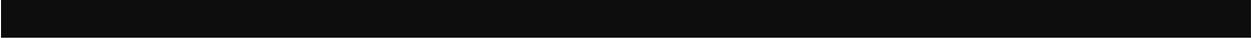


On the Rusk



Spring

Issue Four



On the Rusk

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Issue Four

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Editor-in-Chief

Catori Sarmiento

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The cover art was provided by the On the Rusk staff.

Doug Bolling

Moieties

Shadows gathering along a  
corridor where once  
a cello sounding.  
Our voices dividing spaces  
into a before & after.  
House in which we lived & died  
a thousand times  
& died again  
as though a Hamlet  
had suddenly resigned  
the enterprise of  
discovery,  
of self-mutilation.  
How then does a poetry  
contrive the shape  
of that beyond the words.  
There are oceans  
I have never seen  
but turned the dream  
into smash and thrash  
of emerald green water,  
a believing.

## Elegy of Flowers

From your black poems—Juggler!

White, green, and red dioptrics,

Let strange flowers burst forth

And electric butterflies!

-----Rimbaud, What Is Said to the Poet

## Concerning Flowers

Sojourner, visit the gardens in

black of night.

Press the blood petals to your lips

as token of death.

You the handler of balls and snakes.

You the artist of spaces deceived

into motion,

your hands of velvet

your fingers little stars

performing their

trickery.

The odors of this garden

are the lies we believed.

Pistil & stamen, delicate stem

and the root always hidden

like the gods.

I follow you through the

scented path,

observe your pause

before the iron trellis

of longing.

Soon you will be light

as air, these flowers

the very ones they pluck

for your grave,

your poems become ash

and forgotten.

David Chorlton

### **Fast Shutter Dreams**

An insect designed for the future  
moves across a leaf  
with less than a pinprick at the tip  
of each leg  
and an armoured complexion  
in which it is possible  
to see,  
when magnified to the scale of an uneasy dream,  
an expression  
worthy of the soul  
often accredited to humans  
but a matter of contention  
among theologians  
who think a small  
transparent body can contain little more  
than some liquid  
and a nerve  
that feels its way through time.

### **The Dog**

A lost dog skirts the fence  
that runs around the lot  
of a Mexican restaurant  
whose owners put food out  
and water for the warm days  
now beginning, with one ear  
slack, the other raised to listen,  
and her eyes showing white  
around the pupils as she holds  
close to the chain link  
prepared to run away  
from anyone who would help her.  
She's at the edge  
of the industrial zone  
where trains pass by  
with their own lost calls  
day and night. It's an inhospitable  
part of the city, with concrete  
to soak up the heat and no trees  
to offer shade, no landmarks  
of distinction and no purpose  
anyone can see beyond  
assuming what goes on here  
is necessary to supply  
missing parts for our appliances  
which we only take note of  
when they're broken. The dog  
finds a place where the same  
truck is parked all day long  
until closing time, when the lights  
go out and a last clamshell  
of scraps is placed by the door  
for her to eat while the mechanical  
hum around her becomes  
a familiar backdrop to sleep.

## Western Sky

The sky out here belongs to everyone;  
hard as winter,  
the shade of July heat before  
it darkens in the middle of the day  
and swells with thunder.  
High, wide and open,

or black as prophecy;  
the backdrop for a film too realistic  
for Hollywood to make,  
it picks up where  
the mountains cannot reach  
and arcs across grasslands  
with cattle wandering lost  
as madness, grateful

for the shade a cloud brings.  
The sky is theirs too,  
but apportioned  
by the same barbed wire  
that fences the land.



B.Z. Niditch

A DAY

A day undermined  
by a wonder  
from these field glasses  
for a future pastime  
dissonant expressions  
airs through nature,  
a tree, lilacs, fruit  
through a wind breaker's  
pocket hiding for later  
wrapped in memory.

EVERYWHERE

Everywhere  
your absence landscapes  
from memory of the sea  
dwindles in lambent shapes  
with intimate wounds  
on a horizon of sky,  
paints shroud  
an intertwined echo  
from musical stones  
deafens the waves  
in your watery throbs  
along the sand dunes  
of the Cape  
half- asleep in the sun  
consumed by our voices  
by child laughter on rocks  
and reefs of silence.

Ben Nardolilli

Your Neighbors, Have You Seen Them?

The cement door is stuck, like the rest  
 Of the architecture,  
 We live in a house that is flame-proof  
 But it looks like a crematorium,  
 Inside things do burn,  
 However, only in a metaphorical way,  
 We have pink and yellow  
 Painted on the walls,  
 Plus plenty of pictures of flowers  
 And tropical birds from distant lands,  
 There are books as well  
 That act to keep our collection  
 Of empty bottles in their place,  
 The only trouble is,  
 People take one look at the exteriors  
 And refuse to give this world  
 A fighting chance,  
 Yet those who pass through  
 The infamous stuck and heavy door  
 Are pleased as a whole,  
 Statistically speaking,  
 Over what they find we bring them into.

Next of Kin

With respect to a deceased client,  
 We have to come in and gather  
 Around and surround him or her  
 With fresh circumstances at hand.

These are the final investments  
 We have to make before the defunct  
 Status is granted to him or her  
 And intestate trials come to an end.

The finesse we offer will flee in time  
 From the scene of this dissolution,  
 Private arms will step over the chalk  
 Lines to bank the remnants away.

Simon Perchik

Five Untitled Poems

\*  
 Row after row  
 --it's your usual vineyard  
 overrun the way mourners  
 will always lean too far  
 are already in clusters  
 holding on to a stone  
 as if a sharper knife  
 could fall through  
 and deep inside each vine  
 leave no one to walk past  
 though you come for work  
 with wobbling fingers  
 that no longer make you sad  
 --you pluck each pebble  
 trying not to touch the dead  
 show up as if they  
 would never let you leave  
 with nothing in your mouth  
 except as some seedling  
 just planted and on your lips  
 the dirt is somehow sweeter  
 growing itself into arms  
 and legs and kisses, by now

even in winter the stars.  
 \*  
 Mouth to mouth this rock  
 takes back that light  
 the sun grew fat on  
 though birds gag in it  
 still part their wings  
 not yet the ashes  
 that run through you  
 let their last breath  
 reach under you, hold on  
 till nothing's left  
 except the shadow  
 the dirt counts on  
 --you don't dig anymore  
 afraid more darkness  
 will escape, unfold  
 as in midair  
 the slow wide climbing turn  
 into mountainside  
 unaware how long it's been  
 --you sift, lean over  
 the way this tiny rock

is pulling you closer  
 wingtip to wingtip  
 is swallowing you  
 as if one by one  
 its feathers had opened  
 --in time, in time.  
 \*  
 Already weightless these steps  
 don't need the morning  
 back away as that emptiness  
 stars are used to  
 --you can hear them narrowing  
 creaking and from behind  
 wait for the sun to open fire  
 flash past your forehead  
 though you can't make out  
 the week or year or the cloud  
 that knows you're there  
 comes for you between more  
 rain  
 and mountainside still standing  
 no longer growing grass  
 can't love or remember  
 --you hide the way this attic  
 opens inside a door  
 that is not a flower  
 --an iron knob

that turns away nothing  
 and in your arms nothing,  
 nothing.  
 \*  
 With its feeble hold this hillside  
 --a simple bond though your  
 shadow  
 is pulling loose --this dirt  
 won't keep its promise  
 as if nearness means nothing  
 even when you expect the sun  
 handful by handful, back  
 to warm itself  
 yet you still come here alone  
 can almost make out the breasts  
 the eyebrows and on this mound  
 the forehead you long for, the  
 eyes  
 that rise from this leftover  
 darkness  
 as two mornings and at night  
 two nights, closer and closer.  
 \*  
 From habit, burnt  
 as if every morning now  
 the sun has to be reheated  
 still frightened by the cold  
 more than coming alone

--it's your usual meal  
two slices, made stale  
broken open the way coffee  
just by boiling  
turns your mouth black  
--you've learned to open bread  
till it reeks with ashes  
and smoke already rising

to become another mouth  
and on its lips  
the small blister, resting  
though there's no moon  
only this side by side  
lowered slowly, no longer  
empty, your arms cramped  
calling for each other.

C.S. Fuqua

Special Days

On this special day,  
the shoes squeak,  
the dress is too long,  
and her hair will surely  
muss with a sweater,  
but it's cold,  
*it's cold, Dad.*  
Tears...

Then different shoes,  
a slip-on sweater,  
tickles and a smile...  
The dress-up party  
after school is coming,  
where Brownies  
will giggle and squeal.

She's content,  
reading until we arrive  
at school, park.

She swings the door open,  
looks down at herself.  
*Daddy, they'll laugh at the dress.*  
We can't go back, I mutter.  
but she's crying,  
then walking away,  
always away.  
I love you, I whisper,  
but she's gone.  
These days—  
these awful, special days—  
are just too hard.

## Milton Montague

futureworld

slogging thru the aftermath of civilization's detritus  
rampant smog and disastrous climate changes  
and the chemical offal of unbridled industry  
plus exploiting of our natural resources  
poisoning our only habitable world

desertification's certain fate  
no return path remains  
all bridges burned  
no road ahead  
our future  
Mars  
O

Bruce Colbert

Cairo

### CITY OF THE DEAD

Ancient Bedouin tradition demands a man offer hospitality to any who approaches his tent with hunger or thirst, or want of shelter, regardless of what that man has done. It is the law of heaven, the law of the desert.

Normally I'm not much of a breakfast person but when you have your first meal of the day as your last which was my lot as a lapsed Catholic during Ramadan, I'll gladly come to the table. The meal itself is called an Iftar, and follows a day of fasting both with food, and supposedly also involves forgoing the pleasures of the flesh, by the faithful, I had learned after half a year in Egypt. It was October, and this was my first Ramadan. In a sense, I was one of the faithful.

Another reason I had wanted to be at this particular feast was that it was held on the elegantly-appointed third floor terrace of the Ritz Carlton Hotel in Cairo which overlooks the huge old cemetery where two or maybe three or four thousand souls lived among the gravestones, no one really knew quite how many, or obviously cared, called the City of the Dead. Next to the Pyramids, the Temple at Luxor, or even the Mosque of Mohammed Ali, it's a strange sight for Western eyes combining ancient, and alas, contemporary Egypt, at least to most Americans like myself.

Resting in this lap of luxury among the Egyptian ruling class, you looked over your vanilla custard at the enslaved, or at least the impoverished, not unlike the old Pharaoh had probably done.

Why was I in Egypt? The American University here had hired me to teach for two years in its contemporary politics department, run by my old lawyer friend Roger from Chicago and later the Clinton years in Washington, who had heard over the grapevine that either out of craziness or sheer desperation I'd taken on too many political campaigns I couldn't possibly win, was drinking far too much, and had been disinvited by most of our former old friends from their dinner parties, and what was worse, had planned to spend the rest of my remaining days holed up in a ramshackle cabin in the Great Smoky Mountains. At least that was the rumor. I was turning into a drunk, true, that's what often happens when your politics go sour. I needed the courage to get out, and that's when Roger called. I took his offer, dutifully packed my two officially sanctioned bags, put a few sticks of furniture in storage, and left O'Hare on that Friday. The university faculty was divided into thirds: one third American, one third Canadian, and the final third, made up of mostly Middle Easterners with a mixture of Egyptians, Lebanese, Jordanians, two Tunisians and a few other Arab nationalities. The Saudis, of course didn't even bother, they didn't need the money which was modest anyway. The school provided us with a furnished apartment, often in one of the old colonial sections of Cairo built by British expatriates during their eighty years as protectors of the Egyptian state on the heels of departing Ottoman sultans. If you had children, only true for perhaps a handful of the most sought after on the faculty, there was an arrangement with the exclusive old Cairo College, which usually sent its few graduates on to us, and sometimes to Oxford and Cambridge. That was the boys, the girls rarely or never left Egypt weighed down by Islamic tradition even in the most Westernized and seemingly enlightened families.

Roger had given me his invitation to the Ritz affair, obsessed with organizing a new softball league among the Americans and Canadians, and only last week had uncovered the breathtaking pitching talent of a few young oil-workers from Houston. He was at Shell tonight making his appeal to them, two tobacco-chewing fast pitch guys. Most Canadians were strong and fast enough on the field, usually ex-hockey players, but they didn't possess the finesse, his favorite word, to make that strategic game-winning double play most Americans kids are born with. Wasn't the roster of the Toronto Bluejays after all filled with mostly players from Texas or lightning-fast Dominicans from New York City and Miami? he would repeatedly ask me, smugly knowing the answer. And of course, politically, he thought all Canadians were still living in the Fifties. So did I. "If you're flying into Ottawa," he was fond of reminding me, "be sure and turn your watch back fifty years," followed by a shrill almost womanly laugh, a sort of hyena-like howl.

The tables on the Ritz terrace were circular in shape and at mine sat three teenagers and their grandfather who told me over our initial conversation that he owned the three Sheraton Hotels in Egypt, and a small blond woman in her early forties sitting on my immediate right who said nothing. Two chairs were empty, waiting on the parents of the teens, who would be a few minutes late I was told. I sipped the cold tea put in front of us by the silent waiters which would remain untouched by my companions until the sun dipped below the horizon as was their custom. Putting the glass to my lips again, I noticed I had caught the attention of the blond woman, and she looked directly at me and smiled, but ventured no opinion of possible disapproval. I assumed she was Moslem, not a catholic Copt who didn't observe Ramadan.

The grandfather asked if I'd been to the Red Sea, and when I said I hadn't, he handed me one of his business cards, and said, "I want you to be my guest in Sharm El Sheik, please, it would be an honor," and called me professor. "Just ring up, my secretary will arrange it. Sharm is our jewel." And with that, he turned to his grandchildren chiding them to keep their voices down. I knew of Sharm El Sheik and had heard that the year before there had been a Palestinian terrorist bombing killing both Egyptian and Italian tourists at one of the big hotels, not his. But the seaside city was filled with villas and hotels, and it was one of the few places in Egypt where you'd see an Arab women in a bikini, mostly college-age girls, true, and a few students from the university, smilingly tolerated by a handful of sybaritic Arab fathers who probably had mistresses themselves the same age in Paris or Rome.

Islam always seemed in delicate balance to me, I knew a London merchant who had made most of his money selling cases of scotch to wealthy Arabs as soon as Ramadan began, his warehouse emptied by this mass exodus from Amman, Abu Dabi, Dubai, Cairo and the Saudi peninsula each year. One of those stories of modern Egypt, the grandfather had come from an obscure village in Upper Egypt, he explained, and went on to greatness after army service as an infantry captain in Sinai, elevated to power by his former commander, the late Anwar Sadat, and was now part of the four thousand families that ruled. He didn't say that exactly, but that's what was implied. He had been two classes behind Sadat at the military academy, stressing that today he was 'a man of business' not a soldier though he would fight for Egypt in a heartbeat. I think he meant against the Jews, but I wasn't certain; it was possible that the mostly Muslim Sudanese could also attack Egypt's borders, and were already a little belligerent after a protracted and bloody civil war ripping their country in two. There was now a new country called South Sudan on the map of Africa.

I had this picture in my mind of a British film actor, maybe it was Alec Guinness, playing the doomed General ‘Chinese’ Gordon at Khartoum, slowly pacing along the crumbling walls of the Byzantine fortification and, looking out into the distance for the enemy, his blood red military tunic buttoned up to his neck in the stifling heat, besieged by the unseen millions of fanatical Sudanese with spears and bloodshot eyes. You would be moved in the film by the sacrifice of his staff of loyal, upper crust young officers, with well-manicured mustaches and names like Clive and Reggie. His son, the father of the teenagers, had graduated cum laude from the university, he added, and later had also studied business at the University of Chicago, a city his son found impossible to live in because of the bitter cold weather. Cairo was their home, with a pleasant climate, important when your blood was thin as was the case with all Egyptians. He stressed that, the thin blood. This is the cradle of civilization, he went on to say, “the world started right here.” pointing toward the table surface but meaning Egypt itself. As for the Saudis, he held them in contempt, “they’re fifty years out of the tent,” he hissed, cautiously looking over his shoulder as if to make certain that no unsuspecting Emir was in earshot and had overheard his cutting remark. He then dismissing them all, the Saudis, with a wave of his hand in the air.

At dusk, Iftar began with five enormous and overflowing buffet tables stacked with silver covered dishes urged out into the muted light of the terrace evening, easily thousands of dollars of domestic and imported delicacies, with France well represented. Quietly the grandfather rose and left the table to circulate amongst his friends there, many already calling out to him, and his grandchildren continued talking hurriedly with each other, the two boys loosening their neckties, or had run from the table also seeking their friends who were streaming in. For a long moment, I looked over at the vast and lonely cemetery but could see no movement among the dark avenues of crypts. Suddenly the woman next to me spoke, her words pulling me back into clamor of Arabic voices surrounding us. There was now only the two of us at the table, the children had all left, their parents not coming, presumably caught in a traffic jam, a nightmare here, or perhaps simply faced with a change of plans, who knew?

“The haves, and the have-nots,” she said to no one really in perfectly-accented American English, with a shrug of her narrow shoulders motioning toward the cemetery, then she smiled at me and pushed a handful of loose hair off a round pretty face, “it’s as old as time.”

I nodded. She had dark piercing eyes, her lids painted with that deep purple hue Egyptian women favored that made them look a little like what I remembered Elizabeth Taylor looked like as a kid, as she rested on her Nile barge on the big screen. The woman was fleshy, I think, that’s the right term to use, a look many Arab men were fond of in their women, full-figured with large breasts and a round bottom, not fat, no, but fleshy all the same. She wore bright red lipstick, and was dressed in clothes purchased in New York, or maybe Paris, clothes that were clearly expensive and fashionable. She wore a large diamond, and a narrow wedding ring on the left hand, below it a gold bangle with rubes on her wrist.

“American, and teach something political? that’s what I thought you told Ahmed,” she said.

“You know him?” I inquired, though not entirely surprised.

“Of course, I know him,” she said, her voice taking on a bored tone. “he’s a friend of my family, same tribe. We marry each other, aunts, uncles, cousins, business partners, I was at boarding-school with his daughter, and God knows what else.”

“Inbred!” she then laughed, putting her head down on the white tablecloth for a long second or two.

I looked at her blond hair spread out before her on the table, waited, and then tried to move the conversation forward. I wasn't quite sure if she were laughing or crying at, except when she picked her head up and looked at me again straight in the eyes, her half-closed eyes seem to be dry. She crossed her arms and leaned forward as if she wanted to whisper. “I'm going to tell you a story,” she went on, asking me first impatiently, “how long have you been in Cairo?”

I told her I'd been here eight months, and came from Washington, where I had lived all over the city and in Georgetown for nearly fifteen years, working at first in a series of Congressional staff jobs, then ten months in the White House with Roger in the second Clinton term, and then as a political campaigner. But added that in the few years after a long and painful divorce, I had started to inch my way back to Chicago which was my original home. I had an older sister that I liked living in a North Shore suburb, and that helped somehow. My only child, my daughter Renee, was in her last year of college in Charlottesville, and was far too busy to talk to me most of the time, and anyway she was frustrated hearing about my problems. I didn't tell her my wife had left me for a divorced friend who sometimes came to dinner, and whose entertainment columns in one of the national newsmagazines was usually the butt of my jokes. I guess you could say he got the last laugh, or maybe I did, I don't know.

“Before you tell me your story“ tell me where you lived before in the states?” I urged, now that I had her full attention. I liked this woman, really. “Well?”

“Two years in New York, a year at NYU, the other working in fashion on Seventh Ave, traveling for awhile with regional trunk shows mostly in southern California,” she said. “A lot of time in LA, an awful place.”

In truth, New York turned out to be the freedom she had longed for, she lived away from home after arguing the case for months with her father who finally relented, drank and got drunk at parties, took LSD one night, persuaded by a few friends and had an out-of-body experience, but for that whole two years she didn't sleep with anyone. She was Moslem, and unmarried, and that fact never changed.

“How did you get out of Egypt?” I asked.

“That was easy,” she went on to say, “my father was a diplomat, he was based in New York at the Egyptian Consulate, and later very briefly at the UN, so he had no choice really in the matter. He couldn't very well leave me by myself in Cairo, or with his or my mother's family, that would have reflected badly on him as a man of a certain class, impossible.”

“What do you know about Arab men? she pressed me further. It felt a little like a cross examination, but a friendly one. “The usual, from the faculty, just living here,” that much.”

“Then nothing!,” she said moving nearer to me as she talked, the fingers of her left hand softly touching my extended arm on the table as if she were gently plunking piano keys. Noticing her movement and intimacy, I nervously turned my drink glass around in a half circle.

“Nothing,” I agreed, looking at my turning glass. The women I saw on the street seemed exotic, from a world totally alien and unfamiliar to me, created before me in this millennium by an ancient and illusive

force called Islam. I had seen them covered in black, sometimes wearing gloves, or occasionally all white, eyes peering out of a slit to watch the world, and hurriedly passed by other Westernized Arab women in skirts and girls in tank tops. But there was a sameness about the men, despite what they wore, their class, whether or not they spoke Oxbridge English, or the pidgin tongue of taxi drivers, or the few words of street sellers, or village men, selling fly-covered meats in the narrow alleys threading the city.

She sighed, letting out a confident breath. "I'm talking to you because I want to, no other reason, you understand," she said. I nodded, and glanced away from her gaze uncomfortably to see if anyone was watching us, no one was.

Laughing, she whispered, "we should probably talk over a scotch!"

"Where? not here? maybe in the bar," I added, knowing of course that the Ritz, or the Hilton, or most any international hotel was free to serve drinks.

"No, that will be another time," she went on, as the darkness started to envelope the terrace and torches were being lit around us and the other tables for illumination. She started her story, slowly, almost haltingly, but you could see the intensity she took in the tale in her black eyes, reflecting by the light."

"My husband is in London for a week, maybe two, it's up to him how long he stays there, it's not for me to question him at any rate. His father owns Osiris Construction, and together they build hotels all over the Middle East and in Athens, and also Beirut when bombs aren't flying around. They built two of your new friend Ahmed's Sheratons, the newest one in Sharm, and the other on the corniche in Alexandria. The hotel in Alex was the only one ever done with any taste. Maybe they had read Durrell's Alexandria Quartet, and were inspired, but I doubt it. Oh a few Arabs write, but it's mostly about Allah and dire warnings about Islam, or something political about the Jews, or the Americans. But Sadat and Mubarak made you our close friends, didn't they?"

This convenient détente had made it possible for me to be here, for Roger to have his fragile and arbitrary power to preach a few Western political values in an Arab university which despite its name was still very much Islamic in character.

"What do you think my husband is doing this minute in London?" She asked.

"I don't know, sleeping, getting ready for a meeting tomorrow, I don't know."

"I tell you, he's screwing his girlfriend, he likes that, and does it whenever he's in Europe, and I imagine she's good at it, it's all part of his privilege."

I didn't know quite how to respond, and simply said, "I'm sorry, that must hurt you."

"Did you notice that woman two tables away, dressed in the pastel scarves, the Paris kind of thing, over there," she indicated moving her head in a slight dip in the direction. "There!" I looked over and saw a man bending over talking to the woman, a sort of serious conversation, I assumed.

"See her wedding ring, she's married," I almost rose from my seat to see but then sat down an instant later.

“Yes, so what? I don’t see the connection.”

“To men of my class, that’s like flies to the honey, she told me. “Most give no thought to a woman’s pleasure, or emotions, beyond the birth of their children, the heirs, and so they know all too well that these married women you see on this terrace at the Ritz, are fair game for them, they’re a tribe of women desperate for love, for anything. They know this because like my husband, God has ordained it, as their rights as a man.”

I thought then that as a man in the path of all this pent up rage that I might be merely a stand-in for her wayward husband, and possibly her father too.

But I was all wrong.

“I’m attracted to you, and that’s enough,” she went on. “We don’t have to say anything more now. I’m Fatima, a common enough name I know, conjuring up Aladdin, but we have no control over those things, do we?”

Unsure of what exactly to say, I ventured. “What do you want me to do?”

“I want us to have a love affair, they’ll be risks, but that will only sweeten it.”

I took a rapid glance around again seeing if perhaps Ahmed or the grandchildren were coming back to the table, but they weren’t, so I said, “OK.” It was something I had wanted since I’d gotten here, I had wanted someone to stop this painful loneliness I’d been feeling. I’d felt isolated and alone, sometimes depressed at the stage of life I found myself in.

“What do you know about love?” She asked me, her voice softening and seeming to hold those words aloft in the air.

I could only laugh. “As much as the next man, maybe less.” came out of my mouth, though not very convincingly seeing my own painful divorce, and the handful of lackluster relationships that had followed, all in a Washington blessed with more women than men.

“I believe that love finds you, a gift that constantly gives, again and again” she told me. “You can be in love on a train with the person you see sitting next to you, a man or woman that you’ll never speak to or ever know, someone in line in front of you at Opera, a woman three tables away at a restaurant, any restaurant, anywhere. You’re in love, yes, and it’s real, real for that precious moment, and it’s as deep and lasting as if it lasted a lifetime. So at this table, we’re not strangers, we’re lovers.” She got up from the table and smiled, saying she was so happy. “When I leave, look under the cloth napkin next to your hand,” she said I’ve left you a key to my apartment, the address is already printed on the card, and I’ve written my cell number next to it. We Egyptian women like to carry name cards, you see, a wonderful legacy from the Brits. Come next Wednesday after eight o’clock but call first. It’s Jack, yes?

“Jack, yes.” I said, and told her I would come, rising from my chair as my Irish mother had taught me to do with ladies and also as a courtesy to her uncertain of what I was about to do next.

“I’ve chosen you, and you’ve accepted,” she said, throwing her head back with tangled hair flying and heading for the door, first stopping to say hello to a table of garrulous old friends for a minute. Then she

was out of sight. I slid the lipstick-soiled napkin over to me making sure no one saw me, and in a quick brushing movement dumped the contents in my lap. It was as she said, there was a key and a card which read 'Fatima Bocktor' on it, with her apartment and street address printed in raised black embossed letters and numbers, and beside it was a hand-written telephone number.

As I thought about what I would do this coming Wednesday with some anticipation and fear the next day, Roger came into my closet of an office, folded his arms and put his feet on my desk. Feigning outrage, he told me laughingly that although he knew it was possible to do stupid things in middle age, and admitted he'd done some himself, it seemed that a lecturer teaching Shakespeare from Toronto had outdone all comers. The university president, a native of Cairo and world-renown Egyptologist, educated at both Cambridge and Harvard, had stopped seeing visitors, and was taking only calls from the police and certain involved government ministries. Waiting for it to blow over. Waiting for what to blow over?

It seemed this lecturer, Percy, whom I remembered from a faculty dinner as a short fat man, with an ill-fitting hair piece, was now in police protective custody following an earlier hospital visit. Percy had been found this morning at one of the downtown commercial Cairo hotels by a chambermaid, naked and tied to the bed, seemingly physically violated in some way, and beaten a bit, it was said. He had a black eye.

The story was that he had checked into to the seedy hotel that night with a young Arab man, a friend and an out-of-town visitor for the night. Of course, he had been robbed of his wallet, wristwatch, and a signet ring was forced off his stubby finger roughly, causing a fracture of his pinky. The word prostitution was being bandied about, and it might be embarrassing for the university. Percy's teaching contract had already been cancelled and the university had purchased a return ticket back to Toronto via Zurich for him at its expense with a departure thought to be sometime before midnight. The police were seeing to his transportation to the airport. So Roger said, inviting me to have a beer with him at a café in Corba called the Bodega. He had just about put together his softball dream team, he told me, rubbing his hands together. One of the Shell boys he recruited to pitch had been coached in high school by the famous fastballer Nolan Ryan, that Texas legend who could throw a hundred-mile-an-hour pitch past your nose all day long. He liked staying power in a pitcher.

Roger loved baseball, certainly more than the law or teaching political science I would venture, and even perhaps more than his two ex-wives, Enid and Gwen, both righteous women, I thought. He was a damn good ball player in his day. After college, he had been signed as a relief pitcher by the St. Louis Cardinals on the basis of his slider, and had struck out his share of major leaguers in spring training before ripping apart a hamstring diving for a line drive. That play was the end of his career. But he loved the game and would look for excuses to coach, but only good players, guys with finesse, as he put it.

I couldn't help but think about Fatima, and so I asked one of the economics faculty, a Cairene from one of the wealthier families, an Oxfordian, if he knew her, mentioning that she'd been my table companion at an Iftar. He said he knew her brother much better, he was a WHO doctor and a selfless man. Of course he had been in their home several times, and they had talked. She was very pleasant and sophisticated, certainly when compared with most westernized Cairo women, and her family was prominent. Her maternal grandfather had been Sadat's Minister of Agriculture, they still had vast farming interests along the Nile. But for all he said about her family, somehow her New York pedigree must have held a more seductive charm for him, because he kept mentioning how much of a New Yorker she was. He had gone to a world economic summit there, had lunch at their Ritz and had gone to hear Bobby Short sing at the

Carlyle. She gotten him tickets through friends, it was a very intimate experience for him. Bobby Short had come over to his table later and welcomed him to New York, hearing from Fatima's friend Heather that he was an Egyptian and big fan of Bobby's too, which he wasn't then of course, at least until that evening. He told me now he had a complete collection of Bobby's songs that he had bought on Amazon, and was very sorry to hear of his recent death.

With the thought of poor Bobby gone, he still managed a laugh, "The thing about Fatima you see is her perfect face, a face that hasn't changed in four thousand years, he said with a flourish, and then sighed looking down at a stain on his Oxford regimental tie, quickly rubbing it away with a dampened finger. "Look on the walls of the pyramids, she's there, right up there." Hurriedly he glanced at his watch, waved goodbye, and started down the long hall to a lecture room, two books under his arm. He was one of the few people on the faculty who wore a black academic gown over his dark suit, and when you saw him walk across the campus he looked much like he could've starred in the 1930s version of the British movie *Mr. Chips* alongside Laurence Olivier scurrying late to class at Eaton, or even some obscure public school in the Midlands, just before the start of The First World War.

I called Fatima in the middle of the afternoon and when she heard my voice she immediately said 'darling', and I could feel her welcoming smile over the telephone, the thought of a new love affair giving me an almost adolescent, animal excitement. The blood rushed through my body, my hands tingled with sweat between my shaking fingers as we talked and agreed on the time for me to come to her apartment. It was an ancient building with enormous prewar apartments, and she told me to come to the top floor and knock twice on the larger door, the small one on the left was a servant's entrance.

Though I'd been warned by Roger and most of the isolationist Canadians I knew to stay away from any intrigues with Arab women on the faculty, or anywhere else for that matter, there were many beautiful women in Egypt. But I wasn't a true womanizer by nature, on the contrary I'm rather shy, the opposite of the perception I'd created jokingly over too many drinks too many times.

One Canadian from Montreal however to the horror of his countryman 'had gone native', and he had been seen mornings leaving the apartment of a woman who taught Arab literature, mostly Mahfouz whom she knew well. Mahfouz lived in Cairo and twice a year would give guest lectures at the school, with usually a dinner at Chancellor's home since he was now a Nobel laureate. He was a humble, literate and an accessible man, I liked him as did many others who met him. In defense of the Renaissance man from Montreal, the woman's family did know about this romantic liaison and tacitly approved, it was said, although I doubted that, since the affair flew in the face of the holy Koran itself. Supposedly then, he would settle permanently in Egypt and do the right thing which was marriage, she was single, and a subsequent conversion to Islam, thereby forsaking hockey and its national treasure Celine Dion forever. I didn't remember hearing about any pending engagement though, but my faculty conversations were infrequent. I didn't much trust the Canadians, anyway, they seemed so unworldly and parochial in the conversations I had with them, plus they always stayed conspiratorially to the themselves. The men all seemed so similar to their lackluster prime minister with his greasy pompadour who could've easily played the dad in the Fifties TV series *Leave it to Beaver*. Their women tended to be too masculine for my taste, and coached girls basketball teams. A good time to them was Saturday 'beer night' at the Canadian Embassy; there wasn't a true Arabist among the whole gaggle, and for the most part, they pretended that the Middle East didn't exist at all.

The taxi I took to Heliopolis was driven by a man with little English but he could understand the language enough to find the apartment building which was nine or ten stories, her apartment was on top floor. The doorman directed me to one of those caged continental elevators from the thirties and a young man in a blue blazer with gold buttons took me to the top floor. The door opened and I walked out and knocked on the large wooden door, a door with fine brass filigree around its edge in some ancient Islamic design. Fatima opened it with an inviting smile motioning me in, dressed in what I guess you'd call harem pants of a light almost palm leaf shade of green, her feet encased in gold sandals and her toe nails painted perfectly to match the deep red color of her fingernails. With the door closed, she kissed me ever so gently on the mouth, again smiling, and led me into an open solarium with the lights of the warm night flickering through the open French windows in the distance. I trailed just behind her in a scent of cinnamon and jasmine it seemed, blending so exotically in my nose that it made me a little light-headed, uncertain on my feet. I thought of the tale of Ali Baba and part of me felt like the thief of Baghdad for a moment though I dismissed this as silliness. It was an action of consenting adults, was it not? I assured myself that.

She told me to sit on a divan covered in damask and then walked over and opened a large dark cabinet of what I saw over my shoulder contained a well-stocked bar filled with at least a half-dozen bottles of Johnnie Walker Red label, a drink liked by most Arabs I knew in Washington who drank.

"Scotch over ice," she said, and I nodded. She disappeared for a few moments in what I assumed was the kitchen, returning with a bucket filled with ice and then slowly filled two crystal glasses, mine and her own. She handed me what looked like a very generous drink, and sat down contentedly next to me on the divan with her own in her hand.

"I don't smoke, but feel free to," she said. I told her I had quit many years ago when I had returned from two trying years in the Army at the end of the Vietnam War.

"Unfortunate war, like Nasser's," she said, dismissing the whole subject as she got up to look out upon the darkening night. She stood quietly, then turned to me.

"You know, I can't have children? that's why as a forty-year old woman, you hear no one playing here, in this apartment, she said. "Ovarian cancer came the year after we married "and they took the toys out of the playpen. That may sound crass, but

that's what they did, with that surgery. Arabs of my class don't adopt, my husband never speaks of it, nor of what he really does, and he does that thing, with other women. I assume he has a family somewhere, he's a man of some wealth, maybe in Egypt, or in London, or Athens, I'm certain of it, with young children. Does that trouble me? No."

She looked at me to see my reaction to what she had said, I looked down into my half finished scotch glass, then up at her with a half smile. "It's OK." She came over and took my face in her hands and kissed my mouth, this time harder than the first time. We looked at each other than for what seemed like a long time. I could only imagine what she must have suffered where the Koranic commandment and the only measure, the sum total of woman's worth, was to bear children. I had hoped that was all in the past for her, but knew it wasn't.

“Take that stupid tie off, “ she said, “and come with me, and bring what’s left of your drink.” Then she laughed the most beautiful laugh I’ve ever heard. And that’s how it started with the two of us. I came to adore this woman so much, it hurt me to think about it, but we never talked about any kind of future together, there wasn’t one for us, she told me. “I won’t leave Cairo and desert my tribe, ”Fatima would joke, For months I urged her to divorce her mostly absent husband, certainly now that civil divorce was possible in Egypt. She wasn’t bound by Shariah law if a woman of her class ever was. Several of the students at the university had divorced parents, they discussed it all matter-of-factly. One whose mother was a Mideast reporter for the New York Times, and a Egyptian, had a man, a so-called companion, a lover, living at her home.

Her daughter laughed about it. But of course,, this woman was the younger sister of Sadat’s wife, and perhaps like the Kennedy’s, all was permitted the powerful. We saw each other most weeks with the complicit understanding of doormen and elevator operators, her husband was traveling constantly from the Middle East to Europe and then back again. She would give me the nights she was available, usually a cryptic text on my phone, simple, to the point and the time to come. We never saw one another in public places like restaurants, really only at that first Iftar breakfast where we had met. Our meetings suited her. Of course I never met any of her family, her humanitarian doctor brother had been in Palestine and Lebanon for almost a year working at refugee camps with the Red Cross, and on occasion he would see her if he returned for a weekend furlough. Her father was dead, and her mother lived alone in a large apartment with servants overlooking the sea in Alexandria, where she regularly entertained friends, and for the most part seemed happy. She called Fatima maybe every other week, and dutifully once every two months Fatima would take the deluxe train to Alexandria for an overnight visit.

Fatima became my life, teaching and Roger and his irksome Canadian friends and what little other life I had in Cairo slowly disappeared from my daily consciousness. Some weeks I would visit her apartment almost every night, and during one of those weeks her husband came home unexpectedly, cancelling a weeklong trip to London because the hotel chain’s Swiss bankers pulled out of the deal at the last minute, much to his surprise.

For the past three hours that evening, I had sat through a faculty meeting followed by a dinner to outline a new expansion of study disciplines, and was ready to hail a taxi from downtown to her apartment when a jarring text appeared on my phone screen, ‘He’s here, don’t come!’ This unknown man had never interfered in our lives before that evening, and to me he was this mysterious lunar force who had clothes in her bedroom closets, true, but never wore them. Some nights I would stare at his handmade English shoes, brilliantly shined and stuffed with wooden shoetrees, and I would think, “Who is this person, what sort of man is he?"

I saw the books he read and kept in their bookshelves, photographs of him as a young man sailing and playing tennis, the fall wedding party with all of Cairo’s elite, and the treasured snapshot housed in an engraved silver frame of the British Ambassador making his wedding toast. There was also a photograph of him and his father on a safari in Tanzania, standing proudly over a slain jaguar and surrounded by smiling black bearers. He must have been in his early twenties when it was taken. At night in the bedroom, I would find myself in his closet, and I would sometimes caress his soft Egyptian cotton dress shirts, the fifty or more in the colors of the rainbow neatly sitting on hangars, awaiting his pleasure. They were all hand-fitted by an elderly Lebanese tailor hidden in a small shop somewhere in the Souk. They

had a sense of him for me, who this man was. I never told Fatima what I did, the presence of this man, her husband, in my life.

One evening I foolishly spilled scotch on my shirt as she playfully pulled me up from the divan, and she got me one of his silk robes to wear; he had five, she said. Wearing the robe, I somehow felt closer to this man almost like knew him, that we had a connection beyond this woman, his wife, that somehow, we were friends. I understood him, felt his person inhabit my body for a time, saw his bitter disappointment with how the hand of fate had made his wife barren, childless, had forced him to go to other women when he really didn't want to. I became this man, wearing his blue silk robe, when I stood on the balcony alone, Fatima drawing her bath. When his clothes touched my skin, some part of him, some small part, became me. I felt the smooth silk of his robe, and I thought about what would happen when we finally met. The night was quiet, there was the only the echo of a street vendor calling out in the darkness, so I went back in.

She was standing in the doorway of the bedroom fresh from her bath, and called to me softly, saying something strangely melodic in her Arabic, a verse maybe, I couldn't tell, and with the heat of the Cairo night at my back I went to her. His unplanned arrival happened just once, and then everything took on its familiar routine again, a mock marriage of sorts. She was generous with herself, and so I became comfortable within this spider's web, sitting on her divan for so many nights intoxicated in her reverie, drinking and laughing, the endless conversations, happily together amongst perfumed satins in a bed which once belonged to a sultan. For me, it was living in the world of the magical Arabian Nights, and it was.

In December, the week before Christmas, it actually rained, for two days a year it rains in Egypt, and it rained hard for almost four solid hours one night as I stepped into her elevator, soaked to the skin. For some reason the downpour amused me, and as I got off the elevator I noticed she had left the front door half open for me. Shaking off the rain, I stepped into the apartment, and called out to her, figuring that she'd gone to the kitchen for fresh ice for our cocktails, and as I started toward the kitchen a man stepped in front of me. As soon as I saw him I knew who it was: a tall, swarthy man with coal-black hair, dressed in a dark suit, it was him, her husband.

I started to speak but before I could get anything out, he reached across and slapped my face hard with his right hand, forcing me to back up a step with the impact of the blow, I raised my fists to answer his slap, and two men grabbed me from behind, twisting and pinning my arms to my sides. He walked over and slapped me again.

I called out, "Fatima, Fatima? What the hell is going on?" but there was no answer.

The husband said something to the men in Arabic, and they started to drag me toward the French doors out on the terrace. I pushed one of them off me for an instant, but he was back again with even more savagery, twisting my arm till I cried out in pain. I kicked out at him and knocked over a table and lamp, but no one paid attention to the broken lamp on the floor, as they dragged me out on the terrace. They had me backed against the stucco wall of the terrace and tried to turn me around facing the city, when I wrenched one arm free and managed to punch one of them behind me in the face. He grabbed his face for a moment, and then was back was on top me, holding my arms again. Her husband moved to the side of me, perhaps no more than a foot away, and looked with deadly eyes, and he said in English, "They will

throw you off this terrace, and you will die, it's nine floors down to the street. I've already paid them to do it, and you will go to your death."

He went slowly and deliberately over to the bar, and poured himself a drink, then stood looking at me for a moment, thinking aloud, and he uttered. "It will be called a suicide, if the police bother at all, a man kills himself. For the woman he can't have!"

He looked at the drink in his hand, smiling. "Fatima was a fool."

Fear overcame me, I tried to shout at him, but nothing came out of my dry mouth, my body and mind seemed paralyzed, locked up and useless. I struggled with every ounce in me, and it took them some time to pin me back against the half wall, digging into my back. I was frantic, and panting. He told them something in Arabic, and they grunted some half answer in reply. They started to push me over the wall, and I was kicking and screaming, Then he said something again to them, this time more loudly and forcefully. They stopped and put me down, releasing me, and moved two steps away, watching me closely. I looked down, ashamed that I had urinated on my trousers, an instinct of all animals caught up in the horrible, immediate fear of death. Men had done it in the screaming and heat and smoke of battles in Vietnam, I remembered,; it just happened, period, and yet a part of me couldn't blame this man for what he done to me.

"This is a lesson to you. I'm not a murderer like these Bedouins," he said without emotion, "I'm a civilized man," but if you want to live, you will leave Egypt, and you will never speak to my wife again. "You may go, leave now, go."

I hesitated for a moment, wanting to say something, and walked toward him but stopped as he held his hand up, shaking his head, no.

"What you've done to me," he told me, "has been seen by all of Cairo, you're gravely mistaken if you think otherwise. Of course, I found out, why wouldn't I be told? No man tolerates this, this, from a woman, any woman, even the dirtiest camel-herder squatting in some God-forsaken wadi, no one." I moved a step closer to him, intending to speak.

"They're armed and will kill you, go," he said, with no real anger in his voice, pointing to the open door. I walked past him and then standing in the hallway, rang for the elevator momentarily looking back into the room where he stood. The Bedouins had started to argue with each other, and he quickly turned and shouted something to them, and they were silent. The elevator came, its small door opening, and I saw a message of fear written on the young operator's face as I stepped into the carriage, and then just before the elevator door closed, I looked back one more time into the living room past the divan with its silk cover at the man standing there, and at that moment our eyes met, and there was nothing,. In a few seconds we started to descend.

THE END

Daniel N. Flanagan

**It's Kind of a Love Story**

**1**

“Relationships are like drugs; they either kill you, or give you the best feeling in the world.”

**2**

Her name...her name was still enigmatic to me. She came into my gym one summer afternoon. It was a scorching, humid day and she was glistening. She had long, straight, brown hair with highlights, and couldn't have been more than 5'2. She wore these tiny white, jean shorts contrasted by sun tanned skin, and a short dark green army tank top that showed off her sun-reflecting belly ring. This girl was perfect.

Quickly my insecurities surfaced and I wished I was high. Too often I have popped Klonopin before work in the fear that I might have to deal with people that day. This had been a good day, and so I wasn't relaxed or buzzing, leaving me defenseless when this girl strutted into my life.

I was the only one on duty, like most days, it's a minimally staffed gym and I prefer it that way. No one is ever there to look down my back or order me around. However, because I am the only worker, I couldn't ignore her and run away to the office behind a shut door, like I'd wished.

I was in the middle of cleaning the cardio equipment with antibacterial spray and a micro-fiber towel when she came into the front door. She caught several stares from quarter-aged joggers, but it was obvious she was seeking an employee, given her non-workout attire and adorably unknowing expression. A look that says she needs help without a hint of insecurity in her eyes. The exact kind of girl that scares the shit out of me. The same kind of girl that's generally a pretentious bitch. Before she ever told me her name, I simultaneously wanted her more than any broad I've ever known, and despised her for it.

She hopped over to me once I had made eye contact with her and she identified me as an employee, given my fitted, logo emblazoned t-shirt. She was so happy and enthusiastic over making this connection with me. I detested this because I loathed overtly joyful, fraudulent females like this.

“I’m Kristen!” She said.

Naturally I turned on the act I do with everyone, be it customer, family, or friend. The fake smile; the “Everything is A-Okay!” bullshit grin. I introduced myself in return and found out she was interested in joining the gym.

I ushered her into the office and had her sit across from me while I assumed the role of a more confident person. Sitting behind the exquisite mahogany desk, settled upon the plush leather chair, I fooled myself into thinking I’m someone of stature. More than the toilet scrubber I actually am. I relished in the momentary power trip either way.

I told her all about the summer special price for students and found out she went to the same school that I was planning on transferring to; Boston University. But she was interested in the yearlong membership, and then she asked me this.

“Isn’t there a discount if one of your friends works out here?”

“Yes, you get an additional \$10 off per month. Just write your friends name down on the form.” I replied.

“What’s your name?”

I couldn’t believe she asked this, the fucking slut. She thinks just because everyone wants to fuck her that she can flirt her way into discounts; just like every spoiled broad. I don’t think so.

“Ha-ha, I’m sorry, but I can’t do that. You have to actually be friends with the person to get the discount,” remaining artificial.

“But, I *want* to be friends; I saw the way you were looking at me,” she said.

And yes it’s true, I couldn’t help but ogle her, but I’m not about to get fired because some skank is trying to flirt her way into a reduced price.

“Yea, I mean, you’re cute...but we’d have to actually be *friends* for you to get the ten off.” I told her.

“Okay, well you have my address written on the form here. Let’s leave it unfinished for now until we get to know each other better. Stop by my house tonight, you can take me out.” She said this with a coy smile while simultaneously, silently, sauntering out of the office and out the front door.

On the security camera monitor I watched her drive her white Lexus out of the parking lot and onto the street.

### 3

After the end of my shift and subsequent work out, I still had not come to a definite decision on what to do.

I hate these situations. They are the ones you fantasize about and wish would come true, but when they do, you’re too chicken shit to pull the trigger.

It was still light out after I came home and showered so I decided to hang with a drinking buddy of mine to “Power-Hour”, well, a “Power-Half-Hour” anyways. I didn’t want to be too messed up to drive. Jim came over in a matter of seconds. On account of us living together. We are both soon-to-be college seniors and decided to rent an apartment together. This is a clichéd attempt to get all the drinking out of our system before the real world hits and we need to start our careers.

After the 30<sup>th</sup> round of beer shots I was beginning to loosen up, but decided to kill a couple Vicodin before departing. *I never like to leave my nerves all by themselves; they get too restless when left alone, they demand companionship.*

Full of tense energy before the medicine kicked in, I changed into my favorite blue jeans and button-down Ralph Lauren with the sleeves rolled up to  $\frac{3}{4}$ . After draining another Budweiser, I brushed my teeth so as to not have the taste on my breath.

Sitting in my car, I plugged her address into my iPhone and peeled out of my driveway. My courage having been reinforced by the musical styling of a 90's-rock mix CD I keep close by at all times. It contained hit songs from *The Goo Goo Dolls*, *Matchbox 20*, *Hootie & The Blowfish*, etc.

Comparatively speaking, it was a very quick ride. I used to drive forty or so minutes, out to Taunton, for the sole purpose of drinks and sex with a member of my *past smash cast*; an inclusive list of all my previous conquests. Thankfully, Kristen lived only a few miles down the road.

When I found her house I was too scared to slow down and park, I kept the car driving straight down the road. My body was tingling and I knew this anxiety was going to kill it for me. I grabbed the emergency mini water bottle, hidden under the driver's seat, which contained Mr. Boston vodka, and killed the few fluid ounces that remained, followed by green Listerine. I waited a good fifteen minutes in the generic looking diners' parking lot I had pulled into. While taking one final lingering drag off my menthol cigarette, I decided to turn back around.

When I got a closer look at the house I was hit with mixed emotions. The first time I whizzed by I didn't take in too much detail, besides there being a door and some windows. But now upon stopping my car and stepping out of it to coolly lean on the driver's side door, I realized she was a rich chick. Secretly I had wished for her house to be a rundown, government-funded bungalow type. If it had been, I would have rejoiced in its utter homeliness, feeling a surge of superiority over her. Within seconds, out this

*gillette* appeared, sporting that same smile. I couldn't admit it to my conscious mind, but I had already fallen for her.

Immediately I pressed myself off my car and bear-hugged her; pressing my muscular chest into her face and getting a better feel for her busty frame as it rubbed against mine. I complimented her appearance as well as her home and asked for a tour. Oddly enough, she refused to give one. Her uneasy feeling was palpable; something was amiss. Not wanting to push the subject since we had only known each other for seven hours, I dropped it. I asked her if something was the matter though.

"No, I'm just bored, let's do something fun." She replied.

I could tell she was eyeing my car, so I walked over to open the door for her. She slinked her way towards me and skimpily slid in the passenger seat. Once I had walked around the rear of the car and settled into my seat I asked her "Where to?", but received no answer. She was spacey eyed and I began to wonder if she was also a little high, I pondered what her drug of choice was. These thoughts were quickly diminished with one long, irresistible stare towards the top of her low cut tank top.

#### 4

"You're staring again," she said without moving, without emotion.

I may have been staring, but she was starting to irritate me. I wondered where her smile had gone to. Had she slipped down the rabbit hole? Perhaps this was a mistake.

"So?" I asked, trying to figure out if she was offended or not.

"Just drive," she told me, as she watched straight ahead with vacuous eyes.

I did as I was told.

Dark had fallen fast and it was as if we were all alone. Alone, while together. Alone, while on the road. It was the most silent bonding I've ever done with anyone. We drove and drove and zoned out while

the music blasted. It took me by surprise, and a handful of seconds, to wholly grasp the fact that she had nonchalantly unzipped my pants and leaned over the center console to perform fellatio on me while I drove.

The stars were burning bright as I sped down I-92, making frequent lane changes to increase the endorphin rush my brain was releasing. Kristen was making muffled, porn-star moans of pleasure while slurping away. I was more or less silent due to the otherworldly trance her performance had bound me to. It was all just so natural. We did not need to communicate in order to connect.

I had already taken an exit ramp heading back home when, nearing the end, I grasped the back of her head, snatching a handful of her luscious hair and slammed her head up and down faster and further than most broads would permit. She was a special kind of whore. She took it like a champ. When I finished, she leaned back and craned her neck upwards, looking at me with a satisfied, girlish grin; the tiniest bit of cum that trailed out her full lips and down onto her chin made me berate myself for not having a camera on hand for these Kodak moments.

I rewarded her with a meal of her choosing at the diner I had stopped at just an hour earlier to slug my vodka. She got a bowl of Raisin Bran.

The comfortable silence continued. But her blue eyes had brightened. They were vibrant; she was elated, filled with pride, along with my sperm. This girl was exceptional somehow, set apart from the typical sluts I had been too accustomed to. She was detached and unnaturally natural; I envied this about her. Her demeanor was her own, while mine was scripted. We both appeared non-phased by inner turmoil, but hers was genuine. I sensed she had a more crowded closet than most, but hers was more organized; she knew who she was and she didn't give a fuck about the rest. I was still searching for answers.

I can't really say we ate together. I just watched her. And she didn't mind. Kristen was back to the original demeanor she displayed in the gym. She had released an inner demon in order to forget the

rest and reset to normal. She must have sensed something about me; the way she accepted me into her world pre and post self-exorcism. My admiration and desire for her grew rapidly. I needed her. This had nothing to do with easy sex. I knew she was what I needed in order to forget.

I paid the \$2.50 bill with a \$5 and walked her back to my car, *placing my hand on the small of her back as to guide her; women have a poor sense of direction and are apt to become lost.*

## 5

That night I stayed awake until nearly six in the morning, which was even pushing my personal insomniac hours. I had a cornucopia of feelings that deserved to be analyzed, but my mind was blank. I laid there in bed, aware of my non-thinking and wondered why I wasn't thinking thoughts. I killed another K-pin before I finally dragged myself unto the bare floor to sleep. The plush mattress had lost its allure.

## 6

She didn't come into my gym the next day, or the entire week after. Two months had passed before I saw her again. During her absence I had thought about her insentiently and frequently, but I never called, or drove back to that house. It took a while for me to realize why I let this happen. She reappeared at the end of summer however, just a week before our scheduled return to college.

I was in the same gym, cleaning the same equipment, wishing for the day to end so I could begin my exercise regimen, when she appeared. Instead of opening the unlocked glass door, she knocked on it while waving excitedly with her spare hand. With an animated smile plastered on her face, I melted into her warmth. She was dressed in a fashionable mini skirt and crop top that only the body of a girl in her twenties could pull off. I stepped over to the door and opened it half way, casually leaning in the doorframe. She beamed with excitement to see me, hugging me and kissing my cheek like we were old friends. There was no awkwardness, even though I had anticipated a great deal of it on my trek to greet

her. She was invigorated, alive in a spirit that bubbled out of her; *I drank it in and became intoxicated.* We discussed our imminent end-of-summer plans and what we had to do in order to prepare for the school year. Apparently there was a party to be held at her house that evening. I was befuddled by the late nature of my invitation.

Regardless, I accepted the offer as it promised to deliver ample hors d'oeuvres and refreshments. Not to mention an easy lay. Before I went back to work, I took Kristen snug around the back of the neck with my dominant hand and nudged her in for a playful kiss. This left her flushed as I turned her away with a slap on the butt. A sexily, airy moan emitted from her mouth as she twirled back to her luxury sedan.

## 7

When I pulled my car over, alongside her lawn, I could only relate this bash to one thrown by the infamous Jay Gatsby. Cars were pulled over all along the length of the street and her stretch driveway was filled. I could hear the bass of some hefty sub woofers bumping as I turned my own car's stereo off.

Upon walking up the driveway I decided to forgo knocking on the front door and being let in through the house. Instead I wanted to tramp around the side of the McMansion to flank the party and get a better feel for it. I surveyed for a few seconds before locating the outdoor bar. It was adjacent to a man-made lake which I hadn't seen the first time I came over Kristen's house. The water was serene and contained a few spunky girls philandering enough to strip off their dresses for male approval and wade in the water, waiting for them to reciprocate in action.

Before I ordered my first Budweiser, I noticed that everyone was dressed more formal than me. I sported cargo shorts and a backwards Polo hat while all the other guests had variations of skimpy dresses and dress shirts. I felt rather left out of the loop and ostracized because of it.

After my fourth anti-social beer followed by two hastened Patron shot, I decided I was loose enough to find Kristen.

The party was a mix between an elegant celebration, and a kegger, due to the thrown about booze bottles and the pop/hip-hop music swimming through the oversized, weatherproof Bose speakers. There were cocktail tables in plentiful amounts, and plenty of pretty, young ladies in cocktail dresses. This was a fine college attempt at fancy. I hadn't located anyone I knew personally yet, so I decided to make some friends.

The first table I sat down at seated two guys my age and their dates. Upon sitting we exchanged names and jokes at the expense of my attire. This annoyed me. I expressed my disapproval in the young man's jest by breaking my beer bottle over his head. This seemed to quiet the fellow. This did not cause a scene though, the day had grown dark and with the music blaring, no other guests could detect if the screams were of the simple collaboration of excited white girls, or terror. Night blindness and warming booze told everyone's inner judgment that it was the former.

I was told once before that I was an angry drunk; I assuaged this issue by drinking into nirvana. Once the blackness falls, no one is able to lighten or stall. I took the same advice and motto into this party. I drank into oblivion, danced with a spanking group of friends. Kids I had once known in college, ones I secretly despised, but there was a larger goal at hand. I wanted to prove to Kristen that I could assimilate into her culture, her world. I wanted to be her world.

## 8

I started my search for real this time. No more chit chat, no more fights. Walking straight through the party guests, I made a beeline for the grandiose back door. The door was preceded by four, white steps made of genuine marble. The imperfection lines glistened in the twilight. And around I went, asking multiple people where my Kristen had gone off to. No one knew her whereabouts, but I felt something was awry.

I stumbled into a subcultural basement party which offered a horde of pharmaceutical and street drugs as opposed to the alcohol and cannabis floating about outside. This basement held the cool kids, the wanna-be's, and the outliers; the island of misfit toys. I sat down in one of the free seats huddled beside a mirrored coffee table.

“Who the fuck are you?”

“I'm Matt, Kristen's date.” I told the fellow.

After a three second period of awkward silence and exchanged glances amongst themselves, an explosion of laughter occurred. “Her date?! That's so cute Matt, I'm sure you two will be perfect for each other.” One of the females said.

I decided to take this in stride; after all, if these were her friends, I wanted them to be my friends as well. “Ha-ha, yea, me too. Have you guys seen her?” I asked.

“Hmm...” one of the older grad students said, “I believe she's in her bedroom. Yea, she's definitely tied up in her bedroom, she's a busy girl, you know.”

The alpha-male group leader, named Roy, spoke next, once the snickers had cleared. “Want to do a line?”

“Uhm, I don't know, it depends...A line of what?” I inquired.

“Well we have a bevy of options, old sport. To your left is snow...cocaine and some methamphetamine. Then OxyContin, which is my favorite. There's a little heroin left to snort since no one brought a needle, unless you have one on you, which I doubt. And on the farthest right is a bowl of trail mix, including Adderall, Codeine, Ecstasy, Klonopin, LSD and Vicodin.”

Without thinking I dove my hand into the bowl that most likely once contained peppermint candy, and ate at least nine of the pills. “Oh shit...” I thought immediately afterwards. I'm going to make

a bad impression on Kristen. I was planning on going all the way with her tonight. What if I just took all downers and passed out, or wouldn't be able to get hard. I had no way to know. I decided to play it safe.

“Hey, anyone have a bill I can use?”

Immediately the beautiful psych major to my left handed me a previously rolled hundred dollar bill. I re-rolled it tight and blew a fast line of coke to combat any downers I may have ingested. On the very next inhale I switched over to a line of crushed crystal meth before retiring. The whole group started cheering and praising my reckless behavior.

“Kid, you're a fuckin' champ! That coke must have been at least a half gram rail!”

“Someone get this fucker a beer to wash down those pills!”

And I did receive that beer. And I was a champ. I entered another world though. Before any drug hit me, I felt the pseudo high. I was in the spot light. I danced in it. Smiled and acknowledged my greatness, my bravery, I was a member and a trailblazer all at once.

This was unlike any beer and opiate bender I had ever felt. The coke hit hard within fifteen minutes, the drip was numbing and made me feel overjoyed. The pills hadn't taken hold yet so I was safe for the time being. I was a king among peasants and the stagnation didn't suit me for the time being. I was drunk, but unaware of it. I departed this dungeon. First though I snatched another few pills for the road, as I was advised they were all weak doses.

“Go easy on Kristen Matty!” All the girls bellowed.

This must have been in reference to the clear nature of my sexual intention, as this was our date night. To let them know that I fully understood their cryptic message I grabbed on my crotch like a young Marky Mark back in his Calvin Klein modeling days. The roaring laughter reverberated off the walls of the refurbished basement and up the stairs as I opened the egress.

9

But still she was truant.

The kitchen I walked into was occupied with young ladies who have grown tired of their heels and decided to walk barefoot; there were also young men with rolled up sleeves and loosened ties, or ties wrapped around the side of their domes.

College class resumed as the elongated, fine wooden dining table was being used for a beer pong tournament. I was feeling relaxed and up and flying and high, and like a celebrity. So I took a celebrity shot. Unbeknownst to the players who didn't know me, they were in the company of royalty. I had been knighted down in the basement and crowned emperor. I swiftly and succinctly caught the pong ball in a mid-air shot and gathered the attention of all my serfs. They wore smiles as wavy as a wave. I rubbed the plastic ball and squeezed my thumb into it, making an indent. My thumb had found a home and he enjoyed his real estate. It was so smooth and loving. I told my colleagues all about this home and how much it would cost for them to buy real estate beside my thumb, but they had turned on me. "The great Dining Room Revolt of 2013" occurred. I was ambushed, by my own people, they swarmed! I saw them come forth in great strides and piles; luckily I had a sword and a surge of energy. They all perished. All but one.

I heard her calling out to me. I slugged another lager and continued my crusade. I took to the great winding staircase and found my Kristen lying upon her bed in a primrose dress befitting a princess. My armor was fading. I took the extra pills from my pocket and crushed them up in my mouth and swallowed the little bits. There was movement in the sheet beside her. I was not in those sheets. "Who

was in those sheets?" I thought this to myself. I entered the opened room, Kristen never saw me. She lay there, arching her back, on her back, moaning. Panting, she was engaging in coitus.

I stared, stayed and stared in the corner of the room. I leaned in the darkness for three hours. I know this because I had my watch on, I timed them. She never stopped moaning; I would have to wait my turn.

The man beneath the sheets. It was Roy, the man from the basement who gave me the pills. He must have drugged me on purpose in order to steal my conquest while I was giving speeches and engaging in battle downstairs. The motherfucker. I had trusted him and he deceived me. Out the window he went. I made him fly and soar onto a cocktail table from three stories up. There were gasped and screams, but they only ignited my passion for Kristen. I was ready for her. I leaped and began to ravage her. She was oddly resistant to my advances. I had just defeated multiple foes for her affection. I was also wholly aware that she was a whore, so this made no sense.

Hands were being thrown across my face until it was red and puffy. I closed my eyes to the pain, so I don't know who did this or why, but when I opened them it was Kristen under me. She was sticking by me and I was so happy for this. I began to kiss her long neck, when I felt it. Right in my side, an excruciating pain. The maroon sheets were absorbing all my blood. I had been stabbed by a ballpoint pen, taken from the bedside table. Kristen was still under me and I was in shock. I pulled the pen out and only whimpered once. I rose from the bed, surveyed the room and locked the door. She ran to a corner and began screaming and looking like she would jump out the window. She remained hesitant about the fall, though, staring down at Roy.

There was a large mirror beside her bureau, and a chair in front; a vanity for the vain. I sat down and looked at myself. I became nauseated and projectile vomited unto the mirror. The image reflected towards me was now squiggly and green. I grabbed ahold of my side and penetrated myself with two fingers; feeling the bones of my ribs thoroughly. This made my eyes tear. There had to be repercussions

for Kristen ruining this evening for everyone. I walked over to her and brought her back to the bed. She was fighting with the veracity of a drunken Irishman, I am normally never violent towards women, but she had proved to have the mind of a man and so I beat her like one. Once she had quieted, I walked over to that same bureau and seized the bloodied ballpoint.

I gripped the slippery writing utensil in my right hand and began to inflict her with the same pain she had just caused me. Whilst stabbing her, I grabbed the silk pillow from beneath her delicate neck and rammed it into her mouth until there was no air for her to breathe, or to scream with, while my impromptu weapon beat down on her bosom. I was sure she was dead after sixteen strikes.

The music continued to blast throughout her vacationing parents' house, so no one ended up hearing what happened, and even *if* a passing guest heard, what would they think? The heavy breathing, panting, and downward thrusts toward the bed; they would simply assume I had made my conquest! I took a step off the bed and examined my work; gruesome shit I had to admit. I was already considering how to dispose her bloodied up body. Obviously the room's door was a no-go. Couldn't exactly sneak a fresh corpse by the party's guests, even if they were drunk, they're not blind. I looked out the torn, screened in window and devised my plan for her. I would wrap her carcass in all the bedding she ruined and proceed to stuff her through the window.

Her room was located on the side of the house, adjacent to a thick patch of woods and the private lake. After taking some time to survey activity outside the window, I deduced that none of our peers were strolling around, not even to smoke another joint.

After I rolled the bedding and her together like a cocoon, I took out the lacing's of my Nike mid-top sneakers to tie this bundle together; didn't want my girl coming apart on me. Quietly I raised what remained of the hollowed out screen and hoisted all one hundred and nine guesstimated pounds of Kristen onto my shoulder and then fit her head first through the window. After she was halfway in, I shoved the rear of her out hastily; as she landed with a thud I also recognized the harsh sounds of cracked vertebrae.

She had landed with the front of her face eating the dirt while the rest of her body was arched backwards over her, like a gymnast; her toes touching the ground as well as her teeth. I perched down on the windowsill, spun myself and fully extended my arms as to decrease the amount of distance between my bare feet and the ground. After releasing my calloused grip, I free-fell the remainder of the distance, making contact with Kristen's belly button. This caused her back-bending spine to bear the full load of my one hundred and ninety pound frame. Another series of snaps were heard from beneath my feet. I could faintly *feel* the snaps under my toes. Landing on her broke the majority of my fall, but I was also thrown back and smacked the side of my body flush against the table where Roy had landed and still remained.

Throwing her across the stretch of my back like a wounded soldier, we sprinted through the trees to avoid enemy detection. Pine cones and branches all managed to derail my course as much as possible, but barefoot or not, this soldier was gonna' complete. "Sir, yes sir!"

Attached to the shed near the lake was a wooden canoe rack. I slid one out and placed my darling inside of it. I also placed cinderblocks around the ankles of her two muddied feet which had been protruding outside of the bedding. These of course were tied with spare fishing line I found lying around the shed, they probably never fished anyways. I squatted down and pushed the canoe like the tackling stations I once used in high school football practices. Only this time, I was enjoying myself.

Nearing the water's edge, I hopped down the side wall and stood in the murky lake while I gently pulled the canoe towards myself. It scraped the wall with scratches audible enough for someone to hear. I hesitated and stopped altogether for a three full minutes, just sitting there with my toes wiggling in the sand.

I pulled the canoe towards me in one defiant tug and it fell in the lake with the grace of a body-surfing penguin. I grabbed the only paddle and used it to maneuver us towards the center of the lake; it was there that I decided to drop her, the pen still jutting from her chest cavity.

No remorse, no guilt. Although I did take some pleasure in it, I try not to brag.

**10**

Rising from my special chair, I asked; “*You won’t tell anybody any of this, will you?*”

“Of course not Matt, anything your say in here will stay between us.” She said.

“So that’s my story doc, what do you think?” I asked.

“I think you have quite the lovely imagination, you’re so articulate! You could write a book about this whole experience some day, just like Susanna Kaysen’s *Girl, Interrupted*. She stayed here in *McLean Hospital* too, just like you. Did you know that Matt? A lot of writers have had their stays here.”

“Yes, I did. And thank you, I agree...so when do you think I can go home?”

“Soon, Matt. Mental illness is never a quick fix, but here’s what we’re going to do. We’re just going to up your dose of your Abilify for your bipolar issues and add another 10mg of Haldol for your schizophrenic episodes. You’ll be able to leave as soon as we get you better, okay sweetie?”

“Sounds lovely doc.” Said the man with a perspicacious smirk.

Joel Netsky

A Sojourn

The grains of sand in the hourglass of his life, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, kept falling until he was in his early fifties, alone, in an efficiency apartment in a city in decline.

At times on his way to work he'd stop at a food cart and buy an egg sandwich, made on the spot, with salt and pepper. There were a number of carts at which he could get it, and most, he had noticed, when he asked for salt and pepper, shook them from two separate containers, but one cart had a third container with salt and pepper combined, which to him was smart.

One day he, whose name was Stan, wishing that his life contained more than falling grains of sand – at times he actually envisioned his body as a large bag of sand, like those used to hold back flood waters – saw intermingled with that sand grains or seeds of a different sort, like that third container which sprinkled with two ingredients; they looked like the small seeds in the middle of peppers. Is that what his life needed, some spice in it, or, if not spice, then variation? But what could he do? He was completely acculturated, could talk with a semblance of intelligence on all the topics of the moment. Yet wasn't this, the trivialities and nonsense of the day, what had brought his life to a state of total immobility, where all to him was but the eternal declamation of entropy and convention? He decided to eliminate everything from his life which wasn't of absolute necessity. Since he needed money to live, he continued working. Since he needed a roof, walls, and heat, he continued living in his dwelling. But everything else, to the exclusion of nothing, he eliminated, and only if in the course of time it became a necessity would he allow it back into his life. In essence, he in middle age was starting over, would no longer allow himself to be a smiling idiot, talking enthusiastically with co-workers about things in which he had no real interest in the least, occupying his mind for hours on ephemera like imbecilic movies which were the sudden rage. To stand in line at midnight for a tenth sequel in a movie saga whose violence to him was abhorrent, but which he generously tolerated, finally no longer was endurable.

On the first day of this new Stan, after work dumbly he sat in his efficiency. Soon he realized he needed his coffee, but since that was an addiction, he couldn't forgo it. As he was sipping, the idea that he need not do anything at all, that his mind now was on permanent vacation, not prey to the obsessions of cultural fads and societal twaddle, like a cool breeze on a hot beach suffused the abode of his psyche. Slowly he sipped, enjoying the coffee, the taste, the aroma, the texture, the color. His apartment was a world, if not a universe, with its own laws. Here the primary documents dealt with historical verisimilitude - history was his natural medium: he could immerse himself in the history section of a bookstore and not know that an hour had passed. Without thinking otherwise, he rose from his seat and as he was about to remove a book, paused. Hadn't he abdicated all inclinations towards his previous life? But that was absurd, to erase all! What was he to do, sit in his apartment like a Buddha? The here-now aspect of the East had indeed manifested itself with his coffee, he partaking delightfully of its manifold sensory offerings, but could he suddenly block the ability to read or count? That wasn't at all what he had thought of doing: he simply wanted to remove everything peripheral from his life, and if something would then become a part of it, then would he proceed from there. At this Stan smiled, thought to himself, "Now that's a plan!"

It was as if he were living in a house whose furniture had been repossessed. Sports, movies, politics ceased to interest him. Of course he couldn't entirely slough off politics – that was a part of his life. Didn't his interest in history testify to a continued curiosity of sorts about some contemporary happenings? And if he didn't occupy his mind with some things of the world, what could he occupy them

with? He found he was eating better. He had overheard some women talking about the use of a segment of garlic while cooking whole grains, then adding olive oil; he tried it and liked it. Still, every now and then he would devour his egg sandwich with salt and pepper in the first minutes of work.

His personal life had been a disaster, to put it mildly. Now that the appurtenances of society no longer were of moment, he found the female of the species on the prowl in his mind. One lioness, Ellen, who worked in Billing, had become his prey. Could he just go up to her and ask her out? In a moment would she have rejected him: she probably thought of him as a geek, one who imparted more of his being to personal development than social. Yet something in her had touched him: she wasn't beautiful, but was pretty and pleasant, though a mite pudgy. In addition, she had a daughter in middle school, but that to Stan was of no consequence – should her mother fall for him utterly, so would the child.

How could he capture her heart? He knew she at times played on the company softball team; hence, she must follow the local professional major league baseball franchise, the Continentals. As if he were on a mission, Stan for the first time in years began attending their games. He found it humorous that this sport, baseball, which in his mind he previously had

ridiculed as squintball – before every single pitch all the players squint towards home plate – had now become a mainstay of his life. One day he was asked by a couple of guys at work if he would like to go to a Continentals game with them, to which he replied in the affirmative. Before going he told himself not to talk too much, just to sit and watch, and to speak when spoken to like a good little boy.

All three had a pleasant time; Stan was an acolyte to them, deferential. He knew statistics, and since he had attended some recent games, the scuttlebutt. Rather than go directly home, they decided to have a few brews at a nearby pub. These were a different sort of women than the ones in the office, more garish. Though Stan had been to bars near where he lived, they to him were no more than a change of pace; he of course at times might chat with the members of the gentler gender in such establishments, but hesitant was he to engage in active magnetic quest of them.

They introduced Stan to a couple of the women, who were approximately Ellen's age, she from the office. One, Louise, who smoked, was as thin as Ellen was pudgy, but otherwise to him was pleasant; she asked if he liked reading, because with his glasses he looked like someone who did. He replied that he did. She said that all she read was romance novels. "What's wrong with that?" he said.

"I don't know. Nothing, I guess."

Should he mention about her smoking? No – for the time-being he'd refrain. Louise knew both of the fellows with whom he had come, said she'd be there that Saturday. When Stan walked out with the two, they kidded him that he was going to score.

By noon the next day half the people at the office knew about Louise, though Stan hadn't uttered until asked. Should he be offended? Wasn't privacy an unalienable right, but likewise wasn't also freedom of expression? Yet it wasn't as if the people who knew were ridiculing, but delight seemed to be their common fount. Did Ellen know? If so, she made no disclosure.

That night he dreamt that before him was a distant land and in its center a castle. Guarding both land and castle were thousands of zombies; in a private chamber in the middle of the castle dwelt Louise. Zombies are the lowest of the low – even werewolves have little to do with them. They'll eat anything that was ever alive. When Louise wanted to communicate with them, entirely would she disrobe and the beauty that was a woman would keep them all in thrall at a distance – both men and women zombies,

both genders now genderless. No human ever approached zombies, yet she did so willingly and lovingly, and as the supernatural has laws outside those of physical science, was one of those laws now at work here: she could walk among those insentient creatures with impunity.

He awoke, the dream vivid. When he reflected on it, he knew that Louise was very lovely. That Saturday night he took a taxi to the bar, saw Louise with her friends. This time, though, instead of his two pals from work, the guys with them seemed more local - as was Louise - yet they were cordial; they wore bracelets, one a gold chain around his neck, another an earring; including the females, a couple sported tattoos. Should he also get a bracelet? They let Louise and him orbit in their own world. Louise had a son who was out of high school, but whose girlfriend didn't want to get married. Why? She was looking for someone with more prospects than spending the rest of his life working in a sandwich shop. Said Stan, "I'm sure he's a nice kid."

"He is, but he's like his father: he likes to spend money he doesn't have."

Soon Louise and he were brought into the others, and before long all were heading to a dance club. Stan paid the tariff of admission for Louise, who thanked him. Said he, "You're very welcome."

A couple of times had she touched him and once, to whisper, had leaned against him. As they were ordering drinks, one said to Louise, "Joe's here," and pointed.

"My ex."

Within minutes Joe, a lean, muscular guy with gold necklace and bracelets, had joined their party. Louise introduced; he and Stan pleasantly shook hands. To Louise he said, "Let's have a dance."

"Joe, I just came in."

"Come on. I know you already had a few."

Soon the two were heading to the dance floor, where they joined the *mélange*. Within a moment the song ended, followed by a slow number; after the first song they had stayed out on the floor, then when the second song began, their bodies embraced.

Watching them dance the second number, Stan of all things thought of Joseph Hooker, a Civil War general at one time in charge of the main Union army, the Army of the Potomac, who resigned his command four days before Gettysburg. Hooker was an enigmatic character. Most people know him by virtue of his last name, a synonym for prostitute, because he allowed women to set up camp not far from his corps. In the battle two months previous to Gettysburg, the defeat at Chancellorsville, according to popular legend the first he knew of the battle was when he was leaning against a post, a drink in his hand, and a Confederate cannonball knocked the post down, causing the roof of the porch to crash on him. Yet two months later, still at the helm of the Army of the Potomac, he had the wherewithal to proffer his resignation to

President Lincoln days before having to face the redoubtable Robert E. Lee. As Stan watched Joe and Louise dance intimately, as problematic as was General Hooker, he realized that there was something to be learned even from a character like him. Hooker knew when it was time to pack up and call it a day. Stan would remain, but would depart as soon as decorum permitted, never to return.

## About the Authors

Stephen Beckwith has worked as a copywriter, a creative director, and a senior communications manager in Detroit, Chicago, Richmond, VA, and Grand Rapids, MI. I've taught copywriting and marketing courses at Grand Valley State University, and I've taught creative writing workshops at the Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts in Grand Rapids.

Doug Bolling's poetry has appeared in *Emerge*, *The Inflectionist Review*, *Indefinite Space*, *Tribeca Poetry Review*, *The Muse: An International Journal of Poetry*, *Lalitamba*, *Gravel Magazine* and others. *The Missing Slate* selected him as Poet of the Month with interview recently. His work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. He currently lives in Flossmoor, Illinois, part of the greater Chicago area.

David Chorlton has lived in Phoenix since 1978 when he moved from Vienna, Austria, with his wife. Born in Austria, he grew up in Manchester, close to rain and the northern English industrial zone. In his early 20s he went to live in Vienna and from there enjoyed many trips around Europe. In Arizona, he has grown ever more fascinated by the desert and its wildlife, and especially enjoys the mountain ranges of southern Arizona, a region that appears frequently in his writing, including *The Lost River* from Rain Mountain Press, and two Slipstream chapbook competition winners; also full length books, including *A Normal Day Amazes Us* from Kings Estate Press and *Waiting for the Quetzal* from March Street Press. As much as he loves the Southwest, he has strong memories of Vienna, and that city is the setting for his first work of fiction: *The Taste of Fog*, from Rain Mountain Press. *The Devil's Sonata*, from FutureCycle Press, is his newest collection of poetry.

Bruce Colbert, a former journalist, is an actor and playwright in New York where his plays have been produced Off-Broadway, and in Toronto. He recently completed a new collection of stories entitled *NOMAD* which will be released by LummoX Books late in the Spring.

Daniel N. Flanagan is a Worcester, MA native; currently writing a novella, while taking a year off from college. He is the author of the short story "Daddy's Girl", located in *The Commonline Journal*, and five poems, featured in *Aberration Labyrinth*, *The Onyx*, and *Pyrokinecton*. He has three stories and two poems scheduled for publication between December '13 and February '14 in the following literary journals; *Beyond Imagination*, *Danse Macabre du Jour*, *Yellow Mama*, *Leaves of Ink* and *The Camel Saloon*. Check him out at [www.DanFlanagan.webs.com](http://www.DanFlanagan.webs.com) and follow him @DanielNFlanagan.

C.S. Fuqua's published books include *White Trash & Southern ~ Collected Poems ~ Vol. I*, *Hush, Puppy! A Southern Fried Tale* (children's picture book), *Rise Up* (short fiction collection), *The Native American Flute: Myth, History, Craft, Trust Walk* (short fiction collection), *The Swing: Poems of Fatherhood, Divorced Dads*, and *Notes to My Becca*, among others. My work has appeared in publications such as *Main Street Rag*, *Pudding*, *Dark Regions*, *Iodine*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Cemetery Dance*, *Bogg*, *Year's Best Horror Stories XIX, XX and XXI*, *Amelia*, *Slipstream*, *The Old Farmer's Almanac*, *The Writer*, and *Honolulu Magazine*.

Ben Nardolilli currently lives in Arlington, Virginia. His work has appeared in Perigee Magazine, Red Fez, Danse Macabre, The 22 Magazine, Quail Bell Magazine, Elimae, fwriktion, THEMA, Pear Noir, The Minetta Review, and Yes Poetry. He has a chapbook *Common Symptoms of an Enduring Chill Explained*, from Folded Word Press. He blogs at [mirrorsponge.blogspot.com](http://mirrorsponge.blogspot.com) and is looking to publish a novel.

Joel Netsky was born in Philadelphia in 1946, and have always loved literature and writing. In 2007 a book of my poetry was published by an established press to good reviews. From 2008 to 2010 I had a used bookstore, and currently live in metropolitan Boston.

Milt Montague was first turned on to poetry after seventeen years as a senior auditor at hunter college, new york city. His poems were for himself and a few intimates who had encouraged him to spread his wings and soar. One of his features poems “college and ....” appeared in the fall 2013 Poetica magazine.

Simon Perchik is an attorney whose poems have appeared in Partisan Review, The Nation, Poetry, The New Yorker, and elsewhere. His most recent collection is *Almost Rain*, published by River Otter Press (2013). For more information, including free e-books, his essay titled “Magic, Illusion and Other Realities” please visit his website at [www.simonperchik.com](http://www.simonperchik.com).