked him to the hospital as if he were late for his shift. "Russell, there you are. The intrepid captain of the S.S. Campland who went down with the ship. You look tiptop. It's the excellent Campland insurance. You're welcome." Bill dumps a box of CLIF Bars on the nightstand. "Carbs and protein to help you recover," he says. A black slash from a permanent marker covers the barcode on the box, a sign that they are past their expiration date and should have been thrown out. Ravenous Camplanders usually either fish them out of the trash, desperate for nourishment and not minding the stale log of processed and extruded nuts and berries, or greedily snatch the stray one Bill tosses them throughout the workday like fish to a trained seal.

Russell remembers when Bill first introduced the idea for the S.S. Campland last summer. At the start of a shift, Bill waylaid Russell with a kayak strapped to two moving dollies and said “Russell, perfect timing. You’re here for the S.S. Campland’s inaugural sail.”

“Meaning?” Russell asked, trying to quash his manager’s latest sales stunt with incomprehension.

“Setting sail to more sales, get it? To draw the customers in, we need a gimmick. Don’t get me wrong. I think I can speak for the entire management structure here at Campland and say we appreciate how clean you keep the Kayak Department. But, let’s face it, it’s in the back corner of the store. So, when it’s slow, you can take this bad boy around the store. Be a rolling, paddling billboard.”

“You mean push it around?”

Bill flipped the paddle around in an improvised and graceless kata, threatening Russell’s neck with the blade of it as if it were a spear. Toxic smells assaulted his nose, epoxy and plastic. “Look, I’ve added rubber strips at the bottom to provide better traction on the carpet for you. You can cruise the store and pass out catalogs, direct customers, raise the presence of the Kayak Department. All while doing what you love.”

“What I love?”

“You’re always talking about your kayaking trips and paddling off into your sunset years. Now, each day will be a journey. A tour of Campland. Picture it: you’re a customer, popping in to Campland for a quick purchase. A CLIF Bar. Or replacement batteries for your GPS. And, what do you hear swishing along? What do you see?”

“Me?”

Bill performed another kata. The keys on the carabiner attached to his belt jingled like a metallic storm and provided the soundtrack to this latest pitch. “Bingo. In a kayak. A sleek, state of the art, dazzling piece of equipment for maritime fun. At a fair price. Sailing straight for you. It’s fate, you think. I’ve got to have one. And boom—we sell a two-thousand-dollar hunk of fiberglass.” He handed the paddle to Russell ceremoniously, the scepter of the King. “What say you?”

Russell wanted to say it was a waste of time—kitschy, demeaning, and sad. “It’s definitely eye-catching.”

“You bet. Why don’t you give it a whirl?”

“Now? I’ve got some new drybags to unpack and price.” Bill looked at him then with the same determined and idiotic desperation that he is looking at him with now in his convalescence. Back then, Bill had added, “but they can wait. Let’s see what this can do.” Russell got in the kayak. Propped atop dollies, it was unwieldy and dangerous. It rocked like it was struggling to stay afloat on heavy seas and not on Campland’s diarrhea-colored carpeting. He gripped the paddle and imagined sculling enough customers’ shins to lead to a lawsuit and Campland’s bankruptcy.

“Oh, I almost forgot. Hold on,” Bill ran into the break room and returned with a plastic bottle of Coke from the vending machine. “We need to christen it.”

“That’s just for bigger ships.”

“Nonsense. We need to do this right. I dub thee, the S.S. Campland,” he said, his voice booming throughout the department. He loosened the cap and whacked the side of the kayak with the Coke bottle. It exploded everywhere, spraying Russell, the kayak, and the carpet. “She’s ready. But before you take her out, make sure you clean this up, right?” Before hunting

down the next employee to terrorize, Bill extracted a CLIF Bar from his Campland vest and waved it at Russell. “A little snack for your journey? On me?”

Russell shook his head. His Coke-damp shirt clung to his chest.

Russell nods again now when Bill asks him if he is on the mend. “Your Campland family misses you.” Bill’s keys jingle as he sits in the visitor’s chair. The chair’s upholstery is the same diarrhea color as the carpets of Campland. “We might even make a temporary exception and allow you to have a chair in your department.”

“A chair?”

“And don’t worry about the cost of the kayak now. We’ll just take it out of your vacation time.”

“Cost of what kayak?”

“Why, the S.S. Campland of course. The ultimate responsibility for a ship lies with the captain, does it not?”

Russell wonders about ultimate responsibility as he bitterly recalls the inaugural sail of the S.S. Campland as an unfortunate success. So much so that Bill sent Russell farther afield, to cruise the parking lot. He was a rolling advertisement for the department, captivating not just the customers already inside Campland, but those clogging Route 17, enchanting outdoorsy consumers across the tri-state area. Russell didn’t mind. Not minding was the key to his success at Campland. He was fifty-eight and reeling from bad investments. He lost his wife to his best friend Barry and his retirement savings in the stock market with the collapse of Bear Stearns. His home too. His foreseeable future was forty mindless hours a week at Campland. He didn’t mind that the parking lot reeked of car exhaust and rancid fry oil wafting over from the KFC next door. Didn’t mind that his ex-wife and ex-best friend moved to the South Carolina coast

to sail and fish and look like a glamorous AARP ad, madly in love on the pickle ball court. Didn't mind that all he could make out over the stream of traffic was a faded billboard advertising the services of an ambulance-chasing law firm, the heads of the lawyers long since dissolved, their spectral, suited bodies and the telephone number beneath them their only remains. Russell kept on not minding until a week straight of freezing rain made him brave enough to complain at the start of his next shift.

"It's even more important that you're out there in inclement weather," Bill said. "That's when customers need that extra push, that special bait, to lure them into the shop. Plus, it keeps us old boys young, eh?" Bill was at least ten years younger than Russell but looked twenty years younger and talked down to him as if he were thirty years his senior.

"It's forty degrees. And raining."

"Where's your holiday spirit?"

"What holiday? It's October."

"Exactly! Christmas is practically upon us. Set sail, man. Make sales. The Campland way!" Bill summoned a CLIF Bar from his endless supply and tucked it into Russell's Campland apron pocket before he could decline and sent him on his way.

Russell rolled the kayak out through the warehouse and into the lot. The rain was so heavy no one from the road could see him or the kayak. He hurled Bill's CLIF Bar onto the roof of the warehouse with all the others he'd been rewarded with over the years, then squeezed into the S.S. Campland and paddled across the parking lot. Cars, pulling off the highway too fast, splashed a polluted cocktail of road grime and puddle water all over him. Unminding, Russell pretended it was a wave breaking. The smell of the sea. The motor-oil slick puddles morphed into intertidal pools rich with marine life. He wore a dry suit but was wet inside with sweat. By the fourth day of this, he was feverish. By the fifth, he was hallucinating enough to see the pitted

asphalt lot as a tranquil sea and, the walls of the store a great, cinder block reef, his ex-wife materializing as a siren calling from it.

Russell looks out over Bill's shoulder at gray Hackensack. Looks at his legs in casts. At Bill. "Ultimate responsibility, you said. Meaning you want me to pay for the kayak?"

"No, don't be ridiculous," Bill says, adjusting the box of CLIF Bars on the nightstand to draw attention to his generosity.

"Oh."

"You won't pay now. That's what I'm saying. We'll take it out of your vacation time so you don't have to worry about it. Though there's the matter of damages to the truck."

"The truck?" Russell rubs the edges of his leg casts with his thumbs.

"Yes. It'll need a thorough cleaning and the wheels need to be realigned."

"The wheels?"

"Don't worry. I've already contacted a good mechanic who charges a fair rate."

"You mean the wheels that ran me over?"

"It's just a matter of deciding whether you want us to deduct that from your vacation time as well or whether you'd like to pay for that now? It's entirely up to you."

"I'm paying for that?" Russell's legs throb. The numbness of the meds wears off. He minds the pain now.

"I'm glad we're in agreement. I knew you'd understand. Well, I can tell you're tired, so I'll be on my way." Bill stands, raises his fist at him in mock solidarity. "And feel better, ok, buddy? Campland needs you. And we can't hold your job forever." He casts one final, motivational smile

at Russell and leaves, the sound of his keys on the carabiner attached to his belt rattling loudly down the hall.

Russell remembers that last Saturday before Christmas as he navigated the treacherous waters of a parking lot teeming with holiday-crazed customers. Weak and wheezing from a bout of pneumonia that lingered through November, he inhaled, his lungs crackling, as he dodged careening SUVs. He treated each car as a boulder rising up out of rapids, its exhaust so much froth and spray. He had his phone in a pouch on his PFD and knew its buzzing was Bill recalling him to the store.

“Ahoy, sailor!” Bill’s voice boomed through the tiny flip phone. “Working hard or hardly working?” No matter how powerful his imagination had become, he never managed to hear Bill’s voice as the cawing of an exotic bird along the river or the crash of water down a fall ahead. It was always, stubbornly, bleakly, only Bill. “Campland needs you.”

“Be right there,” he said. He saluted his headless, spectral lawyer friends on the familiar billboard and paddled towards the warehouse door, propelling the S.S. Campland across the parking lot with more experience and skill than he wished he had. The dollies’ wheels creaked beneath the hull. He came upon a truck blocking the warehouse door. The last resupply run from Campland’s larger warehouse to the north. He paused to take it in. Felt the cold air in his feeble lungs. The hot sweat dripping down his back. The coziness of the cockpit. He thought about Sandra and Barry in South Carolina, probably sipping margaritas on the beach or wiping the pickleball sweat from each other’s well-tanned brows. He thought about where he’d like to be. On some arctic adventure to see the last of the polar bears before the ice sheets were all broken up and melted into the sea. He imagined the penguins: slick, flightless birds wobbling towards the edge of the ice and stumbling into the half-frozen ocean to torpedo in with an innate grace unseen on land.

Hissing air brakes and the red glare of tail lights cracked the floe in his imagination as the truck backed up toward him. Onto him. He struggled to yell, waving his paddle, “Hey. Hey! Down here!” The driver neither saw nor heard him. The truck kept coming, relentless, inevitable, like the crash of a market or the failure of a marriage. It filled his whole field of view, overwhelmed him like an act of fate. He pushed off with the blade of the paddle, hard, to pull clear. But both his muscles and the kayak failed him. It dislodged from the rear dolly and dumped him onto the pavement. He cursed Bill and the S.S. Campland. A fucking kayak on wheels, what were they thinking? What was he thinking? His life, if you could call it that, churned past him—almost sixty and working retail, plied with meager wages, expired CLIF Bars, and a discount on outdoors gear, renting an illegal attic studio in Clifton, no savings, no plans, no one to love, no purpose—the truck rolled over the front end of the kayak, crushing the hull and both of his legs encased in it. He heard a noise, an alien whelp. The cry of some sad creature. He realized it came from him. A flash of white-hot, searing pain. He passed out. His mind left him.

Russell can no longer hear Bill’s jingling. He picks up the CLIF Bars and tears open the cardboard box. The bars spill across his lap. He opens one, crunches into the brick of oats and nuts long past its best by date, and keeps chewing as he stares at the empty chair until a nurse arrives to check on him.

“Need anything?”

“A lawyer,” Russell says, swallowing the last of the bar.

“Oh. Well, do you want me to get you a phonebook?”

“No. I know who to call.” He remembers his headless friends hovering above Route 17.
“I’ve got the number memorized.”

Adrian Elise

TLDR;

They tell me to seek growth

Through brevity.

Transcend, kaizen,

Say more by saying less.

Melissa Flores Anderson

Job Offers

The air in the office hung stagnant around Sofia. She was dressed in a brand-new pair of slacks and a tan blazer that cut a boxy shape of her frame. The temperatures were in the 90s outside even though it was only April, but at least there was a slight breeze outdoors. She squirmed in her seat, trying to discreetly drain away the sweat pooling beneath the underwire of her bra. She was sticky and hot, but tried to keep her face pulled into a neutral expression.

She sat in an uncomfortable wooden chair, one with stiff armrests and no cushion, that dug into the sides of her hips. She tried to ignore the discomfort and instead focused her attention on the man sitting across from her in a lush leather office chair behind a cherry wood desk. Everything in the room was dark and masculine from another design era, including the brown blinds turned down against the sunlight. The wood paneling in the office let off the faint smell of cigarettes smoked decades before.

Sofia clutched a shiny black portfolio awkwardly across her lap, 24x30 inches to fit the broadsheet pages from the newspaper in South Africa where she had interned the summer before. She waited for an opportunity to show it to the executive editor in his office a few miles from her parents' home.

“Why do you want to work here?” the editor asked.

“I grew up here,” she started. “I know the city and I care about the community. I think I’d be an asset to the team. I’m finishing up my master’s at USC, one of the top journalism schools in the country. It’s a tough program and I know I’m ready to hit the ground running.”

She cringed as the cliché slipped out. She was full of nervous energy in front of this burly man who was a foot and a half taller than her and built like a former lineman. He was dressed impeccably in a pinstripe suit with a light blue collared shirt and a tie he'd loosened around his neck. The suit fit his frame so well she wondered if it was custom made. She hunched down in her seat, willing him not to notice her own ill-fitting outfit, the buttons of the wrinkled white blouse straining across her body.

"I've had more than three dozen pieces published between the campus newspaper, the *SoCal Parent Magazine* where I interned and the few months I spent at the *Cape Town News* in South Africa," she went on, clasping her hands together to hold in her jitters. She waited for him to ask her about the international internship, but he didn't.

"Your last name is Moreno," he said. "Do you speak Spanish? That's an asset around here."

"My dad's Mexican, but I never learned the language," she said. "I took French in high school, actually. Your wife was my teacher one year."

The editor didn't say anything but jotted a note down on a yellow legal pad and nodded.

"I babysat for your kids a few times when I was in high school," Sofia blurted out. "The baby was only about 10 months old, I think."

He looked up to examine her face, his eyes searching across her features. He didn't recognize her. She'd been a chubby kid in jeans and baggy t-shirts back then. Not much had changed except for the clothes.

"Ex-wife now. And that baby is almost 11," he said. "My oldest just finished high school and is heading to my alma mater next year."

He dropped his pen onto the desk to signal the end of the conversation.

“I’ll be in touch soon,” he said as he walked Sofia out of his office.

When she got outside into the sun, her old ’87 Sentra had reached blistering temperatures and she turned the a/c up full blast before she got in. She glanced back at the office and thought of how much that poor baby had looked like her father, with a square, cinderblock head and tufts of white blond hair. She wondered if the little girl had grown into better proportions, but when she had looked around the office there were no family photos in sight. She shouldn’t have mentioned the babysitting gig. He might think she was trying to use this old connection to get the job – rather than her own merit.

Sofia hadn’t yet learned that men like him always used their connections to open up opportunities, their rich families and friends offering a wide net to catch them if ever they should fall. Even if they left a job in disgrace, these men landed on their feet with some consulting job with a friend of a friend. Strategy consultant. Management consultant. Financial consultant.

The only job she’d ever landed by accident was that babysitting gig in high school.

When Madame Jensen started to speak in French, she kept reaching toward her desk for a French-English dictionary. Every time she said “Qu’est-ce que c’est...,” which translated to “What is it?” in English, Sofia and her best friend Lara rolled their eyes at each other and tried not to giggle.

At the end of class a while into the semester Madame Jensen asked if any of them had ever babysat before.

“I’ve been watching my little cousins since I was 12,” Sofia volunteered, thinking the question was somehow related to a lesson.

“Great,” Madame Jensen said. “My husband and I are celebrating our 10th anniversary this weekend and our regular babysitter canceled.”

She wrote down an address on a piece of paper and handed it to Sofia.

“Be here at 6 p.m. on Saturday.”

Sofia’s mom drove up to the Jensens’, to one of the fancy houses up on the hill that looked down on the rest of the city. She shooed her mom away, not wanting her teacher to glimpse the beat-up Tercel hatchback.

Mr. Jensen answered the door, a tall, imposing figure who pointed at his wristwatch in agitation as he glared across the room at his wife.

“I’m almost ready, Lou,” Madame Jensen said. “Let’s just go over a few things with Sofia and we’ll go.”

The baby cried as soon as the parents departed and refused to take a bottle. The older girls ran circles around the kitchen and begged for treats, adding to the cacophony and grating on Sofia’s nerves. She finally gave in and offered them popsicles just to have them still and quiet for a moment.

At the end of the night, Mr. Jensen drove Sofia home in a dark blue BMW with tan leather seats.

“Hope the kids were good,” he said.

“Oh yeah, they were great,” she said.

When they got to her house, he handed her a few bills.

“Thanks for taking care of my kiddos.”

When she got inside her house, she unfolded the bills. Two \$5 bills and a couple of ones. Not even enough to buy a new CD.

“So how was it babysitting for Madame Jensen?” Lara asked on Monday. Sofia shrugged and made a face.

The next time Madame Jensen asked her to babysit, she said okay. She watched the girls a half dozen times over the months. The last time Sofia went to the house, she watched the baby while her teacher took the older girls to a Brownie event.

“Lou was supposed to be here, but he had to go out of town for work at the last minute,” the teacher said. “We’ll be home by 2 p.m.”

But Madame Jensen came home hours later, into the dinner hour, when the baby had turned cranky and Sofia had grown impatient.

When she finally got home, Madame Jensen took the whining girl out of Sofia’s arms.

“What’s wrong, sweetheart? Mommy is home,” she said. “Sofia, do you think your mom can pick you up so I don’t have to load the kids into the van? Let me write you a check. Five hours, was it?”

It had been almost eight hours, but Sofia didn’t correct her. She folded the check into a triangle and shoved it into a jeans pocket.

“I’ll wait outside for my mom.”

The next time the teacher needed a babysitter, Sofia said no.

“I’m sorry, I can’t help out anymore. I got a real job.”

At the end of the semester, when a print out of grades was mailed home, Sofia opened it expecting to see all As. But next to French she saw a faded blue C-. She stared at the sheet as

though she could will the letter to transform. She needed a perfect GPA for the scholarships she was applying for over the summer; she couldn't pay for college without them.

Sofia went to her room and pulled out her assignments and quizzes. Not one of them had less than a B.

"I bet she did it on purpose because I wouldn't watch her dumb kids anymore," Sofia said to Lara. "I can't believe she would do that. What should I do?"

Sofia got a knot in her stomach at the thought of confronting anyone, but she finally rode her bike to campus the next week when the teachers were finishing up an in-service day.

"Madame Jensen, can you take a look at my grade?" she asked, the words coming out as barely a whisper. "I don't think I should have got a C."

The teacher waved her hands like she always did when she was flustered.

"Oh dear, I'll take a look at my calculations."

She hadn't thought about Madame Jensen in years but being in that office with her husband, ex-husband, brought the memory back.

The editor called a week later. He didn't offer Sofia a job. Instead, he asked her to write a trial story.

"I don't have any reporter openings right now, but I want you to cover a story Friday night," he said. "It won't pay, but if I like it, I'll publish it and maybe I can hire you at minimum wage as an intern for the summer."

She got the intern gig and managed through the editor's mood swings and petulant directions.

He relished taking the printed edition of the paper into the office each morning and marking it up with a red pen, then hanging the broadsheets in the hallway for everyone to see. Bloodsheets, he called them.

“Just giving everyone an opportunity to learn from their mistakes,” he said.

When her stories escaped a red mark, she was elated.

One morning during the budget meeting, he brought the front page of the weekly paper—their competition—with him and slammed the rolled-up paper on the pinewood conference table.

“Did you see this?” he yelled. “They scooped us on this downtown revitalization story. Get your shit together. This kind of reporting isn’t going to earn any awards or launch any careers.”

Despite the editor’s brash attitude, Sofia was elated when the crime reporter announced he was moving to Southern California for a job. Here was the opening she’d been waiting for all summer.

The editorial team went out for a going away party at a place downtown. Sofia found herself seated next to the editor’s wife – his second wife.

The woman was the opposite of her old French teacher. She was slim with wavy chestnut brown hair that curled around her face, skin toasted in a tanning bed. She looked to be at least 15 years younger than the editor, the first signs of wrinkles appearing around her green eyes.

“I’m Julie,” the woman said as she offered a manicured hand to Sofia. “How long have you been with the paper?”

“I’ve been interning for six months,” she said. “I’m hoping to get hired on permanently now that we have an open beat.”

“Oh, I know Lou loves your work,” Julie said. “The hometown girl, right? I’m rooting for you.”

“Yeah, I grew up here so this is kind of my dream job,” Sofia said. “I actually babysat for his kids when I was in high school. How long have you been together?”

“It’s been about 10 years now,” Julie said. “I was working here for Lou as the education reporter and we just fell for each other. Once we started dating, I transferred to one of the other papers.”

The timeline intersected with the year Sofia had babysat for her teacher, when she was still married to the editor. She didn’t say anything, but that night she turned over her memories of Madame Jensen. All the years she’d thought the teacher had given her a low grade on purpose, she wondered now if she had been distracted because her marriage was disintegrating.

The Monday after the going away party, Sofia waited for the editor to make her a job offer, but instead he walked casually by her desk and said a candidate would be coming in.

“He’ll need a computer so can you make yourself scarce tomorrow?” the editor asked. “You’re covering that theater summer camp so just hang out there most of the day.”

After weeks spending her days out in the field at assignments and watching a string of young reporters settle in at her desk for their trial runs, Sofia stepped into the editor’s office.

“Do you have a minute?” she asked, fidgeting with the ends of her tan blazer. She sat down in the wooden chair and looked him directly in the eyes. “I want you to know I am interested in the open crime reporter’s job.”

The editor smiled at her and glanced at his watch as though he was running late to a meeting.

“Okay,” he said. “I just needed you to tell me you were interested.”

The interviews didn’t end. He brought in five more candidates, and then Claire arrived. Claire walked in, all angles, cheekbones framed by a sharp blonde bob. She wore a white two-button blazer boldly against her skin, nothing but a bra underneath.

Claire sat at Sofia’s desk for two days, the floral scent of perfume lingering when Sofia returned from a city planning meeting to write up a story on deadline after hours. By the end of the week, the editor called Sofia into the office.

“I’ve made a decision. I’m going to hire Claire to cover education. She’s got a great resume. A Northwestern grad and she’s won awards. She has more experience than you.”

“Okay,” Sofia said.

“I’m moving our current education reporter onto the crime beat.”

She looked toward the brown blinds that shut out the late afternoon sun to keep the editor from seeing her cheeks flush in anger. She scrunched her mouth to ward off tears of frustration.

“I can offer you something at the other daily,” the editor said. “They need someone to help with answering phones and covering the front desk. So it would be partially office work, but you’d have the chance to do some writing.”

Sofia knew the paper. That’s where Julie had been transferred.

“I’ll need to think about it,” Sofia said. “Can you let me know when you want my last day to be here?”

He leaned back in his chair and rested his hands on his belly.

“I’m not in a rush to get rid of you. Take your time to think about the job I can offer you.”

The offer was an insult. She had a master’s, just like Claire, and more knowledge of the city than anyone on staff. Sofia didn’t hesitate a week later when she saw *The Metro*, a local weekly, was looking for a reporter. She took a day off to interview and the publisher hired her on the spot after perusing the portfolio and chatting about her time in South Africa.

Sofia wrote a two-sentence resignation letter and handed it to the editor. He didn’t read it but moved it to the corner of his desk.

“So you took a job with the enemy?” he said. “Well, I wish you would stay with us, but I guess it just didn’t work out.”

At the weekly, Sofia got into the flow of writing four to five stories a week on politics, education and public health. Every time she broke a story before the daily, she gloated internally. She imagined the editor reading her piece over the weekend, then telling his reporters in the Monday morning budget meeting they needed to get their shit together.

A year in, she was leaving city hall when she ran into Nathaniel, the guy who had taken over the crime beat at the daily.

“Congrats on all those awards this year,” he said.

The California Newspaper Publishers Association had just announced the list of winners for the Better Newspaper Contest. The papers were in different divisions, but the weekly had taken home more awards than the daily, including prizes for three stories Sofia had written. She’d noticed that Claire hadn’t won any awards.

“Yeah, it was exciting to get first place for investigative reporting,” Sofia said.

“It’s too bad you left us for the weekly,” the reporter said.

Sofia shrugged and looked up at the light from the streetlamp.

“It wasn’t in the cards,” she said.

“Did you hear about Lou and Claire?” the reporter asked.

Sofia hadn’t.

“Rumor has it he and Claire hooked up in the newsroom after hours,” he said. “Must be true because Claire transferred to the *Watsonville Times* and then after a few months she quit to go back to her old paper in the valley.”

“What happened to Lou?”

“He’s gone, too. I heard he’s working as a communications consultant.”

Sofia wasn’t surprised. Two years as a journalist had made her stronger, less naïve. She was learning that men like Lou always landed on their feet.

Connemara Wadsworth

As Our Mother Tells It

In the blur of just waking my mother
feels a glaze of cool moisture on her

head, she touches the sticky stuff,
sees a shocking red in those seconds,

and small prints of fingers and palms
pattern the wall, blue footprints marching

themselves out the bedroom door—
too thick, too blue for blood and each

the size of my little brother's chubby hands,
feet, the tubes of oils their painter friend

left on her easel last night, the colors
my brother squeezes out where he wants,

the apartment his canvas, the patterns
his own making and our mother arrives

for her job interview clean, well dressed,
with traces of eau de turpentine.

Thomas Reed Willemain

Spent Force

Dave Bradford fidgeted outside Nick Knowles' door. Linda Graham wanted the job too and had her interview yesterday.

Dave's mind began to circle around his situation...

I know Linda told her friends that I was a "spent force". Who knows what other sucker punches she landed behind closed doors?

If that's the kind of Team Lead they want, then maybe I'm lucky to find out early. I could just pull my name now and walk away from the mud fight.

Or I could give in to my inner demon who can talk tit-for-tat behind closed doors. It wants me to mention the time I saw her emerald green thong crumpled up on the carpet under her workstation. "What's up with that?", I'd ask.

Maybe even having someone like her on the way up means this company is not the place for me. Maybe instead of bucking for a promotion I should be all over LinkedIn waving my little flag of competence and my little pennant of integrity.

What can I showcase when I walk through that door? I know I've stopped about six big mistakes. I probably saved us a few million bucks and kept two or three good customers from leaving. But there's the old bugaboo about "How do you prove a negative?" How do we know they stayed because of what we didn't do? Besides, that's defense, and everybody knows the offense gets all the glory. Where's my offense? What's my Affirmative Pitch?

If I'm honest with myself, I'd say I've had eight significant ideas in the last fiscal year. Two I can point to as successes, though not home runs. Four died early deaths because the very guy I'm trying to convince has Stubborn-Lack-of-Vision Syndrome. One I never explained well

enough to convince anybody to back. One was an innocent victim of the chaos when the Comptroller got indicted and all forward motion just stopped for a quarter. So, is that enough for me to beat Ms. Future of the Firm?

Maybe that's what she meant by "spent force." And maybe she's just perfect for the job.

Nick's door swung open.

"Dave. Sorry for the wait. Corporate has its hair on fire again. Come in."

Dave sat and took a deep breath. He reminded himself to make eye contact. He saw Nick picking up a pad and pen.

"Dave, I've got three questions that I'm asking all the candidates for Team Lead. Why do you want the job? Why do you think you'd be good at it? Finally, who would you like on your team if you got the job?"

Dave had been in the game long enough to know that flattery was the best form of stalling. "Those are exactly the right questions, Nick. Why do I want the job? Well, I like working with you. You're a straight shooter, you're plugged into leadership, and you've listened to my ideas. I'd have more access as Team Lead."

Nick nodded. "And the pay bump?"

"Goes without saying. But also, coding is satisfying, but I'd like a bigger voice in product development. I'm ready to drive the bus, not just ride in it."

"OK. Next: Why do you think you'd be a good Team Lead?"

"Because I'd copy your style, Nick. I'd understand who'd be best for each role in the project, keep everybody informed, listen to the troops, ask questions. Although, let's face it, most of the team don't talk much to real people, so I'd have to push a little to find out what

they're thinking. And if they're not thinking right, I'd find a way to make them see the Big Picture. Besides, I'm getting a little stale; I'm up for a challenge."

"Right, good, ok. Last question: What's your Dream Team? Who would you like to manage?"

Dave sensed a trap. Is Thong Girl a right or wrong answer? Dave knew that the second-best way to stall was to answer a question with a question. "Can I pick anybody no matter where they are now?"

"Sure. Go ahead -- cherry pick your Dream Team."

"Ok then. No question: Espen, Harry, Kate, and Nelson from my current team. Ryan and Mary Lynn from the Spyglass Project. Oh, and I'd steal Susie Smart from the Hydra Project."

"Interesting. I can see it. All forward leaning, hard charging, young gun types. Umm, not that youth has anything to do with it, per se... I noticed you did not include Linda Graham."

Moment of truth. Thong story? Obfuscation by praise? They go low, we go high. "I think Linda would be more valuable as the lead on her own Team."

"Interesting. Thank you, Dave. Any questions?"

"When will I hear?"

"I'll be moving pretty quickly on this, so you won't have to wait long."

And the wait was indeed not long. Two days later, Linda Graham grinned as she told Dave he'd soon hear the news that she had been promoted to Team Lead. She grinned wider as she thanked him for endorsing her for the position. She positively smirked when she added that she was taking Espen, Harry, Kate and Nelson from Dave's team to join her new Dream Team along with the three other rising stars Nick had named.

Two days later, Nick emailed that he'd selected Linda Graham as the new Team Lead but was sure there would be other openings "fairly soon".

The next day, Dave's cubicle was empty.

Three days after that, Hans Levin, a Vice President and Nick's boss at headquarters, notified the entire division that Nick Knowles and Linda Graham were no longer with the company. The coffee-room consensus was that they must have taken their widely-noticed relationship a bit too far.

The email urged interested parties to consider applying for open positions as Group Lead and Team Lead.

Because IT was slow to reset Dave's computer, the email sat unread for weeks, mute testimony to a fumbling attempt to both play the game and do the right thing.

Rachel B. Moore

Acknowledgement

My boss Robert's sister died two days after her release from prison. She served eighteen months in the Georgia State Prison for forging checks. Again.

Their cousin, Walter, called our office in San Francisco to tell him. A moment later, Robert strode into my cubicle and leaned against my desk.

"Well, Dana, Elizabeth's gone. We always thought the booze would kill her but apparently it was pneumonia." He said it so matter-of-factly that I looked up at him to see if he was kidding. He never had anything nice to say about his baby sister. She was a troubled woman who, after forty years in the south, spoke with a slight southern accent. Elizabeth called every now and then to speak with "Bobby" and ask for a loan. She was the opposite of what I expected from Robert and his family. They were old money Main Line Philly people. The kind that sent their children to the same boarding schools they'd gone to, where they'd played lacrosse and rowed crew before college at the Ivy of their choice.

Until I spoke to Elizabeth on the phone, I never knew Robert had a sister. I knew all the other details of Robert's family, especially about his cousin Walter's life: the kids, his divorce. But nothing about Elizabeth. I wondered what had taken her so far away from home.

When Robert kidded, his eyes crinkled at the corners. A precursor to his wide smile and his approximation of a fake laugh, har har har.

He was not joking today.

“She died in a halfway house. Walt and I have to make arrangements. I’d just as soon leave her there, but Walt wants to bring her home.”

There was nothing I could say except “I’m sorry,” and “Let me know if I can help in any way.”

Robert sounded offhand about his sister’s death but it affected him more than he let on. The news plunged him into his birthday funk several weeks too early. He snapped at the staff and stomped around the office. We all tried to keep our heads down and focus on work, hoping Hurricane Robert would fizzle out soon.

He worked late after Elizabeth died. His emails were stamped at midnight, and he came into the office before me. He had coffee percolating at 7:50 AM.

As much as Robert had distanced himself from his sister, she was family.

He said nothing else about it but for the next few days, every time I put Walter through to him in his office, Robert raged loudly through the closed door.

“I don’t want to have anything to do with the funeral arrangements. Walt. No one’s going to come anyway. It’s a waste of money. Liz wouldn’t have cared, and you know it. When did she ever take us into consideration? No church. No programs. And don’t mention me or my family in the obituary. I’m serious. You do that, and I will not talk to you again.”

Three weeks later a fax came in. I was about to throw it out. We only ever got junk faxes these days. Too-good-to-be-true Caribbean vacation offers and timeshare opportunities. The fax was crooked and hard to read, but when I looked carefully I saw the letterhead from the Collier Funeral Home.

In the matter of Elizabeth Sperry, we are writing to let you know that we have yet to receive notarized documents releasing her body to the Reading Funeral Home in Philadelphia.

Please visit the Reidsville, Georgia Town Hall to complete these documents at your earliest convenience. If Mrs. Sperry's body remains unclaimed, it will be cremated and the cremains interred in the Tatnall County public burial ground.

That fax made me so sad. To die alone so far from home was one thing. For no one to claim you, well, that was another.

I waited until Robert went to lunch to search his desk. I found the forms underneath a thick architectural tome. He had used them as notepaper and his chicken scrawl pencil marks dotted the page. A beige coffee ring covered one corner.

As a California notary it wasn't my job or my business to look at the documents except to confirm I was able to notarize them. These forms were a straightforward acknowledgement. I could have witnessed Robert signing the papers weeks ago and Elizabeth would be home already.

My knowledge of death rituals was limited to the Jewish traditions: burying the dead within twenty-four hours, a prescribed mourning period, and most importantly the Kaddish, the prayer for the dead. I wasn't religious, but knowing that Elizabeth's body remained in cold storage in Georgia almost a month after her death pained me. I don't believe in the soul, but Elizabeth deserved better in death than what she'd gotten in life.

I called the funeral home and spoke with the funeral director.

"Mr. Howard can't physically come in," I explained to Director Quentin. "Would you accept out-of-state notarized documents? If you need originals I can overnight them."

Mr. Quentin paused before he replied in his soft Georgia twang. "Yes, Ma'am, that should be fine. Fax them on back, when you have a moment."

Robert was usually too busy to read documents before signing them. He trusted me to review them on his behalf. After lunch I handed him the papers, shuffled in among other items from San Francisco Planning to be notarized. I fanned them out so he could sign each page without looking at them.

“Just need you to sign.” I handed him a pen.

He didn’t even ask. Just scrawled his name with looping cursive on each signature line and on the signature page of my notary journal and then walked away.

Funeral Director Quentin called half an hour later to thank us for sending the documents back. “We’ll start the paperwork to get Mrs. Sperry back to you all. God bless.”

I said nothing to Robert about it. Two weeks later, after the funeral in Philadelphia that Robert grudgingly attended, after I heard him tell Walter he’d share the cost of the headstone, I came in to work one morning to find a bright yellow post-it note on my monitor. I recognized Robert’s shaky block letters, the pen slightly smudged. The note simply read:

Thanks, Dana.

-Robert.

Erin Clark

*Every paid gig except that one I don't tend to
talk about at parties*

Babysitter

Lawn-mower

Cigarette butt picker-upper

Plumbers' gopher

Flower arranger

Children's activity worker

Medical records clerk

Car-washer

Apple-raker

Pizza-maker

Pizza-deliverer

Comic book archivist

Pet-and-child chauffeur

Freelance editor for a would-be pick-up-artist

Pizza-cook again

Hotel housekeeping laundry-worker

Hotel receptionist & security guard

Camp counselor for summer camps

College tour guide

Visit office assistant

Vacuummer of dormitory staircases

Social media officer for a Chinese fashion brand

Waitress, again

Scrubber of toilets

General dogsbody

Comms assistant

Waitstaff, this time

Pizza-whatever-er

Editor, again

Landscaper, hauler of woodchips

Housesitter

Dogsitter

Catsitter

Plantsitter

Accompanist

Writer

Erin Clark

journeyman pipefitter

how many times will i write this goddamned poem
how many times will it take a shape in my brain
what is the angle of the cooling tower & its
wafting vapor? most of the operation is
unseen, reactors and turbines dwarfed
by tall concrete columns, a group of six
looming over a postindustrial landscape
populated by the middle & working class
who can't escape the interruption of their
horizons by the cooling towers of the plant.
a nuclear power plant. nuclear power plants
must be shut down regularly in keeping with
safety regulations; the reactor and its cooling
systems are stilled, the piping replaced so that
the coolant, usually plain water, can continue to
absorb and transmit heat from the reactor in the
form of steam, turning turbines and creating the
power. during these shutdowns, hundreds of men
(they are mostly men) called journeymen plumbers
& pipefitters and welders swarm to the plant, lured
by excellent pay on the road, and good per diem, to
complete the work of the shutdown, the replacement
of the cooling system. they wear dosimeters 'round their
their necks to ensure they're not exposed to too much
radiation. i hated hearing of my father's lanyard—i hated it.
& then after ten years of this work, brain cancer killed him
but i was told the long dark hours in the power plants were
not to blame. don't be silly, girl. don't blame the radiation.

Elisabeth Dahl

The Dead Baby Files

It was January, the iced-over heart of a mid-Atlantic winter. I was studying for my Bachelor's in English and had been hired to help extract data relevant to a grad student's maternal and child health research. A large-scale longitudinal study had followed children from prenatal care through their pediatric-visit years, yielding a body of information now contained in short, medium, and tall file cabinets, a skyline of metal towers colored mustard, black, and pencil-lead gray.

The job was located in a deserted warehouse. My area within that expanse had the dimensions of a living room and the ambiance of a prison cell. A folding table and chairs sat at the center of the concrete floor, a space heater beside them. Around the table were forty or fifty of those file cabinets, and beyond them, high chain-link fencing that separated this storage space from the others. My new supervisor—a seasoned administrative assistant with short, no-fuss frosted hair—pointed to a handful of file cabinets set off from the rest. “Those are the dead baby files,” she said matter-of-factly. “We’ve already finished with those.” She opened one drawer, then banged it shut, sending a metal-on-metal sound slicing through the empty space.

When it fit around my class schedule, I'd drive my grandparents' Chevy Nova past blocks of row houses, until I reached the warehouse. I'd unlock the door, listen for footfalls, apprehensive about who might be waiting around the next chain-link corner. I'd head down the hallway, passing storage spaces where outdated mainframe computers and medical equipment sat hulking under tarps.

Sometimes I'd arrive to find my supervisor or the grad student already working in our locked enclosure. We'd make conversation, sitting around the table in our hats and coats and fingerless gloves. As the weeks passed, we made our way through the file cabinets, folder by folder. The files could be inches thick, their colorful medical forms clamped in place by a brass fastener. My coworkers would flip through them, efficiently finding the relevant information and recording it on the corresponding form. I wasn't as disciplined. I'd get lost in how the children's lives were playing out—the height and weight charts, the medical tests, the handwritten care providers' notes. After all, I was studying literature, and these were stories too.

Always, though, the dead baby files lingered on the periphery. During a few visits when I found myself alone, I drifted toward the cabinets and lifted out files. As thin and slight as bird wings, they told of stillbirths, crib suffocations, and other terrible outcomes.

The weeks went on, and I found it harder and harder to drag myself to the warehouse. The work was so cold and lonely, the warehouse so inhospitable. After a couple of hours, I couldn't wait to climb into my Chevy Nova with its rusted-out hole under the driver's seat, turn the heater all the way up, and drive back to the off-campus house I shared with friends. When I'd go to have my timesheet signed, my supervisor would frown at me. They were trying to get this study done, and I wasn't pulling my weight.

Eventually, I switched to a new work-study post: editorial assistant at the university press. The office was near campus and full of people doing jobs I could envision myself doing someday. The hours were regular, the manuscripts interesting. The workspace had centralized heating, carpeted floors, and the regular presence of coworkers. There was no chain link fencing, no folding tables. I appreciated the creature comforts. But beyond that, the work suited me. Proofreading an index, red and blue colored pencils at the ready, felt right in a way that no other work had before.

And, there were no dead baby files. The closest thing we had was the dead manuscript copy. It would pile up in the corners of production editors' cubicles, as new versions of manuscripts—the live copy—rendered the old versions obsolete. “Dead baby files” and “dead copy” shared a word, it was true. But at the press, the term was just a metaphor. At the warehouse it was real.

Shamik Banerjee

The Rickshaw Puller

Whether mizzle or heat;
or skyful of glisters;
he e'er has unshoed feet;
is ever in blisters;
and whether 'tis cold;
whether young or old;
whate'er the weather falls;
he Rickshaw hauls and hauls!

Anear the footpath-folk,
in his party of three,
he would smilingly smoke-
the Tendu-leaved Beedi;
and rest his hands and feet,
upon the teastand's seat;
then come commuters' calls;
again he Rickshaw hauls!

A tatty undervest;
the cheekbones expended;
and sharp skeletal chest;

all show: he's underfed;
but his calves, his loins and bones,
are hard as Diamond stones;
his lank limbs, you see,
stronger than you or me.

In chill, no woollen pall;
no ease from Summer's Loo;
no tough tect 'gainst rainfall;
then marauds him some ague.
Not always by him keep-
good aliment and sleep—
cannot affordably
nourish his family.

He wakes with crack of dawn;
bathes in a bourne as ice;
each day, same rags, puts on;
eats Chapati or rice.
He treadles everywhere-
to each gennel and chare;
and when belimps noonday,
he rests atop a footway.

He services for us;
yet some men with disdain,

for few coins they make a ruckus;

and abased he does remain.

But in his heart's a gold

if seen through, 'twill unfold;

which gives the same aglint rays,

like your own joyant days!

Madison McSweeney

Status Symbol

Kate was typing “visual hallucinations causes” into her browser when a customer stole her attention.

The woman looked like a ball of crumpled grocery bags amid the designer purses. It didn’t help that she was carrying one – a grocery bag, that was, stretched and wrinkled plastic that rustled when she walked. Kate instinctively checked to make sure its contents weren’t dripping onto the floor.

Kate winced at her classism. That wasn’t a charitable way to judge a potential customer. Not a viewpoint the store would endorse. And then she saw the woman raise a hand to stroke the white leather of one of the dangling crossbodies, her fingers stained so black she might have just been handling coal.

“Can I help you find something?” Kate mouthed, her voice so small and tinny it didn’t make it across the floor.

The woman was examining every purse with a sort of rapt fascination, as if they were precious objects d’art. Which in a way, Kate figured, they were. Opulent handbags in soft leather and shiny vinyl, shaped like flowers and exotic animals and arranged artfully on white slabs. Women who would never drop one hundred dollars on a bag, let alone five hundred, regularly came in just to look at them. The store may as well have been an art gallery.

Except galleries have display cases. And alarms. Sirens that blare if someone was to get too close.

The woman had moved on to the Valentine's line, arrayed at the front of the store like chocolates in a heart-shaped box. Delicate necklaces in rose gold; branded socks, notebooks, and card holders, in pale pink or white leather with red hearts - a glam but affordable gift from a new boyfriend, if one had a boyfriend. (Kate didn't, but liked to imagine hers would buy her something from this collection). The centerpiece was a heart-shaped purse so red it seemed to drip blood. When she'd opened it to check the ~~purse~~ price, Kate had been overcome by visions of lonely women having their chests cut open, gloved hands reaching to extract the beating organs within.

The woman stared at that purse for a long time, but wouldn't touch it. *Small Blessings*, Kate thought, then remembered that was the name of last season's clutch line.

Kate liked to believe simply stepping into the store made one feel worthy of the items they sold. But that hadn't always been true: back when she was just a window-shopper with frizzy hair and a pizza face, beautiful items had made her feel self-conscious. The first time Kate dared venture into one of these shops, she was convinced the staff would peg her as a shoplifter, even though the sales assistant's dance recital smile and warm, *Is there anything I can help you find today?* betrayed no judgment. No personal opinion at all, really. Which was the ideal; you were here to represent the brand, not yourself.

Kate mimicked that long-gone shop girl's inscrutability. Avoiding scrutiny of the grocery bag and ill-fitting winter jacket, Kate made herself a wall of pleasantries as she echoed: "Is there anything I can help you with?"

The other woman glared, eyes as grey as the bags underneath. "I work here."

Kate didn't recognize her. "Are you from one of our other locations...?"

“I’m here to quit,” her newfound co-worker cut in.

Kate looked over her shoulder as if hoping the manager – off that day – would materialize from the back. “Jean-Paul’s out, but I can take down your name if you’d like to give him a message.” Kate liked how that came out – professional and efficient, which was how you should appear to anyone who crossed the threshold here, whoever they may be. You never knew who might be a mystery shopper or a slovenly millionaire.

The woman dropped her sac onto the cash Kate was manning. “Just give this back to him. Tell him I gave it a shot and I don’t want it anymore.” She stalked out of the store and into the mall, tracking February slush across the tiles.

Kate was convinced there was something alive in the bag, or something that had once been. A soft-eared rabbit peeled off the highway, pink organs poking out beneath folds of silky fur. She wanted to pick it up by the handles and drop it into a garbage can – in the food court maybe, somewhere far from the store. But she’d been told to give the bag to Jean-Paul. And what was more, she really didn’t want to touch it.

But she couldn’t just leave it on the counter. This wasn’t a junk shop. Taking care not to touch the mass within, she unknotted the handles. To her surprise, inside was one of the store’s trademark silk dust bags – and inside that, an item Kate had always coveted but never laid eyes upon.

The brand’s flagship purse.

The Jane was an icon, a status symbol for a generation of young career women. The leather was dyed a sedate but vibrant shade of pink (fun, but not too distracting for the office), the lining bright as cotton candy – a secret known only by those with access to the bag’s inner sanctum. The style was simple and chic, elegant but youthful, and the price point demarked quality without being unaffordable. It was the brand’s most popular item for three seasons,

discontinued to save it from becoming cliché. They'd re-created the design as part of a *Legally Blonde*-inspired line a few years back, but it wasn't an exact reproduction: the leather pink had been more garish, the lining yellow. *This* purse, dumped like garbage by the strange woman, looked like an original *Jane*.

There was only one way to tell.

The zipper stuck as she pulled it open. When she peered inside to inspect the lining, a sickly sweet scent breached her nostrils. Kate's head swam, black dots floating in front of her eyes, like maybe the bag was full of rotting meat, after all, and now the flies had come. And they must be swarming both her eyeballs, because everything was dark.

When her vision returned, Kate was surrounded by glittering pink.

Her first impression was that she was standing inside a tunnel made of candyfloss. But when she ran her hands across the wall, the material was solid and cold. A closer look revealed clusters of perfect gemstones, so delicate they looked like swirling fairy dust.

She spun around slowly, failing to identify her point of entry. The pink cave seemed endless, its corridors stretching for blocks before curving out of sight. The colouring of the stones became darker and richer as the corridor got deeper, creating an almost vaginal effect. In the distance, Kate heard tinkling, like a thousand champagne bottles clinking. She followed the sound, emerging into a quarry.

The rockface here was a thousand shades of rose, cherry blossom, razzle dazzle and tickle me, pure and unmarred. On the ground and on scaffolds, women in red coveralls chipped at the walls, filling wheelbarrows with sparking pink powder. Wheelbarrows were emptied into oil barrels, which were in turn loaded onto trailers pulled by zebras and unicorns along a precarious ramp leading up and out of the quarry.

So this was where the magic was mined. The intangible that made the brand's creations so enchanting. What the original *Jane* had been stitched from and dyed with.

Someone tapped her shoulder. "You replacing Christine?" Before Kate could answer, the forewoman handed her a pickaxe. "Helmets are in the bin. These rocks may look insubstantial, but in a cave-in, they'll knock your block off."

The work left Kate's hands raw and her shoulders aching, the soft *tink tink* of the hammers building to a tinnitus that made her feel like her own skull was being chipped at, rather than the rock. But that was more of an Alexander McQueen aesthetic.

In the second hour of her shift, Kate watched a woman fall to the ground after a chunk of stone came loose and struck her on the temple. She landed on her back after her knees crumpled, blue eyes fixed blankly at the ceiling. Blood dripped from her forehead to her cheek, red as the Valentine's centrepiece. A pair of workers dragged the unconscious woman off the line as the forewoman yelled at Kate to take her place.

She'd only two hours left in her schedule at the store, but her shift in the cave felt longer. By the time she joined her colleagues in line to clock out, her back was stooped and her feet had erupted in blisters. The woman behind her smirked at Kate's bloodied pumps. "You'll know to wear better shoes next time," she said. Kate gritted her teeth.

One after another, broken and weary women shuffled toward a punch-clock (fire engine red with rounded edges, similar in style to the limited edition alarm clocks rolled out in 2005), punched out, and then disappeared in plumes of pink smoke, coveralls slumping lifeless on the ground. By the time Kate reached the front of the queue, the pile of discarded uniforms was

taller than she was. The sweet scent filled her nose again as she inserted her punch card, and she felt suddenly weightless, a fairy fluttering on hummingbird wings and pixie dust, shrinking smaller and smaller until the dust molecules were planets, battling over who would pull her into their orbit.

And then she was standing behind the cash, watching the desktop power down, register locked up. The Jane sat primly on the counter, waiting for her.

Her first impulse was to flee the store and never return, leaving the bag for her replacement. Instead, she picked it up, experimented with its weight. Looking guiltily over her shoulder, like she was that underage presumed shoplifter again, she carried it over to the mirror on the east wall. Kate was shocked by how haggard she looked. But the bag somehow tied the whole look together, made her appear polished even though her feet were bleeding and her face was caked with sweat and smeared mascara.

Kate held the purse at hip level and turned to the left and right, whispering its name like a prayer.

The Jane. The ultimate status symbol for today's young woman who isn't afraid to work hard – but wants to do it in style. It was Kate's now – and you know what? She'd earned it. She was committed to the Brand, unlike that quitter Christine. After she locked up tonight, Kate would strut out the store with that bag and know she was worthy of it. And then she'd come back to that mine tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, content knowing she played a small part in producing something beautiful.

It would be hard work, but at least they weren't asking her to cut out her heart.

Jay Parr

Juke Joint

The joints I used to hung out at, I ain't never see no—um—what word can I use here, Negroes? Anyways, I ain't never think much of it til I rode down cotton country and ended up on the wrong end of a old Black man's sawed-off.

Man it was hot that summer. Been hot for weeks. Hot on the job site puttin' up walls and trusses out in the sun. Hot up the mountains. Hot on the bike at ninety mile an hour. Hot at thirty-two hundred feet where my old trailer was. Ain't have no air conditioning and it was a fucking oven inside. So when that job wrapped up and they cut us loose I decided fuck this shit I'm gonna pack a bedroll and some smokes and ride down to Myrtle, go jump my ass in the ocean.

So I been carving down out the mountains, getting into how the tires feel on the hot blacktop when I'm down in the curves, shifting my ass off the seat, knees damn near dragging the ground. To this day I ain't never felt more goddamn alive than when I'm one little rock, one crack in the blacktop away from them tires cutting loose and smearing my ass across the road, over the high side to land fucking busted-up dead in a field somewheres. Somehow it ain't never happen though. If I'd knowed I'd live this long, I reckon I'da took better care of myself.

I'm on my old CB750, the one I used to call Baby, with the wide-open pipes and the racing air filters, carbs jetted sixteen over so's it don't run too lean and burn holes in the pistons. The raw gas makes that short little 4-into-1 pop like a gunfight when I roll off the throttle, but then when I power into the curves it braps out like a trombone playing some

kinda rowdy-ass street jazz.

I come up out a curve and lay into a straightaway, throttle wide open, and I see this old juke joint up ahead on the left. At first it don't look no more than a tractor shed by the cotton fields, built outta mismatched scraps of wood and sheet metal, two three different roofs stuck together, whole thing shimmering in the heat. But then maybe a thousand yard off, ninety a hundred mile an hour, I see it got a little lean-to porch facing the road, somebody walking in the front door, a old car pulling out the dirt lot with its back end squatted low like it got a trunk full of moonshine or some shit. That gets me curious. Some of the best joints is just local folks out middle of nowhere.

I been tucked in on Baby four or five hour by this point, and a cold beer and some grub sounds damn good. I roll off the throttle and them pipes start popping all blappity while I'm raising up off the little racing handlebars to catch some wind, kicking it down through the gears, easing in on the brakes.

That old lean-to porch got a patch of sandy gravel out front, room enough to get a couple cars clear of the road. I angle across the oncoming lane, find a good spot for my kickstand, unzip my leathers that's already getting hot, and stretch my back while it's idling down. That bike idles rough and rich, smells like a damn gas station, and I only idle it maybe half a minute, cause my pipe's pointed right at the front door and that bike ain't no kind of quiet. Besides, without a eighty mile an hour wind, with the engine heat, the hot and muggy weather, even unzipped, them leathers get sweaty in a hurry. I turn the key off and the engine tickety-ticks over the hissing in my ears, while I'm shutting off the petcock so's it don't flood again. The little half helmet I'm wearing ain't really legal, but South Carolina ain't got no helmet law no how.

I step off the bike, light a smoke and pull my ponytail out the back of my leather. The oil

tank under the seat's at 185°F. On the hot side, but about right for the weather and the way I been riding. I painted it flat black with the same rattle can I used for the gas tank, stenciled バカ外人 on it so's the Harley bikers can see it when I pass their ass. Rag on my old rice burner all you want, you're still back there on your hog eating my smoke.

Ain't no kinda sign on the building. Up over the lean-to porch where you might expect a sign there's just a old air conditioner stuck through the wall, half iced up, dripping on the tin roof with a little sound like pank-pank, pank.

The storm door got one of them stick-on hardware-store signs says "PRIVATE" like up at Turtle's joint, but I ain't think nothing of it. He just got it on there to keep out the—um—folks he don't want in there. The door clanks open on a stuffy dark room, and when I pull off my shades first thing I see's a old Black man, real dark skin, and he either got weird buggy eyes or he ain't real happy to see me there. He got one of them cheap plastic diner baskets with some wax paper and a little bag of chips front of him, good sign I might can get some grub. Ain't but maybe half a dozen old wore-out Black guys in there, all of 'em a good thirty forty years older than me. They all shut up when I come in the door, and they all sitting there eyeballing me, no sound but the air conditioner rattling up behind me and a little boom box behind the bar. I guess they ain't used to seeing no young white bikers round here.

I step up to the near end of the bar. The old dried-up bartender looks at me sideways, but he don't move.

"Hey," I say. "Could I get a—"

"Ain't nothing here for you," he says.

...the fuck?

The bartender looks at me like so much garbage needs took out, while I'm looking at

him thinking you mother fucker, I oughta come over that goddamn bar and...

But I look round all their faces, hard faces telling me I ain't welcome, all of 'em ready for me to start some shit, every single one of 'em ready to jump at me. All these crusty old fuckers, I could probably take three or four of 'em. But still. I'm outnumbered and I'm on their turf, somebody'd get the drop on me. And the bar man's reaching for something under the bar. "All right," I say. "*Fuck* you then. *Fuck all y'all!* Buncha goddamn..."

The bartender comes up with a sawed-off pump-action twelve gauge, racks a round, and I swear he done growed a good two inches taller somehow.

"Git on now," he says with that shotgun at the ready, finger on the trigger guard and the sawed-off barrel pointed at the rafters above my shoulder.

But even looking at that twelve gauge I'm still too goddamn stupid to just turn around and leave. I sweep a stack of bar coasters and a tinfoil ashtray off onto the floor, flick my smoke bouncing orange sparks off the bar at him, kick over the barstool beside me, and storm the fuck out. The aluminum door sounds like a gunshot when I kick it open, and just for a tiny sec I wonder if he really done did it. But nope, I'm still walking, still breathing, and that door's still clanking shut behind me.

Back on the bike, seat hot from the sun, ponytail still loose (gonna regret that later), I jam the key in the switch, twist the throttle and kick the starter. Hard. Baby's engine's still hot, roars like a pissed-off bobcat, and I chunk it into gear, dump the clutch, and spray gravel across the whole front of the joint spinning my way out onto the road. I don't even check for traffic until I done ripped through three gears in the wrong lane, probably running eighty mile an hour. It splutters when I hit fourth, cause it's starving, and that's when I remember the petcock. Shit ain't gonna run if it ain't got no gas in the carbs.

But see, my old man grewed up in a sundown town and was goddamn proud of it. Turtle's place with all our bikes out front, to this goddamn day I ain't never seen no Black nobody in there except working the griddle. The one Black driver at that motor parts job I used to had when I was too busted up to build forms and lay rebar no more, he run the Tazewell-Grundy route just one time, his first week there, come back saying he weren't never running up them shops again, and he'd walk off the job first, cause he wun't entirely sure he'd come back down outta there alive. And them old fuckers at that juke joint, they probably grewed up right around there workin' theyself to the bone, trying they damnedest to survive. Probably had ancestors was sharecroppers and slaves buried all around them cotton fields, they graves marked with rocks you and me'd step right over and never know it. Some of them bones probably folks stoled all the way from Africa, snatched right out they own lives and crammed in ships like a goddamn can of sardines. Thinking back on all that shit now I might kinda get it, why they ain't want my cocky white ass strutting right in their front door, like I was flying my colors in their clubhouse or some kinda shit.

Had that day to do over again I might just say, "Fair enough," and walk out.

Little late for that shit now.

Neil Randall

A Short Film About Dying

They said there was nothing they could do for him. At eighty-five years old, R. had just completed his useful working life cycle and must leave his post with immediate effect. Legally, they could no longer let him continue with his administrative duties at the Ministry.

“But I’m in perfectly good health,” he had argued. “You need only look at the results of my last medical.”

But the Terminations Officer, a prim, upright, immaculately dressed young woman with her hair scraped back into a neat bun, looked singularly unimpressed.

“Granted, your eyesight is exceptional for a functionary of your age, as are your blood pressure and cholesterol levels. Heart rate is strong. You have had no significant health problems throughout your useful working life cycle. Nor is there any history of serious illness in your family. Functionaries ten or even twenty years your junior would be delighted to have results like yours. Unfortunately, we have restrictions in place to serve the wider populace.”

“But I’m simply not in a financial position to retire.”

“You need some assistance?” Her nostrils twitched, as if she had caught the scent of something unpleasant. She tapped a few keys on her computer keyboard. “But from the looks of your employment history, you’ve only been with the Ministry for fourteen years. Not nearly long enough to be eligible for a pension. More to the point, your early records are incomplete. For instance, what were you doing between the years of 2018 and 2043?”

“I dedicated my early years to the arts.”

“The what?”

“I didn’t go down a traditional career path. I traveled a lot, never stayed in one place for too long.”

“I’m not sure I quite understand. But with these gaping holes in your records and insufficient state contributions to receive even a small monthly stipend from the government, you’re in an unenviable position.”

“But couldn’t you make an exception?”

She shook her head. “Out of the question. As far as the Terminations Department is concerned, there really is nothing else I can do for you. You can no longer legally work in any capacity. Your final salary has been paid in full and your records amended accordingly.

“If you wish to apply for financial assistance, you’ll have to visit the Appeals Department. I doubt they’ll be able to help you, but they’ll be much better briefed than I am regarding your options.”

“And where is that? In this building?”

“Of course. Floor 201. You can take the elevator from just along the corridor.” She attempted to smile, but it quickly collapsed into an uncomfortable grimace. “Before you leave, would you care to rate our interaction today?”

“Rate?”

“Yes. On a scale of one to ten, how satisfied have you been with the service I provided?”

“Service? I just came here to see where I stood in regards to keeping my job.”

“Affirmative. And did you receive the correct and most up-to-date information?”

“Yes, I suppose I did.”

“Therefore, you would rate the interaction as a ten?”

“A ten?”

“Thank you so much for your participation in the survey. Your score of ten has been added to my Personal Achievement file. Have a nice day.”

Feeling increasingly weary and dejected, R. took the lift up to the Appeals Department. All that talk about being fit and healthy and capable of continuing his work duties had been a lie. For many years, he had found it increasingly difficult to get out of bed each morning. A profound tiredness weighed on his shoulders like an immovable object. Routinely, he sneaked off to the storeroom for a nap. That he hadn't been discovered was a miracle in itself, especially considering the number of supervisors that patrolled the main building and the number of cameras situated at the most ubiquitous of angles.

“Can we help you, sir?” asked one of the administrators stationed by the entranceway.

“I was referred here by the Terminations Department. I need some advice regarding my employment options following the end of my useful life cycle.”

“They referred you here?” He pursed his lips and raised an eyebrow. “A little irregular, but I'm sure they had their reasons. Here.” He handed R. a small slip of paper with 1234 printed on it. “Take a seat over there.” He pointed to the packed waiting room. “Your number will be called in due course.”

R. managed to find one of only a handful of unoccupied seats among hundreds. All the other functionaries wore the standard blue coveralls, with a white identification tag affixed to the top

pocket on the right-hand side. There was a mix of demographics. The one thing they all had in common, however, was the worry lines etched across their faces, an almost palpable sense of anxiety permeating through their hunched-over bodies. When R. took a seat, one young man with watery, mournful eyes made a vague yet hopeless gesture, a brief shrug of the shoulders and a deep intake of breath.

“We could be in for a long wait.”

When R. was first making his way in the world, he ignored all the well-meaning advice from his family and friends. While his contemporaries opted for safe, secure, if poorly paid positions at the Ministry, he had always wanted more from life. For over two decades, he traveled around the country. One summer, he worked on a farm, the next he busked in the city streets. The year after that, he offered his services as an artist in the capital city, drawing beautiful charcoal sketches of holidaymakers and day-trippers. But he never registered with the proper authorities. Back then, he thought he was being clever, ducking his financial responsibilities, never paying any taxes. Now, even though the standard pension system had been radically overhauled, he was seeing just how foolish that decision had been.

He couldn't have said how much time passed. He kept a close eye on the clock on the main wall, watched the way the second hand slowly traversed the face. Sometimes, it appeared to stop or travel in the opposite direction, as if entrapping him in one tiny pocket of time. A moment replayed over and over again, a nothing moment, an empty, designated point between one unedifying event and the next.

“Number 1234.”

R. gave a start and looked down at the ticket in his hand: 1234. Getting to his feet, he walked over to the desk of the officer who had called out his number, a fresh-faced young man with a neat cropped haircut and bright, inquisitive eyes.

“Please, do take a seat. How can I proceed with your inquiry today?”

“I’ve just come from the Terminations Department. I’ve reached the age where I can no longer work, even though I’m willing and more than capable of continuing with my duties. Unfortunately, I don’t have enough state credits to be eligible for a pension. All of which means I have no way of providing for myself.”

“Not good.” The young man winced and shifted in his seat. “Thankfully, you’re in the minority. After the last big state pension reforms, most conscientious citizens made their own private plans. Looking at your records, you would perhaps have been better staying off-grid and never contributing at all.”

“How’d you mean?”

“If we didn’t have a record of you, we could’ve housed you in a special facility. No picnic, but at least you’d have had a roof over your head and three-square meals a day. As you’re on file now, that’s not an option. Your one and only course of action would be to hand your apartment over to the Acquisitions Department. That way, you could free up some credits to give yourself a modicum of financial freedom.”

“But the apartment is all I have. It’s my home.”

R. sucked back a pang of genuine sadness. Twelve or thirteen years ago, just after he’d taken a job at the Ministry, he had an unlikely stroke of luck. The last of his living relatives had remembered him in a will – gifting him an apartment of shoebox proportions, but which had nonetheless served him well as a home ever since.

“The apartment might just be your saving grace.”

“I will have to sell it, you mean?”

“Sadly, yes. And I sympathize, really, I do. But your options are severely limited. You’ll be immediately arrested if you attempt to work. The state takes a dim view on anyone contravening regulations. With no living relatives, there’s no way you can generate any income to both feed yourself and pay your monthly bills.

“It’s a tough one, but at least you’ll no longer be a burden to yourself. The State will be happy to take the decision out of your hands. But our services don’t come cheap.”

“Sorry, but I don’t know what you mean.”

“It really is simple. I’ve just made the request on your behalf. If you go to the Acquisitions Department on Floor 301, you can complete the process.” He handed R. the same piece of paper he had received on entering the room. “Keep this number with you. It’s your own unique identifier now.”

Resigned to what was looking like an increasingly bleak fate, R. climbed into another elevator and rode the conveyance up to Floor 301. In contrast to the Appeals Department, there were only a dozen or so people sitting in a much smaller waiting room. Again, there was a mix of age groups present, but all the functionaries looked sickly and morose, as if they’d just been given a fatal prognosis from their general practitioner.

“What you in for, friend?” said a man of around the same age as R., who was clearly suffering from a terrible disease. The stench of decay clung to his clothes, hair, skin, the breath he exhaled as he spoke. “They stick the old requisition order into you, eh? A bad business. I used to work in the private sector. At one time, I was a wealthy man. But I never put nothing aside for a rainy day.”

Before he could further elaborate, a young woman at one of the advice booths pressed a buzzer and shouted out:

“Number 1562.”

“Ah, that’s me. Good luck, friend. I’ll see you on the other side, no doubt.”

R. watched him shuffle unsteadily over to the desk and take a seat. Getting old had never really worried him until recently. He had always associated the aging process with wisdom, and becoming the person he was always destined to be. Of course, there had been many missed opportunities, times when he could perhaps have become both a husband and a father. In particular, he remembered his relationship with Rose, the one woman who could genuinely be called the love of his life. He recalled how she used to admonish him for his stubborn ways. ‘You’ll regret this one day. You’ll end up with no pension and they’ll toss you into a pauper’s grave, or worse, leave you to rot at the side of the road.’ Rose was a fiery woman. Often, the intensity of her love literally took his breath away. Now, he couldn’t even remember why they had parted. But like everyone else – she had been right. And now he was having to face up to the consequences.

Lost in a fog of the past, it took a second call of his number before R. realized that his turn had come. Raising a hand to identify himself, he went over to the booth and took a seat opposite a serious, plain-faced woman in her mid to late thirties.

“Ah, yes, 1234. I have just received your file from my colleague in the Appeals Department. Before I explain the ins and outs of the process, I want you to know that you’re not alone. This is a big decision and the State is behind you one hundred percent.”

“Oh, right. Thank you. Although I’m not quite sure about the true implications of selling my apartment. But your colleague in Appeals gave me the impression that things have already been initiated.”

“That’s correct. I can finalize everything right this minute. Our system is flawless. If you would just provide your authorization, I’ll transfer the deed of your property to the State Holding Company. In a matter of seconds, your financial worries will be over.”

“But like I said, what does it involve, exactly? Would I have to rent an apartment and live off the proceeds of the sale?”

“Erm, not exactly, no.” She lowered her eyes and bit into her bottom lip. “This is rather awkward. I assumed that you’d been fully briefed on your options. To be perfectly honest, there is no way you can renege on our agreement now. You’re on Floor 301, after all. There’s no going back.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Put simply, you will receive sufficient funds to be swiftly and efficiently euthanized, at no extra cost to any dependents.”

“But I don’t have any dependents.”

“Great.” She grinned and raised both thumbs as if that was the most wonderful news. “All the better. The process is hands-free from here on out. In a few minutes, you’ll be escorted to the Assisted Dying Chamber and be given a pain-free injection to put an end to your life.”

“What?”

“Wonderful, isn’t it? You won’t have to worry about a thing. We’ll take care of everything on your behalf. So many people of your age group are taking up this option nowadays. Who wants to be frail and helpless, eh? Who wants to struggle to clean themselves and go to the toilet properly? No one. You’re a pioneer. You really are an inspiration to other functionaries. Once your working life is over, why wait around simply to die?

“And taking a look at your activity log today, the whole liquidation process has taken less than sixteen hours. Pretty impressive, eh? If you’d like to recommend the same service, do feel free to rank us on the government review website. It will only take a few seconds of your time.”

R. didn’t know what to say or do. He just sat there with his head lowered until two orderlies in white uniforms arrived and escorted him to the Liquidation Department.

“Number 1234?” said the receptionist. “We’ve been expecting you. If you’d like to follow me, we’ll prep you for your journey.”

R. was taken to a white-walled cubicle and told to lie down on the bed. From concealed speakers came the low strains of a classical piece of music R. recognized well. Clair de Lune by Debussy, a recording his uncle used to play time and again when he was a young boy. It had been such a long time since R. had heard music of any kind, other than the irritating and tinny electronic bleeps that sounded in the elevators and canteen. He completely lost all sense of time and place. He leaned back and hummed along softly to the beautiful soaring piano movements, which produced the most blissful of sensations. Every note sent a tingle of pleasure through his old, beaten, and weary body, making him feel young, and energized for the first time in many years.

“So glad you decided to take out a plan with us,” a nurse said as she entered the room, carrying a needle on a small metal dish. “You won’t regret it. We’re the number one facilitator of assisted death. You couldn’t be in better hands.”

Placing the tray on the bedside table, she picked up the needle and briefly studied the level of medication.

“Perfect. In a moment, you’ll feel a little scratching sensation. Nothing too painful, I assure you. Just close your eyes and drift away. Don’t fight it.”

In that one moment, when he felt the needle pierce his skin, R. experienced an odd sensation. Rather than seeing his whole life pass before his eyes—the many people who had populated his small part of the world, and the truly memorable things he had seen and done—all he could picture was his cramped work cubicle at the Ministry and a desk piled with thick, dusty files. The sum and parts of his true life experience perhaps, the last thing he thought about before the injection overwhelmed him and he breathed his last.

Jessica Cory

23 North

Pete Yorn's *musicforthemorningafter*

pours from the cracked
window of my hand-
me-down Buick with its one
working door handle.

Speakers crackle *I, live*
on a chain into the 5 AM
blackness of the interstate
and my coffee. Maybe it'll work

and I'll wake up soon. Another
day picking in the aisles. Match
sticker to item, slap it on, throw
it in the cart. Repeat. Clock

out. Take the interstate
an hour back home. Repeat
tomorrow and Wednesday
and the rest of the work

week. Because there's no
rest for the weary and no
jobs in my hometown
paying above minimum
wage and at least I get

weekends off and am done
before dusk, I tell myself,
avoiding the mass exodus
of 5 o'clock traffic flooding

outward from the city
to the hills and hollers
we call home.

Jessica Cory

Before Recycling the Beer Bottles at Night's

End

We had to dump them. Drain
the chaw, its slosh & thick drips

slicking the stained inside
of a repurposed plastic
pickle bucket. Sometimes peeled

labels appeared, their silvers
& reds floating among the back-

wash. The once-white bucket
awash in taffy-brown bottom
dregs, bloated foamy cigarette

filters, flecks of leftover tobacco
sprinkling the surface like stars.

Dionissios Kollias

Naxian Marble Chunks on an Orange Truck

This isn't the driver's first trip onto the ferry.

The squares, spray-painted in Greek, "LARGE".

Newly formed,

we shared this knowledge:

This marble comes from Naxos.

The wheel was not invented yet.

We joke about it, but the narrow staircase up the island tells us that
this was our physical strength. Our angular shoulders, our arms.

In formation,

an idea as pure as the newly chiseled rock.

We weren't happy with the way it was.

This fear of solely being, but also this is the most holy!

A part of the timeline. A cache of our souls,
deliberately broken. Blessed.

These theories we agree to, interject *hmm*.

Squeeze the belief that we are.

The landscape was altered for fun.

And we carried votives to stop the dead from touching us in our dreams.

We looted from each other, only to buy back what belonged to us.

Dug up from the ground, the former forest.

Erin Jamieson

Fry Cook

I write on the corners
mustard- stained napkins
the air warm with peanut oil
& crinkle cut fries

I've memorized it all:

3 minutes for fries

9 for fish filets

4 for chicken nuggets

enough time for
a simple poem
that will be tossed out along
with half-eaten Happy Meals

each hour collecting
money meant to be saved
for a different future
money that instead
goes to keep the electricity on

frying is an art
even though it seems
mechanical
even though someone
could replace me
if I don't work
quickly enough or

someone spots my
silly poems
someone sees
I'm hoping for more

Andrea Eaker

Expiration

In the parking lot of the Pine Bluffs ValueFoods, Matthew decided that if they had saved him rotten food again, he'd cancel their account. He wouldn't really cancel it, of course. He needed every account until the patent on PerishTracker® went through. But the very fact that he was tempted told him how bad it was here. All the stores saved food, but Pine Bluffs saved the most.

When he knocked on the manager's door, there was no answer. He knocked again.

"Are you the guy from PeriShure?" A young woman in a ValueFoods polo came out of the break room, eyes on her phone. "Harry's not in, but he told me to let the guy from PeriShure into the storage closet. I'm assuming it's you? Rotten food, right this way." She led him down the hall, hardly looking up from her screen. "Someone left out rock shrimp and I just clipped off the tag instead of saving the whole thing," she said as she tucked her phone away and pulled a key on a retractable lanyard away from her belt loop. "I hope that's okay."

"Yeah," said Matthew and cleared his throat. "Yes. That's what people are supposed to do."

“That’s what I thought,” she said. “I mean, I’m new, but I thought it was a little weird that everyone saved all that food for you.” She unlocked the door and then said: “Oh jeez, sorry,” and turned toward him, extending her hand. “I’m Sara. Sara Lawrence. Don’t laugh.”

Matthew didn’t want to laugh, he wanted to kiss her. Seeing her outside the break room he hadn’t really noticed, but he did now: Green eyes, the color of apples verging on ripeness. Face shaped like a satin box of chocolates. Matthew felt something shift inside his chest. His ribs spread outward slightly like fingers, his heart pushed forward against the inside of his torso.

He had to shift his laptop to his left hand to shake. “I’m Matthew,” he said. “Matthew Bledsoe.” In a rare attempt at humor he added: “Don’t laugh.” He cringed inside as soon as he’d said it, but she giggled and said, “Okay, I *won’t*.”

She waved her hand into the storeroom. “It’s all in here. Yuck, right? No one’s been able to go in here for a week. Is it like this at other places you go?”

“Pretty much,” he said, and she nodded. “But I’ve only been coming here for a few months, so everyone’s going above and beyond. So it’s a little worse here.”

“Well, you’ve got a tougher nose than I do.” She smiled, stepping around him, and walked away.

“Wait,” called Matthew.

She turned.

“Do you want to have coffee, maybe? When I’ve got the mold off my hands.”

She smiled again and Matthew held his breath. “Sure,” she said. “Why not?”

#

While Matthew was working in the storeroom, Harry stopped by. He was a potbellied man who liked calling Matthew “Tiger” and then focused his eyes on some middle distance, as if remembering a time before his potbelly when someone had called him Tiger.

Today, he slapped Matthew’s shoulder, said, “Hiya, Tiger,” then gazed around the storeroom. “Wow. Whole lotta raunch in here, huh?”

“It’s not so bad,” said Matthew. “I’m glad to see you, though. I wanted a chance to talk about the corporate referral you mentioned last time.” Right now, all Matt’s accounts were local, meaning he worked directly with people like Harry. But Harry said he was pleased with Matthew’s results, and if things continued going well, he’d mention it to his regional boss. Deploying Perish Tracker at the regional level would multiply his business by ten overnight. Things would grow quickly after that, if region heads started talking to each other. Matthew could imagine a map of the state, and server instances of his tracker spreading out quickly, like spilled juice. He’d have to hire people. Maybe two. The thought made him lightheaded.

“We’re doing good,” said Harry, reaching to poke a box of butter that had gone soft and transparent. “One more visit, just to make sure the decrease in loss isn’t a blip. Okay, Tiger?”

“Well, it would be great to get started sooner, but...”

Harry slapped his shoulder again. “Your work stays this good? Whole region’s gonna know about it in a few weeks.”

#

Matthew’s coffee date with Sara was one of the rare moments of sustained charm in his life. Sara had a latte. Matthew shook nutmeg onto his cappuccino with a single swift cut of the shaker, hoping the sure movement of his hand would make him seem sophisticated. Perhaps even European. Matthew explained his job: how he input specification codes from every perishable food item that was “dropped and left” – misplaced in a non-refrigerated zone – into a computer program that tracked how much revenue a store lost. Grocery stores sometimes did this themselves by calculating the price of everything spoiled, but this only gave them a total of lost revenue. Matthew’s program (PerishTracker 2.0, patent pending) used algorithms to analyze patterns, so stores could discover if one brand of cheese was being dropped more than others, or if a certain location was particularly prone to left-behind potato salad. Then Matthew would suggest how to prevent it: rearrangement of promotional displays to make them less inviting to set things on. Things like that.

He didn't tell her about how he had to hold his breath to scrape green-orange fur off packages of meat so he could read the labels. Or how he had to step out of storerooms to get fresh air, or how he scrubbed his hands at the end of the day, using entire motel-sized bars of soap to take the stink off his hands and wrists and then air-drying his chapped skin. He still loved being an entrepreneur, but dealing with so much rot was adding up to a serious dent in the time he could devote to sales and updating his algorithms.

He made jokes, and she laughed. She even snorted into her latte once, then looked at him, giddy and accusing, as she coughed into a napkin. As they stood at her car saying good night, she clasped his hand quickly and Matthew, distracted by her eyes, wasn't even embarrassed by the raw skin of his palms.

For the rest of the month, Matthew's happiness made him immune to the smells and textures of his job. Between stores, he rolled down his windows, rolled up his sleeves, and turned the radio volume higher than he ever had. One employee in Langston Ridge saved an entire leg of lamb, and the plastic that should have kept in the worst of the smell had been perforated by a jagged bone. When Matthew saw that maggots had made a home under the barcode, he just whistled as he used a knife to pry the label away.

At the Riverside store, he thought of a way to track drop and leaves by time of day crossed with store location. In the reeking storeroom, he went through past data, typing with

one hand and eating a pastrami sandwich with the other. He saw it: a trail of chicken salad in the baking goods aisle every Thursday afternoon.

“Sure,” said the deli supervisor, when Matthew went out to praise the sandwich and ask about the chicken salad. “I know who you mean. Little old lady.”

Matthew got a call from the Riverside manager the next day. The manager was ecstatic. “We got her! She goes to the deli and then she goes to the baking aisle! But she *doesn't use a basket*. Tries to carry everything! And she puts *down* the chicken salad to pick *up* her muffin mix. And leaves the salad behind!”

“I'm happy to help,” said Matthew. “And if you upgrade your PerishTracker package now, you can save up to three times the revenue...”

The manager chuckled. “Seems like the package we have is doing pretty well.”

“Sure, but the increased upfront costs pays for itself in just a couple months when you take into account...”

“We're fine with what we have now,” the manager interrupted. “But thanks for offering, son.”

#

Matthew talked to Sara a couple times from the road, or from his apartment, which had become a dusty repository for his SQL and R textbooks, the licensing documentation for PeriShure, LLC, and his now-dead houseplants. He always thought of something witty to say first, some lightly cutting observation on the ValueFoods manager he'd seen most recently, or even something he'd seen during his drives across the region.

She laughed, she asked questions, she compared what he told her to her own ValueFoods experiences. And although he did his best to steer the conversation away from PerishTracker 2.0 (patent pending) she managed to bring it up a few times. She seemed genuinely interested when he told her how he'd gotten the idea (a custom birthday cake he'd seen abandoned in the soup aisle) or how the algorithms worked (he kept that at a high level).

"If I had more capital," he said, "I'd do observational stuff. Like finding a way to see people as they're dropping stuff and then doing follow-up interviews with them. Figure out the root causes, fix those."

"Well, you can," she said. "PerishTracker is about to take off and you'll be fabulously rich and famous. Right?"

He tried to imagine it happening. "I guess. That's always the hard part, you know? You get the idea and it's great. And you sell some people on the idea. And there's no one else to

share the credit with. So the ups are higher, but the downs...it's like they were hills before and now they're cliffs. With no safety net."

"Yeah." She sighed. "I think I know what you mean. Cliffs."

#

The evening before he went back to Pine Bluffs, he made sure the spaces under his fingernails were pink. He sent out a shirt for overnight cleaning and the next morning, the starched-shut sleeves made a tearing sound as he pushed his hands through.

The manager met him at the front of the store, and although Matthew glanced down the row of checkout aisles, he didn't see Sara. "Hi, Harry," Matthew said "Got a minute? I'd like to talk about the frozen dinners in aisle eight."

"Sure."

Matthew went into Harry's office and they both sat. When Harry's eyes slid over Matthew's shoulder to the door, Matthew turned. Sara came into the office and stood leaning against the doorframe behind Matthew. "Hi," she said. "Don't mind me."

Harry glanced at Matthew, eyebrows up. Matthew gave a little shrug.

He told Harry about the frozen dinners, the curious variation of brand paired with consistency of drop locations. Told Harry his theory of who might be doing it. Suggested a

couple preventative measures. Sara's rubber soles made little squeaks on the floor, and a couple times she puffed out little sighs.

Afterwards, Matthew tried to be nice about it. "Next time," he said, "Just give me a minute alone with Harry, okay?" He couldn't forget Harry's perplexed looks, and the way he hadn't called Matthew "Tiger" when they shook goodbye.

"Don't be silly." She lifted up onto tiptoes to kiss the side of his face, repeatedly, like a bird drinking out of a puddle. "He doesn't care. Anyway, I need to watch out for you."

Matthew wasn't quite sure what she thought she was watching out for, and she wouldn't tell him. She seemed to think it was so obvious that he was making fun of her by asking.

#

He was halfway through his regional rounds – a week and a half away from returning to Sara – when the Alderwood store pulled their account. "I'm really sorry about this," the manager told him over the phone. "Regional says we've maxed out on the prevention we can do with your system, and now it's just...you know."

"No," said Matthew, trying to be pleasant. He was gripping his phone hard enough to make the plastic groan. "I don't know."

The Alderwood manager gave a few audible grimaces. “Fluff,” he finally said. “Just...information we can’t do anything with.”

#

Matthew spoke to Sara the night before he returned to Pine Bluffs, talking lightly about how he needed guy time with Harry. He wanted to see her, of course, but not at work.

“Come on,” she said. “No one wants *guy time* with Harry.”

“Just give us time alone.” Matthew rubbed his jaw and noticed for the first time in weeks how rough his hands were. “I don’t want to get you in trouble, anyway. I’m sure you’re not supposed to be dating anyone at work.”

“But you don’t work at ValueFoods.” She giggled. “*Silly.*”

#

As soon as he stepped into the Pine Bluffs store, Sara saw him and closed her station, leaving customers in line. She wrapped her arm around his waist, matching the length of her stride to his as he walked back toward Harry’s office. “I missed you,” she said. “Three weeks is too long.”

Harry stepped out of his office and watched them approach. Matthew said quickly: “I want to see you, but *please* Sara...”

Sara tightened her grip, and suddenly Matthew felt a rush of something too hot, too all-encompassing to be called anger, at least anger as he'd known it. This was his job, his *life*.

He pushed her arm away and hissed, "Later."

In his office, Harry shook his head. "What have you gotten yourself into, Tiger? You know she's only seventeen?"

#

That conversation with Harry was the toughest thing Matthew had ever done. More difficult than his first calls to grocery store managers, trying to explain PerishTracker® without sounding desperate, trying to sound confident even after they said: "Wait, it does *what?*" through their laughter. Matthew told Harry what he would gain by upgrading the Tracker package, how he could get a cut of the returns once he'd advocated PerishTracker® to the corporate office. Emphasized now was the time to act.

Harry never met his eye, and the word *seventeen* hung between them. "I just don't think I can stick up for you," Harry said, finally. His voice, like his gaze, seemed fixed in the middle distance somewhere. "I don't think you're the guy I thought you were."

#

Matthew only answered Sara's calls after he had left town. "How old are you?"

“You left me sitting there!”

“Sara,” he said. “How old?”

She sniffled loudly. “What did Harry say?”

“Can’t you just answer—” Matthew took a deep breath. “Look. Sara. I like you. A lot. But it doesn’t matter if...”

The sniffing stopped.

“I should have seen it before. I’m an idiot and...” he decided laying it on thick might be a good idea. “I know I’ve lost the best thing that ever happened to me.” He took a breath. “I just need you to tell Harry nothing happened. That you and I...that there was nothing inappropriate there. Okay? Please?”

“You know what?” Her voice was as quivery and cold as gelatin in the freezer. “That would be a lie. Are you asking me to lie?”

“It’s not a lie!”

“No?” Her voice warmed up, becoming coy. “You don’t remember the sex?”

Matthew got dizzy. “We didn’t...”

She hung up.

#

He went back to Pine Bluffs the next week, as quickly as he could get away from his other accounts. He'd been rehearsing ways to beg for Sara's mercy. On his way to Harry's office, she stepped out of the staff restroom and stopped. Matthew stopped, too. "Sara. Hi."

She turned away and walked down the hallway, pulling out her retractable key ring. "I'll let you in. But it's the last time."

"I'm not here for that." He jogged to catch up. "I came to talk to you actually, and Harry too, and see..."

"It's the last time." She stopped with her hand on the door handle. "Because Harry's going to fire you."

Matthew's mouth went dry. "He's...he said that?"

"No." She smiled and he remembered how her face had been like a satin heart. "But he will."

"Sara." He tried to think of what he could say, how he could beg, tell her how hard he'd worked, how he'd given up everything for PeriShure, LLC, and she was being unfair. But her eyes had gone flat, dull, like a layer of wax on an apple's skin.

"Sara," he said quickly. "Don't do this. I love you."

She watched him: long excruciating seconds while her eyes twitched over his face. Then she said, “Yeah, right.” She sipped in a lungful of air and held it when she opened the door.

The smell rolled into the hallway. It was the worst thing he had ever smelled, worse than if the maggot-ridden leg of lamb was stacked on a heap of other sheep parts and left in the sun. The smell was tangible. It enveloped him. It invaded his sinuses and expanded.

Still holding her breath, Sara gestured him inside. He followed the movement of her hand, hearing the word *love* echo in the hallway.

Inside the storeroom the heat was turned up and there was more food than careless customers could possibly have dropped in a week. The food seemed selected for how revolting it was: slime-coated fish filets, cracked and sulfurous eggs, puddles of hairy milk surrounding ice cream cartons.

“Enjoy,” she said, and closed the door. In the immediate darkness, Matthew believed he could hear the food putrefying, could feel the rot covering his skin, and realized the only things in the storeroom were in the process of dying or already dead.

Adam Haver

Ballet

Through the glass I watched
a ballet without sound,
a rhythm but no beat,
a song full of silence.

My eyes caught glimpses
of grand skill and discipline,
but all else was lost to me,
the music and the reason.

And then I saw at last-
it was no windowpane
but a mirrored reflection,
a semblance of endeavor
at the interminable desk.

My movements were quick,
graceful but unlively,
full of a tired sound.

There is always demand
and so, the dance goes on.

Merryn Rutledge

Supply Chain, Pandemic Economy

A bright clementine I bought this morning spills
blossom-scented juice—and a cache of questions.
Who got up at dawn in rising heat
and rode a crowded bus to pick the long rows of trees?
Who ferried tractor loads to the packing plant
where what *señors* and *señoras* stood for hours
culling fruit and heaving crates onto giant pallets?
What truckers fought to stay awake
to bring the harvest east to us, the winter-weary?
In the grocery store this morning, the man building
perfect pyramids of clementines was also singing.
He looked my way and, switching to English, asked,
Miss, what can I help you find? He smiled.
I have everything, I might have said—the fruit of many.

Tom Lagasse

Spice Of Life

For eight hours a night, minus two
fifteen-minute breaks and thirty
more for dinner, I run the auger filling
machine in Production Room I.
Tonight, my teammate and I
are running cayenne pepper. My job
is to pulse the pneumatic pedal
with a drummer's steady rhythm
releasing a pre-weighed amount,
send the bottles down the line,
through the metal detector and to be
capped, and he will box the finished
product. A few particles escape
until a thin, invisible cayenne
cloud accumulates. My senses disappear:
eyes mist from a low-grade burn.
A deliberate film builds on my glasses
so slowly that I do not notice the haze

until I am on break. All I taste is a
faint heat. Nose blind, I cannot smell
what has been absorbed into my skin
and clothes until I shower well after mid-
night. Through the discomfort, I stay
true to that internal beat. My job depends
upon it. The cayenne pulses like blood
through the auger, and I am the heart
of the operation. Tray upon tray
of clear plastic bottles are pumped with
the lifeblood of this company. Together,
we fulfill our destiny.

Victoria Giang

臨時收入臨時生活

Temporary Income, Temporary Living

Everything sold in town had got so expensive these last few years, villagers couldn't live nearly as well as they used to. But a bachelor in the prime of life who wasn't afraid of work could get by easily enough.

Guisheng, Shen Congwen

In order to spend another day in the internet café, I have seen many sell their ID cards, their blood, or a pillow picked up from the street. They would even steal or rob or do anything.

[The Vagabond Club](#), Du Qiang

With strong arms and body, a man can be as happy as a little god. That was an old saying. Guisheng had gone out east to the area around Jingle Market because, in the countryside village where he was from, he had heard that, in a single day, a laborer could earn the same as what he would earn as a farmhand around his village in a month. He didn't have his own land in his village, just a share of his family's land, and there were other men in his family, so there really was nothing keeping him there. He had been making ends meet by hiring himself out to others on a daily basis since he graduated middle school. It was without question that he went down to try his luck in the factories in Shenzhen.

At first, he just hung around the market and stood around where the recruiters hung out, clutching his bucket, early to get in line. In that way, he had gotten work in nearly all the factories around. But he quickly gave up on doing that daily. It didn't feel like there was any purpose to saving, either for a house or anything else. His mother's house had just been

demolished to make room for apartment blocks, and everyone had to walk or ride their scooter a long distance just to cultivate their fields. Some of the older people had been crippled in the fight over the demolition process. Why save to buy a place out there? It was a dead spot. No woman would want to go live out there anyway.

He quickly realized he had no future.

But the loss of his future was a gain for the present. That was how he became one of the Sanhe Gods: the day laborers who knew no ambition, no striving and who worked as little as possible for as much as they could get, only to spend it on casinos, paid sex, or to spend the night playing League of Legends or watching porn at the internet café.

That morning, Guisheng had woken up to an incessant buzzing from his phone, blowing up with messages. The sun wasn't up yet, but the covered rooftop where he slept was already beginning to radiate heat. He sat up on the quilt that was spread across the moldy concrete beneath him and started to read through the increasingly insistent messages. It was the recruiter who had gotten him into X Factory telling him they wanted him to stay on as a permanent employee. He rubbed the back of his head, shaggy from lack of shaves. If he became permanent, he would be on salary, and he would have to live in the factory dorms, where he would be at the beck and call of the floor supervisors, and woken up in the middle of the night as it pleased them to fill last-minute orders. He couldn't stand having his freedom curtailed like that. He started typing out a message and then gave up; he wasn't good with words. He would just go meet him at the market and maybe, if he dared, try to get a free meal out of him while he strung him along about the offer.

The recruiter was one of the richest men he knew in the area, as he had contracts with all the big and small factories alike. He got commissions daily for all the heads he brought on as well as monthly fees and commissions for people he brought in from the countryside or by converting temporary day laborers into semi-permanent employees. He was glued to the screen

of his phone at all times, writing sweet words to country boys and girls to get them to come to the city to work, and watching his digital wallet's balance climb higher and higher with each small deposit. He was able to front money for meals to the desperate workers, and his eyes were sharp enough to determine who among those standing around Jingle Market could make it through a day on the factory floor. His heart was icy enough to beat a willful subordinate into submission and to extract the promised sum on time from stingy factory supervisors.

“Guisheng, why didn't you take the permanent job at the factory? What are you going to do now?” The recruiter was crestfallen to see Guisheng come all the way out to meet him only to reject his offer.

“I'm not like him,” he answered, gesturing to the one-armed man swiping his phone, legs crossed in his wheelchair. “I can still live day to day and do better than a permanent employee. I'm not only a wage slave.”

“Alright, I can't win against you. I'll find you something good today. Not permanent but a little longer term, how's that?” the recruiter told him.

Guisheng looked thoughtful for a moment but shook his head.

“Not today, or even this month. I've got plenty. I'm going to play, and I'll be back in a few days.” He smirked and walked off at a slow pace.

“Must have sold his ID papers. Complete dimwit, typical. Useless,” the recruiter grumbled, and went back to swiping his phone, seeking other targets. He had several spaces left to fill for the day, plus longer contracts he needed to fulfill for larger payouts. It was hard to find anyone to take long contracts here. He needed a steady fresh supply of recruits from the country looking to make their way into the city. Before long, they would be corrupted and start looking for jobs that paid more and made less demands on their time. This city turned country

people rotten at an astonishing pace, as if it was a factory that took naïve, hardworking bumpkins and manufactured them into no good, spoiled kids.

x x x

Guisheng picked up cigarette butts from the plastic bottle outside the internet café and lined them up by length on the plastic table. He picked out only the longest ones as he waited for his friend to finish the last few rounds of League of Legends. He used to spend entire nights at the net café when he first arrived here, fresh from the countryside. He had been sixteen years old, and there was no one around to stop him – he'd gotten decent enough that he thought about going pro, but he was too hot tempered and easily distracted. Those pro-gamers had become respectable citizens, netting big contracts and winning huge cash prizes, but the Sanhe Gods had no ambitions. Eventually he'd lost his interest in gaming totally, although some of the younger kids occasionally asked him to teach them a thing or two. He didn't even bother going inside anymore.

When his friend finally finished, they rode rented bicycles along the riverside. Mulberries grew beside the bridge where some of the more hardened vagabonds slept. He remembered that Little Red loved mulberries, as red as her little lips. There were several trees growing on the riverbank, which was flooded with water as brown as milk tea, and lined with foam along the edges. The riverside was steep, and the trees grew every which way along the steep hillside. They were laden down with fruits sparkling bright against the cloudy sky.

“Come on, let's pick a few. Help me out,” Guisheng told his friend, enchanted at the thought of plucking a few of the berries to give as a present.

“Fuck your mother, prick, get them yourself,” his friend told him and laid down on the still damp grass before hopping up, brushing himself off and laying himself back down a second time. “Give me something to smoke.”

“Don’t ask me to light it for you,” Guisheng said and threw him one of the burnt ends.

He scrambled down the hillside and made his way toward the mulberry tree, cap in hand to collect the fruit. But the ground around the tree was muddy and thick, and the branches of the tree were too weak to support him climbing them. All he could do was pull the branches down closer to him and pluck as many of the fruits as he could at once. Then he cradled his hat gently as he climbed back up the hill one-handed. By the time he got back up, the cuffs of his tastefully distressed tight jeans were mud-encrusted. His friend was on his feet in a defensive pose, standing down a feral riverside dog whose fur stood up on the ridge on its back.

“City people,” Guisheng spit. “Scared of something as common as a dog.” He stamped his feet and yelled at the dog until it turned tail and fled.

“Thanks, bro, you saved me there. I don’t know what he wanted from me.”

The dog slinked back to lap something up off the ground; it was the mulberries that had fallen from Guisheng’s cap.

“Help me get a few more of these,” Guisheng told his friend, shaking his hat.

“Alright, I guess I owe you,” he said, and they scrambled back down to pick berries together under the grey sky.

x x x

Guisheng was on his way to the convenience store with his gift in hand. He had “sourced” a plastic clamshell box with red plastic foam padding on which he had arranged the mulberries in orderly, slightly overlapping rows. They were glistening like jewels, delectable, and they looked as fine as those sold in any shop. He hoped Little Red would be delighted.

She worked at a small convenience store set up in the front room of her aunt’s ground floor apartment, and he was certain she was the most beautiful woman in town. When he

entered the store, her aunt was seated behind the counter, and he sheepishly held up the package of mulberries.

“Present for you, big sis,” he said.

“I know that’s not meant for me. But why are you here in the middle of the day? You get kicked out of the factory for slacking?” She said, and she motioned him over lazily, revealing a little gold bracelet that slipped down the still plump and firm flesh of her forearm.

“Just taking a break between jobs.”

“That’s no good for you, Guisheng. You’re not like the other so-called Sanhe Gods. I can tell you still remember how to work. I never hear you complain or angle for settlement money, or go be a money boy or run off gambling. Don’t get rotten. You’re one of the only good ones here,” she admonished him.

“Well, you know, I like the freedom I have,” he said, hesitating. He was tongue-tied and peered behind Little Red’s aunt, trying to spot her.

“Oh, you’re looking for Little Red? She went out to the movies with her new friend,” her aunt said in a loud voice, giving Guisheng a cool once over.

Just then, Little Red appeared through the door to the storeroom, and Guisheng tapped the plastic box of mulberries on the table.

“What new friend? I was just hanging clothes up in the back, and I heard Auntie out here making you squirm. I decided to have mercy on you. No one comes to this store just to get lectured,” she said and smiled at him, then pounced on the mulberries, cracking open the plastic loudly and popping one in her mouth. “Wow! These are unusually sweet! Where did you get these?”

“I may not be the richest, but at the very least, I’m resourceful,” Guisheng boasted, giving a meaningful look to Little Red while her aunt burst into guffaws.

“Not the richest – I’ll say! The way you talk, oh!” She covered her lipsticked mouth while she laughed. At that moment, the recruiter walked in.

“A pack of Yu Xi cigarettes, boss,” he said with his characteristic swagger, smacking his hand down on the counter. A man in a dingy and ill-fitting Japanese suit followed behind him. The recruiter turned to Guisheng. “So this is where you ran off to today. Meet your next new boss. He just moved in from Chongqing as the new floor manager at Y Factory. You know the one, they make peripherals, headsets and keyboards. I can get you in there tomorrow if you want.” The recruiter peeled open his new pack of cigarettes and offered Guisheng the first.

“How much would this be, miss?” the new floor manager asked Little Red as he pointed to a plastic comb. “I forgot to bring my own. I’ll probably need to come back here to pick up a few more things. I forgot so many things back home,” he told her. Little Red quoted him the price. Then, eager at the prospect of further sales of even cheap daily use goods, she showed him where the toothbrushes, undershirts, and soap were located, and offered him a discount on a set of everything.

“Yes, sir. I’ll definitely be there tomorrow. What time? And how many days do you need me?” Guisheng answered the recruiter, a little more aggressively than he normally spoke, eager to attract Little Red’s attention back to him.

“That’s excellent. It’s so good we ran into you here,” the floor manager said, clapping him on the shoulder.

x x x

The week at the factory assembling keyboards left Guisheng's fingers a bloody mess. All the skin peeled off the tips of them, and he wore double gloves to try to dull the raw sensation. He listened to some of his coworkers seated at the workstation next to him gossiping.

"Did you hear about Miss Hsu's miscarriage? I heard it happens to a lot of the factory women, but I say she got lucky with this one. Both are hazards of the job, really," one of the women said and snickered to the other that was seated beside her. They turned on Guisheng next when he had no reaction.

"Did you ever see a Sanhe God work like this? I clocked him right when he came in, that greasy hair and those dry lips, like he'd just walked in bleary-eyed from an all-nighter at the net café," one of them said, poking fun at him.

Guisheng just smiled to himself. He'd received a message just yesterday that the local government had given a settlement to his family for their village land, and since he was registered there too, he was entitled to some money. It was a windfall. He was planning to buy a new smart watch for Little Red and ask her what she thought he should do with the money. He was hoping that she'd want to open a shop together in another town. She could run it; he'd just provide the start-up capital. He had a feeling she'd like that idea.

Shifts weren't supposed to last over ten hours, but when they had an order to fill, they simply had to push through to fill the quota. Otherwise, the factory would lose the contract and no one would end up getting paid. There was no other way. And Guisheng desperately wanted the money from the job for the smart watch.

So when they pulled him out of bed in the middle of the night, he got up and worked. And when they asked him to stay on an extra few days, even though his temporary position was up, he welcomed it. They paid him out for the initial period, and he ordered the smart watch. He could use the extra money he'd earn to buy a few more presents and a new shirt for

himself, to replace the stained polo that he washed and hung out to dry nightly. He had examined his hands and decided to push through. They'd have time to heal later.

After his last few days were up, he went to see the new floor manager who had agreed to hire him. Guisheng wanted to thank him for the opportunity – he had even bought him a cheap bottle of liquor, the most good-looking of the cheap bottles. But he couldn't find him anywhere that day, so he left it on his desk and walked out, leaving a note where he only signed thank you and his name. He wasn't confident enough to write anything more without misspellings. He had never been the type who was good with words.

Guisheng walked out into the street, under the sun he'd seen so little of these past weeks, and honestly, hadn't cared to, since it was so hot and humid. All the sun did was bring out the stench of the water that pooled in the alleys. He went to the market to buy a few things for Little Red, so they could share a meal together, a whole fine fish, some vegetables, more wine. He would have her aunt cook it for them all to eat, and he'd give her an envelope as well, for taking such good care of Little Red for all those years, and to ingratiate himself with her. Carrying all these items in colorful plastic bags over his arms, Guisheng ran into a guy he'd worked with in another electronics factory before. This friend came from a different village but his same county, so that they shared a similar dialect. Such differences and similarities mattered little in Sanhe's territory, where everyone was severed from their pasts and lived day to day.

"Have you heard about it? Little Red really hit the jackpot this time. A factory foreman. And they say he bought out the whole shop from the aunt so that all she has to do now is collect rent off him. Of course, she was eager for Little Red to pull him. They say he has a wife back in Chongqing but what of it? She's not here, is she?" he told him and cackled.

Guisheng spit on the street and then rubbed the back of his head with his hands, still chapped from those couple of weeks he'd endured on the job.

“So what’s that mean? She’s still going to work at the shop?”

“I doubt it. Maybe she’s there for a couple more days, but he’s moving her into one of those buildings.” His friend pointed to the skyline that rose up around Jingle Market – a skyline that was looking increasingly prosperous in contrast to their increasingly shabby looking street. “And what’s all this for? What’s the occasion?” he said, pointing out the bags.

“Nothing, nothing. I just felt like it. I’m having a get together with a friend by the riverside,” Guisheng said.

“You are? Can I join you?”

“Sure, sure. I have something to do first but you can meet me down there tonight,” Guisheng told him.

Despite what he had heard, Guisheng still went down to the store, around the back alley entrance where Little Red hung the clothes. He saw her sitting out there, on the little plastic stool, and the floor manager was squatting down beside her with his arm around her neck, and he was grinning like a fool. Guisheng dropped his bags right where he stood and walked off.

x x x

Later that evening, a few of his friends came down to the riverside spot where they usually hung out to wait for Guisheng. There was an orange glow out on the horizon, visible just over the riverbanks, then they heard the sound of sirens.

“What a sunset!” one of them said.

“That’s fire, prick.”

They scrambled up the bank to find out where the glow was coming from. After walking a block, they found a crowd gathered near the convenience store, which was all ablaze. Some people were pointing at the top of a nearby apartment building, which was also burning, but the

two buildings were too far apart for a spark to have blown over and set the other fire. Firemen were arriving to put out the blaze.

“Is it because it’s been so hot recently? Two fires in one night?” one old woman asked her neighbor.

“They’ve lost everything in that shop. And right after that rich man bought it, so strange,” her neighbor said.

One of Guisheng’s friends recognized the rooftop as the spot where Guisheng slept at night. It was in an apartment building where one could easily get onto the stairwell and climb up to the top. There was a covered area where one of the building’s residents stored paint and other tools of his trade, but the rest of the rooftop was open. He remembered it because when he had moved into the area around Jingle Market, Guisheng had invited him to sleep up there, too. There weren’t any mosquitoes, but he preferred the beds in the dorms and hostels to the hard concrete, even with a quilt spread on top of it.

Little Red was in the crowd, watching the firefighters tear down the walls of her shop so that the fire wouldn’t spread. The floor manager was beside her with his arm encircling her sympathetically, and she was crying.

“Missing your old home?” Guisheng’s friend thought to himself as he watched her cry. “You’ll have something a million times better than this. If you’re still crying then, you might as well kill yourself.”

The firefighters determined that there was no one in either of the places where the fire was burning, so there was no one to save. It made their job easier.

No one could figure out where Guisheng had gone.

Meredith Brown

“Multiverse” by Peaer

In another universe...

I have never cried.

I have never worked a job I didn't want.

My friends all live in the same city.

In another universe...

I drive a brand-new car and

I don't love you more than you love me.

In another universe...

I don't cut off pieces of myself to fit into yours.

Instead

I stand up for myself.

My parents never leave me.

I never have to bus the rich's dirty dishes.

In another universe...

I realize I am a lesbian sooner rather than later.

In another universe...

I don't obsess over anything other than myself.

I grow up in a different part of Texas.

(I never meet you)

In another universe...

I am happy in a different way than I am in this one.

Not better, but different.

Zary Fekete

The Clown Machine

Tom worked at a toy factory. His station was the foam rubber pressing machine. His job consisted of two things.

First, he pushed a button which lowered a pneumatic piston. The piston pressed a rubber clown into shape. This took three seconds.

Second, he removed the rubber clown from the metal cradle and placed it on a table to the right. He had four seconds to do this.

When he was finished with 50 clowns, a conveyor machine whisked the table away and replaced it with a fresh one. It was in this way that Tom's work day was divided into seven second chunks.

Yesterday, at 21 seconds past 10 AM, Tom dropped a clown. It landed on the floor directly between the pressing machine and the table. The machines never stopped, Tom did not have enough time to reach down, to grab the clown, and to place it on the table. Instead, 49 clowns later, the conveyor machine took the table away, one clown short.

For the rest of the shift, the clown on the floor stared up at him. The rushing movement of each departing table created a slight, recurring breeze every seven seconds. The clown that fell on the floor, the one that stared at Tom, rocked back and forth with it, shaking its clown head.

CONTRIBUTORS

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Erin Clark is a queer American writer and clergywoman currently based in London, England. She grew up in the rust belt and until two years ago, has done more years in pizza-shop kitchens than in any other job. Erin's current life is a combination of the TV shows *Rev*, *Spaced*, and *The Office*. Her poems, stories and essays have been published in journals and magazines on both sides of the Atlantic, including the *Oxonian Review*, the *New Critique*, *Geez*, *Pilcrow & Dagger*, *The Hour* and elsewhere. She is the author of the nonfiction *Sacred Pavement* (2021, *That Guy's House*), and can be found online at emclark.co or on Twitter [@e_m_clark](#).

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Tom Lagasse has spent the last three years telling customers that items were out of stock due to supply chain issues for a family-run spice bottling company. During that time he also has helped implement food quality/safety procedures, worked the production rooms, hand-bottled imitation bacon bits, and lifted his share of boxes - all with mixed results. Before that he has bounced around as a retail clerk, freelance writer, and educational sales representative. He lives in Bristol, CT.

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Rachel B. Moore has worked as an office administrator and manager for over 20 years. From filing bank records and packing and shipping 50-lb bolts of leather and fabric to brewing high-end coffee and recording documents at City Hall, there is not much that fazes or surprises her anymore. Rachel received her MFA in Creative Writing in 2012, from Lesley University. She lives and works in San Francisco, CA. Her work can be found in *Debs: Four Women Writers on the Verge*, *The Lindenwood Review*, *The Stonecoast Review*, and *Peatsmoke Journal*.

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Neil Randall is a novelist and short story writer. His debut novel, *A Quiet Place to Die* (Wild Wolf Publishing), was voted e-thriller Book of the Month for February 2014. His first collection of short stories, *Tales of Ordinary Sadness* (Knox Robinson Publishing, 2016) received much critical acclaim. One story was short-listed for the prestigious Wasafiri New Writing Prize 2009, another long-listed for the RTÉ Guide/Penguin Ireland Short Story Competition 2015. His latest novel, *Bestial Burdens* (Cephalopress) was released in April of 2020. His shorter fiction and poetry have been published in the UK, US, India, Australia and Canada.

Merryn Rutledge ran a consulting business for 25 years before retiring to write full-time. As a consultant and leadership coach, she worked with people at all levels, from the factory floor and nurses in hospitals, to mid-level managers, to CEO's. As an adjunct professor teaching graduate-level management courses, she learned about students' work lives in all sectors. It was only during the COVID pandemic that Merryn came to more fully appreciate the people all along myriad supply chains. Merryn holds a doctorate in leadership. She is a widely published poet and book reviewer. A collection, *Sweet Juice and Ruby-Bitter Seed*, is being released by Kelsay Books in May, 2023. merrynpoetry.org

Jennifer Saunders is a poet living in German-speaking Switzerland. She is the author of the chapbook *Self-Portrait with Housewife* (Tebot Bach, 2019) and in the winter she teaches skating in a hockey school and drives her hockey-playing children to many, many ice rinks.

Connemara Wadsworth's chapbook, *The Possibility of Scorpions*, about the years her family lived in Iraq in the early 50's, won the White Eagle Coffee Store Press 2009 Chapbook Contest. Her poems are forthcoming or appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Solstice*, *Chautauqua*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, and *Valparaiso*. Her poem, *Mediation on a Photo* was a winner of The Griffin Museum of Photography's *Once Upon a Time: Photos That Inspire Tall Tales*. Connemara and her husband live in Newton, Massachusetts.

Dr. Thomas Reed Willemain is a former academic, software entrepreneur and intelligence officer. His flash fiction has twice been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and has appeared in *Ariel Chart*, *Granfalloon*, *Hobart*, *Burningword Literary Journal*, *The Medley*, and elsewhere. He holds degrees from Princeton University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

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James and Shannon are these people. Thoughtful, opinionated, detailed, and each possessing their own artistic voice and vision in the world.

Thank you.

Tim Batson, Editor-In-Chief 07/05/23

