

FLASH

The Current

By: Jack Durant

A river flows past the castle in Okazaki. It's a beautiful river when the banks are flush with bright, spring Sakura. The castle is famous for this scenery and is thought to be a gift to the little city's people. There is a low bridge close to the castle. Under this bridge is always a large school of carp.

The current was strong from the week's rain as the young man watched the fish swim in place. The air was humid of the season to come and made him sweat heavily in his dark suit-jacket. Removing it didn't occur to him. Instead, he watched these dark-scaled fish twist in place under the water.

Their reliable presence gave none of the usual comfort. Instead, it hurt to find them struggling to keep pace in the water, using every reprieve to beg for scraps with open mouths. Generations had done so here, under the eye of the castle. And he had come his whole life to look down at his reflection in the water. They were a fixture, almost a decoration. Always so identical, moving in synch, their dark scales mirroring the uniformity of a dress-code. He tried to tell them apart but couldn't. Any small differences were too soon swept away by their suffocating uniformity as creatures that fought the current to stay in place. He felt very hot in his clothes, sweat had tightened the collar and it felt fastened to his neck.

The castle's lights had come on, shining bright and proud above the trees. He looked away from the tyrant of this beautiful river, back down at the fish swimming to nowhere. He watched these

And so I did.

That can, squat, generic, its white label torn - I still have it.

* * *

I walked by the girl's house every day after that, sometimes twice a day. I tried all hours, setting alarms on my phone for such times as 2:47 AM and 4:13 PM. The porch remained empty.

Five years later, I met a sweet, red-haired girl named Kitty. She paused before she spoke and had the most girlish gap between her two front teeth.

We honeymooned in Costa Rica, where the water was blue and the sands almost painfully white. Our first meal there, we decided to split a dish, chicken al pastor. The waiter delivered it to our table, and I spent maybe a full minute staring at it.

“Here, silly,” Kitty laughed, spearing a bite on a fancy metal fork and holding it out to me.

“Open wide.”

I did. Then chewed. Then swallowed.

“Well?”

I looked into her eyes, the same eyes I'd be staring into for the rest of my life. “It's...great,” I said. I tried to smile. “Everything's great.”

Her smile faltered.

“No, really,” I hurried on. “I love pineapple.”

Alexandra Grese doesn't talk much and usually has ink on her fingers. Her work has been accepted for publication by The Garfield Lake Review, Jelly Bucket, Superpresent, Feels Blind Literary, MUSE Literary Journal, and others. Her flash fiction collection DREAMSCAPES is published through Alien Buddha Press. Find her on Instagram or on her [website](#).

A Visit to the Dentist

By: Nadja Maril

“This isn’t going to hurt a bit,” Dr. Young said. She could feel the latex of the thin white gloves he was wearing as he put his hands inside her mouth to feel her gums. ‘I’m just going to give you a few little shots so you won’t feel a thing,” he said.

Julie thought about the English paper due at the end of the week she was planing to write. She’d picked an author t, Tom Wolfe, and if the dentist finished up quickly, maybe she’d be able to google the needed background for her project before dinner.

“Still playing field hockey?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said, trying not to move her jaw,” but felt a tiny spittle of saliva drip down her chin. She reached for the stack of tissues on her lap.

He reached for a needle. “It’s just a little prick. Nothing to worry about. A goalie, right?”

Julie gave a small nod. No one else wanted to play the position, probably didn’t want to wear all that heavy equipment, the padding and the mask. and in spite of the added weight, you had to be fast, with both your feet and your hands. You had to hit the ball hard, using the long goalie stick and slam it across the turf towards center field. “Don’t bother trying again,” was the message a goalie wanted to convey.

The first shot of novocaine was a slight prick as he’d described. The second shot hurt a little more and the third shot penetrated deep into the muscle of her jaw, causing initial discomfort before dissipating into a general numbness. “Think of it as ice cream,” her mother had told her, “ nothing to worry about. Dr. Young is an old family friend. He’ll take good care of you.”

She could feel the pressure and smell ; the peculiar odor of her tooth being hollowed for a filling. “I’m using a composite of resin and glass,” he said when he’d stopped drilling. “It’s very resilient and will match the color of your teeth, so no worries about that nice smile.”

He handed her a mirror to look at her mouth when he was finished and then threw his gloves in the trash. “Now bite down one more time for me,” he said bending over her. “Such a pretty smile, “With his right hand he squeezed her left breast.

Her left nipple continued to throb for several minutes. Her frozen mouth stayed immobile.

“You look great,” he said, “Say hi to your parents for me.”

Ten minutes later, Julie was getting inside her mother’s station wagon. ‘How did it go?’ her mother asked.

“Mom I think there’s something wrong with Dr Young’s hands. They have a shake like he’s getting one of those degenerative diseases. Maybe we should change dentists, because when he did my filling this time, it really hurt.”

Nadja Maril’s poems, essays, short stories, and novel excerpts have been published in The Lumiere Review, Lunch Ticket, Spry Literary Journal, Change Seven, and other publications. Her chapbook, RECIPES FROM MY GARDEN comprised of flash prose, poetry and essays draws upon her life experiences as an artist’s daughter, antiques dealer, journalist, and author. Nadja earned an MFA in Creative Writing from the Stonecoast Program at the University of Southern Maine. She lives in Annapolis, Maryland and posts weekly on Substack, Medium, and Wordpress. Find more on her [website](#).

The Moors

By: John Repp

Outside the 12th-century Moorish church in Mojácar, Josh took snapshots, the hyperrealism of the place having entranced and bedeviled him since he'd arrived two weeks earlier. The skeletal remains of a Fiat at the base of a nearby hill, the gypsies (his guidebook told him "Roma" was the more accurate word, but he'd seen too many Foreign Legion movies in childhood to dislodge "gypsies" because of mere accuracy) muttering over Turkish coffee on the plaza past midnight, the kid on a scooter who'd nearly run him over the previous day, the minuscule grocery where he'd found his favorite muesli--every detail and moment had so far defeated his meager grasp of photographic technique.

Imagine the light in coastal Almería. "Etched" would become the word on which Josh most relied as he failed to adequately describe to the few friends who seemed interested once he'd returned home weeks later the way everything--what? "Appeared" did no justice. "Looked"? "Bodied forth"? No. Things "more than existed" there. Things didn't require words even as they demanded them. "Or something like that," Josh thought, composing a third shot of the shadow the church's massive, recessed doorway cast on the stone sill.

When the Foundation had invited him to consult on Algerian educational practices, he'd felt elated, justified, no longer the seeming imposter who deserved to rise no higher than assistant manager at Robert Hall, refolding slacks on the Summer Clearance table, drafting the next week's work schedule for the sebaceous salesmen to gripe about. He knew no Spanish, which had made his stay occasionally difficult though ultimately humorous, as when he'd delighted a postal clerk by ordering two dozen post offices.

Nevertheless, he was in Spain, it was July, and he wore a Panama hat, a silk shirt that barely existed, pleated pants of featherweight cotton, and slipper-like Italian shoes, no socks. He could walk down the hill to the Mediterranean whenever he had the time.

Work done, social obligations endured, he sat alone each night over a cafe con leche on the plaza, watching starry pinpricks waver across the water from African houses, African streets, African wedding celebrations, dances, ceremonies smoky, smudged, alien. On the map he'd tacked up in his whitewashed room, the distance seemed too large for this sight to be plausible, but there it was.

At the base of the church steps, he lowered the camera, caught by the foreshortened shadow he cast on the ancient stone. There, the brim of his hat reached almost to the soles of his feet. No one had so far disturbed his reveries, the slow tourism of f-stop and light meter, but now a crone in head-to-toe black shuffled past, climbed the steps and knelt on the stone slab before the door. She began slowly rocking, scratchy whispers audible as she did so.

Without intention, he climbed the steps and stood behind her. The woman hunched deeper into what he took to be prayer, chanting no Dios no Dios no Dios in a voice barely this side of silence. He wanted to touch her. He stood very close. He could smell her--smoky, sour, low-tide odor of the aged.

John Repp is a poet, fiction writer, folk photographer, and digital collagist living in Erie, Pennsylvania. Seven Kitchens Press has just published *Star Shine in the Pines*, Repp's twelfth chapbook of poetry.

SHORT FICTION

The Rat Race

By: Elias Jay Abel

The tacky orange, yellow, and teal kitchen tiles stretched out to a seemingly endless distance in the mind of Dennis Muridae. Cloaked in the smooth, satin obscurity of a shadow provided by an ajar door, he plotted how he would get from this nook to the next. While the rug hid the scrabbling noise of his nails hitting the tile, the mud he had collected from the storm outside would undoubtedly leave tracks. Ultimately, he knew each second spent pressed against the cold surface of the wall, fervently planning, would just leave more room for a human to find him, and if Muridae knew one thing, it was that humans would stop at nothing to kill a mouse.

Muridae rubbed the scar on his tail, a trait picked up from his early days as a food filcher, and made his decision. While the phrase ‘as quiet as a mouse’ is typically considered to be a hurtful generalization, no one made the point truer than he. A soft swishing was all to be heard as Dennis Muridae dashed across the rug and over to the low cabinet where the humans kept their formal kitchenware. Dennis felt the large sack he wore shift from left to right with each stride he took. It was a simple tool, made from strong denim and a length of thread to cinch the bag shut. As he ran across the rug, however, his nose twitched at a familiar but unexpected smell, there was a dog in the house.

Dennis whipped his head around to where the scent was coming from, and saw a tuft of black fur run down the stairs so clumsily it might as well have fallen down them. The mouse hadn’t expected this. It was only last month that he raided this house for food and there wasn’t a dog in sight. Now, he found himself running to take cover in a gap barely larger than he was under a worn wooden chest.

The dog in question was hardly older than a puppy, and resembled a black mop head. The beast's head bent low, its snout barely hovering over the ground. Muridae rubbed his tail frantically. It was only a matter of time before his position would be discovered, and then what? The mouse backed away from the opening, not bothering to look behind him, in the hopes that maybe he could evade the dog's keen sense of smell. It wasn't until he found his hind legs could no longer move did he realize that, in his carelessness, he had cemented himself in a glue trap.

"I'm hungry, Mama," Marvin whined to his mother.

"It's okay, sweetie. I'll go to the market later today and pick up some food for the house," Pauline Muridae responded.

In reality, there would be no food purchased from the market that day, and Pauline knew it. As she made herself busy tidying the already meager space the once-complete family called home, she scarcely had any idea how she would afford rent, let alone food. A more likely scenario would be that she would go to the market to sell one of the few amenities the family owned. Perhaps it would be the silver thimble they kept flowers in, or the antique acorn bowl Pauline had received as a wedding gift from a friend so many years ago. Maybe it would even be the ancient sewing needle sword she had been told her great-grandfather once wielded with ruthless efficiency. Regardless, as noon approached in the Muridae household, Pauline knew only two things: Dennis was missing, and she had a child to feed.

The market was busy at this time of day, especially in the budding springtime. As Pauline walked through the worn dirt path, passing vendors, her bag of food seemed especially heavy in her hand. However, it was her hand itself which felt the most disproportionate, unburdened by the weight of her freshly sold wedding ring.

“Hey, Pauline. I heard the news about Dennis. I’m sorry for your loss.” The voice was familiar and chirped from a stall fashioned using an especially large mushroom as the core building. Twigs held up the cap, preventing it from drooping, and an outer wall made from packed dirt and moss served as the store front. Strewn in between the twig support beams was a banner that read: “Chip’s Chunks.”

“Thank you, Chip, but Dennis is just missing. He wouldn’t have gone out if he thought he wouldn’t come back. If he did, I would need to kill him a second time for leaving me with Marvin and this little fella.” Pauline gestured to the growing bulge in her stomach and laughed, somewhat nervously.

Chip *Tamias* laughed along, twiddling his thumbs rapidly underneath the dirt and moss wall.

“Well, regardless, how about you take a chunk loaf for Marvin, on the house.” Chip turned around and walked to his oven, a quaint thing his grandfather constructed when he first opened the stand. Reaching within the open pebble furnace with a wooden stick, he retrieved a large brown loaf of bread, laden with seeds and berries. Chip handed the warm loaf, now wrapped in old newspaper, to Pauline. He couldn’t help but notice the absence on her finger, and he felt his heart crack at the realization.

Shadows cast their impressions on the ground as the sun sank into its bed once again. Through this gradually obscured path, Pauline *Muridae* walked back to her child. As she followed the winding dirt road, she found herself approaching the familiar sight of home. The once full residence was made inside part of a hollowed out log, cast off from the old sawmill. It was one of many in the neighborhood, and despite its shabbiness, to Dennis and Pauline *Muridae* it always felt special. Now, as Pauline cast open the ochre colored door, it felt empty.

“Mama, Mama, Mama!” Marvin yipped excitedly, rushing out from his room and hugging Pauline tightly.

Pauline smiled. “Now, now Marvin, you don’t want to squish your sibling do you?” she asked.

Marvin emphatically shook his head in response and loosened his hug, instead turning his attention to the large bag of food she held. “Mama, what's for dinner?”

“I don’t know, what would you like?” Mrs. Muridae answered.

Marvin’s eyes went wide. “Anything I want?”

“Yes, darling, anything you want,”

“I want centipede-loaf!” Marvin announced.

“I’ll get right on it sweetie,” Pauline said, moving over to the kitchen and getting started on dinner.

It wasn’t long until Muridae residence filled with the fragrant aroma of Pauline’s centipede-loaf. Marvin sat excitedly at the table, can-crafted silverware twirling in his fingers. As the dish was cut up and distributed between the two of them, there was a palpable feeling that something was missing, and based off of the empty chair that sat next to Marvin and Pauline, they both knew what it was.

“What made you choose centipede-loaf, honey?” Pauline asked.

Marvin looked down abashedly. “Well, it's Papa’s favorite food, so I figured maybe if we made it he would smell it and come back,” he explained.

Pauline felt a growing lump in her throat, and tears well in her eyes. She blinked away the latter. “That’s very sweet of you Marvin, but Papa may not be back home for a while, okay?” The words scratched her throat like nails.

“Oh, okay,” the young mouse responded quietly.

The rest of Muridae household’s dinner was eaten in silence, only the tapping of forks on plates and cups to table punctuated the air. It was an experience foreign to both of them.

The moon hung in the sky now, its crescent shape casting haunting light over the peaceful valley. Marvin Muridae sat in his bed, waiting expectantly to be tucked in, and maybe even read a bedtime story. The young mouse had come to realize that since the disappearance of his father, much of his time was now spent waiting rather than doing. He lamented this and cursed his young age, which relegated him to such little means. His thoughts were soon disrupted, however, by the creaking of the door and his mother’s presence at the end of his bed.

“Ready for bed, sweetie?” Pauline asked.

Marvin nodded and laid down, pulling his favorite quilt over his body. As Pauline tucked him in and kissed his forehead, she noticed a peculiar rectangle of paper on his bedside table. She picked it up quizzically.

“What’s this?” she asked, holding the envelope up.

Marvin’s eyes widened. “I knew I forgot something. Mr. Lepus came while you were at the market and told me to give that to you.”

“I see. Sweet dreams, Marvin.” Pauline shut the door lightly as she left.

The thin paper which Pauline held, seemed to weigh a ton in her hand. The formal text spelled out exactly what she had feared. Hours passed, and ideas ran through her head on any conceivable way to make rent. Eventually, she found only one viable solution, and prepared herself for the challenge ahead.

The following morning, Pauline woke Marvin early and instructed him to put on his nice clothes. The reason for this was alien to the young mouse, until they reached a familiar but rarely visited residence.

“Mama, why are we at Grandma and Grandpa’s house?”

“Because Mama needs to have a talk with them. You can play in the backyard while I’m inside,” Pauline answered.

The building was a grand, old residence, carved into a strong oak tree. Windows dotted the trunk, and a pebble path led to the ornately carved blue door. Pauline approached with apprehension, flinching as her hand grabbed the brass door knocker and rapped it three times.

“But we hardly ever visit grandma and grandpa’s house, why are we here no—”

The question was cut off by a witch of a mouse opening the door.

“Hello, mother,” Pauline said curtly.

The older mouse observed Pauline intently. Glassy blue eyes scanning her figure as if to check for fleas. “What brings you here?” she responded.

“Aren’t you going to invite us inside first?”

The two women looked each other in the eyes silently for a couple of moments, before Pauline’s mother begrudgingly moved to the side and gestured for the two to come in with a sway of her rheumatic hand. The interior of the house was as overbearing in demeanor as the crone who decorated it. Upholstered couches and chairs filled the sitting room, their carved feet trampling the various colored rugs which blotted out the floor. Pauline took a seat on a moss green armchair, while her mother sat on the sapphire blue couch, the one she could never sit on as a child. From the coffee table next to the couch, the old mouse retrieved a candy wrapped in yellow paper and outstretched it towards Marvin.

“How about you have a sweet and run along outside?” Agatha Mus Musculus suggested.

Marvin took the candy, nodding as he did so, before scurrying off to the backyard.

Without his presence the room was entirely silent, only the ticking of silver clock hands reverberated in the air. Pauline broke the tension first.

“I trust you and father are doing well?” she asked as politely as she could. “As well as one can do without knowing the status of their only daughter, other than the knowledge that she married herself to a dirty ruffian,” Agatha replied, expressing the same cool distaste for Pauline’s decisions she had held since her daughter was young.

“I made you well aware of my plans with Dennis before we were married. Maybe if you bothered to attend our wedding, you would have a better idea of my status.”

The crone’s whiskers twitched at this response, but any distaste that may have been visible was quickly smoothed over like waves on the shore of a beach. “Well, based on the lack of a ring on your finger, I can see that your status has somewhat changed.” Agatha flicked her hand at Pauline’s missing ring finger.

Pauline inhaled deeply. “Yes, mother, that is why I am here. Dennis has gone...missing during one of his business trips, and without his support, Marvin and I would appreciate yours and fathers.”

The wry shadow of a smile twisted on Agatha’s mouth. “And how long has Dennis been missing?”

“Two weeks,” Pauline admitted bitterly. The words felt like bile coming out of her mouth.

“What did your father and I say would happen when you married a rat bastard like Dennis?”

Pauline stood up at this, firmly planting her feet on the sanguine rug beneath her. “Do not call Dennis that!” she shouted indignantly, before feeling light headed and sitting back down, a single hand placed on the growing bulge in her stomach.

“And I thought you were merely losing your figure. Good to know that your mixed breed husband left you with one more burden before he kicked the bucket,”

The scathing response Pauline had in her mind never left her mouth, trapped there by the shambling walk of her father entering the room. Alfred Mus Musculus was a tired-looking man with a build that still held onto the last vestiges of power, but had largely been reduced to slender fragility. Pauline exhaled deeply at the sight of him, releasing her contempt for Agatha and refitting the mask of serenity she wore.

“My little poppy seed, what brings you here?” Alfred asked warmly.

“I was just asking mother for some help. Dennis has gone missing,” Pauline said regretfully.

“A tragedy to be certain, but I'm sure your mother and I can provide assistance. Isn't that right dear?” Alfred absently twirled his exquisitely groomed whiskers while he talked, a habit Pauline remembered him having since her childhood.

“I'm sure something can be arranged, of course, you'll be needing to get back on your feet as soon as possible. You remember our arrangement, don't you?” Agatha asked Pauline.

Pauline did remember the agreement she and her mother had come to when she revealed to her that she was not only engaged to Dennis, but also pregnant with his child. Pauline was to be written out of the will, replaced by Marvin and any other grandchildren to come. Agatha still had hope for the proper child she had always wanted, and saw Marvin as a less-than-ideal way of getting it.

“Arrangement?” Alfred asked cluelessly. He was ignored by his daughter and wife.

Pauline looked hard into the eyes of the hag she called her mother and balled her fists tightly in her lap. “Marvin!” she beckoned.

The young mouse skittered into the room, taking a seat on the couch next to his mother. His light brown fur reflected the sunlight which spilled in from the stained glass windows. From her upholstered throne, Agatha observed the youth with surgical eyes.

“Yes, mama?” he asked.

“How would you feel about staying with your Grandma and Grandpa for a while?”

Pauline’s voice nearly cracked like her heart as she spoke.

“Will I still get to see you?” Marvin asked in return. His head now looked upwards to face his mother.

“Of course sweetie, it would just be for a bit until mama gets a job, okay?”

Marvin looked down, brow furrowed in deep thought. His feet rubbed against each other and the rug, creating the only sound in the room. “Okay, as long as you promise to visit me,” he said somewhat firmly.

“Good lad,” Alfred interjected, a smile on his face at the thought of quality time with his estranged grandson.

“Excellent. Alfred, after supper you can take Pauline and Marvin back home in the coach so he can pack his things. Pauline, I hope to see you back soon,” Agatha said with a small clap of her hands.

The next day, Pauline stood entirely alone except for the ever growing mass in her stomach. Dressed in slightly ill-fitting formal clothes and armed with a neatly bundled stack of

papers, she prepared to venture out into the market as she had done many times before, except now with the intent of finding a job.

The hustle and bustle of the market was especially prevalent that day, but despite the bumping shoulders and cramped walking conditions, Pauline held the pleased expression of someone with a purpose. Her life demanded change, and the only thing to do was accept it.

Pauline continued to wear this expression as she walked into the large pebbled building of Vulpes & Vulpes Financial Services. Inside, gray carpet intermittently discolored with age and residue covered the floor. Lining the northern wall was a string of worn, cheap looking chairs with legs that could hardly be considered twigs, and next to them a coffee table with a chipping birch bark surface and a leg irritably shorter than its uniform companions. Pauline walked over to the empty front desk and tapped the small silver bell. After a brief moment of waiting, she heard measured footsteps coming from down the hall and was soon greeted by presumably one of the Vulpes brothers.

“Ah, welcome,” the fox said energetically. His green eyes flicked to the stack of papers Pauline’s hand. “I presume you’re here for the secretary position?”

Pauline smiled. “Yes, I am.”

“Excellent. I shouldn’t have any clients coming in for around...” He looked down at his watch. “Thirty minutes, if you would like to get it done now,” he finished.

“That sounds great.”

“Well then, if you would just like to follow me into my office, we can get this started.”

The fox gestured down the hall and started walking. Pauline followed.

Mr. Vulpes’ office was much like her father’s. A grand but worn desk with a snail-shell inlay sat in the middle of the room, flanked by large bookshelves almost spilling with cloth-

bound volumes. Vulpes lowered himself down onto a toad-skin chair and gestured for Pauline to do the same. After they were both seated, Pauline handed him a couple of the many papers she had with her and waited in silence while the fox read them.

“I see there’s a large gap in your employment. Would you mind explaining?”

“Of course. After my husband and I settled down, I needed to end my employment with Mus Musculus Real Estate,” Pauline explained. Her hands found themselves busy shuffling papers around as she spoke.

“I also see you were a secretary there. I’m glad you have experience with the position,” he continued, hands still flipping through the papers. “What would you say draws you to Vulpes and Vulpes over other secretary positions?”

“The proximity is definitely a factor and because I’m looking for a stable position where I can become a part of a team,” Pauline said. Only one of the two reasons she gave was true.

“Well, as much as we would like to have you as a part of the team I’m afraid we won’t be able to hire you Mrs. Muridae.”

Pauline froze for a moment. A rejection after such little questioning? “I don’t think I understand. If it has to do with my employment gap I can promise you it won’t take me long to adjust to work life, I’m very quick to adapt.” The words spilled out of her mouth.

“Please forgive me Mrs. Muridae, but we can’t just hire someone only to lose them for months on end.” He gestured vaguely to her stomach. “I hope you can understand.”

Pauline said nothing, only breathing deeply to keep her fracturing composure. “I see. Well I wish you the best of luck in finding a secretary then. We all know that there is a large excess of them in Badger’s Brook,” Pauline said bitterly. The mouse released her vice-like grip

of the chair's arms and rose, somewhat shocked at the growing effort it was taking to do so, and walked out of the building, tears beginning to cool her burning face.

Later that night, alone and without a job, Pauline wept over her soup. Tears stained her fur and crept down her whiskers, occasionally finding their way into the bowl of seed stew that lay on the table. She knew that life demanded change; she just didn't know how to accept it. Most of all, she didn't know much longer she could bother trying to accept it gracefully. Her lamenting was soon interrupted, however, by a quick rap on the door. The mouse looked up from her lukewarm bowl of soup and shakily stood up.

"One moment," she said, wiping any stray tears away with a napkin and tidying herself.

Hastily, she scurried to the door and out of curiosity peered through the peephole. Pauline inhaled sharply at the sight and opened the door at once.

"Good evening Mrs. Muridae," said a tall hare with fur in varying shades of brown.

"Hello Mr. Lepus," Pauline said quickly. "Would you like to come in?" "I would, thank you." His ears grazed the doorframe of the mouse sized entrance as he walked in.

"Would you like something to drink?" Pauline asked, her hands already in a battle for who could pluck the fur from each other the fastest.

"No, I'm alright," Lepus said, pacing slowly about the room. "I presume you know why I'm here?" He stood still as the question slid from his lips.

Pauline knew the question was coming but still inhaled sharply when she heard it. "I do, and I promise I'm working to get you the money but ever since Dennis went missing its been so hard to do anything and—"

“You don’t need to explain it Mrs. Muridae, I understand,” the hare interrupted with a wave of his hand. “I can see why it would be hard and I want to help both you and I get through these troubling times.” Lepus took a step towards Pauline, placing a hand on her shoulder.

The mouse flinched slightly at his touch. “I’m going to go make tea. Please, have a seat,” she said before quickly making her way to the kitchen.

“Of course. Thank you.” Lepus watched her as he lowered himself onto Dennis’ favorite chair.

Pauline slowly gathered the required elements for tea in the kitchen, tail swishing across the pebbled floor as she did so. Her breath was fast and she took comfort in the tactile sensation of preparing the beverage, one of the few things her mother taught her that she enjoyed enough to retain. Carefully, she placed the kettle on the stove, retrieved a pair of chipped acorn-shell tea cups, and the last of her tea leaves. A brief moment reignited itself in her mind with each object she touched. Thousands of small victories to achieve such meager amenities, only for them to be lost in one defeat. Pauline’s hand now gripped the kettle’s handle tightly at the thought, and a flood of determination filled her being. Minutes later she reentered the living room with two cups of tea, mannerly composure reformed.

“Here you are,” Pauline said, handing him the drink. She felt bile grow in the back of her throat at seeing where Lepus had made himself comfortable.

“Thank you.” The hare’s hand brushed Pauline’s as he took the cup from her. He was acutely aware of the lack of a ring on it. “So,” he said, taking a sip of his tea. “Dennis is missing?”

“Yes, he is,” said the mouse.

“And how long has it been since you’ve seen him?”

“Nearing three weeks.” She gripped the handle of her tea cup tightly.

Lepus shook his head. “I’m sorry to hear that, Pauline. I’m sure it hasn’t been easy on you and Marvin.”

The change from Mrs. Muridae to Pauline was not lost on the mouse, however, she already felt as if oxygen had been sucked out of the room with the hare’s presence, and she certainly couldn’t waste her fleeting breath on a correction so miniscule.

“While that is true, and I hate to be curt Mr. Lepus, I don’t see how any of this relates to my rent,” Pauline said as firmly as she could while still sounding polite.

Lepus smiled at this and placed his tea cup on the small table, woven from firm leaf stems, that sat next to the chair. It was a gift for Dennis made by Marvin and Pauline only months prior. He stood and slowly paced across the room until he stood behind Pauline who still sat.

“It isn’t wise to talk business under such stressful circumstances. It’s a lesson I learned many years ago.” The hare placed both hands on Pauline’s shoulders and began to gently massage.

Pauline shuddered at his touch and stood up immediately, backing away as she did so. “Mr. Lepus I am a taken mouse and this is inappropriate behavior,” she said, a slight tone of shakiness betraying the power she hoped to achieve.

“I don’t see a ring on your finger, and I certainly don’t see a husband either,” he said, starting to take a step towards the mouse.

“Well I see a ring on yours.” Pauline took a step back.

“This old thing? It hardly matters,” he said, quickly sliding the ring off of his finger and tucking it in his pocket.

“Quincy Lepus, leave my house now,” Pauline commanded with as much force as she could muster.

The hare’s eyes scanned her lasciviously. “And what if I don’t?”

He took another step towards the frightened mouse.

Pauline’s eyes darted around the room until they eventually came to the only possible solution. She quickly sidestepped towards the fireplace, reaching above it and retrieving her great grandfather’s sword. The dull metal of the blade seemed to carry the weight of the lives it had once claimed, but Pauline held it firmly in front of her. Quincy Lepus stopped his advance.

“Don’t make me do this Quincy,” she warned.

“And what do you think will happen if I do? You still won’t be able to pay me rent. You’ll still be evicted.” Anger had seeped into his voice and his speech sprayed like a bursted pipe.

“Get out,” Pauline commanded, her words slow and clear.

Quincy said nothing, only putting his hands up and sidestepping across the room towards the door. Pauline turned so that the tip of her weapon always faced him. One hand firmly held the grip while the other was placed protectively over her stomach. When the defeated hare was halfway towards the door, however, he lunged forward, attempting to swat the dull edge of the sword away. Pauline panicked and stepped back, retracting her sword from the initial offense. Quincy lunged forward again and in a fraction of a moment Pauline thrust forward with the sword, firmly lodging it in the hare’s gut. There was a brief moment of silence before Pauline removed the blade and Lepus dropped to the floor, curled in agony and regret. He let out a guttural sound of pain as he leaked out, further staining the sanctity of the Muridae’s home.

“I-I’m sorry,” Pauline mumbled, still holding the handle of the stained sword.

She received no response from Quincy Lepus, and in a matter of minutes the hare wasn't able to respond to anything at all. Pauline stood over the corpse silently.

Pauline sat dully on a rough bench. Stinted light filtered into the room through a single, barred window. She wore an itchy, unflattering dress which, like many things in the prison, was a stained beige-ish color. It was an existence she was quickly becoming acquainted with. Despite this lack of interest in her surroundings, her head still rose when she heard the metallic scraping of a door followed by the rapid pittering of two feet.

“Mama?” The voice was unmistakable. However, it spoke with a filter of trepidation.

“Marvin?” Pauline's voice cracked as she spoke, both out of emotion and a lack of recent speech.

Quickly, the young mouse pressed himself against the bars, as if he thought that he may be able to squeeze himself through the barrier and embrace the familiar yet somewhat alien figure within. Pauline reached a hand through the door to her cell and touched her son's face. It had hardly been a month since she last saw him, yet he had seemed to grow so much. With every coming day he resembled his father a little bit more.

“Mama,” Marvin repeated, tears streaming down his face. His hands had also found their way through the gaps and now held the loose fabric of her dress tightly.

Pauline barely restrained her own tears, instead stroking the fur on his head and mumbling comforting words only he would understand. After the initial well of lament had been emptied and the young mouse only had sniffles, he backed away to view his mother entirely.

“I've missed you, sweetie,” Pauline said. Even though she had rehearsed this moment hundreds of times in her head, she still found it hard to pick the right words.

“I missed you too.” Marvin averted his gaze while he spoke.

“How is living with your Grandma and Grandpa?” she asked as cheerfully as she could.

Marvin stuck his hands in his pockets. “It’s not too bad. Grandpa has a lot of funny stories and Grandma always has things for me to do. They’re here to see you too, I just came in first.”

“I’m happy to hear that, Marvin.” Pauline could feel the tears in her eyes starting to well.

“Mama, when will you be able to live with us again?”

Pauline couldn’t answer the question.

Elias Jay Abel is an emerging writer, violently scrambling away from the jaws of self-imposed mediocrity. He currently lives in the Pittsburgh area and attends Lincoln Park Performing Arts Charter School. His work has appeared in such publications as PULP.

Red Faces (Who Knows Where The Time Goes?)

By: James Joaquin Brewer

I never found out Red’s “real” first name—the name his single mother called him long before her only child went to work in the sawmill as a master driver of that tall, wide vehicle designed for moving stacks of lumber around the yard and known as a “straddle-bug.” His nickname had been bestowed so long ago that no one who worked with Red at the mill remembered his being called anything else. Some claimed the name was related to his rust-flaked hair, but others wondered if it was explainable simply with reference to his drinking. His face, even in winter, was frequently the color of summer watermelon meat. On a couple of occasions he had been sent home by Charlie, the mill foreman, thinking Red must be sick because he had shown up for the day shift with an unexpectedly paler face—a mere pink. But from what he called a “public safety perspective,” Red prided himself on never driving any kind of vehicle after his adult-beverage-based evening supper (taken alone in a cabin up in the woods between Wakonda and Wave, a half-dozen miles from the mill). He admitted he had “sort of an on-and-off” drinking problem, but he asserted also that no other drivers would ever have to fear his being behind the wheel “under the influence,” whether on an old two-lane dirt local or a distant city-bound four-lane freeway.

But Red had another problem—one he was apparently unaware of until the day we saw him staggering down the stairs of Charlie’s foreman shack during a ten-minute mid-morning rest break. We glanced at each other with raised eyebrows as Red wandered around in tight circles on wobbly legs before finally sitting on the gravelly ground with an audible *plunk*. At first, I assumed Red had finally showed up for work thoroughly drunk and had been told he was fired. But that was not it. Charlie had informed him of something perhaps even more disturbing.

A couple of the older guys sauntered cautiously toward Red to ask if he was okay—if he needed first aid of some kind. Red accepted someone’s extended hand and hauled himself back to his feet. He looked up silently for several seconds at the cloudless blue sky. Shading his eyes with the ridge of his hand, he gave me the impression that he was looking for some kind of answer to some kind of question, some insight hiding high in that sky. Next, he lowered his watery gaze and blinked rapidly at the yellow glare glancing off the metal roof over the temporarily halted planer chain. He shook his head. He shrugged his shoulders. He started to talk—to move his mouth, that is, but with no words coming out. He shrugged again, cleared his throat, spat on the ground, blinked his eyes a few more times, then said softly in an emotional tone, “Boys, this is prob’ly the last day fer me workin’ at *this* man’s damn sawmill. I guess I’m sorta retirin’ without actually *knowin’* what that might mean.”

“So,” I was thinking, “Red *has* been fired!”

Wrong.

He shook his red-cheeked head again, took off his rain-stained hard-hat and stared at its top as though wondering what it was and where it came from, ran dirty fingers through the self-cropped hair on the top of his scalp, noisily scuffed his boots in the gravel, stared at the hard-hat crown some more, and spat again before casually remarking without looking up, “You won’t believe what Charlie just told me.”

By now everyone was gathered around, ready to hear just what-the-hell was going on.

“I’m five years older than I thought I was.”

It was true. Irregular Social Security Administration paperwork out of some office in Portland had finally found him. Many years before, after his mother had passed away but before he had subsequently moved to his little cabin, he had occasionally given his mailing address as

“the sawmill off Highway 36 in Wave, Oregon.” A large brown envelope had recently been delivered to that exact address (supplemented with some fairly old hand-inked notations from a post office over in Florence), and foreman Charlie had unexpectedly been given the sensitive and unwelcomed responsibility of informing Red Finnegan that he was sixty-six years old—not sixty-one.

There would be various explanations and excuses proposed for how this anomalous situation had come to pass. Red and his deceased mother had been known to be mostly illiterate. Family paperwork was basically nonexistent. Red was not a high-school dropout but rather a *grade-school* dropout. *But more than that:* for reasons that his mother may have taken with her to an inexpensive grave in Florence, she had not sent her son to the first grade until he was eight years old, and when he began attending school she lied about his age—claiming he was six, like the others in his entering class. A couple of times after that, he had been held back because of what passed for “academic” reasons and had been kept from moving up a grade level at the end of a school year. When he told her at the start of the eighth grade that he was embarrassed to be a few years older than his classmates, she insisted that he should simply start thinking of himself as the same age as his peers but tell them he knew he was “kind of big for my age.” Red got used to it. He gave an inaccurate age when he got his driver’s license (which, however, had no effect one way or another on his ability to purchase beer and liquor at Brockman’s convenience store in Wakonda). He gave an inaccurate age when he applied for a job at the mill. He claimed not to remember how any of those conversations had gone, and the then-current sawmill bookkeeper, who had not been there at the time of Red’s long-ago hiring, said he could not put his hands on any filed applications or other relevant employment documents going back to that time. It remained mostly a mystery just how the Social Security Administration had tracked down Red

and his real age. After a while, it was rumored around Wave that somebody in the Portland office had contacted one of Red's former teachers in Wakonda who was familiar with his grade-school (lack of) progress: a retired woman who preferred to remain anonymous (but whose name some people claimed to have guessed). One half-memory from her led to another, and that one led to another, and finally a scenario had been partially pieced together, a grade-skipping account that some accepted as plausible and some scoffed at, but a story that none of us at the sawmill that fateful day had been aware of previously or would have imagined.

I was not sure how to react to the shocking news that morning, but I could tell Red expected someone to comment—maybe to hazard some advice, some congratulations, some sympathy, or whatever might be emotionally applicable and appropriate. Although I was the youngest one at the mill (working through the summer while waiting for my senior year of high school to begin in the fall), when none of the older men said anything, I decided to speak up: “Well, Red, how old do you *feel*?”

The answer came quickly, almost cheerfully. “I feel *sixty-one*, of course! Just like I did when I woke up this morning!”

“Well, then,” I consoled, “good for you, Red; it’s far better to be sixty-six and feel sixty-*one* than to be sixty-one and feel sixty-*six*!”

Red rubbed a calloused thumb across his rust-stubbed chin, frowned, looked around at the others, then looked me directly in the eye and whispered huskily, “I’ll have to think about that, young feller. At yer age, five years maybe don’t make no damn difference to *nothin*’. Or maybe I’m completely wrong and stupid about *yer* thoughts about that; but in any case, Lee, thanks fer at least *sayin*’ it. I guess you just wanted to help me feel a *little* bit better about bein’

several years closer to . . .” He glanced down at the hard-hat still in his hand, then re-settled it firmly on the top of his head.

The break was over. I nodded at Red and headed back to the planer chain, that wood-and-metal monster that any moment would be noisily starting up again and sending us finished boards to pull and stack. He did not head over to the straddle-bug as he normally would have done. He went back to the foreman’s shack, where Charlie was standing in the open doorway with a fistful of carbon-papered forms in his right hand. The two of them went inside. I could see Charlie’s left arm moving cautiously across Red’s shoulder as the door closed behind them.

I’m not sure if I ever saw Mr. Finnegan again in person. I’m positive I never spoke to him after that day.

A couple of weeks after Red had left, Charlie told us that someone at Tony Seaver’s service station in Wakonda was claiming Red was enjoying retirement and thinking of using some of his social security money to take a couple of small-plane flying lessons from someone in Florence—a funeral parlor owner who had a few unrelated businesses on the side. Not long after that, one hazy day toward the very end of summer, during a Friday afternoon lunch break, looking up at the sky as an aircraft the size of a Piper Cub droned by, Rex Swartz, one of the lumber graders, laughed loudly and offered up a weird version of a fresh farewell: “We know you’re not over *here*”—jerking a thumb toward the straddle-bug—“but if you’ve been drinking already today”—pointing to the sky with his big red grading crayon and grinning at Johnny Stanton, Red’s recent replacement—“we hope you’re not gonna lose track of time up *there* either!”

I did not laugh or smile or comment on the supposed witticism. But I did start wondering afresh about perplexed Mr. Finnegan—and not just as a potential airplane pilot slicing through coastal Oregon sky, but perhaps also as one of the twins in Albert Einstein’s famous rocket-ship/space-time/age-gap relativity paradox. I couldn’t easily imagine the twin Red should be—an age-accepting older one still willing to lug lumber around down on the ground? or an age-defying younger one needing to speed like light from one bright section of Heaven to another? (After all, beyond scientific theoretical speculation, Red Finnegan had *actually*—already—experienced the “illusion of time.”) Perhaps if Einstein had used triplets instead of twins, I could have creatively imagined where Mr. Finnegan would fit best. Instead of laughing with Rex and Johnny, I just doubtfully waved a splinter-resistant green-gloved left hand toward the little plane that was maybe or maybe not carrying sixty-one or sixty-six years’ worth of an earthly human being as it disappeared behind some gray rainclouds of the kind that eventually help Oregon’s forests grow big green trees to be turned into big brown logs to be turned into boards of all sizes to be pulled off planer chains and stacked by people like me—and to be chauffeured around sawmill yards in the underbellies of straddle-bugs by people like Red Finnegan—before they would eventually become part of another calendar-bound human being’s real-time shelter in the Great Pacific Northwest (whether a metropolitan mansion in Portland or Seattle or Vancouver or just a rural backwoods cabin closer to the place I still thought of as home).

Raised on the rural coast of Oregon, James Joaquin Brewer currently shelters in West Hartford, Connecticut while working on a novel about political protests on college campuses. Among other places, his writing in a variety of genres has appeared in *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, *The Write Launch*, *LitBreak*, *The Hartford Courant*, *Aethlon*, *Jeopardy*, *Rosebud*, *The Poetry Society of New York*, *Closed Eye Open*, *The Manifest-Station*, *Quibble*, *Open: Journal of Arts & Letters*, *Blazevox*.

Pavement Artist

By: Heather D. Haigh

The soothing clunter-chug of wheels on track, and Joseph's right back, back with Dad, crossing the country—station to station—train to train—Dad noting numbers, and Joe—yes plain Joe he was then—working with crayons, then pencils, then charcoal—filling his sketchbooks with fields and mountains, engines and funnels, churches and people, Best of all people—with dogs and hats, umbrellas and pushchairs, scowls and smiles, and each with that something. Something Joseph longed to hold forever on the page. Once, he thought he could.

By the time Joe progressed to brush pens, Dad's feet dragged—a rasping shuffle of leather on concrete. On the platform, he'd ease onto a bench and fold into himself, his breath barely a whisper, his cheeks sunken, his eyes charcoal smudged.

Joseph orders another G and T and smiles wryly. Dad would hardly think slumming it in first class was going back to his roots.

If only Joe had sketched him that evening, his head resting on condensation-fogged glass, his fingers trembling on the leather of his notebook, and the tungsten lights painting jaundiced scars into the deep creases of his flesh.

Gunmetal clouds scud across a skittish sky, the air squallish as a brat. Joe turns left from the station, pulls up his collar, and skids to a halt. The ground has fallen away. He finds himself teetering on a precipitous outcrop of pavement, staring into a pit—mangled pipework and rock strata exposed for hundreds of feet. Scrambling up the opposite side of this chasm, right in the middle of Westgate—a huge tawny lion, eyes ablaze, mouth wide, teeth glinting. Every tooth, every claw, every strand of its mane is perfection.

The artist—a youth wearing a black tee shirt smeared with splodges of colour, kneels on the pavement. He's working on a leopard that's beginning to scramble up from below. Joe's seen street art before of course, but this is so detailed, so charged, so—alive.

A baseball cap squats beside the boy. Joe can see about three quid in small change. He looks at the lad's arms—thin—scrawny even, blue veins run beneath delicate skin. No track marks. Large cargo pockets on his trousers slump empty, save for one with a handkerchief poking from the top. More smears of pigment surround them.

Joe peels a twenty-pound note from his wallet and bends to hand it over. "Weather's too wild to drop it in the hat, mate."

The boy's eyes widen. He takes the note with slow deliberate fingers. "Fanks a lot. It's reight appreciated." His vowels are flat, his tone deferential, grateful. An image ghosts into Joe's mind of an art teacher with wire-rimmed spectacles and a fondness for tweed, handing Joe a slim box of pastels—the sticks well-used, paper wrappers peeling, but still proudly lined up from white, through the rainbow, to midnight black.

An icy gust whips the vision away and Joe straightens. Fat globs of rain are falling. Joe scowls as one hits the lion right in the eye dissolving the pupil into a sightless hematoma.

As Joe looks back from his taxi, he watches the artist, pockets now stuffed with his materials, shoulders hunched against the rain. The boy is buying a hot dog.

Forty minutes later, Joseph's gaze sweeps his flat. Polished walnut, leather, chrome, great lighting and great paintings. His latest additions mock him from the walls: Barrable's rendition of a boy with a distant gaze—bold strokes of ink conveying the essence of a lost soul. The droop of naked shoulders by Hesheer, leaking sorrow and loneliness into the room. The desperation of a

covering figure, portrayed by Wild. They all have that something. He can see it; he can afford to buy it. He can no longer capture it.

Climbing the stairs to his studio, he recalls—relives—that vertiginous lurch, the ground crumbling away beneath his feet. He wonders where the boy will sleep tonight.

Half-worked canvasses slump against the walls. A round-bellied woman, as yet untitled. Was she expecting her first—excitement mixed with anxiety, happily anticipating her second—a boy they'd hoped for, or wearily accepting there'd be a fifth mouth to feed? Old Man on Park bench. Reading a newspaper. Maybe he was checking the sports results, and maybe he was reading about the imminent end of the world. Or maybe he was reading his father's obituary. Joseph doesn't doesn't remember his impressions. The paintings yield no clues.

He folds his easel away. It takes a good half hour to rearrange his canvasses so he's cleared as much floor space as possible without binning the lot. The thought crossed his mind.

Instead, he squats on his heels and runs a hand over the absurdly expensive dove grey flooring. The surface is soft and smooth. It has an inviting degree of porosity.

He selects brush pens, something he reserves for preliminary sketches while being chauffeured around these days. Settling himself cross-legged, smooth plastic stick in hand, he recalls days hunched over a large art pad—the cover thin blue cardboard, the paper thick, pale yellow. The way he had to press the book open with his palms to make it lie flat. Dad perched on the edge of his armchair—a great wing-backed thing in bottle-green leather that was crazy-crackled on the arms. Dad would pour over maps and timetables, then check the contents of the jar beside his chair—a picture of Mallard sellotaped over the label that once said Murraymints—thruppences and shillings piled around the odd half-crown. While Dad dreamed and planned, Joe drew and dreamed and drew.

It takes several days and nights to complete his latest work—time spent living on coffee and sandwiches and ignoring his phone. He sleeps when his body insists.

It's a cool, clear morning when he lays down his pens, lets out a deep breath and stretches. He backs out of the studio to survey his work. He's looking right into a deep, dark hole. It has the look of a railway tunnel, burrowing straight down into the earth but—hanging from one side and attached by frayed knots to rusted iron rings—is a rope ladder. A thin lad is already heaving himself out, splayed halfway across the studio floor—a lad wearing a black tee shirt splodged with cadmium, burnt sienna and yellow ochre. Behind him a smaller boy follows, white-knuckles gripping the ropes, saucer eyes full of fear, hope, and sorrow. His bottom lip soft and protruding, as though it might be trembling.

He closes the door and pads back down to his office. He seats himself at his desk and opens his laptop. He's surprised to find it's a Wednesday.

Wednesday seems like a great day for Joe to ride trains.

Heather is a sight-impaired spoonie and working-class writer from Yorkshire. Published by Oxford Flash Fiction, Fictive Dream, The Phare, Timberline Review, WestWord and others, she is a Pushcart and BOTN nominee. When not writing or napping she can be found waving her camera around or making messes she optimistically calls arty. Find more on her [website](#).

True Crime Junkies

By: Allison Kelly

She'd been the one to find him. Splayed out against the edge of the treeline, strands of his black hair trailing in the sand, his eyes pointing toward the sky, browned feet bare, wearing his favorite t-shirt, the one that read "Once upon a time in Florida..." There was a ragged hole the size of a penny through his forehead. Blood seeped out from the crown of his head, sinking into the dirt of the Everglades.

They'd met for the first time in the early days of 2013, after the relief of having survived the predicted apocalypse of 2012 had faded, but before the shiny newness and the future feeling of the year had worn off. She'd been spending more and more time online recently, that was her problem, her mother had started saying. She'd accidentally stayed up all night on an internet forum that investigated missing persons cases, and slept right past her alarm. Her mom barged into her room thirty minutes before the first bell. "Jean! Are you fucking kidding me! Get your ass out of bed!"

Jean attempted to wrestle her hair into submission, dug through a pile of clothes for a t-shirt and shorts, slid on flip-flops, and her mother drove her, complaining all the while, thirty minutes out of her way to school. The clock blinked accusatory red numbers on the dash, encased in a light patina of dust. "I'm gonna be late for work! Your poor father."

They owned a market, which was her parents' pride and joy. It had been her father's dream his whole life to own his own business, and he and her mother had saved up \$50,000 over ten years and bought an empty building on a prime downtown street in 1980. She remembered her childhood being swaddled in a near-constant wash of customers – sunburnt tourists bathed in sunblock fumes, families wearing alligator hats from the Miami zoo, hungover spring breakers buying snacks, shaggy surfers trailing seawater. After Hurricane Andrew smashed the store to

pieces, they'd rebuilt it, piece by painstaking piece. After 2008, they were the only employees left, the three of them. They worked in shifts: her father worked 9pm to 7am, her mother worked 7am to 5pm, and Jean worked 5pm to 9pm, so they could keep the place open 24/7.

It had gotten to the point where Jean generally thought of her father as someone who existed within the context of the store, as much a part of it as the silver slushie machine and lightly cracked blue tile on the back wall. He would come to relieve her at 9pm on the dot. "Did you do your homework?" he would ask. "Yes," she would lie. She usually managed to finish it on time.

Jean's mother dropped her off at school. The day was mercilessly hot, gluing legs to metal desk chairs and foreheads to desktops. In English class, they read "A Good Man Is Hard To Find," which was about a grandmother getting shot for her worldview by an escaped convict. It was surprisingly grim for something written in 1953. In Science, they watched a video about the ecology of the Florida Everglades. A narrator intoned: "Spanish cartographers named the unexplored, unknown area of land Laguna del Espiritu Santo, or Lake of the Holy Spirit." Jean daydreamed. She took the bus home.

She went into the house, keeping quiet because her father was asleep. In her room, she slung off her backpack and sat down in front of her computer, opening up a Facebook page called *Florida Missing But Never Forgotten*. She'd stumbled onto the forum last year, after a girl in her grade at school, Melissa Cohen, had vanished while walking home. The group was already deep into the case, following leads, requesting police records, looking into suspects. Everyone had their own theories, but they never managed to prove anything concrete. The case went cold. In her last moments, Melissa fractured into pieces, and dissolved into the Florida ether. Jean felt like her failure to find answers was always hovering over her shoulder.

Working on the case was also how Jean met MommaBearDetective. MommaBear was a stay-at-home mother with a three-year-old who lived in New Jersey, who was in the group because she wanted to make the world a better place for her daughter. She'd had a friend go missing on a spring break trip to Miami her senior year of college, and brought the cold case to the forum, who solved it in five months. The remains of MommaBear's friend were found at the bottom of Biscayne Bay, and the man responsible was arrested. The case made national news. Jean clicked on her chat tab, and saw that MommaBear was online.

She sent her a message: *Still digitizing those files. How was preschool shopping?*

Jean went to her scanner, which was stationed beside a dusty stack of boxes. She grabbed the first file and began feeding the papers inside through. There were bank statements, interview transcripts, photos, news articles, scribbled notes. Jean was helping MommaBear look into the disappearance of a North Florida mom, Lynn Palmer, who'd left in the middle of her son's baseball game without a word to anyone, driven to the nearby country club, and, after a purported argument with her boss, the club's owner, was never seen again. The owner's family had connections to every law enforcement bureau in the state, and rumored links to organized crime. MommaBear was certain that Lynn had been killed for seeing something she wasn't meant to see. Jean spent the previous weekend driving upstate to meet a journalist who was also obsessed with the case, who'd given Jean all her files to copy. Jean's computer pinged.

From MommaBear: *Terrible, she's growing up right in front of my eyes! But – I finally got someone from the family to agree to talk to me! A cousin who cut off all connection with them in 2005... after an investigative journalist went missing. Same exact MO.*

Jean responded: *NO WAY!*

From MommaBear: *I know! How was school?*

Jean responded: *Lame, as usual.*

From MommaBear: *You're gonna miss it one day!*

Jean finished scanning the box of papers, then worked her shift at the store. No one came in; the downtown area was like a ghost town. She read a Shirley Jackson novel, soaking in the white noise hum of the ice cream refrigerators, and glanced at the mail in the back office as she restocked the shelves. *Final notice - final notice - final notice.* She biked home, and fell asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

Jean awoke to the soft sound of voices. She sat up. Her clock read 4:30am. She crept out into the hallway, where she saw her mother, her father, and their neighbor, who was a doctor at the free clinic downtown, stumble into the living room, red-eyed. Jean's mother's eyes were half-lidded. She was smiling. Jean's father flowed onto the couch. "Shh shh," her mother said in a loud whisper. "You'll wake up Jean." This had happened once before, and Jean didn't like it.

Jean saw that the sun was rising, a tiny pearl encased in the mesh of her window. She threw on clothes, grabbed her camping bag and backpack, exited into the garage, and took her mom's car. She could walk to the store in the morning for all Jean cared.

Jean drove south, until the outside world disappeared and she was swallowed by the Everglades. She stopped at the Royal Palm Visitor Center, grabbed her bags, and hiked into the panoptic green. She followed a wide dirt path, surrounded by swampland as far as the eye could see. There wasn't another soul around. She walked to the feathery swishing of trees shaking in the warm curtains of breeze, the slow rolling of the clouds overhead, the far-off hooting of owls, the hissing of crickets. Tents rose in the distance at Ernest Coe Campsite, in all colors. There were a few campers already awake, standing around the central campfire. Jean saw her friend Peaches, and ran to give her a hug.

Peaches was tan and smiley, an Australian nomadic long-distance hiker who had traveled all over the world, working odd jobs to sustain herself. Her hair was bleached-blond after a three-month stint spent surfing and teaching freediving lessons in Hawaii. Jean met her a few years prior along a Florida hiking trail, and sometimes dreamed about an alternate version of herself who lived Peaches' life. It was like imagining herself as a superhero.

Peaches was talking to a man Jean had never seen before. He had a dark beard, long dark hair, and worn clothes. His eyes, as they shifted onto Jean, were so dark brown they were almost black, his gaze piercing. "Huck, this is Jean."

Huck smiled. "A youngin' who appreciates the wilderness. A rare breed, these days."

Jean shrugged.

"Huck's new in town," Peaches said. "He's been hiking around North Florida and wanted to see the Keys. I promised him some primo trail-life breakfast." She was cooking up cinnamon oatmeal on the fire. Jean spent the morning at Ernest Coe, and then drove to school. She slept through an essay test in English, woke up when the bell rang, and turned in her test booklet blank. She drove home to a furious note from her mother and went into her room, where she started combing through the digital files of everything she'd scanned in the Lynn Palmer boxes.

She took notes in an old spiral-bound notebook: *Public donations to police fundraising organizations: (1) Florida Sheriffs' Association (2) Palm Beach County Criminal Justice Commission (3) Tampa Bay Area Police Chiefs' Association (4) Florida Crime Prevention Association (5) St. Augustine Police Department. News clipping about the arrest of a member of the country club family for reckless driving of a yacht – charges dropped.* She began scanning through pages of subpoenaed corporate records and court disputes, highlighting anything that

looked incriminating. Jean knew the key to uncovering Lynn's story had to be buried somewhere, she just had to find it. She had nothing but time.

A few months later, Jean woke up at 4am, the crypt-like silence of the house once again broken by her mother, her father, and the doctor, who were in the living room. Jean watched the doctor uncap an orange bottle of pills, spilling them across the dark wood of the table. He crushed them up expertly, divided the white power into lines, and they all vacuumed it up with a straw her mother brought from the kitchen.

Jean left, again, and went to Ernest Coe, where she took a hike with Peaches and Huck. They stopped along the way to cook breakfast, and Huck taught Jean how to make fire with a flint and a pocket knife. She'd never been more proud to watch a flame burst to life, Huck smiling. That evening, at home, she found an empty bottle of vodka in the recycling, and her mother had dark circles under her eyes. "Late night?" Jean asked. Jean's mother frowned. "I don't know what you're talking about," she said.

It started happening more often. Whenever it did, Jean would drive out into the green. Peaches left in April, to hike the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu, and other backpackers and hikers filtered in and out, spinning stories about life on the road. Jean went on hunting and fishing trips with Huck, who caught all his own food. She read her books, and he wrote in an old cracked-leather journal. "This was where my dad used to take me, when I was a kid," Jean found herself saying. "Out into the Everglades. We'd go out hiking and camping. He'd say, 'We're so lucky to live here. We're so blessed.'"

"It's all you really need," Huck said. "A tent, a pocket knife, a journal, and the wilderness. That's freedom."

They went paddling down the Taylor Slough in a boat Huck built by hand, rippling blue aisles of water surrounded by grassland. Jean told him she was failing all of her classes and that her parents expected her to take on half the hours at the store when she graduated, so one of them could get another job to start paying off their debt.

“Fuck them,” Huck said, staring at her through the fire, his eyes black. “They decided to buy into a broken system – doesn’t mean you have to make the same choice. You can do whatever you want to do in life, you control your own destiny. It’s a human right.”

As spring melted into summer, Jean and MommaBear ran into dead end after dead end investigating Lynn Palmer. Jean read every single document, took tours of the country club where Lynn had disappeared, tried to talk to the staff. They struggled through unsubstantiated rumors. The cousin who’d agreed to talk to MommaBear went underground and changed his phone number and email address. They called all of the members of the Palmer family whose numbers they could find, and were met with answering machines and “I’m sorry, this number can no longer be connected.”

Jean messaged MommaBear: *There has to be something else we can do.*

From MommaBear: *Sometimes you have to know when to call it quits. I’m sorry, honey. We did our best for her. I’m proud of you.*

Jean was sobbing, tears sliding down her nose and splashing onto her keyboard. She put her head down on her desk and cried, embraced by the blue light of her computer screen.

School let out for summer. Jean hiked, she drove up and down the coast, she sat around the Ernest Coe campfire. She caught her first snake. Huck skinned it, stripping the skin off like it was nothing more than a costume. She went to her shifts at the store, like everything was normal, but she would leave early so she didn’t have to see her father. She approached them, once, when

all three were zombified in the living room. She looked at the label on the pill bottle, which read: CODEINE. “I can’t believe you would close the store for this,” she said. No one replied. Her mother started to cry in her chair, silently.

“It’s a dog eat dog world, the one they live in,” Huck said. “They’re running away from the inevitable.”

Jean found Huck dead a week later. The gun was next to him – it was his hunting gun, Jean recognized it. She went looking for his wallet, and found it inside his tent. There was an ID that had expired ten years prior, registered to John Huckleberry. She took a picture of the ID, grabbed Huck’s journal, told the others, hiked back to her car, where she had reception, and called 911.

After that, days quickly turned into weeks. Jean had dreams about Huck being shot, the echo of it, the body slumping onto the sand. After a month with no news, she badgered her way into a meeting with one of the detectives on the case, who was exasperated. “He’s a John Doe,” he said. “That ID was stolen. He’s just some vagrant. Who is this guy to you, anyway?”

“What can you tell me about the case?” Jean asked.

The detective sighed. “We’re obviously still trying to figure out who he is. The owner of the ID didn’t remember where or when he’d lost it. No fingerprints in the system. He did have these –” The detective grabbed a box, snapped on latex gloves, and removed two journals.

“They’re all in some kind of code – did he ever talk about these?” Jean put on her own pair of gloves and examined the pages, which were full of strange symbols and numbers and strings of nonsense words, the code changing periodically as she flipped through. They matched the journal she stole, which she kept in her bedside table and tried to decode when she couldn’t sleep. He wrote in a sharp, angry way, ink bleeding through the pages.

The Florida Missing But Never Forgotten community also rallied to the investigation. They posted fliers all across the state, and looked into tips and Florida missing persons cases. Jean drove around to other Everglades campsites, asking if anyone recognized the picture on Hutch's ID. A few had seen him; none had talked to him. "He had a kind face," an older hiker offered on one of Jean's investigative excursions. "I always felt safe around him." They also identified one section of Huck's journal as a keyword cipher, and tried hundreds of different keyword variations to crack it.

Peaches wrote: *I met him on the Florida Trail. We camped across the way from each other. He said he'd walked out on his life three years ago and never looked back, and that it was the best decision he'd ever made.*

Jean messaged her: *The fact that it was his own gun...*

From Peaches: *I was surprised by that. He always had an eye on that gun.*

Jean messaged her: *Which means it was probably someone he knew. Someone he would let his guard down around.*

Jean messaged her: *Who did he know, other than us?*

From Peaches: *No idea.*

There was an exodus from Ernest Coe, as the group agreed it was no longer safe. A few left immediately, spooked by the presence of law enforcement. Jean spent a night out there by herself afterward everyone was gone. She thought she saw an alligator around midnight, huge scales rippling through silver grass. She could see why the early Spanish explorers thought the place was haunted.

When Jean came back, her parents were gone. The house was empty and dark. She checked her parent's closet: ransacked. Their suitcases were gone. Jean went into her room and

sat in front of her computer. She logged into Facebook, and saw that a post about the case had gone viral. There were 20,000 new members in the Facebook group. Someone new recognized Huck – they’d stayed in the same campsite along a hiking trail in California two years prior. The group added every California hiker they could find. Another person had taken a picture with him – *he told me he was born in Los Angeles*. They narrowed their search to missing persons cases in LA. Theories churned.

Weeks passed. Jean’s parents didn’t come back. After a few days, Jean took the money her mom had squirreled away in the top shelf of the utility closet and forgotten about, and used it to buy herself food. Someone posted about DNA testing in the group, and the post got thousands of likes. They found a company willing to test Huck’s DNA and raised the money on Kickstarter, with MommaBear spearheading the campaign.

As Jean waited for the results to come in, she focused on cracking the keyword cipher. It was a four-letter word. Jean tried: camp, tent, hunt, fish, land, fire, wild, free. She scrolled through the database of words that the group had already tried. She finally tried: JEAN, and the nonsense jumble of letters in the final pages of Huck’s journal resolved themselves into words. Pages and pages of paranoia, dark creatures hiding in the trees, men creeping towards him on their bellies through the tall grass, sniper rifles pointing upwards from deep water. *How can I make myself whole again, after what I’ve done?* Huck wrote. He also wrote about her, and it was the first time Jean had seen herself through someone else’s eyes. He said she was young and beautiful and smart, and had her whole life ahead of her. He said she reminded him of his younger sister, a shy bookworm who came to life exploring the California wilderness.

When MommaBear texted that the DNA test had failed, Jean was already making preparations to leave. She packed everything she needed into her camping bag: headlamp, tent,

compass, first aid kit, dehydrated food, sleeping bag, along with a blank journal. She rode her bike to the market, which had been closed for months. She crept inside, then opened one of the liquor bottles, poured in the aisles, picked up one of the matchboxes by the register, and lit the place on fire. She was going to leave her old life behind, like it was nothing more than a costume, and go so deep into the Everglades that she would never be found. She would disappear, just like Melissa and Lynn and Huck.

As Jean exited the store and got back on her bike, her eyes were consumed by the fire, swallowing shelves and steel and paint and plastic packaging that were as familiar to her as her own skin. Her phone buzzed. She pulled it out to see a text. From MommaBear: *Someone in LA recognized him. An ex-girlfriend.*

The screen transformed into an image of a ringing phone. Jean picked up. On the other end of the line, MommaBear was crying so hard she could barely speak, deep heaving sobs, like her heart was breaking. “He beat her black and blue, Jean. He hurt every woman in his life. He was a monster. He was on the run from the cops – for killing this girl he’d started dating. Oh my god, oh my god –” As MommaBear dissolved into tears, Jean watched the fire, which waved to her from behind the store windows, wrapping its orange arms around every familiar object in her field of vision until it was all that she could see.

Allison Kelly is a writer who's spent her whole life in Los Angeles, California, and plans to never leave. She graduated from USC film school with a major in Cinema and Media Studies and a minor in screenwriting. You can find her work in Maudlin House, Every Day Fiction, and Herstry. She's currently working on her debut novel, which is about the end of the world.

Joyride

By: Terry Sanville

The bathtub Porsche threaded its way through the tight S-turns, its tiny engine screaming. Then the carousel ride began. As the car's rear end came around, Tyler jammed the brakes and downshifted. Neither action helped. The world spun by – hills, sky, trees, road's edge, and the slopes of the deep valley. A momentary silence replaced the sound of shrieking Perellis. The sports car flew off the pavement and sailed downslope into ancient sand dunes covered with chaparral. It landed with a bone-jarring thump on its front tires. The momentum flipped the car end over end. Windows shattered. It came to rest on its wheels.

Tyler sat stunned and stared up at the roll bar installed a month before. The stench of scorched rubber and gasoline filled the coupe's cabin. Detaching his seatbelt, he pushed on his door; a huge shrub blocked it from opening. But the passenger side looked clear and he climbed out. Smoke curled up from the engine compartment. He reached inside the car, grabbed the fire extinguisher, pulled the engine lid release, then sprayed the motor.

He checked himself. Other than an aching left arm, nothing dripped, oozed, or felt broken. Tyler leaned against the wreck and sucked in lungfuls of ocean air. He retrieved his wallet and cell phone and fingered the service number for Triple-A. Upslope, several cars had pulled over onto the shoulder. Two men moved toward him, calling out, offering help.

He had just wanted to have some fun, lose the hollow feeling in his gut after a soul-crushing week of combat with clients and bosses. And then there was Merriam, at home with the kids. Was his joyride an attempt to escape them also? Drinking or drugs would be easier, but such a cliché.

One of the approaching men shook his head and stared at the crumpled Porsche. They shared cringe-worthy stories about vehicle wrecks, trouble with sports cars and wives. A low

coastal fog rolled in off the Pacific. The tow truck arrived along with the Highway Patrol. Documents proffered. Questions asked and answered. A steel cable dragged the car upslope to the road where it was winched onto a flatbed and hauled away. In silence, Tyler rode into town with the tow truck driver who dropped him at home.

The garage door of their house stood open, exposing a vacant parking bay where the Porsche had dripped oil onto the concrete. Tyler closed the door quietly, went inside and climbed the stairs to his wife's home office. He found Merriam with her back toward him, talking to herself. She sounded crazy, until he realized she jabbered away into her Bluetooth.

"I don't care . . . I don't give a good God damn how many kids they have . . . the seller won't budge below 900K . . . no, he won't carry . . . Look, I've got three other fish on the hook for this listing . . . yes, and by tomorrow the price will be going up . . . a bidding war, you finally get it."

Merriam tore the headset from her ear and threw it onto the desk. "Damn idiots."

"What's wrong?" Tyler asked.

She jumped then spun around in her chair. "Jesus, don't scare me like that. Flick the lights when you come in and I'm on the phone. Or better yet, just stay out."

"Sorry. Having a rough—"

"Don't even ask. I've had it with idiots. It's like they know nothing about today's market."

"Yeah, it's been a tough day for me too. I—"

Merriam waved him off. "Tell me about it later." She gulped white wine from a long-stemmed glass and lit a cigarette. "Could you check on the kids on the back patio, make sure

they're not killing each other. And then go to Giuseppe's for takeout . . . I'll have my usual and the kids will want pizza. But you'd better ask 'em first because Laurie's getting picky."

"Sure, hon, sure."

Tyler backed out of the room and descended the stairs, stopping midway to let his heart slow to a more normal rhythm. In the kitchen, he rubbed his sore arm and gazed out the open window at his son and daughter. The young teens sat morosely near the grill and stared at their smart phones, thumbs stabbing away, the silence punctuated by an occasional grunt or snicker in response to a text.

Tyler sucked in a deep breath and faked a cheerful voice, "Hey guys, I'm going to Giuseppe's. What kind of pizza do you want?"

Laurie wrinkled her face. "Too much fat in all that cheese. Get me a salad with extra anchovies."

"When did *you* start worrying about fat?" Jacob asked then turned toward his father. "I'll take a meat lover's pizza."

"That's my boy," Tyler muttered to himself. "Get the heart attack special and the future be damned." Tyler turned to go. He would order at the restaurant, which gave him time to down a flatliner or two at the bar while he waited.

Driving his Lexus sedan after wrecking the Porsche felt weird, like someone had slipped him a sedative. His shoulders and back relaxed but his stomach continued its turmoil. He would have to tell Merriam about the crash. She would explode with, "We've got a two-thousand dollar deductible on your damn midlife crisis. I hope it's totaled."

At the crowded restaurant, he hurried to grab the last vacant stool at the bar.

“A flatliner, Mr. Owens?” Jess the curvaceous bartender asked, fluttering their eyelashes at him and smiling.

“Sure, and I’ll order some food to go.”

A middle-aged woman on the stool next to him leaned in close, her breath warm on his neck. “What the hell is a flatliner?” She drank white wine. An empty bottle stood in silent testament.

“It’s a coffee cocktail with Kahlua, vanilla vodka, Bailey’s, and cold espresso.”

“Yikes, that could stop your heart all right.”

“That’s the idea.”

“Why would you wanna do that?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Got of few of those myself. So why are ya in here ordering takeout? Your wife hates to cook?”

Tyler grinned. “Yeah, something like that. She’s busy with her work.”

The woman scoffed, “Huh, another liberated gal. Everybody knows that the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach . . . and points south.”

Tyler laughed and stole a glance sideways. The woman caught him at it. “So what do ya think?” she asked. She had beautifully sculpted lips painted a deep magenta.

“About what?”

“About me? Not bad for a forty-something broad, huh? Guys tell me that I’m a real MILF.”

“A what?”

“I can’t tell you here, I’m too much of a lady.”

“I’m *sure* you are.”

The woman frowned and stared straight ahead. Maybe she hadn’t liked the tone of his reply. Women seemed to pick up on tone more than men. Use the wrong inflection, a word or phrase spoken too sarcastically or too condescendingly and Tyler could find himself in trouble, a mistake never to be forgotten. He remembered Merriam’s tone; it could turn from soothing to sour without warning. So what if he crashed the Porsche? Shouldn’t she be worried about *his* well being, about losing *him*, about anything except some lost buyer or the damn insurance deductible? And why was everything a confrontation between them?

She’d been so sweet before the children. They’d spent their honeymoon on Santa Catalina Island, found a deserted cove on its south coast, went naked for a day, made love in the shade of ironwood trees. But their increased cost of living drove Merriam into getting a realtor’s license and taking her frustration out on other agents. Had he become that *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, only with a smart phone, streaming, and a classic sports car?

His thoughts returned to the spinning world inside the Porsche as it flung itself off the State Park road. The flatliner had hit hard. He felt fuzzy, confused, and in pain. His left arm throbbed and his fingertips tingled.

Jess laid two bags and a pizza box on the bar along with the check. Tyler handed over his Visa card. He turned toward the woman next to him but found a bald-headed guy slurping a beer. Had she been just a booze-addled dream?

Jess returned. “I’m sorry, Mr. Owens, but your card has been rejected.”

“What? Merriam’s supposed to take care of . . . ”

“I’m sorry, but I tried twice. Do you have another card?”

Tyler nodded and handed one over. *What more shit can happen today? Time to push the reset.*

With the tab paid, Tyler pressed his way through the crowded restaurant and outside onto the sidewalk. The cold September air stunned him. He shook his head, as if to free himself from the images of what awaited him at home. He would have to tell his wife about the crash, whether she wanted to hear it or not. Would she hear at all? Was her indifference a worse punishment than her scorn?

The aroma of the hot Italian food broke into his wonderings and he hustled toward the car. Inside, he gobbled a hot bread stick that helped soak up the flatliner. He clicked on the radio. NPR broadcast an interview of a psychiatrist who specialized in PTSD patients from the Afghan and Iraq Wars. Tyler listened intently and munched, devouring his daughter's salad and his wife's lasagna before laying into Jacob's pizza.

The sun dropped behind the coastal mountains. He dozed. The annoying buzz of his cell phone woke him. He stared at the caller's number, expecting to see Merriam's. But he didn't recognize the number.

"Hello," he muttered.

"Hello, Mr. Owens. This is Lydia from Main Street Toyota. We've noticed that the warranty on your Lexus is about to expire and wanted to offer you a new low-cost extended warranty for just—"

Tyler stabbed at the disconnect button, turned the phone off and leaned back in his seat, shuddering from the cold. His injured arm pounded. A massive bruise had formed and he couldn't feel the fingers on his left hand. His short-sleeved shirt and chinos provided little warmth. He started the car and cranked up the heater. Motoring through the downtown he came

to the freeway ramps, one on-ramp signed “SF, ” the other “LA.” In a split second he flew onto the LA ramp and headed south on the 101, out of town and away from home and his closetful of suits. He chewed on a bread stick and fantasized about the woman at the bar. She filled his thoughts deep into the San Fernando.

Hours later, at a rest stop outside of Tonopah, he turned on his cell and texted Merriam. His left hand barely worked. “This afternoon I totaled the Porsche.”

Merriam replied with invectives and questions. He texted back, “Deal with it!”

Tyler disabled the phone’s GPS tracking feature, turned it off and tossed it in the back seat. He drove east then south across the black desert toward New Mexico and the barren lands of West Texas, where the weather would better suit his clothes.

Terry Sanville lives in San Luis Obispo, California with his artist-poet wife (his in-house editor) and two plump cats (his in-house critics). He writes full time, producing short stories, essays, and novels. His stories have been accepted more than 550 times by journals, magazines, and anthologies including The American Writers Review, Bryant Literary Review, and Shenandoah. He was nominated four times for Pushcart Prizes and once for inclusion in Best of the Net anthology. Terry is a retired urban planner and an accomplished jazz and blues guitarist – who once played with a symphony orchestra backing up jazz legend George Shearing.

The Earth Moves with Palumbo

By: Paul Smith

One year we all called each other 'Babe'.

Half a year.

I'm not sure where it started, probably Car 8, though. Or maybe South Side Ted, who had that smooth line of chatter that he brought with him from Crowley Sheppard. More than likely, though, it was Car 8, coming out of a meeting with IDOT, leaving a lunch restaurant around 3, blinking at the sun, wondering who he was with and not remembering their names and saying the first thing that came into his head, which at the time could have been 'Babe,' because one of them might have been a girl.

It started slowly, but gathered steam and by May everyone was Babe, the fuel man, the lowboy drivers, the plant superintendents, Wayne in dispatch, who hated Car 8 because Car 8 drove him crazy every night after he set up everything and Car 8 came along and changed where the paving spreads went because he'd made promises to people he never told Wayne about, the tire man, every swinging dick at every plant from Romeoville to Dundee was Babe. Everyone except maybe Johnny V, who didn't get along with Car 8 all that well because Car 8 ran the asphalt and Johnny V and Car 5 ran the concrete, and maybe the new Civil Engineer they hired to run the Tollway job. But the rest of us...we were all Babes.

You had to be careful, though. I mean you have to use judgment. One day Car 1 showed up at 63rd and Hobson with two suits in the back of the Bentley, all shined up, with the big **P** on the license plate all by itself. And Car 1 gets out, says hi to the guys, and as he's leaving who else but the Civil Engineer, yeah, him, the Civil Engineer with the fine features says, 'See ya later,

Babe' To Car 1. You just don't do that. Car 1 looks at him, smiles, pokes his head in the back window of the Bentley to the two suits, and there is a big, huge guffaw. Then Car 1 grabs the Engineer by the shoulder, puts a finger up to his face and whispers, 'You, too, *Babe.*' Then he drives off.

All of us stand around the Engineer in dead silence.

It was a way of building camaraderie, or whatever that thing is called when you're in a big group and everyone gets along, which we didn't all the time, but we tried. Between stealing trucks from each other, using the other guy's job as a dump for whatever junk we had on our own jobs, charging our guys' time to others guys' jobs, we didn't get along too well, but we acted like we did for appearance sake. Like we were in an exclusive club. Which really reminds me, this whole bonding thing, this camaraderie idea, to me, it's like meant more to keep others out that to keep us in. That's actually more fun, when you can exclude somebody and watch their jaw fall as it dawns on them they're not part of the 'club'. That's what the fine-featured Civil Engineer didn't get when he tried to get clubby with Car 1, number 1, you don't do that with the boss and number 2 you have to do something to earn it, which he hadn't. He kept trying, but I could tell in advance it wouldn't work out.

Like when Greek George brought the boom truck over to Hitchcock to steal the road plates from Ryan the excavator, he was all over the radio, blabbing away on Channel C about how 'They got those plates!' till finally you heard Car 5 go, 'Hey, uh, Paulie, go check the weather station. I want to know if it's warm enough to pour concrete tomorrow.'

The temperature at the time stood at 88 degrees.

Nope, the new Civil Engineer with the fine features, who read the Wall Street Journal in the trailer wasn't invited to Tom's Steakhouse in Melrose Park when all the other superintendents got

together for that one Saturday in June. I was there, Butch was there, so were the Deagans, the Dohertys, Ted Leahy. Even Car 5 made an appearance. But the engineer knew about it. You could tell just by looking at him the Monday after.

He wanted to be a 'Babe,' but didn't know how.

But the 'Babe' fad went just as fast as it came.

There was a triggering event, of course. That arrived one Wednesday around mid-August. It was hotter than a pizza oven, and everybody was paving like crazy, desperate for asphalt. The plants were running 14 hours a day. Channel A was so busy you couldn't get a word in edgewise, couldn't order trucks, couldn't set up operators, couldn't tell the fuel guy go to the north end of York road, not the south end, because everything got moved last night. Even Channel C went bonkers from time to time, and that was the concrete channel for Johnny V and Car 5. So South Side Ted is placing an order for 2000 tons of Superpave out of Lyons and Butch is taking the order down and all of the sudden, after he's got the order you hear loud as can be, 'And Screw Babe!'

The radio goes dead. Everybody is trying to figure out who said that. It didn't sound like Butch. When Butch was talking we could all hear everyone yelling like made in the scale house. It was someone else's voice. Somebody made a real *faux pas*, as they say.

Then there was Car 8's raspy, scratchy voice, raspy from yelling at the scraper operators two years ago on I-290, scratchy from yelling at Sammy 3 in the Hillside shop, sandpaper-like from fighting with the Teamster BA's before taking them to Heavenly Bodies in Elk Grove Village. There was Car 8's voice, on Channel A, saying, 'Hey, Butch, what's up, Babe?' We all waited.

It wasn't Butch, but that's not what Car 8 thought.

‘Nothing, Sam, nothing. Everything’s cool.’

‘OK, Butch,’ Car 8 shot back, ‘Just checking.’

This was good stuff. Butch was in some shit. I liked Butch, young guy, not a whole lot upstairs, but savvy, streetwise, would never screw up in public. I thought how I’d miss him. You couldn’t do anything with this on Channel A, but on a hunch, I went to Channel C and wasn’t disappointed.

There was our old friend the fine featured Civil Engineer who sat in the trailer and read the Wall Street Journal and who had bought a new pair of Red Wing boots that were still clean after a month saying, ‘Hey, anybody hear that?’

And there was somebody to oblige him since C was being used all year for the concrete guys to pour concrete out on Roosevelt Road. It was Johnny V. ‘Hear what, Babe?’ I could hear the sarcasm in Johnny V’s voice along with the garlic, the sweet peppers and the Chicken Vesuvio, I mean, if you could hear all that stuff and not just smell it.

‘Johnny?’ He couldn’t believe Johnny V would even talk to him.

‘Yeah, what’s up, who said what?’

‘Butch just told Car 8 to get stuffed!’

‘You don’t say. Hey, Huey, add a little water. OK, Paulie, I’ll make a note of that.’

Because gossip travels at the speed of an empty semi, everyone soon new the Engineer’s version of the story as noted by Johnny V.

Next week Butch suddenly was gone, as was the Civil Engineer with the fine features, the practically new Red Wing boots, the Wall Street Journal and the red diary he kept up to date even when nobody showed up on his job. Wayne the Brain was on his way to a nervous breakdown and wouldn’t be replaced until next year. But Jimmy Lombardo took over Butch’s spot at Lyons

and then took Wayne's job in Hillside the following spring. He kissed Car 8's rear better than Wayne ever would, switched operators whenever he felt like it to keep certain superintendents really happy because it only took a month for him to figure out who he should be afraid of and he started a Super Bowl lottery with a hundred squares and lots of ways to win that nobody could ever figure out if he distributed back all the money or kept half for himself, but by then he was tight enough with Car 8 that we started to be afraid of him, too, and we didn't say anything.

Butch I was going to miss. Wayne, not so much. Car 8 and Johnny V made him cranky, plus we did, too and he got to be a pain in the back, only not nearly as big a pain in as Jim Lombardo wound up being. But the Engineer nobody missed. He didn't get it. He didn't get that even if you don't cause the shit to happen, the shit can still wind up on your shoes if you don't know how to walk around it. Next we heard Wayne, Butch and the Civil Engineer all wound up with one of our competitors the next year and we waved at them when they drove by in their green trucks, not orange anymore, like us, and we kind of smirked because they weren't Babes, never had been, and never would be. And that same year someone tried a new thing using 'Dude' in place of 'Babe' over the radio. It might have been South Side Ted this time.

It lasted about a week.

We never found out whose voice that was, the one that sounded like Butch. We didn't care.

Sometimes it's even fun to see one of your own go down.

Paul Smith is a civil engineer who has worked in the construction racket for many years. He has traveled all over the place and met lots of people. Some have enriched his life. Others made him wish he or they were all dead. He likes writing poetry and fiction. He also likes Newcastle Brown Ale. If you see him, buy him one. His poetry and fiction have been published in Convergence, Missouri Review, Literary Orphans and other lit mags.