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## HOLES

*Corey Qureshi*

Under the tiles in front of the fridge the hole deepened, wood warped and worn from wetness and footsteps. We asked the maintenance man to check it out. He became visibly annoyed, started it days later and left the floor in front of the fridge undone, a crusty rusted open hole that polluted all of our meals. A small canvas sheet was stapled over it with little effect. Two days of the stench and he still hadn't come to finish or at least patch it up.

"I can't deal with this anymore," I told Rosario. "I'm gonna have to look myself and figure something out. I can't think straight with the smell."

"Baby, no. If you fuck something up, they'll blame us and do nothing." His gracefully curled eyelashes worked with the pout contained in those round cheeks. Sometimes Rosario's dewy beauty disarmed me (especially when I was his baby), but not today.

"I'll be right back," I said, ran downstairs and grabbed a long steel bar to pry the tiles around the hole for a better look. I guessed the spot beneath the hole, then cleared the messy floor space in the office.

"What're you doing?" he called down. I started up the stairs and flashed him the bar. He rolled his eyes and moved out of the way.

"You think you can manage to cover it up? He left the tiles over there," Rosario said. He pointed near the low shelves that desperately needed to be dusted. In a pile were the same flimsy tiles that needed replacing. Repairs here were always quick, fixes that prolonged the apartment's problems.

"I didn't plan on covering it again, I just wanted to see what the smell was about," I told him. "There has to be a reason it smells like that and I need to end it now!"

I pulled the staples from the floor with the tip of the steel bar and tossed the sheet to the side. At first the old adhesive cracked with resistance, but the tiles that surrounded the hole came up pretty quick. Under the tiles were layers and layers of wood in different points of decay.

The hole bled over into small portions of these other spaces, otherwise I wouldn't've made a bigger mess. Wood chips and splinters were all around our feet so I told Rosario to stand back. His size 13's stepped over the edge of his chanclas, his huge toes near all the shreds worried me.

Overall, the hole was four or five feet wide. We could only see the darkest black, impenetrable even with a flashlight. I reached in and grasped at cold air. There was nothing immediately under the floor.

The smell intensified with all this exposure, so I walked to the closet and grabbed a scarf to wrap around my face. I came back and sat on the edge. I could feel how the floor caved slowly under my wide buttcheeks. I leaned in and reached for a surface with my foot, still felt nothing.

Rosario stepped in toward me — "Emile, you need to be careful!"

"Hey, stand back! The floor isn't the best over here," I warned him. Just as I put out my arm to push him back, the wood under me started to give. We both screamed and he reached for me, fumbled like he always did. We lost each other as the hole opened and took me.

I closed my eyes and expected to crash through the office ceiling. Instead, I fell a few seconds longer than anticipated and landed in a heap on a wooden landing. The planks were nearly as worn as our kitchen, but from a different tree. I looked up for the hole in my kitchen floor and saw nothing, just that same darkness from before. From the landing a set of steps went down. Behind me was a metal door with the type of handle you pull, not turn. After I checked myself for bruises (a long scrape on my shin from the fall), I stood and tried the door. Locked, firm and unmovable with any pressure I put on it.

The stairs shifted under my steps, a railing appeared as the rest of the basement filled in like a drawing. It was a large space. Tons of cardboard stuffed in larger boxes, napkins and various other food service stocks on racks, a hallway full of bottled drinks. Pipes littered the cement walls and ceiling as a network of fluids and debris flowed throughout.

The room converged on a larger hole, a perfectly cut cylinder three feet deep. It must've emptied itself from the bottom. At least seven different pipes aimed into the hole steadily pissed different color liquids to form a slimy bisque. This was where the smell that continually ruined my appetite came from.

I ripped a bit of cardboard and pushed a small piece down into the muck. A single deep glug from the pooled slime sucked the cardboard from my fingers like a machine. A strong burst of the odor fit itself into a sliver of smoke that rose and gave me a vulgar kiss, my reward for feeding it. I needed help if I wanted this smell contained.

I gave a second look around and acknowledged somehow I was in a restaurant's basement storage. I fumbled through the drinks, searched for a brand I knew Rosario liked. He would need some type of proof I wasn't lying once I found my way back. A voice came sharp from behind me.

"Hey you! That shit, on your first day? You gotta play it safe for at least a little while here," a man said to me as he dumped dirty mop bucket water into the hole. I drew toward him, ashamed and empty handed.

"I'm messing with you, you can grab what you like. They don't notice little things like that here." He waved me back to my business with the back of a hairy, dark brown hand.

I walked back with two juices and tucked one under my other arm so we could shake hands. He was a bit smaller than me, old with a mustache and eyes that expressed most of what his face couldn't.

"Hey. What's your name?" I asked.

"Diego. Y tu?"

"Emile."

"That's not who they told me was coming... But I've waited a while now and it doesn't matter to me. We have a lot to get done. Vente!"

Before I could ask where we were, he took off through a doorway that led down a hall I hadn't noticed before. We passed through a small room full of clothes, bags, clean rags in crates. After this, the hall slimmed to an unreasonable width. Diego turned sideways before he stepped up on a thick plank of wood installed over a spot where several large pipes converged. After I stepped up then stepped down, we walked through a tiny boiler room with a wet floor that led to another steel door, like the one from the staircase.

He held the door open for me, then we were in a dishwasher's nook. He pulled me gently by the shoulder to an older white woman and walked off.

"So you're the new one. Eduardo, right?" She didn't wait for a response and walked off. She wore a bandana, a white shirt with a black apron with red peppers printed all over it. The veins in her pink nose throbbed in their thinness. She came back around with arms extended and handed me a bucket full of cold shrimp.

"Can you clean these for me? Also, you're gonna be able to close tonight right?"

I didn't want to explain myself, explain the smell, explain the confusion of this basement, so I took the bucket. "What time are we open till?"

"Two A.M. Is that okay?" Her face showed that for many it wasn't (probably how I'd landed the job).

"Nah it's fine, can I just call my boyfriend first?"

"Sure," she said. "Phone's in the office, just leave things as you found them. The managers get sore over clutter."

I walked into the cramped office, found the phone and dialed what I thought was Rosario's number. A stranger picked up, began to bark out questions so I hung up. I called my own phone and after a few rings he answered.

"Hello? Who is this?" He sounded worried.

"Rosario? It's me, it's Emile. I'm okay."

"Where'd you go? It's been a while. I thought they only needed you for a few hours, I've been worried."

"Sorry baby, it's busy today. They're asking me to close, do you care?"

"I mean, I feel like I never see you anymore." He sounded apprehensive.

"Yeah, it's just been bad since we paid for the floor... It'll only be this way a few more weeks, then we can take that lil vacation. You still up to it?"

I felt Rosario's sadness through the line but held my own feelings out of the way. I didn't like to be away from each other either, but he was over dramatic at times.

"That sounds nice. You'll probably come up with some expense to keep us from going though," he said, about to list off various other complaints about me.

"Hey. Stop that. Watch a movie, read, go out tonight, something. I miss you but we can't say no to money."

"I know. I appreciate you doing so much."

"I'll see you in the morning, be good, don't be upset!"

We blew kisses in each others' ears and hung up. I went back to the corner and scraped shit from shrimp.

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## NEST EGG

*Claire Rudy Foster*

The problem, Jane thought, was that the distribution dates were different for everyone. The basic income check came on the sixth of the month, right after rent was due. Food stamps came on the day of the month that matched the last digit of your social. Medical benefits got loaded into your HealthGo card on the twelfth, or twelve days after the date of your last hospital discharge.

It wasn't even that much money: it was insulting actually, thought Jane, but everyone took it anyway. The economy was still recovering from the Fourth Depression. Even if employment was over 95%, who could afford to say no to state benefits?

If you didn't take it, you couldn't give it away.

It was easy to tell who had enough money to weather the recessions and who didn't. Riding the bus to work in the morning, Jane noticed the bumper stickers on the Jaguars and Teslas that pressed nose-to-fender in rush hour. *NPR All Classical . I Love My Co-Op. Don't Shop, Adopt .* A gold sticker meant a member donation, \$500 or more. If the sticker had a silver border, that was the highest level. It meant the person could afford to commit their annual distribution income to the nonprofit of their choice. More than one silver-rimmed sticker meant real wealth.

She sneered at a neo-Lambo hybrid covered in shiny donation badges. *These people. They fund a perfect society but still can't share the credit.*

Jane pulled the cord for her stop and stepped onto the curb. A few pigeons, pulling french fries from an abandoned McDonald's carton, scattered as she passed them. It was half a block to her office---an ugly walk. She was glad she'd bought the blocker glasses. She turned up the volume on her device and made sure she had a good grip on her tote bag. Her route took her under a filthy overpass, past a trash drop-off, and around one of the smaller East Side encampments. She told herself she wasn't scared, because she didn't want to be that person who was afraid of the world she lived in, but all the same she felt her pulse elevate until it was keeping pace with the synth beat in her headphones.

It wasn't even eight yet, and both sides of the sidewalk were already lined with

beggars sitting on cardboard squares. A few of them propped up handwritten signs, or put out battered hats and bowls to collect spare change. Jane walked stiffly, feeling many eyes on her. There was so much need. She didn't carry real money: hardly anyone did.

What would these people buy, with that kind of money? One sign said, *Reparations*. There were more of them down the block. Clumps of filthy hair. A man in American-flag pajama pants argued with a woman wearing a policeman's cap. Two people, so thin that their sex was indeterminate, fought over a wheelchair, yanking it back and forth. Jane was glad she couldn't hear their voices. The tents were covered in white streaks of bird shit. Pigeons nested against the beams of the nearby freeway overpass. She could smell a fire, meat cooking. The homeless caught rats, sparrows, ate them. They ate everything. Anything.

The encampment frightened her. It smelled terrible, even though there were community showers and two bathrooms. The nonprofits dedicated to serving this population provided sanitation, plumbing, clean syringes, personal care and paper products, but it didn't seem to make a difference. Everything was dirty. The new installations, like soap dispensers and outside sinks, immediately acquired a layer of grime. Orange caps floated in the gutters. Every other week, there was an ambulance outside the camp, loading out another overdose.

*This is fine*, Jane said to herself. She held her breath, as though poverty was transmittable, an airborne virus.

It felt contagious, all that bad luck, the sickening fumes of human need. Today was the fifth, though, and she didn't have her rent. Her account was close, but she was a hundred-odd shy of the total payment. Weekends were like that: accumulating service charges that all got dumped on Sunday at midnight. This wasn't the first time Jane had woken up to a smaller balance, but it was unusually bad timing.

She stepped around a body wrapped in a brown, scuffed tarp. She hated this walk. Every time, it wasn't just the smell or the muffled shrieks that made their way through the padding in her headphones. It wasn't the up-close desperation that might have been real or might have been performative. It was the vacant spaces on the sidewalk between panhandlers: the space that suggested, *you are not as far from this as you think*.

There was always a crack to fall through, no matter what the billboards said.

Jane tapped her security code into the office door and set it to lock behind her. This morning, nobody was sleeping in the stairwell, which felt like a small mercy. They were usually hung over or strung out or just plain sick. Loud but not combative. Yesterday, one of them had spat directly at her face when she asked him to leave. The phlegm splattered over the left lens of her blockers. Jane's boss Mitch had found her in the stockroom, looking for the alcohol swabs.

"If you have any HealthGo benefits left, you should probably make sure your vaccines are current," he said.

She didn't tell Mitch she'd already spent them on a mental health module that was supposed to help manage her chronic imposter fatigue syndrome. She only spent her benefits on the things that soap and water couldn't fix. The saliva smeared across her lenses when she rubbed them with the swab.

Pretending to be cognitively normal was exhausting.

How could it be worse, though? Chasing trespassers out wasn't part of her job description. She was a bookkeeper, which was funny, because nobody used actual *books* anymore. Jane's job was nudging the long columns of digits into line, balancing the daily ledger, and reviewing the industry grant applications before they made their way into the mail. Both sides of her desk were cluttered with soylent wrappers. Cherry chocolate. She cleared them into the trash hamper and sat down facing her monitors. The surface tablet, awakened by the proximal temperature of her body, lit up under her elbows. She set her tote bag on the floor. The screens flickered, updating. She watched them, munching a handful of pistachios out of her snack drawer.

*Overnight returns: increased. Spending: as predicted. Payroll: account balance holding. Budget: as predicted.* The financial news pinged on the right screen. Any fluctuation in the market might affect the nonprofits' monthly take. Political unrest, an election, another Constitutionalist riot, or more broken windows on Wall Street all meant decreased funding. A warhead in North Korea translated to job shrinkage at home: one less paid position. The donors stopped giving and the economy, at least below the 5% privilege mark, slowed. Above the line, of course, things continued as usual. Private banks, schools, and for-profits were insulated from all this. They didn't seem to understand how the rest of the



country was so easily affected by the day's headlines, when they were the ones who controlled the cash flow. They didn't want to pay to support upward mobility: they wanted to invest just enough to keep things as they were. Even the rich had their limits. Every time Jane saw the numbers drop, she thought, *what are you punishing us for now?*

The national news outlets sometimes went so far as to say to protesters, *if you'd just do your jobs, you'd keep your jobs. Don't you want your debt to go away? Why aren't you happy with all you've been given?* They couldn't limit the basic income, but they could shame you for being satisfied with it.

The system was set up to encourage compliance. They'd found ways of preventing dissent: HealthGo, for example, didn't apply to injuries or negative outcomes incurred in Free Speech Spaces. Police could ticket you and tag your basic income check with as many fines and fees as they wanted, sometimes thousands of dollars. Drain your whole account. It was all auto-debited, of course, and could be appealed in court, but if you didn't have money, what were you supposed to do? The message was clear. Keep your head down. Contribute to the society that sustained you. Try to be selfless. Meanwhile, the encampments got bigger.

*Ask Not What Your Country* was branded on every subway roll-up, on the side of every bus or blank building. Jane's office had a print of it in the break room. Next to it, a poster of New York Vermin. Deer, raccoons, pigeons, sparrows, Canada geese, rats, and squirrels. The handful of species that had managed to reproduce and adapt at rates that matched urban expansion. You never saw foxes anymore, not even in the zoo. The poster suggested different approaches to population control, mostly poisons applied in the breeding season. All seven species were gray, the color of concrete, evolved to blend into places without grass or trees. They were all scavengers. They survived because they took whatever they found, and left no trace behind. Even their nests were temporary. *Keep your head down .*

Jane tried not to look at the poster while she made the coffee. She filled the water compartment from the dispenser, then loaded the double pods into the coffee machine. It huffed and puffed. Last year's model, already breaking down. Nothing came with a warranty anymore. The reasoning was, *you have income:*

*can't you just buy another one?*

She mixed in a few spoonfuls of powdered milk from the cardboard canister. The coffee turned the color of faded pajamas.

She was \$200 short on her rent. A nice, round number. She'd need to pull up the list of transactions and see what had cleared overnight. Compound interest? A quarterly service fee? Maybe her account had been hacked again. It wasn't unheard of. The mental health tech who administered the mental health module had taken Jane's credit information verbally, over Skype. But if you were going to steal from someone, why not take everything you could? It seemed silly to help yourself only to what you needed, instead of scraping out every last credit.

Rent was deducted at midnight, when the fifth of the month became the sixth.

Payday began tomorrow at 4 p.m., after trade closed. Jane set her coffee on the neutral pad next to her audio set. The Skype comm blinked. Answering the phone also wasn't part of her job description, but like locking up, making coffee, and keeping the doorway clear, it ended up getting done anyway.

If she was smart, she'd try to negotiate better pay in exchange for these little tasks she did every day. They added up. They represented time, effort invested. The least she could do was try to get some of that back. She looked at the ledger every day: she knew that the Brooklyn Urban Bird Society could afford it.

After the Greater Accounting, nonprofits and community groups like BUrBS had flourished. The economy rebounded. Under the New Clinton Administration, people were encouraged to *spend their time giving*. It was a massive social education campaign, billions of dollars pumped into messaging across every conceivable platform. The income credits were supposed to create a volunteer state. A subsistence wage, universal healthcare, food stamps for everyone, and improved quality of life across the board meant that people like Jane had the chance to really do what they loved. The current President's double terms represented almost a decade of strong economic growth, high approval ratings, and decreased violence. It seemed like, with everyone's basic needs taken care of, there was nothing left to fight about.

Jane was applying to colleges when the credit bill passed. Universal education was still on the table, with private universities holding out. The President, who'd graduated from Stanford like her mother Chelsea, and then done a Master's at

Yale like her grandmother, was a strong proponent of public college, because of course *she'd* had a choice. It looked good, to be wealthy and choosing to live like someone who was just ordinary. Slumming.

Going to a private college was discouraged if you weren't from the 5%, but Jane didn't care. She'd dreamed about someplace with ivy on the dorms and ancient professors in cabled sweaters, talking about the marches in Ferguson and Little Beirut. She got into Georgetown. She studied, of all things, medieval illuminations.

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Maybe the \$200 was a student loan payment. She still had twelve years to go on the loans. She'd been at BUrBS since graduation, patiently working off the fancy education she'd wanted so badly. Her friends, less ambitious, had settled for a public, no-cost community college and were not only working, but saving their income credits. They were planning opulent weddings, housewarming parties, baby showers, group vacations to the Commonwealth of Hawaii. Everything was chronicled on social media. Their happiness was totally unavoidable, so Jane kept the notifications muted, especially when she was at work. She hated thinking about them, getting married on a beach in Thailand, while she sifted through receipts for birdwatching workshops and membership sign-ups. She was the one who got stuck, the last to leave the nest. Everything she needed was provided, but beyond that? Seemed to fall from the sky, enriching some people but not others.

In college, she would have sneered at all this. She had thought she was going to be an artist. Her friends weren't as smart as she was, and she scorned their aversion to risk, which she had thought was romantic. But after graduation, nobody wanted to hire someone who still worked with real ink and a hand-cut quill. She was a sideshow act; her family didn't have the money to help her set up a studio, or buy space in a gallery. She was, for the first time, truly poor.

She'd never wanted to be middle class so badly. Her desires were embarrassingly bourgeois. She fantasized about soft, mass-manufactured sofas, picture frames with glass in them, and imported cheese. Drawing all day, with no screens chirping at her. Cherries dipped in real chocolate. Even the flavor of the

soylent bars she liked smacked of decadence. She always wore her tote bag, printed with the Georgetown seal, design out. As if to say, *I don't belong where I've ended up* .

For Jane, \$200 was equal to a loan payment, or two non-subsidized meals, or five delivery charges, or a handful of incidentals. For BUrBS, it was equal to an executive hour, or half of a donor lunch, or a single standard member donation. Jane scrolled through the ledger. They were down to four full-time employees from the last reduction cycle. The appointment scheduler worked remotely; most of the work was done by unpaid volunteer staffers, hoping to earn points towards their annual Civic Contribution quota. Jane had once caught one of these volunteers in the supply closet, sneaking a box of silver-edged member stickers into his bag. Those sold on the black market for ridiculously high prices, sometimes even higher than an annual membership fee. Jane had heard about people adding the stickers to swag bags, or distributing them at weddings as party favors. After Jane reported the attempted theft, the stickers were kept in the safe in her boss' office. Her honesty was commended, but they'd also instituted a bag check policy. Nothing left behind was exempt from search. In fact, she was sure her airtight container of pistachios was lighter than it had been when she left work on Friday.

"Jane," her boss said, flipping the lights on. "What are you doing here in the dark?" "Just getting organized." She watched Mitch go into his office. Through the door, she could see the faux wood

paneling, walls crowded with award plaques and framed prints of local, native songbirds. Every year, he convinced another major donor that they could revive the Baird's Sandpiper population: that the East River's arsenic levels had subsided, that the banks were habitable by shorebirds. That money would erase the damage that money already had done. He'd told Jane once that his job was telling a story that someone wanted to believe in, whether it was true or not.

"It's all fear or greed," he'd told her. "They're afraid of not getting what they want, or greedy with what they've already got. But everyone likes songbirds. One guy gave us a million dollars because I could whistle like a scarlet tanager."

Jane heard the familiar *clump* of his personal device landing on its neutral pad. "Is that coffee I smell?" he called. She brought him a cup, with a packet of white sweetener stirred in. He thanked her, face

pointed towards the cascading icons on his desk screen. "Did we get that Audubon Scholarship Grant paperwork off last week? The deadline's

tomorrow," he said. That we made her bristle.

"Application," she said. "Not paperwork."

"Right." He picked up his coffee, blew on it. Tapped the navigation deck. "So weird that we still say paper."

She made an agreeing noise and went back to payroll. We . Sure. It wasn't a hard job, which was good, because her wages were low. But it was full-time, which meant the dullness wore on her. There was never time for anything else, after two hours on the train and nine hours in the office. She was glad there was only one real window, in her boss' office, because she would have spent too much time staring out it, wishing she was somewhere else.

It took an hour to set up the payroll deposits. Most of her tasks were automated, and she'd set up a few processes to populate recurring information. It was simple math, just in and out, and filling in the blanks with the same information as last time. Nobody had been sick this month, or taken a day off, which made things even easier. The scheduler got paid on a 1099, through a temp agency. The nonprofit filing forms were already done, ready to be sent with the payment stubs.

The blue tubes in the ceiling clicked overhead as the gas inside them warmed, casting a glow that was supposed to mimic the natural light spectrum. She saved her own timesheet for last. She was reluctant to look at how little progress she'd made.

*Jane Newman. Single. Deductions: 0. Tax Status: See Form 940.* No wonder she felt like nothing ever changed: it didn't. Her anxiety started to rise, bubbling through the muscles in her lower back. With the coffee, she took a packet of aspirin. The marketing and membership girls would be in soon, too loud and cheerful, sharing stories about their weekend dates. They had boyfriends who bought them drinks and held their places in line at clubs. They each had a cat, declawed bird-killers. Their parents were healthy. They talked about the places their friends' weddings would take them, this summer. Until Jane had left Georgetown, she had ignored this kind of talk: it was mundane, boring, unartistic. Now, she envied her coworkers' security. They didn't realize it, but a

future worth talking about was a luxury. Not everyone had one.

The *hours* field blinked at her, a soothing grassy green.

The payment was deposited at midnight. Hours from now. If she missed a rent payment, she'd be evicted. If she had no permanent address, she couldn't collect any income or benefits. If she couldn't collect income, she'd be panhandling in less than a week. She checked the draw account balance: over seven figures. She weighed her options.

She could put the money back the next month, or make it up by staying late. She was already coming in early, working half an hour unpaid in the mornings, off the clock. Over the past three years, that added up. It was more than 700 unpaid labor hours. Jane reviewed her morning routine. Door, lock, coffee, screen. Beginning to look at the stack of grant proposals, with their bureaucratic, silly titles in bold: *Not All Songbirds, Seeing Native Singers in Brooklyn, Urban Appetites and Foraging*. She calculated that more than half a year's wages were packed into those undocumented half hours.

Nobody was keeping track except for Jane.

She tapped the screen. Her work hours automatically populated into the drop down menu. Another three-figure paycheck, always a day late. A skipped or delinquent automatic withdrawal could freeze your accounts, for up to ten business days. That didn't happen at bigger banks, but she couldn't afford to belong to one. That was for the 5%. She'd joined a local bank and hoped for the best. There was a community credit union on practically every corner, willing to cash in non-standardized paychecks, pawn electronics, and offer an advance of high priced credits when you'd gone over your limit. 500% interest, compounded hourly. Jane's finger hovered over the ten-key. She added a zero to her paycheck. The sum in the payment window increased exponentially.

That looked better: the anxiety bubbles diminished, incrementally. Just for the sake of experimentation, she added another zero. They'd just finished another membership drive, so the account was flush. Printing the special stickers cost fractions of a cent: shipping was more expensive than the actual swag. The office paid more for coffee and cleaning supplies than she made in a week.

She tapped the zero again. It wasn't even close to the CEO's pay, still. Jane didn't whistle, couldn't do bird calls, but she knew the Latin names of every

species the monks had inked on vellum. She could identify the special combinations of chalks they'd mixed with goat urine to blend the colors. She had copied the hundred secret little leering faces that peeked, like opossums, out of the dense foliage of the illuminations' holy garden. She felt the invisible hand that shaped words from inky brambles. Learned how to be subversive, even under the eye of God. She clicked the blue moon in the window's upper right corner. A new drop down appeared: a calendar.

She backdated the payment, then sat back in her chair, considering what she was about to do. Her foot knocked against the trash hamper, making a hollow clang. She held her breath, but Mitch didn't say anything. He probably had his headphones on: he liked to listen to old Zeppelin recordings on the days he didn't have to take potential donors out to lunch. Jane's hair stuck to the back of her neck.

It had taken three months to save up for those blocker glasses. They weren't even Apple, just a knockoff brand from one of the pop-up marts. The strap on her canvas tote bag was wearing out. At home, a rat had climbed in her window, stinking of the Gowanus Canal, and chewed through every pair of leather shoes she owned in a terrible frenzy. If she pressed *send*, the payment would appear in her account within minutes. She could order takeout noodles, watch a new Skin Series episode, and buy a pair of decent shoes. She'd make rent. She'd say that there was an error this month, maybe something with the software, and point to an app glitch that existed but didn't affect the syndicate copy she'd downloaded for the office.

She was leaving enough for the utilities, the operating budget. And everyone else's paycheck. She was taking the equivalent of maybe 150 platinum donation stickers: a recurrent income source that they'd double in the next month, since not all the new membership sign-ups had been processed yet.

*It was a mistake*, she rehearsed in her head. Her hand crept into her snack drawer, withdrew a soylent bar, and peeled it.

"Jane," her boss called. She jumped. "Coming," she said. He was standing by the window, looking down into the street. "Look at this." The tent city was on fire. One of the tents was burning. Another one vomited a column of

dull orange smoke. The dwellings were packed together: it was difficult to see between them. Jane saw a few structures shaking, as though someone was locked inside and desperately trying to escape. A blue tarp, rigged up as an awning, sagged into black, smoldering holes as the heat ate the plastic away. A raccoon, cub dangling from her mouth, bolted for the safety of the overpass. From the window, Jane could see that the settlement was most cardboard, houses improvised from packing materials, and old camping equipment. All flammable.

"Did you call 911?" she asked. Mitch shrugged. "You know, it's not so far from here to there." He pointed down at the people standing on the sidewalks. They wore filthy backpacks,

stuffed with things that couldn't be left behind. They clutched each other, hands holding heads and shoulders and bodies close. One man, jacket smoking, rocked back and forth. Jane couldn't hear sirens, though Emergency Services was less than three blocks away.

"They all have exactly what we have, up here," her boss said. "What do they spend it on? People like this. You give them what they need, or you take it away, and the outcome is the same."

"The same?"

"No, worse. That place they're squatting used to be a park. Three species of sparrow migrated through it. I can guarantee that the birds contributed more. But the police won't evict these bums. The sparrows can't use this space. What's the point of protecting something that doesn't make the city more beautiful?"

"Ask not," Jane recited, like you were supposed to. She wanted to say, *there's no money in homelessness, or you'd be out there taking collections on it.* People liked birds because they were simple: reminders of a simpler time, when people hung clear tubes of seed outside, and watched the cardinals gather around to eat. They were beautiful, not like these ragged humans with their matted hair and filthy, darkened fingernails.

"I work here all day, looking down at them," he said. One of the little houses, nailed together from sheets of discarded plywood, ignited. The people on the sidewalk flapped their arms, as though they could fly away. They were *not* migratory. They weren't going anywhere.



Jane heard the first squeal of sirens.

"It's a short fall," her boss said. Then, he looked up, as though seeing her for the first time. "Having enough isn't enough. Food, water, healthcare, shelter. What about the rest?"

"The rest?" "You're young. You're lucky you don't know what you're missing." She knew, though. She felt the missing pieces acutely. She backed out, under the

pretext of refilling his coffee. When she got back to her desk, she could hear the shouting

outside, mixed with the fire services' horns. Her screens were all dark, so she slid a finger across the surface tablet.

*Transaction complete*. Her breath caught in her throat. She felt her ears burning. Her blood drained into her stomach, making her feel full. She felt no guilt, no anxiety. It was the sensation of having *enough*. The payday feeling, as though all of her distribution dates had suddenly aligned and she was complete, provided for, and safe.

Tomorrow, after everything cleared, she could report the error. Make it seem like a mistake. Her rent was covered now; if her boss believed her, she'd still have a job. He would. She was trustworthy. Hadn't she reported the sticker theft? She could point out the glitch to her boss, letting her voice shake while she explained that she'd read about this problem online. The error caused superimposed digits and incorrect ACH deposits.

He'd have to believe her. She had twelve more years to go.

At lunch, she slipped out to buy a sandwich. Suddenly, she could afford it. She could afford anything she wanted, until the theft was reported. She bought a package of cracker jacks and sat on a bench, scarred by skateboarders and insulting graffiti. Even with her blockers and headphones on, she could hear the sirens and shouting from the fire. The smell of burning plastic stuck to her nose. Pigeons crowded around her feet, pecking the pavement suggestively. She tossed a handful of sweetened popcorn into their midst and watched them fight over the kernels. Their lidless eyes gleamed, capturing everything, retaining nothing.

New York's two million pigeons build their nests on flimsy platforms, ledges, under bridges, and even on windowsills. As naturally cliff-dwelling birds, they roost in high, exposed, unstable places. A handful of straws, twigs, or dried grass signifies a nest but does not provide protection. Even with two parents and reliable access to food and warmth, nest insecurity makes the pigeons' outcomes unpredictable. Predators, weather, and lack of safe spaces shortens the expected lifespan. Most people do not think twice about a pigeon's future, Jane considered. After all, it's just a stupid looking grey bird. It doesn't even sing.

She let the popcorn fall from her fingers like gold-plated credits. As though there was an endless supply of candy, enough to give away, forever. The pigeons' hunger frightened her a little. They crowded against her legs, clawing the worn fabric of her work slacks. Their pink scaly feet and silver striped feathers were greasy. She pushed them back, tossed another handful into the frantic mass of birds. On her way home, she'd buy herself a new pair of shoes. A shiny bracelet she'd coveted, with a charm on it. Her eyes unfocused. She'd get a year-long transit pass instead of scratching for change to pay for a two-hour ticket. She'd sit on her bed and finally feel the relief the mental health module promised, stress melting down her shoulders like wings.

The pigeons flapped around her, greedy sycophants. She couldn't hear them cooing. Inside her headphones, the beats fluttered against her ears like wings, chafing, lifting her up into the city's gentle, cinder rain, higher and higher, until she was a tiny speck, escaping the small and filthy place she was accustomed to call home.

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## THE SUN GOD

*Paul Fey*

Here, on the eastern seaboard of the United States, lives a species unlike any other: the unemployed 20-something-year-old. Today, we are talking about the male: his behaviors are erratic, staying up until one in the morning to work on a hobby that will, more likely than not, never see the light of day. He may stir several times before finally waking up, often preceded by a guttural exercising of the throat, before finally on his feet. Drained of energy, he ingests more than one cup of coffee and moves at a lethargic pace. At one point, he may ritualistically crack his knuckles before writing 15 to 30 cover letters and applying to as many jobs.

A gigantic weight of dread sits upon those thin shoulders. If he isn't crushed now, he will begin to panic and start freelancing. An equally horrible fate. During which, the unemployed 20-something spends more time pitching jobs than actually working, and even when he is, his labor yields much less than minimum wage. At this rate, if he doesn't get a job, he won't survive.

And for this one, here, the stakes are even higher: He cannot move back in with his parents, or friends for that matter. In the next room, his mate sleeps next to their offspring. Just 6 months old. He was an English major, she, a Psych major. Yes, their situation is bleak indeed.

Today, the unemployed 20-something-year-old returns from a job interview in the City, whose questions and subsequent rejection could have been done over the phone. He is perspiring from the late-summer heat in a suit and tie, passing the crane sanctuary, where the elegant birds stand tall among cast-off cigarettes and dented hubcaps—and sweating the fact that, after the Metro-North, he is down to \$85.58 in his account. In fact, the unemployed 20-something is so isolated in his thoughts that he doesn't hear the lurking Jaguar, revving its engine at the red light, just on the other side of the Fairfield-Bridgeport divide. As a resident of Bridgeport, he naturally jaywalks. In a flash, the Jaguar is upon him. He doesn't stop. The Jaguar screeches to a stop, and, inches away from his leg, emits its horn. Unscathed, the unemployed 20-something gives him the bird.

His fate, for now, still undecided ...

For Pisces, the approach of a very sudden, major life event may drastically change the ways you think about yourself and the people around you. Certain situations may arise that seem to be at odds with you—or obstructions to your path. But that just means you need to follow your course or pursue a better one if it comes up. Stay cool, and you'll get through it, and set yourself up for great future successes. This is all occurring because the eclipse is approaching. It will be a time of great transition—for the better, or for the worse. Pisces, it will be too hard for you to go it alone. Find your complementary sign, Virgo, and lean on them for strength. And on and on like that ...

"So we're absolutely fucked," Dahlia scrolls through her phone as she nurses their Capricorn.

"How so?"

"We're both Pisces!"

"I don't believe that shit—just because when you were born, the fiery balls of energy in the sky circling the earth at different rotating points are supposed to have some sort of effect on my life? Like what if you're mom pushed you out just fifteen minutes earlier—your fate would be entirely different? Come on."

"Noel, the universe is always trying to speak to you."

"What's it saying?"

"That we're fucked."

Dahlia keeps scrolling, as Noel tosses his nautically-themed tie on the bed and puts his navy suit back on the hangers. He flops down next to her as she reads aloud celebrity gossip.

"I wanted to buy the glasses to watch the eclipse. But now they're like \$25."

"And we're broke."

"Exactly."

The Pisces who vibrates at a higher frequency will be able to correctly intuit the worries of the people close to them. And when they voice these anxieties or make passionate outbursts out of seemingly nowhere, the highly vibrating Pisces will react calmly, always giving the benefit of the doubt.

Low-vibrating Pisces on the other hand, such as Noel, who lack security will cause explosive friction because they mistakenly perceive a slight in any small question, like Dahlia asking him later that night if spending his time writing a short story for a prize is the best use of his time.

"It's a thousand dollars!"

"But what if you don't win?"

"How come you don't believe in me anymore?"

"It's just, you need a job ..."

"You don't think I'm trying?"

Besides delusions of grandeur, the inferior Pisces is also prone to escapism. And so, the low-vibrating little shit slammed the door behind him and drove to St. Mary's By the Sea, the looping path, where he parked and walked along a rock wall above the ocean and smoked the cigarettes that he had, supposedly, given up.

When he looked at the dark water and the moon shining above it, he felt like nothing more than a single organism of a species. He did that for some time. Then he turned and faced the magnificent houses, the gleaming stars like an ornate background behind the long regal roof, rows of black shutters, the white colonial columns at the entrance, an American flag that swayed gently, a long, downward-sloping brick path that was eventually hidden by the verdant hedges and a steel black gate. *If only he had been born to a home just 15 miles closer to the sea ...*

Noel didn't always understand that some levels of opulence were virtually denied to him at birth. In high school, Noel and Dahlia used to drive around the beaches of Westport and Fairfield, smoking weed and slowing down for the homes they liked best.

“Can you believe that one?” Dahlia would say, pointing at ocean-front verandas, walls of glass through which you could see spacious rooms with elegant décor.

Sometimes they would disagree: it was too big, or they didn’t love the color, as if they would ever turn down any house like this.

The last time they drove through Westport’s beach-side avenue, Dahlia, a bit misty-eyed, said, “Do you remember how naïve we used to be? How confident we were that we could someday live in a house like this, that we would just transcend the money problems of our parents. How open everything in life seemed to us?”

In those easy days, Noel was fixated on the abstracts of death and eternity. He had nightmares that he was lost, alone, isolated at the edge of the universe, watching stars age and implode and turn into black holes, and new stars born in their stead. Nothing else worried him.

He finishes his cigarette and stares at the black gate, in particular.

When he gets back home, Noel finds yet another rejection: Dahlia asleep, facing the wall. He opens his laptop and closes the draft of his short story and instead heads to Indeed. Every time Noel logs on, the job board tells him to get real, kid: even though he searches exclusively for copywriting, copyediting, and other marketing positions, they target him with ads to sign up for Uber. He would have done it months ago if only his car were a year younger.

Tonight, though, the ad is for Entry Level Solar Marketing and Sales Representative, a position which, above all requires a self-driven and highly motivated individual, who could make up to 90k per year. *I could be self-driven and highly motivated.*

After he applies, he dicks around online for a few hours. On YouTube, before

“Eric Andre’s MOST SAVAGE Moments,” Noel is served a video ad. It’s a 40-something-year-old man in a designer sweatshirt whose sleeves have been fashionably cut off. He has a light, patchy beard but there’s no mistaking him for haggard; he has the tan of a man who recently visited a tropical island, and the sun, in the video, is visibly beaming down onto his face. “Here, I am in my living room, and this is where it all starts: making a plan for success. I hear people complaining about the life they live, and how they can’t stand it. Stop complaining, make a plan. Think big.” Then back to his brilliant, regal living

room. "And then, I believe this, the greatest determining factor for your success is hard work. Hard. Work."

He gets the job. It took \$25 dollars to fill up on gas to get to the interview at an eerily empty office park in Shelton and merely several head nods to win the interviewer over. He was an extremely fit 28-or-so-year-old specimen with compact pectoral muscles under his tight, black Trinity Solar polo. Just as transparent were his corporately sponsored lies: "You're lucky you applied when you did because we're just launching this pilot program, and if you do well, you're going to make a big difference in the company, and be a rising star here."

The next day is training—if you are a detail-oriented individual, you already know that the eclipse is just one day away. Noel sits in one of three rows, full of former part-time employees, failed artists, desperate dads like himself, an ex-Marine. In front of them is a twenty-something-year-old presenter who is thin, brown-haired, a bit vain-looking, but otherwise agreeable.

"You're going door to door. What do you do? Stand at the door and ring the doorbell? If you stand like that, you're going to make them feel trapped. Their next thought is *fight or flight*. Evolution. I'm no biologist, but that's how humans are. They'll either try to escape the conversation with an excuse or just fight you at every turn. Instead, turn sideways so that, physically and mentally, they aren't trapped," he demonstrates and smiles winsomely at them, "*Hi, I'm here on the Energy Council of Connecticut and I just wanted to see if you got the mailer that we sent?* That's a yes or no question. It puts them on the spot. Either way, they have to go onward. They can't escape because they're on your path now. See it's this game. They want you to get off their porch, you want to get into the house and close the deal."

At night, Noel flips through the company literature. It doesn't just welcome him to the family—it made a great deal about how specifically they had *chosen* 'you,' along with all their employees. Then, on the back page, his suspicions were confirmed: The company was founded by a devout family of faith; Trinity did, indeed, stand for the triune godhead.

Without an ounce of faith in anything, Noel hypothetically aligns his new job to his horoscope: perhaps there is no tragedy waiting for him on the other side of the eclipse; perhaps everything is finally turning his way. *90k for a chosen,*

*highly-motivated Pisces, such as himself?* And if a benevolent God had randomly selected him for his blessing, so much the better.

The day of the eclipse, Noel meets his local team at their office in the saddest, dustiest corner of Stratford—a former motel that had been renovated into an office building. The Salesmen are split up, two-by-two, then two pairs carpool together, to go forth and prosper. Noel's partner is Trevor, a twenty-something-year-old with blonde-dyed hair that he flips often. They drive with the ex-Marine and his partner Kandi, whose racist road rage nauseates Noel as much as her driving.

He doesn't feel much better with the fresh air. As Noel and Trevor approach their first house, he forces his himself to smile—the trainer said *just smile no matter how you feel inside* because the hollow act still releases endorphins and you'll genuinely feel better. Because evolution. Noel still feels like shit.

"It's an easy job," Trevor reassured him as he rang the doorbell. They both stood sideways on either side of the door. "As long you don't fuck right off with the first sign of negativity, you can make a killing—*Hi there, I'm with the Connecticut Energy Council ...*"

As the sun follows its path around the earth, the moon in between, Trevor and Noel criss-cross the streets, knocking on doors, getting rejected one after another. They wind around the streets, closer and closer to the ocean by Bridgeport's Seaside Park. He can hear the vague staticky beat of speakers at the beach, where it's overcrowded on the weekends and there's always one couple, covered mostly by the waves, kissing too passionately for comfort. The familiar salty smell comes to him on a warm breeze.

They take a break. Trevor puffs on an e-cigarette and complains, "A bunch of poor fucks. I thought it was gonna be good around here. *Talk to my landlord. Fucking tenants.*"

"Are you going to watch the eclipse today?"

"That's today?" Trevor says and looks up into the sky. "I don't see anything."

"It starts in like ten minutes... But you're not supposed to look at it unless you have special glasses."

"Not worth it."



"Well, it only comes once every hundred years."

"I mean, it's not surprising it was a big deal when they thought the Sun God had abandoned them, but now we know what's going on. It's just a dot in the sky that's just not there for a bit."

"Well, it's only a partial eclipse here."

"Something insignificant happens every day," Trevor snorts. "I'd rather spend my money on a matinee and Milk Duds."

Noel looks off into the distance, pretending to weigh the two options. He ends up staring at the house across the street, a stately mansion with two long wings made of brick. Unlike the home at Saint Mary's, the property ended promptly a few feet away from the structure. But what Noel notices most of all is the sun shining brilliantly over a massive swath of its mansard roof.

"Are we going to that one next?" he asks.

"God, no."

"Why not?"

"We've canvassed this neighborhood before. Yeah, you're not the first pilot program either. That man is dangerous. I don't know what he did, but it's like this thing that's been passed down. I get the feeling there's like a John Wayne Gacey Jr. thing going on."

"Jesus," Noel mutters. "But how much do you think that deal would be worth?"

"Your life? New kid, put it out of your head. If you think we're knocking on that door you can fuck right off. *Noel!*"

He walks slow as a mirage, like a man newly possessed. His finger presses the doorbell, as he realizes he's never sold anything in his whole life. *One-and-done, how hard can it be?* he thinks, vibrating especially low as of now. He smiles like a maniac and stands sideways at the door.

"What do you want?"

Noel recognizes him and experiences a brief wave of relief. He can't be a murderer—it's the entrepreneur from the videos. He's wearing his cut-off sweater and worn black jeans, but there's a look in his eye that the camera did not pick up. *Oh my God, he either wants to kill me or to fuck me.*

"I'm with the Energy Council and ..."

"Stop right there. You're *with* the Energy Council? What the fuck is this Energy Council that has been summoned?" he taunts him, showing off a sharp mind that detects bullshit as fast as it makes it up.

"It's a group of regulatory agencies, government oversight committees, and energy companies, all committed to switching over to renewable energy in our lifetime."

"What's name is on your check? I'm guessing it's an energy company."

"Trinity Solar, but that part is supposed to come later."

"Trinity Solar, huh?" the homeowner leans on the frame of the door, his hand just out of view. "You know, I don't have any names on my checks except for my clients. Nothing is skimmed off the top. My money comes straight to me. In fact, if your company gets a tax write-off for ushering in this new green deal, I'm probably paying *your* salary."

"Well, then, you should be the first to save money with our solar program." He laughs like an Aries. It's obvious he can smell Noel's desperation, feel how his body is pulled in by the weight of his celebrity, can see him seeking a glimpse inside a home such as this. "Why don't you come in?"  
... *Or kill me, then fuck me.* But Noel is ready, and the moon has assumed its position in front of the sun. What he wants is inside, past the threshold of the door, an invisible barrier. Ready to step into his new life, to experience acceptance so total, like death, it changes the fibers of his being.

"You can sit down in one of the chairs while I get you a drink of water."

In the entrepreneur's hand is a five-inch, stainless steel blade; Noel is too busy staring into the glorious vaults of the mansion; sunshine still filtering in through

tilted skylights in the back of the room. Below, there is a wall-length, built-in bookshelf made of stained oak. A series of sharp, abstract statues, and in the center of the floor, a proper divan between two large mahogany chairs. He sits down and looks at the titles stacked on the ancient cocktail table: *John, the Leader of Gnostics*; *Life Paths: How to Unlock the Power of Numerology in Your Life*; *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*; and *The Moral Animal*.

The 40-something-year-old man comes in with Noel's glass. He hands it to him and sits down in the opposite chair. He places his hands onto his head, stretching, and leans back as if to invite Noel's futile pitch:

[The script is there to guide you, to predict what the customer will likely say and how you can respond. The closer you stick to it, the more successful you will be:]

[Intro]: "I'm not here to sell solar panels. I know a lot of people get scared about buying a piece of cutting-edge technology, so don't worry."

[At this point in the script, the customer will be placated, relieved, laughing.] He stares blankly at Noel.

"Instead, Trinity leases solar panels out to their clients, but the cost of the lease is guaranteed to be covered by your energy savings—and in many cases, it's a lot more. If, for any reason, the savings *don't* cover the lease, we pay the difference. That way, you can lock in low energy rate as prices rise." [Remember to smile and nod – it will build excitement].

[The customer may want to move onto the details of the deal or may first voice some hesitations:] "Do I fucking look like the kind of guy who needs to lock in a low energy rate? Fucking cents on the dollar?"

[*You're on your own, kid:*] He blurts out, "Time ... it's a funny thing ... You never know what's going to happen. You never know where you're going to be in the future. All you know is the present ..."

"I know exactly what's going to happen. It's written in the stars, in the book of life. It's why I invested in Twitter when I did."

"As a young man talking to an older, more experienced ..."

"Cut that shit. We're the same age—these cells we share are as old as the universe. 'He created me before the foundation of the world to be holy.' And though the number of lives we've led may outweigh each other, in either

direction, we're the same age, in total. Simply, I have taken more steps on the social hierarchy, more works to my name, more progress on this cosmic journey, and more money. You have no excuse for your current worth. You have to get ahead."

"I don't know exactly what you ... but just, man-to-man, human-to-human, I get at least \$300 if you just agree to have the solar installation experts see if your home is compatible, and I could really use a—"

He stood up abruptly as if he'd heard enough and walked to the kitchen. He said cheerily, "I think I'm going to get myself a glass of water, too." It might be time to *fuck right off*, Noel thinks. Suddenly, a coil of ropes falls onto his lap, around him, and quickly tighten around his arms. He starts flailing but they're heavy, nautical-grade and with a zipping noise, they're tied at his back. The entrepreneur walks back into Noel's field of vision and stands with one arm crossed and the other scratching his chin, like a painter at work. He sticks out his thumb at arm's distance and yells "I will blot you out!" He pounces like a lion through Saharan grass to the chair. He holds a knife up to Noel's neck, "I am a God. The sun beams into me and I feed off its energy. Do you understand?" He does not. He sees death in the knife—and in the face of it, he laughs a detached, internal laugh. *Is this how I die? This has got to be a fucking joke. All one big cosmic joke.*

"I become the energy. I am pure. And people feed off of me. My employees, my shareholders, all of society—they feed off me. Do you understand how much you gain just by being in my presence? Feeling my aura? And you dare to take my money and my time like it was a fair trade?"

*It is a joke, it must be a prank*, he thinks and scans the room for a camera.

There's one on the shelf. *It must be like an intense, motivational video*. Noel starts laughing uncontrollably in relief.

The entrepreneur stops. Angry and turned off, he drops the knife at his side.

Then he moves closer and grimaces at Noel. "I'll fucking kill you. I'll keep you hostage. You'll starve to death."

"Is the knife even real?" Noel laughs hysterically.

"You ruined it," he mutters. He unties the ropes with the aggressive dejection of a spurned man pulling up his pants.

After he says good-bye to the boy, the entrepreneur finishes cutting up the vegetables, then goes to the basement where he jerks off, dreaming of drinking that 20-something-year-old's young blood.

"What happened?" Trevor asks, hitting the vape hard.

"It wasn't right for him, in the end," Noels says, knowing he'd never believe him.

Construction workers are banging into the dusty earth with their heads down. A mailman is carrying on down his route, *rain, snow, hail, shine, or eclipse*. They don't have the time to look up. Mothers and their children sit in the grass, on top of park benches, on the beach, in the backs of trucks staring into the sky, like an air show but slower and grander. Retirees in lawn chairs look almost dead, taking it all in.

As he watches their upturned faces and looks for expressions for his own vicarious excitement and jealousy, Noel realizes that he is and always will be oscillating between two extremes: an abstract, existential fear of death when he is more secure, and a very present struggle to survive. In the exact middle is freedom from either, when he recognizes the absurd way we carry on with our lives—as if anything is ever normal, and that's all there is.

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The Future of Food Service  
*Suzanna Anderson*

The sun glinted off the bus's dirty windows. The Wallace Grocery store loomed large and white as the bus pulled into the parking lot, rolling to a stop in front of the only park bench. I grabbed the worn leather of my book bag and the hard plastic handle of my suitcase. I could feel the frog beanie roll in the open space. My sister's last gift as she hugged me goodbye.

The first steps of my new life sang as I traversed the sidewalk to the store's door whooshing open in welcome. Inside the light was as bright as the sun.

"Welcome to The Wallace Grocery," the greeter said with a smile. He asked if I needed a cart.

"No, thank you," I said. "I'm meeting with Manager Greg."

The greeter turned and waved to a man in a business suit with a red tie. He checked the knot and walked over.

"Welcome to The Wallace Grocery, where we stock all of your grocery needs," Manager Greg said. He shook my hand.

"Let's take a grand tour of the store since it's your first day, Benjamin. Congratulations on your position with us."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

"There are various departments in the store, but there are two main categories," Manager Greg said. "Perishable and non-perishable."

We walked through aisles of toys and clothes and school supplies. At the back of the store we turned to the right and proceeded through grocery.

Manager Greg stopped next to an employee who was stocking canned goods. Her hair was a mousy brown, pulled back into a tight ponytail. The standard store uniform, a purple polo shirt with black pants, was loose on her bony frame. He pulled a ruler out of his pocket and smacked her hand three times. She rubbed her hand, moving her silver bracelet up and down.

"Sandra, please state the correct method of stocking shelves," Manager Greg said.

"Put the oldest product in the front and the newest product in the back," Sandra said. "That way no food is wasted."

"Correct. So why did you put the 13th of July behind the 2nd of February?" Manager Greg pulled two cans from the shelf. He showed Sandra and then he showed me. I nodded.

"Oh. I messed that one up."

Manager Greg handed her the cans, and she put them on the shelf correctly. Manager Greg nodded to the man behind him. I jumped. The man's head was shaved save a neatly trimmed mustache below black rimmed glasses; he was also wearing a suit. Manager Greg nodded again, and the man scribbled a note on his clipboard.

"We have a point system here," Manager Greg said. "Every time you make a mistake, you get a point. The person with the fewest number of points at the end of the month receives a monetary bonus to his or her paycheck and gets his or her picture on the wall of honor at the front of the store. Right now Julia is in the lead, as per usual. She is our star employee. We will meet her later. If you get a hundred points in a month...well, let's hope you never find out, Benjamin. Let's continue our tour."

We passed the cash registers lining the front of the store. A cashier spoke sharply to a customer.

"Ma'am, please try a different method of payment," the cashier said. "That card has been declined three times. Do you have a different card?"

"Timmy," Manager Greg said. "What seems to be the issue here?" Timmy licked his lips and rubbed his hands on his black pants. "She has tried the same card three times to pay for her groceries, but it has been denied each time."

Manager Greg turned to the customer.

"Mrs. Nelson, it is a pleasure to see you," Manager Greg said. "How can I help you today?"

"My card isn't working today. I just made a deposit, so there is plenty on it. I have no idea why it isn't working. But I need to get home to start making dinner. You know how Larry is if dinner isn't at precisely 6:30 p.m. every night. It's my head."

Manager Greg nodded. "Yes, of course I understand, Mrs. Nelson. Just this once I'll cover it." He slid his card, and it was accepted. "There. Thank you, and have a good day, Mrs. Nelson."

"Thank you, Mr. Greg. I certainly shall." Mrs. Nelson pushed her cart at a fast pace.

I watched her leave. With banking classes emphasized in high school, I did not expect to see a customer walk away with a cart of free groceries.

"Benjamin, please pay attention," Manager Greg said.

"Yes, sir. My apologies," I said, returning to Timmy and Manager Greg.

"Now," Manager Greg said, "Timmy, please repeat the third commandment."

"Remember to thank the customer and bid thou a good day," Timmy said.

"Yes. But you didn't do that, did you?"

"No, sir. You did."

"Ah." Manager Greg looked to the man behind us. Again he scribbled a note. To me he added, "We update the point board at breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Timmy, please repeat the tongue twister of the day. Ten times in a row should do it."

"Clean clams crammed in clean cans. Clean clams crammed in cans." Timmy stopped.

"No. Try again."



Timmy took a deep breath. "Clean clams crammed in clean cans. Clean clams crammed in clean cans. Clean cans crammed in clean clams."

"No. Again."

Timmy closed his eyes and tightened his fists. "Clean clams crammed in clean cans. Clean clams crammed in clean cans. Clean cans crammed in clean clams."

"No." Manager Greg turned to the man behind us. The man nodded and scribbled another note on the clipboard.

"If I catch a mistake and it can't be corrected, like Sandra made a mistake and corrected it earlier, I give employees the option of completing a tongue twister to redeem themselves and prevent another point on the docket. Three tries before the opportunity of redemption is gone."

"I understand, Manager Greg," I said.

"Very good." Manager Greg continued the tour. Timmy put his head in his hands and started to cry.

A man pushed a mop bucket out of the bathroom.

"Ah, perfect timing, William," Manager Greg said.

William stopped pushing the mop bucket. He nodded his head to us.

"Every employee is expected to know the location of every product in our store," Manager Greg said. "It is best to walk through the store on your off hours. We have jobs because of our customers. If they didn't shop here, we wouldn't make a living. William, where can I find gluten-free bread?"

William held up both hands with all fingers extended. And then he held up one finger. His bracelet fell from his wrist to the middle of his forearm.

"Aisle eleven?"

William nodded yes.

"There," Manager Greg said. "Simple. Any questions, Benjamin?"

"Yes, sir. Why didn't he say eleven?"

William opened his mouth. He no longer had a tongue. I took a step back.

"William has been with us for a long time," Manager Greg said. "He started out as a stocker, but made so many mistakes that he was punished. Now he can clean and make fewer mistakes."

"I understand, Manager Greg," I said. I closed my eyes and gulped for air. Maybe I should have stayed with the bankers. Their punishment was a few hours in the vault. They never detached body parts.

"Let's continue to the front, Benjamin," Manager Greg said. "Here are the commandments of the company, to be followed and taken seriously by the employees. Please read them aloud. And visit them as many times as you need to in order to memorize them fully."

The Ten Commandments were each written in large print across the wall. Each line was illuminated. The shadows in-between danced, a sinister reminder of William's dark mouth.

"Yes, sir," I said, clearing my throat. "One. Thou shalt not look elsewhere for work unless it is because of marriage.

"Two. Thou shalt not curse on the premises, especially not in front of customers.

"Three. Remember to thank the customer and bide thou a good day.

"Four. Honor thy Manager and fellow co-workers.

"Five. Thou shalt not run over customers in the parking lot.

"Six. Thou shalt not date within the same department. Look elsewhere for love.

"Seven. Thou shalt not steal. There is plenty of food available in the break room.

"Eight. Thou shalt not lie to thy Manager.

"Nine. Thou shalt not covet a different life.

"Ten. Thou shalt not covet a different job.

"Very good, Benjamin," Manager Greg said. He handed me a card with the Ten Commandments printed on them.

"So you can learn them better still," Manager Greg said. "You have great potential, Benjamin. Maybe one day you'll be a manager."

"Thanks, sir."

"Now if you will turn your attention to the wall, here is a picture of me, the manager, and our employee of the month, Julia."

The wall indeed had a flattering picture of Manager Greg. He had more hair than. His bald spot was not visible in the photo.

Julia smiled, her dark curly hair framing her heart-shaped face. She was the employee for the month for the last year. There was a large chalkboard, and the man following us updated it. I found my name on the list. Zero points. Probably the only time it would be zero.

"Follow me, Benjamin," Manager Greg said. "We are almost done."

We walked to the west side of the store, where the deli and bakery were located. Manager Greg went to the deli first. All of the employees were kneeling. The floor had pieces of deli meat on the floor and a small pool of grease near the fryers. One employee stood in front of employees with a raw, whole chicken in his hands.

"That is David, our senior deli employee," Manager Greg said.

David lofted the chicken in front of him.

"Our help is in the name of the Lord," David said.

Together the employees said, "Who has made heaven and earth."

"The Lord be with you."

"And with your spirit."

"Let us pray," David said. "Lord God, You are King of heaven and earth. You are the Word of the Father. Through You He has given us all created things for our support. We beg You now to consider our lowly position. Just as You have given

us help in our labors and needs, so in Your most kind mercy, please bless these chickens with a heavenly blessing, and guard and preserve them. Be so kind, too, as to give us, Your servants, Your unfailing grace, so that we may gratefully praise and glorify Your holy name, who live and are King and God with God the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit for ever and ever."

"Amen," said the employees in unison.

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

"Amen."

David sprinkled the raw chicken with holy water, put it on a cart with its brothers and put it in the oven. The employees bowed their heads and crossed themselves. They rose and returned to work. Manager Greg smiled at me. "We have mass every two hours, starting at 9 a.m. No matter where you are in the store, you are more than welcome to join them, even if you aren't assigned to the deli."

"Good to know," I said. "Thank you, sir. I shall have to join them."

Manager Greg nodded. "And now, to the bakery since we are so close." He wove through the produce carts as they misted the vegetables, and he stopped at the bakery entrance. "Julia, good afternoon!" He waved.

A woman wearing the typical purple polo and black pants looked up from her work and waved. Her curls hid underneath her hairnet halo. Two employees stood next to her, mouths agape as Julia sculpted a castle cake. She handed the icing bag into one of the employee's waiting hands and walked over.

"Julia, this is our newest employee, Benjamin. Benjamin, Julia."

I shook Julia's hand. "It is nice to meet you, Julia."

"A pleasure," Julia said.

"What are you working on today, Julia?" Manager Greg asked.

"I had some orders for castle cakes and one for a snow globe," Julia said.

"Two cakes were taken to the break room today because they did not sell yesterday."

"Good," Manager Greg said. "Two is better than five. I don't understand how we still have cakes left over. They are so delicious!"

Julia smiled. "Yes, they are. Betty does a wonderful job of mixing the batter from scratch."

Manager Greg nodded to the man with the clipboard. He scribbled on a different piece of paper.

"Praise from the employee of the month earns two points knocked off the tally," Manager Greg explained. "Excellent. And how is the bread today?"

An employee on the other side of the bakery stepped forward with a warm baguette loaf.

"The new sourdough bread recipe is splendid, Manager Greg. Would you like to try a sample?"

"Don't mind if I do." Manager Greg ripped off an end of the baguette. He gestured for the man with the clipboard and me to do the same.

The bread was indeed good, light and fluffy. I could get used to this. Fresh bread. Amazing cakes. Maybe I made the right choice after all.

"Thank you, Heidi." Manager Greg nodded to the man with the clipboard.

Manager Greg led the way to the back rooms. "This is our last stop on the tour. And then you have the rest of the day to settle in, Benjamin. Tomorrow you will start as a stocker. We'll go from there."

We passed through shower rooms, laundry, kitchen, library, a hallway of private rooms, lockers, and a large room with multiple bunk beds. The rooms were spacious, a softer, warmer sun than the store's fluorescent lights. It felt like home with children's crayon scrawls on the kitchen tables and faded posters with curled corners on the wall. The bookshelves boasted well-loved paperbacks, the covers faded from multiple readers.

"You are more than welcome to leave the premises," Manager Greg said. "However, I do recommend against it. We take great pride in providing room and board for our employees. Whatever we don't sell is brought here," Manager Greg pointed to the two cakes, of which little was left, "and the employees are free to eat it. Otherwise you shall have to purchase your own food with your earnings."

"Sir, if I may ask a question," I asked.

"Besides that one? Certainly."

"Where do the employees' children live since children are not allowed in stores?"

"Ah," Manager Greg said. "Employees are allowed to rent private rooms, one bedroom apartments, with their own bathroom and kitchen. Those

are for the employees with families, or single people who prefer privacy. Let us return to my office. I have forgotten your bracelet.”

They walked back through the back rooms to the manager office. The desk was in the center of the room, its dark wood knotted and shiny from polish. Ferns sat in large pots in all four corners. A single framed picture of Manager Greg and the founder of The Wallace Grocery faced the door. Both men stood in front of this store with goofy grins and thumbs up. On the desk Manager Greg picked up a metal bracelet. He held it up for me to see. It was an attractive silver bracelet, unisex.

“This is your bracelet. You are to wear it at all times. There is a GPS tracker inside, in case you get lost or kidnapped. But it also tracks how long you leave the store. That is why I recommend you commit to living here. You will be docked pay for every hour you are off the premises. You’ll make friends here. I’m sure of it. This is the only piece of jewelry employees are allowed to wear besides wedding rings.

“But before that, you have a decision. You’ve seen the store. You’ve seen the living quarters. What do you think? Are you willing to commit to The Wallace Grocery and live by the Ten Commandments?

I thought about it. Manager Greg can come and go. He has a job. He has a home. He can smile.

I have a job. I have a home. I can smile.

“Yes, I will live by the Ten Commandments and commit to The Wallace Grocery.”

Manager Greg put the bracelet on my left wrist.

“Welcome to the future, Benjamin.”

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## FACE TO FACE WITH DEATH

*Matthew J. Richardson*

It's not as though the job doesn't have a kind of macabre romanticism. The moonlight casting huge shadows off the crooked gravestones. The periodic flash of a spade before a shower of dirt is thrown into the air. The lantern spilling smoky light through yew branches and over fallen leaves...

Like any job though, the reality of being a gravedigger is more mundane than what is held in the zeitgeist. Most of the work is now done in daylight by machinery and any time a man spends in a hole is really just for cosmetic purposes. There is no longer even the melancholic loneliness that the job used to bring; teams of people dig graves at an industrial scale. Line 'em up and tip 'em in.

Like any old timer, though, James still knows where there are perks to be had. Which is why he is standing in a recently filled grave, spade in hand, with only a cloth-covered electric lantern to guide him. This is the riskiest part of his endeavour – when his head is down and the work is at its noisiest. James stops for a moment, steam rising from his torso in the cold air. There is no sound save for the occasional growl of a vehicle on the distant main road, but anyone could sneak up on him on the manicured lawn of the cemetery. James bends down and continues. Speed is everything.

Gravedigging used to be a young man's game, a family business James's son would have inherited if not for the stigma that came with the job. It was a reliable clientele if nothing else, but you can't tell kids anything and once the boy had got his head turned by the wrong crowd...

Metal on mahogany tells James that he has another hour of digging before the coffin can be opened. A wind has got up in the cemetery. The trees heave and sway. A crunch of gravel makes him glance up. Probably just a fox.

People might find themselves more at ease with putting people in the ground these days, but disinterring bodies still prompts the same queasiness as it did in yesteryear. Once underground, the dead should not be disturbed, they used to say. There should be a barrier between the spirit world and the physical. Let them lie, they'd whisper as they lit their candles in the windows. James would be lying if he claimed that such superstition did not concern him but tonight is not his first dig. With that in mind, he heaves the coffin open.

Even in death, Joseph Packard has been unable to give up what he considered the finer things in life. A gold-linked wristwatch hangs from the man's skinny wrist while fine, Italian leather winkle pickers poke skywards. Bastard. How many poor souls had been levered into his cramped, damp flats across the city? How many families have had their sub-lets sub-let without their consent? How many pay checks have bypassed the hungry mouths of children to feed this glutton's appetite for cigars and sports cars? The injustice of it all...

The blade gleams as it is drawn from his pocket. Joseph Packard will receive in death what he managed to avoid in life. It is hard work. Causing that much discomfort usually is and this is discomfort that is meant to last, pain that will confront Packard wherever he turns in the afterlife.

When he finishes, James wipes his forehead with the back of his hand. Already the sky is beginning to lighten; he can see his work without the aid of the lantern. Lilac rays dapple the carvings on the inside of the coffin lid. Hideous, silently screaming faces are packed cheek to jowl inside high-rise buildings, their hands outstretched and their sawdust-flecked eyes blank. It is the work of a master craftsman; in ideal circumstances James would want it to be appreciated as such. Never mind. What his audience lacks in number it will make up for in attention span. Joseph Packard will be staring into those faces as his eyes sink into his liquefying face. His wooden tenants will watch him wither and cringe. Philanderers, rapists, thieves, tax dodgers, absent fathers, cheats, scoundrels. James shows them the justice that failed to find them in life. Each person deemed worthy of his attention receives a custom designed coffin lid. Their sins not only find them but lie atop them in the crushing darkness.

James nods wearily to a couple of early morning dog walkers as he leaves the cemetery, tools slung over his shoulder and dirt smeared on his overalls. If they have any questions they are too polite to ask them. He starts his van and begins the drive home. Not to rest, though. There can be no respite for James just as there will now be none for greedy Joseph Packard underneath the yews.

There is another coffin lid waiting for James in his garage. It is one that he has been working on for years. It is one on which he labours every day, one which he can never get quite right, one that he can never fit quite enough detail into. It is the coffin lid into which he will be staring sightlessly when his family lower him into the ground.

Not all of his family, James reminds himself. His son will not be there.



The old man may be an experienced carpenter but he was never a details person and some of the carving he has been attempting has been beyond him. He cannot, for example, quite capture the look of betrayal he received from his son on turning him out of the family home. The chisels are too clumsy to bring out the expression of bliss James had seen on his son's waxen face when he had found him slumped next to the toilet in the bedsit, needle hanging loosely from his arm. The quirks and oddities in the mahogany do not allow him to convey the desolate state of that room, nor the grey face James sees looking back at him in the mirror. The old man works on, nonetheless. He cannot wait until the wood shuts out the light.

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## Living the Dream

Jack Godoy

### 1. This may not be the promised land

The Coffee Haus was exactly what you'd expect. It was old, sort of ugly, and smelled like burnt coffee pretty much all the time. There wasn't anything immediately offending about it, but it was unpleasant. Which was kind of a good thing. There wasn't any new job magic to wear off, no sudden realization that this was a nine to five and not some extended spa vacation. It was a shitty coffee place with slightly less than average coffee and service. So when they offered me nights and a paycheck I said yes.

There wasn't much to write home about. I made coffee at night. Sometimes I cleaned tables two or three times because it was slow. I hadn't been here long enough to know if we had regulars or to form a lasting impression of my coworkers. Bria managed most nights and was allegedly only a few years older than me. She took everything extremely seriously. Every drink I made, customer I rung up, and table I pretended to clean was done under her watchful eye. I don't know if she thought that I was the stupidest person alive and needed constant supervision or if everyone else who worked here was just *that* bad at their jobs. Time would tell I guess. From my brief experience with her, Bria took immense pride in the playlist she used during her shifts. It was mostly generic pop with a few throwbacks to the early 2000s. She really liked Ed Sheeran. Like really *really* liked him. I heard Shape of You at least once a night, usually more. And as much fun as that wasn't, it never failed to put the spring back in Bria's step.

I counted out at 2 am each night. The trickle of customers ceased around midnight which meant the last hours of my shift were spent inventing fake jobs to do. I usually left by myself. I was at least tangentially aware that the dark parking lot near downtown Phoenix was not the safest place to walk out into each night, but most of my coworkers worked shifts that got out before or after mine. Bria and I held the distinguished 7 to 2 shift, coveted by no one. Driving back to my dorm each night was almost an out of body experience. I was exhausted in a way that I wasn't sure I'd ever get used to. The radio and A/C blasting wasn't enough to keep me awake, so I started inventing stories for the cars and people I passed. It was stupid, and maybe juvenile, but I looked forward to it at the end of every shift.

## 2. You can only really fool yourself

The longer I worked at Coffee Haus, the more I marveled at its continued operation. My new theory was that Bria watched me so closely because I had experience and it was evident that no one else here did. Charlie, another late shift regular, voided purchases like it was his job. And while there wasn't a true "rush" because not many people want coffee at the same time after 5 pm, he was agonizingly slow and struggled to juggle multiple orders. This was probably because he smoked more weed than any singular person I had ever met. I dreaded shifts with Charlie. He seemed to be nice enough but was endlessly frustrating.

Marian was the other night shift regular. She was only a few inches shorter than me, putting her around six feet. She was good on drinks and decent with customers. The real marvel was how closely she toed the line of acceptable dress code. Marian's style icon seemed to be Dracula and the distilled essence of an MCR song. I respected the hustle, Bria did not. Unfortunately for Bria, Marian was more than prepared to go to bat on this and they grudgingly came to a truce of no ear spikes and one necklace. Shifts with Bria and Marian were very efficient but fraught with simmering disapproval from Bria.

With Charlie's drug abuse and Marian's one woman crusade to make goth great again, it was no small wonder that the Coffee Haus functioned like it did. But it wasn't my problem to solve and I was busy being consumed by school. I spent my breaks in the stockroom doing my readings. Stockroom is a bit generous.

There was precisely enough room for me to sit against one wall and all our other stuff to be in the room and absolutely nothing else. Bria was a talker so breaking anywhere in her line of sight meant pretending to have a conversation with her. So I'd set a timer and put in some headphones and read every fifth page, hoping that it would be a good substitute for actual studying.

About a week ago, my headphones had migrated just south of usable. I had to keep using them because I couldn't justify buying a new pair unless some really rich distant relation died and willed me a small fortune. If I turned them up to hearing-damage-inducing levels, I could almost believe they still worked. With the amount of noise they bled, I was astounded that I was the one who caught Marian stealing coffee grounds and not that she heard my Rilo Kiley playlist at terminal volume from behind the stockroom door. But there she was, filling a rather large mason jar with tomorrow's ground coffee. It's weird what life chooses to confront you with. It's not like I cared that she was stealing, I barely cared about this job. Really, I struggled to determine how I felt. Whether or not I

cared about this job, I needed it if I didn't want to learn how to be homeless. But I couldn't come up with any solution that allowed us both to walk away without anything annoying happening. My pen rolled off my lap and Marian spun around. She was every bit as scary as her outfits suggested she might be. The Execution of All Things was still blaring from my headphones as we held eye contact. I tried to make a neutral positive expression as I stood up slowly. I had settled on shrugging awkwardly and leaving and hoping that Marian would never mention it again.

### 3. Some days are too long (in perspective)

My life was a plane crash and Coffee Haus was the rapidly approaching earth. The man who owned the business had decided that it needed the full HGTV treatment. Of course, he expected us to remain open during this process. Unfortunately for me, Marian was deathly allergic to something in walls I guess which meant back to back shifts with Charlie and Bria. Predictably, Bria did not handle stress well. And wow was there a lot of new stress. I don't know who wrote the Yelp review that put us on the map but I hope they are burning in hell. Thankfully no construction was happening at night, but a good third of the space was unusable. Charlie had also decided that he was going to stop smoking weed. Any secret hopes I had harbored that sober Charlie would be better at his job than high Charlie were quickly dashed.

The early evening produced a new rush. It was mostly people meeting to start or finish up a date which was endlessly annoying. I don't know if it was the asbestos I'm sure was in the air or if everyone decided to fall in love in November, but it seemed like every date that started here lasted for hours. Which of course meant frustrated couples who expected me to throw on a toolbelt and finish the renovations myself so they could send back their drinks from the comfort of an ugly table. And send drinks back they did. I remain unconvinced that Charlie and Bria actually understand English and do not instead rely on a small pool of memorized words and phrases. If we had more than 3 drinks working, at least one was coming back. Bria was useless on drinks when she was overwhelmed so it fell to Charlie and I. So really it fell to me.

My stockroom study space was no more so I had to take breaks elsewhere. There was an old chair and table out the backdoor that Charlie used to monopolize. It was cold and I was pissed because I'd burned myself remaking a drink. I'd never been one for drugs or cigarettes but I wanted a smoke for the

poetic cinema of it all. Whatever. Instead I had to make do with Russian poets and my left headphone that still worked. I was really getting into my groove when I noticed Charlie lounging away from the glow of the street light. I mentally apologized to Marian and made a note to get new headphones. I could barely make out his wave, and I gave a stiff wave in response. He walked over and I regretted my extension of civility.

Charlie needed someone to talk to, and for better or worse that was me. I wasn't finishing this reading, and maybe if I knew him better I wouldn't commit a homicide the next time I had to remake one of his drinks twice. Charlie was pretty obsessed with doing drugs and doing other stupid things for money. He had transitioned from coke to weed when he started his elementary education classes. I wasn't entirely sure of the logic behind that but a life without coke is vastly preferable, I imagine. I was super out of my depth. Less graciously, I didn't care. But I assumed since I was basically a stranger, Charlie probably had very few people in his life he could bring this up to. So I listened and then felt terrible for him the rest of the shift.

In my non-work life, I was already a full-time stabilizing influence so I really didn't want to continue that in my work life. And Bria was possibly the largest source of stress in the western hemisphere, which is to say work was going great. I sat in my car for ten minutes and seriously considered just phoning it in and sleeping in my backseat. There was no way it was legal for me to drive home as tired as I was. But I guess if Charlie can do crack I can drive recklessly. I only kissed the edge of a median once. I got home to my roommates still awake and watching Netflix. I smiled and flung my crap under my bed and flopped on top. I don't think I can say that I've ever felt envy so acutely. Tears actually started coming out of my eyes. There was no fairness in the universe, but I wasn't going to let that stop me from having a meltdown. There was so much that I wanted out of college, and I wasn't going to compromise on any of it. But it seemed that the universe was not interested in letting me have what I wanted. I was balancing school and work by jettisoning my sleep and social life but it still wasn't enough. I had to quit this job.

#### 4. Some days are longer than others (with even more perspective)

The majority of the renovation was over and Marian had returned to work. I'd cycled from Lorde back to Rilo Kiley and hoped that that and having a competent coworker again would prevent me from having a ridiculous meltdown again. The updates did little to make the space better. It was bigger,

and the estate sale furniture was gone but it still seemed to be decorated with ugly in mind. Apparently more decor was on its way, but I was still dubious about the finished product. Charlie had called out sick so I was working on a night I usually had off. Bria had started to go feral with stress. Maybe Charlie could hook her up with his old dealer and get her to calm down.

Marian and I hadn't really talked since the coffee ground incident. I'm not sure if she thought I was going to hold that over her in some capacity, although I'm pretty unsure how I would do that. Still, I was hoping that we could skip out on the heart to heart until Bria either snapped or learned to take a chill pill. The stockroom had been significantly updated and I once again claimed that space as my study room. I felt a little better about not studying in a back alley, but my breaks were hardly sufficient for the level of work these classes demanded. But I tried not to think about that and find the desire to read *Metamorphosis* again.

To my immense satisfaction, Marian did not return to steal coffee and we did not talk about our feelings. That's exactly what I look for in a work relationship. I returned to my register, Bria left for her smoke break and Marian was quietly cleaning some dishes. There was one man sitting in corner wearing a large trench coat. Which was odd because a Phoenix winter hardly warranted something that heavy duty. Marian left to gather more dishes and I found a rag to start cleaning tables. This was the most normal a night had been in a really long time.

I heard mug meet its end on the polished concrete floor. I jumped a little and looked over to Marian. Her face read fear which was really concerning given that I'm pretty sure she moonlighted as the monster under little kids' beds. I turned my head slowly like I was in a horror movie. I was half expecting to see a literal serial killer in the literal act of serial killing but instead it was the man in the trench coat. There was a moment of calm as my brain and eyes scrambled to figure out what the offending agent was. And then I saw the table in front of him. There were bats on the table. I wasn't sure if they were alive or dead but there they were. Bats. In Coffee Haus. But it wasn't just bats, two very large lizards were also beginning to unfurl themselves from the menagerie on his table.

My brain settled on a shaky 'uh sir' as a response to this situation. He looked up smiling at his creatures. Marian ditched the dishes she was holding and vaulted out of the seating area leaving me alone with the world's worst zookeeper. He was reaching into his coat to extract what I can only imagine was another animal

that should never be in a place that serves food. But I only had a rag. He, presumably, was replete with things that I had no desire to see or touch. Frankly, he owned this cafe for all I cared. I turned to follow Marian on her break to freedom to see an incensed Bria. She was brandishing our broom and flew passed me, a woman on a mission. I'd like to say I stayed to watch the Herculean battle of near-feral Bria and crazy trench coat man but I dipped. Hard.

An embarrassingly large part of my brain was convinced that, when confronted, trench coat man would dissolve into a sea of vermin and I didn't want to stick around to see that primal fear realized.

On my mad dash to my egress I nearly collided with Marian. Our almost-crash prevented us both from seeing what I'm sure was a spectacular display of Bria and trench coat man facing off. I could hear the string of expletives and yelling, so I assumed she was winning. When the commotion had finally died down, Bria had called the cops and successfully hurled every unwelcome guest out into the night. I thought the police might have been a bit excessive but I definitely didn't want him to come back either. I was hoping that Bria tapping into her primal urges would calm her down but my hopes weren't high.

I drove home from that shift sure of two things: 1) I definitely was never studying outside again and 2) this job was unequivocally the strangest thing happening in my life right now, maybe ever. But I had two months of the semester left and I seriously doubted I'd be able to find anything else. So I'd have to figure out how to deal.

## 5. Close to an ending that isn't mine

Bria decided to have a baby. More importantly, Bria was pregnant and was going to be leaving soon. We apparently were all close enough to her to receive invites to her baby shower. I had zero intention of attending until I found out it would be at Coffee Haus because I'm the universe's favorite screw. Which of course meant I had to come because I also had zero intention of being a dick. I wasn't surprised that Charlie couldn't make it, but I was surprised to see Marian. It was my understanding that she was pretty firmly on the Bria hate train. Maybe her heroics in the face of lizard man had swayed her. The baby shower was enjoying the full splendor of the Coffee Haus reborn. It was heavily industrial and the pale pastel balloons were monumentally out of place. It was still ugly, but now it seemed to be ugly on purpose. I also learned that Bria's full

name was Brittany. Marian and I were equally stunned. It was a marginally enjoyable experience, but tempered by the fact I'd be back in a few hours for my shift.

I had been promoted to "shift lead" which sounded pretty fake to me since it came with no pay raise or discernible benefits. I now got to co-manage the night shift with another poor sap "shift leader" had been hoisted upon. It did come with more hours which would have been nice if the days also came with additional hours for me to use. The transition of power was pretty smooth, Marian and Charlie remained Marian and Charlie and we basically functioned as a less stressed out version of how we were with Bria.

I did have the added responsibility of taking out the 2 am cash and counting it into the safe each night. Which really only amounted to staying an extra ten minutes and transferring the cash when the safe opened. After the incident with trench coat man, we had taken to walking each other to our cars. Business had once again hit a lull making the night shift unimaginably boring again. With less time and more responsibility I had given up studying during my breaks. I took a hit academically but I was counting on my finals to rebound. Every time I was relieved by the other shift lead I felt a palpable sense of relief wash over me. I had started to look like I was rocking Marian's eye make up due to lack of sleep. Every night I seriously considered quitting and eating ramen noodles for the last 37 days of the semester. It would be a lot of sodium but I felt like I could do it. Not to mention my caffeine intake which I had upped to levels that should have stopped me heart. I didn't really sleep anymore. I blacked out and then got up and went to class or work. It wasn't an effective, efficient, or intelligent system but it's what I had.

Driving home had ceased to be my favorite part of the job. The anxiety of dying by falling asleep at the wheel and a steady stream of caffeine were usually more than enough to keep me awake. There were 12 days before the end of the semester and I could see the finish line. I had 4 sick days I hadn't used and I knew that I could get Charlie to cover at least one of my shifts. If I played my cards right, I might be able to have most of the week before my finals off. I woke up 10 minutes later. I had put my emergency lights on and was mostly on the shoulder. I took my foot off the brake and my car slid forward. I quickly replaced it and felt my anxiety begin to spike. I checked my surroundings, and from what I could tell I hadn't hit anything or run anyone off the road. I pulled more completely into the shoulder and got out. My car seemed fine, no damage



or mangled limbs. I threw up. Several times. My entire body was shaking and I think I was crying. I've had my close calls before, but this one was unique. I don't remember feeling tired or even closing my eyes. I'm not sure how close to death I really came but my body certainly felt like it was still in danger.

I called several friends and got nothing but answering machines. It was still too early for there to be anything resembling traffic. I got back into my car and took a deep breath. Okay. I called my best friend, I knew her phone would go straight to voicemail. I shakily moved the car back onto the freeway and rambled about nothing the whole way back. I wasn't used to being this shaken by something. There wasn't an event for me to replay or analyze. I was just awake and then I wasn't. I didn't sleep that night.

#### 6. I won't stay (with some exceptions)

The Coffee Haus was exactly what it always was, the one true constant in all my time there. A year later, Bria had a baby, Charlie was in rehab, Marian had quit, and I had just finished my last week. Despite everything, I couldn't trade a stable, constant job with reasonably flexible hours for the uncertainty of whatever else was out there. Every last straw turned out to be bearable if it meant a continued income, which was kind of sad really. All the standards I had set for myself about work evaporated when I watched my friends struggle to make it to the end of the month with whatever part-time hustles they could find. So I stayed. I thought I'd be sad, or at least have a fond memory to send off my time there, but I wasn't. When I hung up my apron, I hung up everything else the old, ugly, acrid coffee smelling building had given me.

*Jack Godoy is a writer and poet from Southern Arizona currently pursuing an English Literature degree from the University of Arizona. You can follow him on twitter @chaotic\_pisces and Instagram @jack.godoy*

CONVERSATIONS OPEN SCARS WE NEVER KNEW WE HAD

*Chad W. Lutz*

I said no  
I was scared

because the \$60,000/yr  
wasn't enough pay

because the plane ticket  
would have run me \$500

because I'd have to  
uproot myself  
& sudden  
tonight

so today  
I spent twenty minutes  
talking to a former Chrysler machinist  
who just had his second hip replacement  
after working 100 hours a week  
for thirty-seven consecutive years

never got to see his daughter  
never got to see his son

lives in a trailer  
on a backroad to nowhere

reports back to work  
on Monday

I said no  
I was scared

*Chad W. Lutz is a speedy human born in Akron, Ohio, in 1986, and raised in the neighboring suburb of Stow. Alumna of Kent State University's English program, Chad earned an MFA in Creative Writing at Mills College and currently serves as an assistant editor for Pretty Owl Poetry. Their writing has been featured in KYSO Flash, Foliate Oak Literary Magazine, Gold Man Review, and Haunted Waters Press, was awarded the 2017 prize in literary fiction by Bacopa Review, and was a nominee for the 2017 Pushcart in poetry.*

Jam

Andrew Yoder

The second morning of the game jam  
hosted in a co-op office space,  
I arrive with cup full of four-shot americano  
and a full night of bad dreams back home.  
There are students asleep on couches, others with the haunted droop of those  
who haven't slept, working  
through caffeine gone numb.  
One loud voice says "Sleep is always optional."  
These are students in a college for game design.  
(I'm worried what we are teaching.)  
A game jam is not like when musicians jam  
with friends in some garage, when I unpack  
my saxophone, keys arpeggiating, when we tool  
about our instruments in open exploration,  
arriving at a song is *not the point*. We are there to play. But a game jam's point  
is *to complete a work*.  
Now the students brag records of sleep deprivation. Forty hours. That's nothing!  
Forty seven.  
The game jam's theme is mental health. The irony goes unnoted. As a  
recovering workaholic, I am disturbed.  
The burnout rate for game designers is three to five years. I'm in my fourth and  
feel the burning at my edges.  
In the industry we call it crunch:  
Overtime we volunteer from passion for our work. Crunch. We throw our bodies  
in the maw of our machines. Crunch. Our fleshy lives fuel our engines onward.  
Crunch. We mythologize the heroes of the past...

One designer had a sawhorse  
for a chair dubbed The Throne of Pain  
where he sat to stay awake and work,  
make the best game he could.  
And the game was good. Bad news for us all.  
These are the stories students hear.  
For them the jam is microcosm,  
their studies a competition.  
Those who survive have the passions they need

to live their dreams, to make video games!  
(What if I told them game design is another office job?)  
Despite the rising noise, some jammers haven't stirred.  
"He's not moving, do you think he's dead?" One student jokes.  
But with the stress of a game jam on top of school,  
the words are too close to the truth he may be dead.  
I recall: my heartbeat irregular in my longest weeks of work.  
I recall: one more task became two, fighting hydras into the night.  
and I recall: my breathing—shallow, pneumonic, flooding—slow.  
But these memories all are flat. Scentless. Dull.  
They happened to someone else and he died.  
I have a photo from the end of his longest crunch.  
His hair is grown out a mess. He looks ill  
and the illness makes him look young. A skeletal child.  
I remember he saw a doctor and was shocked when she said  
"You're fine. There's nothing wrong. You're fine."  
The second morning of the jam  
and students are dying to make games.

The Call to Clown  
*Andrew Yoder*

No one *chooses* to be a clown.  
This is not to say you do not  
enroll in a clown school  
and register to clown.  
You are not drafted or kidnapped  
with tape-gag and black-bag  
into a car what seems too small  
to hold so many clowns.  
Nor that you, as kidnappee, will  
find hood removed amid  
circus act, an unvolunteer  
for the human cannonball pact.  
No. When I say no one  
*chooses* to be a clown  
there is, importantly

one choice for you to make.  
You may be in the midday slump  
of office busywork  
questioning the fifth cup  
of coffee and whether  
your coworkers note how  
frequent your trips to the washroom.  
You may be in the evening slump  
of homebound traffic jams  
remembering your car  
is, in fact, visible  
to the drivers who  
saw you pick that snot from your nose.  
You may be in the morning slump of bustling restaurants  
wondering if waitstaff  
forgot your bill—and you  
along with it. You check  
the time. Almost two hours now.  
In one such small embarrassment new thoughts will arrive dark and strange:  
"Perhaps I should go to clown school." "Clown school may be a home at last."  
That these thoughts occur at all means you are already on the path.  
"Perhaps I am a clown."  
And you already are.  
This is what I mean when I say  
no one *chooses* to be a clown.  
You discover a clown is what you are and the choice is what you will do.

*Andrew Yoder is a designer from rural Oregon working in Canada to make video games (as one does)*

The Distance to Apple, Plastic Containment of Brown-Sugar Oatmeal, Green  
Tea

*Kari A. Flickinger*

The clock in the breakroom sways—becomes  
a metronome when the train idles outside.

Regret gathers in this  
tower—I could crack open

lacquer window to slip down

the shiny corporate siding—slide fast—no  
web in the wrist to break—The Fall.

No imagined resonance of a century  
before. When did gas lights turn

to fluorescent beams bulbing from this  
*is-it-almost-five o'clock* sky—does the sky

gaslight me into the belief it is  
much later than the ever-recurrent clock lets on?

Clockwork-rotation wave-measures—I think  
of taking this broken body—of climbing

into the departing train—it flies by in  
increments each day—the pulse of a cloud

passing the mirror-sheen—of slipping  
into a freezing sea that waits

near the end of the tracks—just a short  
bus-trip away—from these clouds—I count  
the cents in my back pocket.

But there is no coming back from this Fall

or the sea.

And I only have eight minutes left.

*Kari A. Flickinger spent her childhood wandering aimlessly through the mountains of Northern California. She was a 2019 nominee for the Rhysling Award, and a finalist in the IHLR 2018 Photo Finish. Her poetry has been published in, or is forthcoming from Written Here, Riddled with Arrows, Door-Is-A-Jar, Ghost City Review, and Mojave Heart Review among others. She is an alumna of UC Berkeley. When she is not writing, she can be found playing guitar and singing to her unreasonably large Highlander cat. Find her: [kariflickinger.com](http://kariflickinger.com); @kariflickinger*



free

Anthony AW

it's music flooding room  
it's paint on wall  
it's tension; art hung  
is free for me

it's paint on walls  
downtown to see museum  
art's free for me.  
*think*, thoughts are free!

down on the ground  
on a floor pillow  
thinking thoughts *make money*  
poetry *pay for me*

on a floor pillow  
listening to music flood  
poetry *pay for me*  
it is tension; art

Anthony AW (@an\_\_o\_\_) is an LA-based writer. His work has been or will be published in *Anti-Heroin Chic*, *The Cerurove*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *FIVE:2:ONE*, *Kissing Dynamite*, *Riggwelter Press*, & elsewhere. Anthony practiced his writing with Terry Wolverton thru her workshop "Poets at Work" from 2017 to 2018. He currently hosts tête-à-tête, a queer reading series at Book Show in the Highland Park neighborhood.

Next Thing Wanted  
*Sage Schilling*

Now that I'm busy,  
I know what those men felt,  
successful ones in Starbucks cafes  
off the PCH in Laguna Beach,  
rotund with years of rich meals,  
over-worked, exhausted and lonely.

Now that life has fallen into place,  
am I ready to return to Maslow's hierarchy:  
food, shelter . . . love? Or at least  
someone to have dinner with before  
kissing goodbye until next weekend  
because we work-sleep the in-betweens?  
How curiously quick we find spaces of lack.

Unlike those men, though, I feel I am  
levels behind, my high school salary  
not enough for more than renting a room  
in town with girls from Craigslist.

But it is enough  
to eat out tonight and contemplate.

Maybe I will not find love. My boss  
doesn't understand this, and so I decline his invitation.

Sun not yet set, I depart  
after a dinner date with my adulting self.

Working for the Weekend  
Sage Schilling

Mourn, it is almost over, sky  
threatening downpour; let's hope  
it will hold while we rush to mash  
morsels of food or freedom  
down any hole, terrified of what  
comes 11 hours from now: work.  
It is not that our jobs are dreadful,  
just long and all-consuming,  
hamster sweating on spinning ramp,  
8.5 hours in concrete cubicle,  
then soporific meal, shower.  
Can unconsciousness be enjoyed?  
Trembling with neuroses, you'd  
think work was a wet warlock  
of monsters ready to devour; yet,  
we like our work, sometimes.

I cry for last year's unemployment,  
a sabbatical of sorts, fresh  
on mind like raw meat on rack,  
but I would not go back, because  
alternative to work slave  
is the trophy whore I was before.

*Sage Schilling is a professor who teaches composition at Oklahoma State University. Most recently she has traveled through Europe for 8 months to write poetry about self-exile and seeking love vs. freedom. She holds an M.A. in Creative Writing from the University of Cincinnati and a Ph.D. in Women's Studies and Religion from Claremont Graduate University. Schilling writes regularly for [feminismandreligion.com](http://feminismandreligion.com) (under Lache S.) and has poetry published in in Crossways, DodgingtheRain, SurVision, Pussy Magic, and the anthology Teachers Who Write (Waterford Teachers' Centre). Find her on Twitter and Instagram @seagreengoddess*