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To Our Readers

Welcome to the sixth annual Ooligan Press Editors’ Choice e-journal. The advanced editing students in Portland State University’s Publishing Program held a short-story contest in spring 2010 calling for unpublished short stories on the theme “Making Monsters.”

Wonderfully dark stories came in. We chortled, we gasped, we were moved. Talented writers with horror-tinged imaginations offered tales of the Shambler, an elusive forest beast; a murderous yellow-eyed creature loosely built of animal parts; a mysterious dog named Ruby; deadly deer that exhaled rancid fog. We read of a young man’s lust for a Siren and her hideous revenge; we enjoyed a terrifying encounter with an Epre, Level D (very dangerous). Monsters of many sorts emerged from the stories—some of them self-made, and some created by poverty, drugs, and abuse.

Every class member pored over every submission. The stories were rich in possibility, and it was difficult to reach consensus. At last, we settled on five winning stories. Each winning author is a writer to watch.

— Karen Kirtley

Karen Kirtley teaches advanced editing in Portland State University’s Publishing Program
We are grateful to Vinnie Kinsella’s winter 2010 copyediting class for choosing the contest theme and to Nancy D’Inzillo, Teaching Assistant, for organizing the spring contest and keeping us on schedule.
Contributors

**Doug Cornett** is originally from Hudson, Ohio. He earned his B.A. from Skidmore College and was the recipient of the 2003 Denise Marcil Prize in Fiction. His work has previously appeared in such publications as *Fringe Magazine, Word Riot, Prick of the Spindle*, and *The Superstition Review*. He lives in Portland, Oregon, where he is a student in the MFA Fiction program at Portland State University. He is currently at work on a collection of short stories.

**Rhea Noel Hindemit** is a freelance writer, musician, and scientist. She earned her undergraduate degree in Cell and Molecular Biology from San Francisco State University as a Presidential Scholar. She recently returned to the Pacific Northwest to study Creative Writing at Portland State University. Originally from Grants Pass, Oregon, Rhea has lived up and down the west coast, and is glad to call Portland “home.”

**Jillian Moody** is a senior at Portland State University, studying for a Bachelor’s Degree in English and a Masters in Education. She earned her Associate of Arts Degree from Portland Community College, where she volunteered as a writing tutor last winter. Her goal is to teach English at the high school level and publish her own short fiction. She lives with her son in Sellwood.

**Obie Williams** has lived most of his life in Oregon, residing in Bend until he was ten and then in Dayton up through high school. He resides in McMinnville with his lovely fiancée, Karen’Ann; his daughter, Airyana; and his son, Adison. When he is not pouring his brain into a Word document he is an avid movie buff and prolific, annoyed ranter. He will decidedly die a happy man if he succeeds in raising well-mannered, happy children, publishing at least one novel, and getting the hell out of Yamhill County. The inspiration he finds in his family will help him achieve all these things—and so much more.

**Kim Winternheimer** grew up in Portland, which gave her plenty of rainy days to spend brooding over life’s great injustices. Why can’t she french-braid her own hair? Why doesn’t she like the taste of black licorice? And why doesn’t she have her own pony? These questions were shelved for the better part of college, and after graduating from the University of Oregon, Kim went looking for answers in Buenos Aires. While abroad, she provided travel content for M&L Research in addition to writing articles for the *Independent* and *VOS* magazine. She moved back to Portland in 2009 and has since published work in *LAX* and *Portland Monthly* magazine. She loves cooking, wine, books, and travel. Kim still doesn’t have a pony, but her cat is very cute.
Contents

THE HOLY HOUSE OF ELYRIA  Doug Cornett  
On Sheldon Street, Gerry Dayton’s house had been vibrating for five days.

DREAM CATCHER  Rhea Noel Hindemit  
I fall asleep for a moment and wake up distressed in the darkness. Everything moves around me crisply, wood creaking, wind chimes sharp and faraway. Then footsteps. Footsteps.

TO BE A WOMAN  Jillian Moody  
Eight-year-old May can’t wait to live her mother’s glamorous life. But as she tries to break free from her abusive home, she finds out that surviving womanhood takes more than fanciful thinking and fairy dust.

CLOG  Obie Williams  
A young, apathetic retail employee copes with a precarious public restroom situation… the perfect end to the perfect day.

FINAL ARRANGEMENTS  Kim Winternheimer  
It always pained George to remove the eyes and replace them with glass orbs, but it had to be done.
The Holy House of Elyria
By Doug Cornett

It was March, and the chill of the long Ohio winter was burning away in the strange new brightness, and with it the dark days and vast silences that stretched into the night. The frost that coated the trees and rocks of Elyria loosened and melted in the sun, causing streams of ice water to trickle from the roof gutters of the modest homes. Everywhere was the sound of drip, drip, drip.

On Sheldon Street, Gerry Dayton’s house had been vibrating for five days.

The morning of the first day he woke to a low hum. He lay in bed for several minutes, waiting for the cement truck outside to muscle on down the road, or for the jackhammer in the adjacent neighborhood to cease. But the humming continued, and he lay there with his eyes open, waiting for Byron next door to finish buzzing his hedges, or for the helicopter hovering nearby to vault off into the sky. The hum kept going, and he felt now a slight tremor in his wooden bed frame, and saw that the glass of water on his nightstand was rippling. Begrudgingly, he arose and moved slowly to the window, pulling aside the curtains to reveal an empty street, an empty lawn, a neighborhood at rest. He looked up, and the blue morning sky was clear.

The humming persisted on into the afternoon. Gerry moved from room to room, standing in the doorway to listen, then in the center of each room, then near the windows. It grew no louder nor could he feel it more intensely when he pressed his ear to the walls, or stretched himself out on the floor.

“It’s a subtle sort of thing,” he said to himself out loud, though he hadn’t meant to speak. It was just the kind of small sensation that Clara, if she were still around, wouldn’t be able to detect. She could never hear the high-pitched ring that the TV made when it was just turned on, or the slight rattling of the refrigerator in the kitchen. In the last years of her life, she sometimes wouldn’t even hear her tea kettle whistling, and Gerry would grumble that one day she would forget it altogether and burn the damn house down.

After lunch, he stepped outside, and the further he walked down the front path leading to the sidewalk the softer the hum became. When he reached the street it was gone.

He checked all the major appliances, pulling the plug on each, but the noise carried on. Gerry thought, this is the kind of thing that might go away if I ignore it. Clara would have called somebody already, but she wasn’t here. And besides who can you call when the house vibrates? He turned on the television, flipped the channels for a while, and settled on an action movie from thirty years ago.
The living room was filled with explosions, shouts, and fast music, and before long Gerry forgot all about the vibration. He fell asleep right there in his comfy seat.

That night, he had many strange and disjointed dreams. In one, he was trying to brush his teeth, but every time he put the toothbrush in his mouth, his teeth grew larger. Eventually, he realized he would have to brush each tooth individually, and to do so he needed to climb upward into a warm, red-lit room. The first tooth he brushed was the size of a sofa, and the color of butterscotch. The second tooth was the awning of a pop shop he remembered from his childhood. The third tooth was a newborn baby, full of screams and protestations. The fourth was the blur of a motor home, zooming down the highway. The fifth and sixth were a hand and a foot. It went on like this until an automated female voice crackled over the loudspeaker that his time was up, and he climbed down out of the room.

In another dream, he knew he could control the weather, but the soft drizzle on his bare skin felt cool and nice, and he dared not interrupt its pleasant sound.

In another, he was running alongside the banks of the Black River, a young man again. Up ahead in the sky he could see something hurtling towards the earth. As it got closer he saw that it was a plastic, glowing Santa Claus riding in a sleigh led by a dozen plastic, glowing reindeer with smiling holiday faces. A great billow of smoke was trailing the sleigh, and before long, it went down on the other side of the river. But instead of crashing, it bounced back up into the sky and out of sight.

Then, he was a child, lost in a tangle of smoke that felt like jungle vines. All around him were the languorous shapes of burning umbrellas. He heard strained voices of teachers yelling for children. A wave of fire cresting on his sides, a sensation like the full-body shock of cold lake water. He crouched to the ground, to avoid being caught in the fire, in the smoke, in the chaos of searching voices. From inside him, the heat swelled and he knew it was over.

When he awoke, he ran his fingers over the back of his neck.

On the second day, Gerry’s morning bowl of Total trembled on the kitchen table. After he had rinsed it out in the sink, he put on a pair of slacks and an undershirt and walked across the driveway to Byron’s front step. His neighbor swung the door open while Gerry was still knocking.

“What do you think it is?” Gerry put his hands in his pockets.

“Hello, Gerry,” Byron said. “What do I think what is?”

Gerry looked past Byron into the foyer of the house. He saw a brightly colored abstract painting that had been hanging there the last time Gerry knocked on Byron’s door. He remembered he had thought it looked like a mule walking up a hill framed in a great red sky. How long ago was that? It must have been years. It still looked like that mule.

“Hummmmm,” Gerry said. “You know, the noise. Do you have it too?”

“Hum?” Byron looked at Gerry with a frown. “I don’t have that.”

Byron and his wife Lenore had lived next to Gerry and Clara forever, or at least as far back as Gerry could remember. They were alright, and Byron used to invite Gerry over to drink from his liquor cabinet, which always seemed to get bigger and fancier. But that was many years ago, and Gerry didn’t drink anymore because it gave him a headache. They talked for a short time longer, but Gerry told Byron nevermind about the noise.

“It’s probably the pipes, Gerry.” Byron said. He explained that with the weather getting warmer and the copper pipes expanding, sometimes the walls could make funny noises. It was probably nothing, but if it kept up for much longer, he might think about calling a plumber. Byron knew a good one.
“Anyway, you should come for dinner sometime. Lenore loves company.” Gerry agreed and shook Byron’s hand, then walked back across the driveway and into his vibrating house.

On the third morning, Gerry shuffled along the hardwood floors in his bathrobe and slippers, wondering whether a house could feel lonely, as a person might if left alone for so long. Each room a museum of lost loves, filled with artifacts from happier times. A front porch where the autumn air always lingered, even in the flush of spring. A living room that turned introspective during the long nights. A driveway that unfolded itself in a desperate welcome. An empty house that sat alone in an empty field, listening to the empty wind, if there ever were such a thing. Gerry wasn’t so sure that these thoughts were his own anymore, and the longer he stood in each room, listening to the ever-growing hum and feeling the vibration now in his whole body, the more he felt like he was becoming someone else. At least, that he was becoming more than just himself.

He walked into the spare bedroom and below him, out the window, he thought he could see an amusement park whirring by. He heard the sound of wood against metal, and playful screams and peals of laughter that reminded him of birds fluttering up from a cage.

In his own bedroom, the floor had turned to dirt and there was ceremony in the air. He thought he could make out the distant sound of a church organ, and perhaps a choir singing a melancholy dirge. He sat in the corner, so as not to disturb the happenings, and tried to remain as silent as he could.

After a few minutes, the doorbell rang downstairs. Opening his eyes, he noticed that his bed was unmade, and he quickly tucked the sheets under the mattress just in case whoever was at the door happened to come upstairs.

On his doorstep stood a tall young man in dark blue work clothes. He had black-rimmed glasses and the hat on his head read “Moleski & Son Plumbing.” The plumber held a pink piece of paper up to his face and announced “Gerald Dayton. You have leaky pipes.”

“I'm not so sure,” Gerry replied. He hadn't remembered calling a plumber, but then he was forgetting all sorts of things these days, and anyway it was nice to have a visitor.

“You must be ‘Son.’ You’re much too young to be Moleski himself,” he said, smiling and stepping aside so the young man could enter.

“I just work there,” he replied, taking his cap off and running a hand through his hair. He stayed in the basement for the better part of an hour while Gerry sat at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee. When he came back upstairs, the man’s eyes were red and his face was wet with tears. Gerry poured him a cup and they sat down together at the table.

“Three years ago,” the plumber began, “my wife Emily and I were in a horrible accident. She walked away untouched, but I fell into a coma. I stayed like that for two weeks, and the doctors told Emily that I had virtually no chance of recovering. Faced with no other option, she consented to pull the plug on me. But she loved me fiercely, and I guess she thought that if both our souls left our bodies at the same time, we could float on together forever. So she found a medicine bottle in a drawer, emptied it into her mouth, and sat by my bedside waiting for my line to go flat.” He looked up from his coffee. “But something cruel happened. I woke up.” He took his glasses off and rubbed his eyes. “Since then, I've carried an enormous guilt.”

Both men were silent for a long time. Gerry wasn’t sure why the plumber had told him that story, but he felt obligated to share one in return. He took a sip of coffee and cleared his throat.

“When I was eight, I burned down Higbees Umbrella factory downtown. You’re too young to remember it, and there’s a strip mall there now, but when I was a kid Elyria was known for its umbrellas. Everybody in northeast Ohio got their umbrellas from Higbees, or at least got them from
somewhere that carried Higbees. We used to take field trips to the factory, even though it was right next door to the elementary school. In those days I was a restless child, always sneaking off on my own and getting into whatever I could find. One day, during recess, I waited until the teacher wasn’t looking and I ran over and snuck in the back doors of the factory. I remember the noise, the grinding of conveyer belts and men shouting orders and all around the steel frames of umbrellas that looked like long, thin bird skeletons. Nobody noticed the little boy sneaking in and out of the machines. I knew I should have run back to recess, but I was curious and bored with school so I kept on exploring until I found a large room that was completely dark.

“In those days I was in the habit of taking my father’s silver engraved lighters when he wasn’t looking, and I remembered I had one in my pocket. I flipped the flame on, and what I saw startled me so much I let the lighter drop from my hands. In a matter of seconds, the whole room went up. I yelped and bolted, somehow making it out of the room before the fire got me. But it’s funny, all I remember thinking was how red my father’s face would get when he couldn’t find his lighter.”

“What was in the room?” the young man asked.

“Giant birds. Terrible black things hanging from the ceilings with their wings spread. I had never seen anything so awful. I panicked. I ran to get as far away as possible. It wasn’t until I got back to the schoolyard and hid myself among a crowd of my classmates that I realized it was the umbrella cloths that I saw. I felt so foolish. I never spoke a word to anyone about it, even when all the teachers and the police came around to each class asking us if we had seen anything. Nobody was hurt in the fire—I was lucky. But like you, I carry guilt too.”

The plumber looked at Gerry for a long moment, quiet, cupping both hands around his coffee mug. Finally, he spoke: “I won’t carry it with me anymore, not after today.” He stood and poured his coffee out in the sink. On his way out, he nodded his head towards the basement door. “She told me I didn’t have to.”

On the fourth day, the vibration was as loud as a jet engine. Gerry felt more alive than he had ever remembered. In the kitchen, he picked up one of the two chairs at the dinner table and carried it down the rickety wooden stairs leading to the basement. For the rest of the afternoon and into the evening, he sat down there, where the vibration felt the closest. His eyes were closed, and he hummed along softly with the house, making an effort to stay in perfect pitch. At times, he was able to harmonize with the noise, going three steps higher, two lower, or a full octave above. It reminded him of his days with the glee club back in college, and how he used to sing all the time around the house and in the car. Clara was admittedly tone-deaf, but she always requested he sing certain songs that she loved.

“Sing ‘Glory of the Old River Tree,’ ” or “Sing ‘Last Night in San Antonio,’ ” she’d ask. He tried, but couldn’t remember those songs anymore. He couldn’t remember the last time he heard his own voice singing.

It came from the cement walls and the plaster ceiling, from the cold hard floor and from the thick still air itself. It was more than a noise and more than a vibration—it was warmth. Gerry sat back, opened his eyes, and let it wash over him like the heaviest sunlight.

After an hour or so in the basement, Gerry climbed up the stairs and retrieved the second chair from the dinner table. He placed it right next to his own in the center of the basement, and sat back down. He couldn’t say why, but he knew it was the right thing to do.
On the fifth morning, when he walked into the kitchen, Clara was at the stove holding a skillet of scrambled eggs. She looked at him in the doorway and smiled.

“There’s coffee on, and the eggs are almost ready.”

Gerry walked past her but didn’t dare put his hand on the small of her back, though he wanted to more than anything. They sat at the table, eating their eggs and sipping from their mugs. When they had finished eating, Gerry asked if Clara wanted to take a walk around the neighborhood, but a far-away look crossed over her face, and Gerry told her nevermind.

All afternoon, they sat together in the living room, talking about things they remembered and listening to Gerry’s old record collection. They even danced during some of the slow songs, and the humming became almost deafening when he had his arms around his wife.

By the evening, they were both so tired that they climbed right in bed without brushing or flossing their teeth. The last thing Gerry heard, before drifting to sleep, was Clara’s soft breathing.

In the middle of the night, Gerry awoke alone in his bed. Instead of the vibration, he heard the peaceful sound of flowing water. He walked to the window and looked down on his moonlit front yard, where Clara stood on the bank of a thin river that seemed to wind through the whole neighborhood. She crouched on one knee, and by the time she brought her cupped hands to her mouth, she was gone.

The following morning, the sixth day, Gerry opened his eyes to a silent house. The hardwood floors creaked as he walked from room to empty room. Standing on his front porch, he watched as ducks flew overhead. In the distance, he heard the high school marching band, the Pride of Elyria, banging away an old familiar song.
I think I will be tough and sleep outside. This time she threw the phone across the room and broke a mirror—her bad luck, not mine.

I knew people who slept outside. Frankie had lived behind the bowling alley for a month. Our carpool used to pick him up for school, and Dijon’s mother would roll the windows down, letting his body odor flow out with the wind, but she never said anything about it to him. Me, I liked his smell. Similar to rolling tobacco, it had a sort of sweetness. In the backseat, I would sit next to him so that our legs and arms pushed together, touching along all the sides of our bodies, and his smell would rub off on my clothes.

The greenbelt cuts through the neighborhoods and crosses several footbridges; its walkway arcs up and dips down where willow boughs slap against my face. Cankerworms hang from their invisible threads, and I check my hair for their gummy bodies. They dangle off the ends of branches, moving with the tree as it shivers against the setting sun. It will set in less than an hour, but I will keep walking until dark.

I lied to Frankie about being a virgin the first time we were together. He had laid his hooded sweatshirt down on the ground next to the creek. Cars passed overhead, hitting the storm drain cover every few seconds. When he was inside me, I couldn’t disguise the pain. We lay on our backs afterward, looking at the drippy pink letters, like child’s scrawl, on the underside of the bridge. It said “The End Is Now.” I rolled on my stomach so my entire body weight was pressing against my ribs. I wanted to feel the effort of each inhalation. I thought about asking Frankie to lie on top of me so I could know how it was to breathe with both my and his weight together, pushing my lungs flat, but he had fallen asleep. So I just watched the slow creek water push dead leaves to its bank. After some time, a strange beetle crawled toward me, its body teetering as it climbed over pebbles. Its abdomen was as big as a silver dollar and patterned like a white-on-tan Rorschach blot, so very alien against the suburban foliage. I pressed my face sideways against the ground so everything looked large in my field of vision. Clumps of dirt became gigantic plateaus and grass blades towered against the sky, as the beetle traversed monster-like through the terrain of this new land. I could see clearly where the joints of its plasticky legs fit together as it moved toward me like a creature suspended on strings. When it got close enough, I picked up my sandal and, holding it sideways, diverted the insect’s path to the left. It entered the dense undergrowth of blackberry bushes and disappeared.
I am still walking, thinking. The sky burns, and clouds make smoke rings around the horizon. I have to decide where I should sleep. There are small mounds near the park, too little to be hills but large enough to shield me from people scouring the trails at night. The mounds butt up against backyard fences, and the space between would make a suitable nook for sleeping. On my way, I pass through the city rose gardens. There are these certain purple roses, like rain-filled clouds; they smell like dreams. I pick just the outside petals of a few and put them in my sweatshirt pockets so I can extend my fingers through them while I walk.

At the mounds, I feel more exposed than I expected. Unrolling my sleeping bag, I sit with my back against the fence. I can’t see anything except the rear of the grassy hill, which means I am hidden, but nothing is stopping anyone from walking back here just like I did. In the failing light, I roll a cigarette. Tobacco strings drop out the end as I light it, and they burn into nothing before they have a chance to land in my lap. The smoke is like fingers down my throat, and then I exhale. I rest my wrist on my knee. The illuminated end of the cigarette is now the only visible light. Taking a rose petal out of my pocket with my other hand, I press its cool skin against my lips. Softness. I think about silky pillowcases and floppy dog ears, about how they are the same kind of soft, like love.

We used to walk these same paths together, me and Frankie, missing the bus on purpose. Six miles of walking would make blisters on the tops of my toes as they rubbed the inside of my shoes. At the end of the day, I would stick safety pins into the blisters and feel the warm viscous fluid run out. It felt like thickened water when I rubbed it between my fingers, and it smelled like nothing, the way water smells like nothing. Peroxide fizzed at the dead skin edges of the popped sores as I swabbed them clean. Then, pulling apart thin paper to reveal Band-Aids, I would expertly wrap each toe and finally cover my foot with a clean sock. The next day, I would repeat this ritual.

My dad raped a neighborhood girl when I was three years old. She flirted with him and was notoriously promiscuous, my mother said, walking around in shorts and bikini tops the summer before her freshman year. I think her name was Angela. Her father came to our door with a gun, my mother said, and we moved two weeks later. We have been moving ever since.

I have the sleeping bag pulled over my ears, but the night sounds are creeping past the fabric. I fall asleep for a moment and wake up distressed in the darkness. Every bending blade, every snapping branch, my deterrent against sleep. My death lurks in every slap of wind against a shuttered window. I don’t feel the security of the mounds at all because they are invisible in the dark. I open my eyes wider as if the strain will somehow make the blackness less black. I stay like this, afraid to stir until my stillness turns to sleep.

I dream about lying flat in the center of Tempeco Court. We lived here when I was eleven. The asphalt is hot on the back of my head as I squint against the summer sun. I am not afraid of cars because no one ever drives into this court. Lying perfectly still, I wait until the buzzards begin to circle high above. This was my favorite game back then. I will wait here until three of them are rotating through the air, then get up and run inside. But this time, when the third vulture joins the flight, I am frozen to the ground. The sun is melting me into the oily gravel. My skin is fluid moving through cracks in the surface. Soon, there are five, and then six, dark looming shapes spiraling down toward my unmoving body. I am willing every cell within me to action; I am screaming without sound. Just when the wretched birds are close enough for me to see their mottled fleshy heads, something blocks the sky, causing my pupils to adjust to the shadowed light. Frankie’s face is revealed.

He says, “Why didn’t you tell me you’d never done it before?”
He says, “I didn’t deserve what you gave up to me.”
He says, “Take my hand.”

I try to reach for him, but my arm is dead weight. I wake and can’t shake the feeling. My arm is numb and useless because I fell asleep with it folded under me. All I can do is wait until the blood
revives the flesh. Everything moves around me crisply, wood creaking, wind chimes sharp and faraway. Then footsteps. Footsteps. I think. And my heart begins to drown out all other sounds.

When Frankie left on a bus for San Francisco, I thought I would never see him again. I thought, this is it. San Francisco is nothing like the back of the bowling alley. When the sun goes down in Golden Gate Park, there are places where you are prey or predator. You better know your role. I rode out on the train twice and went looking for him among the hunched-up, thinning children. But he was near North Beach stealing books from people's houses and selling them on sidewalks in order to get high. Stealing books was where it started, and then what? He made his way home two months later, white-faced and shaking when his mother opened the door.

I have left my sleeping bag behind in haste, clamoring across the ground knotty with tree roots. I keep catching my foot in them, finding myself reaching out into the dark while I fall forward, strain-ing always to hear if footsteps are closing in. I just want to make it to the street where lamps bleed light across the pavement and the sound of someone walking is unambiguous. I make it past the trees and through the tennis courts, still holding my arms ahead of me to brace against the night. I turn my head, look back, see nothing. I break into the fluorescence of the road and stop to collect my breath. There is no person following me, no sounds of feet, no sound at all.

Frankie's parents weren't the kind you might expect to have a runaway son. They were in love and believed in God. They made dinner and laughed at television comedy shows. They let me sleep in his bed, him on the couch, when my mom locked the door against me. I would wake up late in the morning, and someone would be making scrambled eggs with cheese. I felt bad for what he did because they were nice people, but he wanted to punish himself.

I am walking down familiar streets now. Ground fog obscures the painted house numbers that line the curbs.

My mom finally kicked my dad out when she found out he lied about knowing how to play the saxophone. She sold her mother's cameo locket to buy him the instrument after he told her he had a talent for it. He probably never expected to have to prove it to anyone. And there she went, ruining everything by being so thoughtful. She told me about how he was going to come home and play us a song. I rubbed my fingers along the shiny keys. I think that night was when she developed her knack for throwing things across rooms.

I am sitting on a sidewalk now, staring across the street at the porch. There is a swing made of rotting wood and rusty chains. The old love seat is pushed against the side of the house, sagging with the moisture of the night. Once, bees made a hive inside it. When you would sit, the seat buzzed and vibrated. The windows of the house are silent. The air has been rapidly cooling, and my lungs release misty puffs in front of my face. Screech owls are calling to each other from oak trees. With each shrill I feel the singular hairs on my arm flexing, making me tremble. I wish I had my sleeping bag. I wish I could ring the doorbell.

Frankie wrote me love notes in bad handwriting. He told me I was his angel and talked about his heart like it was a car in need of repair. I folded the papers in quarters and slept with them under my pillow. Sometimes, when I would dream about driving off the side of a bridge into the bay, I would die and then wake up with those letters crunched in my hands. He asked me to marry him when we were sixteen, and I laughed at him. I told him I didn't believe in marriage. What does that word even mean? Marriage. I told him I would stay with him forever, but I would never marry him.

The curb is cold and hard against my tailbone. I want to sit here and look at the front door until morning comes, then I can start to forget this night. The owls have let up a bit, and I realize, despite the chill they give me, I like their howling voices. It's like curling myself into a ball and sinking to the bottom of the pool. The reminder of mortality. I roll a cigarette and wait for the sunrise still hours away. Counting the minutes, I make smoke rings that fit into each other like Russian nesting dolls.
When a light turns on in the house, I think I have been drifting to sleep again and morning has come. No. The sky is still pitch black. Shadows move through the window against a hallway light. Someone is in his room. Standing up, I feel the stiffness of the cold night in my knees. I shake it off and blow into the palms of my hands and lightly slap my cheeks to get the blood going. I stand there and look toward the front of the house like I have been for hours. It isn’t until the light turns off that my feet finally find their motion. They bring me up the front steps one by one, the middle stair crying out against my weight. I run my hand down the porch swing chain, turning my palm orange with every rusty link. Facing the door, I falter, and my feet threaten to retreat. I am stopped when the porch illuminates. I can hear the turning of locks. Frankie’s mom is there looking at me, her face framed in the open door. I don’t say anything, but she opens the door wider and tells me to come inside.

One morning, I walked to his house through the early dew because I had been away visiting relatives for the weekend. At a trade post on the side of the highway, I had bought him a dream catcher to hang over his bed. I wanted him to know he had somewhere to send his secrets. When his father told me they found him cold in the bathroom, that he had been there all night after a bad shot, that he had been clean but got in an argument about curfew and called his friend Joey to bring him a fix just this once, when he told me this, I handed him the dream catcher and walked back home.

There were lots of people at the service, people I had never met. His face was so unreal—I couldn’t pretend he was just sleeping. Still, I walked up to the casket because I wanted to touch his dead skin. I wasn’t afraid. I wanted to feel the absence of him. He was wearing a black suit, something I don’t think he ever wore when he was alive. Tucked under his left arm was that damn dream catcher. His father had put it there I guess, and it made me want to punch Frankie’s dead-and-gone face.

She lets me in his room, and things are the same, but a film is starting to settle over everything. Like bronze baby shoes, the objects in here are hardening. I want to throw my body around all the clothes and furniture, the posters on the wall, the stacks of dog-eared books. His mom brings in an extra quilt for me because it is cold, and I take off my shoes before I climb into his bed. The sheets smell like the beginning and the end. The pillow is cool against my face and lets my head sink in with purposeful weight. My back is toward her when she sits next to me on the bed, and I can feel her body warmth. I count my breath against my heartbeat. One, two, three, four… until both are in sync with each other.
May’s sister Fria had started shaving a few weeks ago. She remembered it exactly because it was the day summer break started. She’d watched the shaving cream cover Fria’s legs like a thick blanket of freshly fallen snow. Then, stroke by stroke, a smooth and beautiful world was revealed underneath. Fria shaved three times a week. For those twenty minutes, May could be found lurking near the tub, watching with envy. “Get out of here,” Fria would scold.

On a Saturday afternoon in the fourth week of summer, May had mustered the courage to ask Wender, her father, for a razor of her own. He’d said no. It could be because she was too young—eight years and three months—or it could just be his mood. Sometimes he got a kick out of denying her what she wanted, whether he cared one way or another.

She’d taken all morning refining her request in the mirror. When he’d glanced up and simply said, “No,” her arms and neck splotched red and her hands trembled.

“Why?”

“You’re too young.”

“I’m old enough to cook.” She was feeling brave. He was watching television, and when the races were on, he didn’t mind a little lip. He threw her a quick glance, the blood vessels in his eyes expanding. “You’re old enough to get your ass snapped too. Go outside.”

Fria was four years older than her. Before they moved to this house, they had spent most of their time plotting against Wender in their secret clubhouse. It was really just the three-foot space between the grass and the trampoline net. Crisscrossed shadows would cast their faces in a mysterious pattern and May had felt like the Great Mouse Detective.

They’d moved into a smaller version of their old home a few months ago. Fria and May had to share a bedroom and the trampoline was sold. They didn’t get along as well anymore. Fria was usually out with her new friend Gina. If she was home, she would stand in front of the mirror studying her newly sprouted boobs. “Aren’t they great?”

The new yard was a gravel rectangle running the length of the house. A square of concrete outside the screen door was the “porch” the realtor had spoken of. May had lain face down on the concrete, letting its heat sear the exposed bits of skin around her sundress. She liked to test how much pain she could take before giving in.

It didn’t take long. She pulled her knees to her chest, glaring at the little blonde hairs that labeled
her a child, thinking about her mother, Fria, Gina... all members of the mysterious tribe of womanhood, wandering the island while May sat at home with Wender. She winced in pain as she pulled out a few hairs near her ankle. Soon enough, she would be May Lent, the woman.

The side gate opened and her mother’s legs appeared, capped with blinding white shorts. She sat down next to May—Krys Lent, “that’s K-R-Y-S.” She made up the nickname in her sophomore year of high school, claiming that “Christine” sounded too “pristine.” She still laughed at the joke.

Feeling side by side with May, they looked close to identical. Their eyes mirrored the same pattern of gold flakes embroidering green irises, and they had tan skin and white hair. It wasn’t really white, just a sun-bleached blonde, and they wouldn’t be so tan if they didn’t live in Hawaii. Her mother even cheated, applying a fake tanner before bed.

She set her head on May’s shoulder. “Hi,” she sighed. “What are you doing out here?”

They stared ahead at the cinderblock fence encasing them.

“I was thinking how much I want a razor. Really bad.” She could hear the whine in her voice. Her mother sat up and pulled a pack of Kool cigarettes from her tiny pocket. She didn’t speak until she’d taken a deep, satisfying drag, as if it were a matter to be considered at length.

“Diane’s having a party tonight,” she said finally. “She invited Rob Lowe, can you believe it?” She sighed. “I wonder if he’ll let me go.”

Her mother and Wender both worked at one of the grandest hotels in the world. It sprawled across miles of beach on the east side of the island. He worked as head chef and she was a waitress. Many movie stars came through, and her mother would whisper fantasies of one falling in love with her and whisking her away to Hollywood.

“Could I come?”

Her mother’s eyes would return from the glittering parties of California and regard her daughter with disappointment.

“Of course.”

“He won’t want you to go tonight,” May said. “You went out last night.”

Her mother waved a hand dismissively. “Last night was boring—same old, same old.” She grabbed May’s shoulder with the excitement of a child. “Rob Lowe! Do you know who that is?” At May’s blank look she added, “Well, he’s completely gorgeous.” She stood up and crushed her cigarette, maybe thinking May didn’t understand grown-up things like being gorgeous.

“Mom?” Her voice shot out like a desperate hand.

“Mmm?” She was peering through the screen door to judge Wender’s mood, already planning an explanation for the party.

“What’s up? Can I please shave my legs? I’m old enough. Some of the girls in my class have started.” That wasn’t exactly true, but her mother wasn’t the type to talk to other parents so she would never find out anyway.

She looked down at May and smiled beautifully. “Little May, turning into a lady. I’ll tell you what!” She reached into her banana bag and pulled out a little nail file. “Keep this for today. Nails first! Men love fingers.” She winked. “Now cross them for me!” She patted May on the head and walked inside.

Wender said she couldn’t go, but it didn’t really matter. She strode out the door just before dinner. May had prepared mac and cheese for the four of them. Fria said she’d eat it later as she climbed out their window, and Wender was too angry to eat.

May sat at the table alone, thinking she knew exactly what he was up to in her parents’ bedroom at the end of the hall. A noodle stuck in her throat.

He was stealing her mother’s powder. May had stolen it once, by accident.

Their room was always filthy, covered with dishes and discarded clothes. May loved to surprise her mother by cleaning the kitchen with extra care or making her bed while she was at work. Once, when she had to wait tables while sick with the flu, May had taken on the task of cleaning their
entire room. She’d made the bed, propping Alice, her favorite porcelain doll, on the pillow for her mother to borrow. She’d vacuumed and cleared the dishes from the nightstand.

Beneath a turned over plate she’d found a mess of white dust. Proud of her attention to detail, she’d swept it into a garbage bag and sprayed the glass with Windex.

“What did you do with it?” her mother had demanded. In a frenzy she’d ripped through the many garbage bags piled outside the back door. She’d come back empty-handed, filling her grip with May’s shoulders. “Never go in my room again!” she’d screamed. The look of cold rage in her mother’s eyes was terrifying, as a net of blue veins pulsed into visibility throughout her face.

May took a sip of slightly soured milk and imagined Wender in the room wiping the dust into the garbage, just to get back at her mother. Her fists clenched against her thighs. She wanted to run in there and stop him, stand in front of the nightstand like a courageous guard.

She’d watched her mother’s patterns carefully. After going out she was usually in high spirits, the gold in her eyes shining brightly. After a few days at home she would become sick, lying in bed and moaning for help.

It was simple: the powder was a magic life source that kept her mother beautiful, like pixie dust. One day she would share it with May, and they would go to parties and be beautiful women together. Fria never went with her because they were too different. No one said that Fria looked just like her mother. She had brown hair and thin lips like Wender, and she would say bad things about their mother before slipping into the night.

Long after bedtime May sat silently in the hall closet, the soles of her feet propped against a stack of games. An imitation fur coat cascaded softly around her head. She pouted her lips, pretending it was her long black hair. It smelled like her mother, a bold mix of Oscar perfume and cigarettes. The small band of light from the hall illuminated her fingers, her little nails and the chipped-away pink polish.

Bare feet flew past in the hallway, accompanied by high-pitched panting. Her mother would defend his actions later. His parents were very abusive. They had a padlock on their fridge so he could never have snacks. Can you imagine? Sometimes he’d go days without food.

May burrowed her face into the fur and plugged her ears. It never did any good. The thudding of his heavy steps penetrated her attempts to shut it out, and she wondered how much earmuffs cost, or if they even sold them in Hawaii.

He paused outside the door and her breath caught. He’d found her here before. A suspicious turn of the knob and the door flew open, his anger tearing into the closet like a tornado, stealing the air and choking her. Her mother’s bird-like hands came into the doorway, wielding the living room lamp decorated with flirting peacocks. Her attempts at defense always got her in worse trouble. He forgot about May, and her mother’s punishment ensued in the hallway. She crept her little fingers across the floor to grab the bottom of the door, stealthily closing it and locking her safely away again. She plugged her ears and hoped at the very least her mother knew she had saved her.

Fria came home several hours later when the house had finally stopped shaking. She scooped May out of the closet and carried her to their room.

“Why do you always sleep in the closet?” she grunted.

“She comes into our room sometimes… for help,” she answered sleepily. “Where were you?”

“At Gina’s. Her mom let her have boys over to watch a scary movie.”

May opened her eyes wider and studied Fria’s face. Her eyelids were painted with gold flakes and her shiny lips reflected the light from May’s Lion King lamp. Fria set her down, wrapping the covers around her gently.

May glared at her. “Did Mom give you the powder?”

“What?” With a furrowed brow, she shook her head. “Go to sleep, May.”
Satisfied, she curled into her pillow with a sigh. “I can’t wait ’til I can leave too.”
Fria rubbed her back once and turned out the light.
Their mother stayed in bed for three days. On the first day, Wender wouldn’t let anyone in, and
May was permitted to watch television all afternoon. She played her tape of Peter Pan twice in a row.
All you need is faith, trust, and pixie dust.
On the second day, Wender slammed the door, yelling, “Someone around this house has to show
up for work.”
“She’s going to get fired again,” Fria said. “Maybe we’ll move into an even smaller house and we
can all share a bedroom.”
“They can’t fire her! She’s sick!”
Fria rolled her eyes and went into the bathroom. May immediately went to the end of the hallway
and pressed the door open.
“Mom?”
She dropped down onto her hands and knees and crawled over to the bed, peeking over the
dirty sheets. Her mother’s glowing skin had faded. Purple stains were splashed across her face and
throat. Her eyes snapped open, and she jumped as if May were an intruder.
“Sorry!” May cried out.
Shaking hands brushed aside May’s long white hair as her mother took a deep breath.
“May, May. It’s okay.” She smiled at her tiredly. “Come up in bed with me.”
Her mother curled her body around May’s and held her tight. Bare breasts flush against her
back made May uncomfortable. She flipped her body around so their noses almost touched.
“Did you get to meet Rob Lowe?” she whispered.
“What? Oh, no, he wasn’t there—too bad.” She blinked slowly and petted May’s hair.
“Where’s Wender?”
“He went to work. Fria says you’ll be in trouble for not going.”
“It’s okay. I already got the time off anyway.” Her eyes brightened. “I’m taking a trip to the
mainland soon.”
“To California?”
She smiled. “No, not yet. I’m going back to Utah. Your sister’s getting married. She wants me
to fly back for the ceremony.” Krys had three other daughters from a different man. May had only
met one of them.
“Holly?” she asked.
“No. Lilly.” Krys had gone through a plant phase in her twenties. The third was named Ivy.
“But I thought you were sick.”
“I am.” She threw herself back helplessly. “I’m very sick.”
“But you’ll be okay?”
“I don’t know. I don’t know.” She coughed and rubbed her face with open palms. May noticed a
rash poisoning her mother’s delicate arms.
“Does Wender know you’re going?”
“Not yet. Don’t mention it, okay?”
“I wouldn’t.” Her mother smiled, and she smiled back.
That night her mother got out of bed. May listened to them fight from under her Little Mermaid
blanket. Her mother wanted to leave but Wender wouldn’t let her. After a beating her mother lay in
the hallway, moaning over and over, “You’re killing me. You’re killing me, Wender.”
May imagined what her mother looked like on the other side of her door, dressed in the black
fur coat, her beauty stolen—dying. She passed the night making plans for Wender. Fria may have
abandoned their mother, but May wouldn’t.
When she woke the next morning, Fria still hadn’t come home. She crept into the hallway and peeked into her parents’ room. Her mother was sleeping on the floor, one sad high heel still clinging to her foot. Her face was turned toward the door, so May could see the carpet lines etched into her skin. The deep circles of her eyes looked like the plastic skeleton hanging in her classroom.

Resolutely, she went to the kitchen and dug into the silverware drawer. When she came into the living room he was reading the paper in the armchair next to the chipped peacock lamp. “Wender.”

He didn’t raise his eyes. “What?”

“Give Mom her magic powder back.”

This time he looked up. “What?”

The air stopped in her throat. “You’re killing her.”

May, you better watch what you say.” But she wasn’t going to. The next step of her plan was to press the fork she clutched behind her back into his throat and demand to know where he was hiding it. She stretched her arm out, the small tines trembling toward him. “Where is it?”

He laughed, but it wasn’t the kind of laugh that made people smile. He looked down, giving her an opportunity, but the moment had passed. His right hand swung out of nowhere—a strong backhanded hit. From the floor she watched his feet move. She watched him stand up. She saw one leg retract and strike. Pain shot through her stomach and her fingers relaxed their grip on the fork. It caught the light from the screen door, shining from the carpet like a forgotten hero.

He pushed her toward the back door. One of Wender’s favorite punishments was to make her sleep outside. He shoved her out onto the concrete square and locked all the doors. The idea was that he didn’t want someone like her under his roof. It was always warm in the night, and sometimes she’d take long walks from one end of town to another. Tonight she was not in the mood. She couldn’t stop thinking of her mother, fading away like Tinker Bell when Wendy said “I don’t believe in fairies.”

Her whimpering rose toward the stars until her hero fantasies faded into the nightmares of sleep.

When the birds began their first morning songs, the door opened. She cried out against the pain of Fria’s touch. In their room, Fria ran her fingers along May’s back well into the daylight.

May awoke that afternoon to find a present. A lovely purple razor lay on her pillow with a ribbon tied around it. Fria’s favorite game was midnight gifts, although it was usually just stuff from around the house. If her swollen lips could have smiled, they would have.

Her mother left for the mainland that day while Wender was at work. She didn’t look at May when she said goodbye. She stood in the hallway, promising she’d be back in two days. A big man with gold rings and shiny shoes picked her up in an old Mercedes. As they watched it leave the drive, Fria claimed the car would soon be theirs.

“How?” May asked.

“Mom said Romeo will give her anything she wants.”

“Who’s Romeo?”

Fria gave her a look. “Don’t be stupid.”

Wender questioned Fria about their mother, and May obediently retold the story of Lilly’s wedding. As the days passed he became more and more demanding. On the third night Fria left, and she didn’t come back with the sun. Thankfully, Wender left May alone. The bruises on her face embarrassed him. He kept his eyes on his plate when she served his Chef Boyardee. May lay in bed most of the time, filing her nails to perfection, waiting for her mother to come back or for Fria to return.

She shaved her legs daily. The razor would nick her skin around the knee, around the ankle, and an amazing amount of blood would pour onto the porcelain. So much blood that she would sit on the edge of the tub for an hour, mesmerized. Sometimes she twisted the razor on purpose, just to see more than one river flowing at once. She would stare at her naked reflection in the mirror with bits of tissue stuck to her legs, hoping to see May—the woman.
After a week she gave up on her mother coming home. Maybe Lilly turned out to be a better daughter. She spent her days sitting at the window, imagining the Mercedes pulling in to pick her up. Wender gave up too. He began spending half his nights somewhere else. May cooked dinners for one. Sometimes she’d make up conversations at the table, talking to her mother and Fria about the parties, the celebrities.

“Who did you go home with?”

“Ha, ha, ha. I promised not to tell.”

Then, on a Sunday afternoon in late July, her mother came home. She burst in while May was lounging in the living room chair, using the file to pry dirt from under her nails. Wender was rummaging through the fridge. She didn’t spare a glance at May. She strode straight to her room and locked the door behind her. Wender came running out of the kitchen toward his bedroom. He pounded on the door until it cracked.

She couldn’t be sure what happened after that. The door opened and slammed shut with both of them on the other side. There was yelling—names like “whore,” “pig,” “Romeo,” and “the girls.” The raised voices changed to angry screaming. May had cleaned all of her fingers and seven toenails before he came charging down the hallway and into the living room. He was dragging her mother by the hair. He brought her right up to May and put her bloody face in May’s lap.

“Your mother is moving to the mainland, May. Say goodbye.”

Her mother met her eyes. “Help me, May,” she moaned.

May didn’t miss her opportunity this time. Her hand shot out, plunging the nail file into Wender’s left eyeball. She pulled it out with a distinct squelch, shaking off a mixture of white jelly and blood. He cried out, clutching his face with both hands. May watched in horror as blood gurgled out of the cracks between his fingers. She pushed her mother off of her and ran to their bedroom, slamming and locking the door behind her.

Clothes were strewn everywhere, exploding from an unzipped duffel bag. Her mother would be leaving any second and she hadn’t even noticed May’s smooth, womanly legs. The banana purse was lying near the bathroom. Frantic, she ran over to it, dumping the contents into her lap. Cigarettes, red lipstick, a compact… she turned the bag inside out, opening all the secret zippers. Tampons, a wad of cash, and finally, finally, there it was—the magic dust. Locked safely into a cigarette’s cellophane, the top burned together. She held it in her hands like a precious stone. She could hear her mother getting up.

May shook her head. How does it work, how does it work?

Desperate, she stood up and ripped the top apart. Although some of it was loose powder, the majority of it was clumped into jagged dime-sized balls. She grabbed a pinch of it and sprinkled it over her head, but her image in the bathroom mirror didn’t change—the dust just rested on her hair like dandruff. Her mother was pounding at the door and Wender was still shrieking in the living room. “I’ll kill you, I’ll kill you.”

Suddenly she knew. She dumped the dust into her mouth. At first the dry texture made her choke and she bent over the sink, slopping water into her mouth. She heaved a deep breath. One by one she began swallowing the chunks whole like big vitamins. She clutched the empty bag in her hand. She ran to the door, switching the lock and swinging it wide open.

Before the foam raged from her little mouth, before her eyes rolled and bulged in silent rebellion, before her heart stopped, May smiled. She smiled at her mother desperately.

“Can I come with you now?”
Clog
Obie Williams

Cliff pursed his lips, venting a grim sigh from his nostrils as he watched the water level rise nearly to the edge of the toilet. He never understood why those things were designed so that they even could overflow, and not with a safety drain high up near the lip like a sink. Especially the sort that were installed in the rather crowded public restroom of the SaveRite supermarket.

Pushing up his glasses, Cliff pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes. This was the last thing he needed. The perfect conclusion to the perfect day. Absolutely incredible.

With his hands on his hips he regarded the toilet once more before glancing around his enclosure. He was inside the last of the three stalls in the bathroom, the largest of them all. He always picked the handicap-accessible stall when it was available. He enjoyed the extra space, and using the fold-down baby changing station to set his groceries if he had to use the facilities after shopping, as he had today.

Clicking his tongue against the roof of his mouth, Cliff weighed his options. So he had clogged the toilet. If he were alone in the bathroom, this would not have been much of an issue. He would simply stroll out of the stall and be on his merry way, leaving the job for someone employed there to clean up. It was shitty work, sure, but so was his job, so he hadn’t much sympathy. The trouble was, he was not alone. Not by a long shot. From the echoing sounds around him, he knew that all the other toilets and urinals were occupied, and there were possibly other people waiting for one of those to be vacated. If he were to step out now, someone would slip right in after him and discover the terrible mess he’d created. How embarrassing.

Another option was to try to remove the clog, but with what? There was no plunger available. That would be stored in a utility room waiting for some poor bastard in a reflective vest, hands chilled from pushing carts all day, who would be called in to clean up his sopping mess. He didn’t even have any reasonable semblance of a probing device. He looked hopelessly through his plastic bag of groceries: a paring knife, a can of table salt, a cigarette lighter, a bottle of Tabasco sauce, and a 24-ounce container of bleach; none of them any help whatsoever.

Sadly he didn’t have much else in the way of options. Either the water in the toilet bowl would recede and he could try to rework the clog by flushing it again, or the bathroom would clear out and he could slink away quietly and unnoticed. His final choice seemed the most reasonable: to wait the situation out.
He leaned against the black dividing wall that stood between him and the adjacent stall. Carved epithets denouncing Mexicans and blacks as well as promises of sexual favors with attached names and phone numbers shared an indiscriminating canvas which rubbed against the back of his GrocMart-approved jersey-knit polo. “Grow Smart with GrocMart,” the damned jingle rang in his head. He sighed again. The name didn’t even make sense. It sounded like “Gross Mart” and they only had two aisles of actual groceries, compared to the thirty of consumer electronics, children’s toys, second-rate clothing, and endless amounts of other useless, rock-bottom-priced crap.

For a moment, Cliff slipped off into what might have been a nice reverie, but he was jolted back to reality as someone rapped impatiently on the stall door.

Annoyed, Cliff ground his teeth and barked, “Occupied!” There was a single huffing sound from the other side, and then heavy footfalls stomping away.

Rolling his eyes, Cliff relaxed against the wall once more, but found his mind dragging him back over the crappy events of the crappy day that had preceded this crappy situation.

It had been a more or less neutral day on the sliding scale of GrocMart employee good days/bad days, the former of which were remarkably few. It was actually the last ten minutes which ruined all six minimum-wage-earning hours before it—even putting to shame the fact the break room microwave had fizzled out on him during his half-hour lunch, leaving his bean and cheese burrito still frozen in the middle.

He had been leaning languidly against one of the secure video game cases for nearly five minutes, dealing with a teenage girl who was giving more attention to the cell phone glued to her ear than to him. Just as well; he needed only stand here with his keys, monitoring her as she sorted through the games, paying special attention to the most inane, pop-culture ridden ones she could find. It was just as good a place as any to whittle away the last fraction of his day. Still, her banal ramblings and constant gum-smacking were starting to put the screws to his temples, and he hadn’t missed the fact that her freshly manicured nails probably cost more than he had earned today… before taxes.

Things were looking up, however, as she had finally turned to him and held up what apparently was her choice, and then asked if she had to pay for it in his department. It was an absolutely stupid question that he fielded countless times a day. Why would they bother locking up the games if they would let people just wander off with them? At least it meant she would soon be out of his hair.

He opened his mouth to answer when a grocery cart struck his right hip. Whipping his head around, he blinked at the sight of a fierce-looking middle-aged woman clutching her cart handle in one hand and a dark brown Pomeranian in the other.

“I have been waiting for ten minutes for someone to help me over here,” she spat. Cliff thought he actually saw her forked tongue for a moment.

But his hip ached, and he shot back, “Ma’am, I am helping another customer. I will be right with you.” He said it a little more harshly than he should have, and that was bad. This lady immediately seemed to him as the type who would begin cataloguing such transgressions, waiting for just the right moment to release the ultimate namedrop: The Manager.

He turned back around before the lady could jump all over his case, intending to inform the young girl that she did, in fact, have to pay for the game in his department, but she was already rounding the corner by then. All he got was a brief glance of her rhinestone-emblazoned ass before she disappeared. For a moment he lamented the fact that he hadn’t been laid in a year. The closest thing he had to look forward to in the date department tonight was the slithering dragon looming behind him, waiting for him to turn around so she could gobble him up like some skinny twenty-something entrée.

Securing the video game case, he gave his wristwatch a cursory glance—seven till. There was no way he was getting out on time. He turned to the dragon lady. “I’m sorry for the wait, ma’am,”
he said, putting on his best customer service smile. “What can I get for you?” Aside from my balls on a plate, of course. I’m sure you’ll take those yourself.

“Come,” she commanded. He waited with faux patience as she turned her heavily overloaded cart around in the small aisle—he just knew she would want to ring up all of that back here at the electronics department’s tiny register rather than the checkstands up front, dammit—and led him over two aisles.

They came to a stop in front of a display of various boom boxes, and Dragon Lady pointed to one. “I want to buy that,” she said.

Cliff paused, waiting a beat, then said, “Okay. Well the boxes are right here under—”

“I wasn’t done!” she snapped. As she rifled through her sizeable and expensive-looking handbag, the rodent on her arm growled at him as well.

“I’m sorry,” Cliff said, calmly. “I should tell you, though, that we don’t actually allow dogs in the st–”

“He is a service animal,” she hissed. “Who do you think you are, questioning me?”

Cliff closed his eyes for a moment, took a short breath, and said slowly, “I apologize. I did not mean to question. Service animals are, of course, allowed. I had just never heard of a Pomeranian being a—”

“His presence helps my anxiety!” she snapped. “Without him, I get irritable. I don’t think you’d want that.”

He had balled his hands into fists at his sides so tight that he felt his fingernails digging into the flesh of his palms. “No, ma’am,” he said, his voice keeping its steady calm, perfected as a survival mechanism after four years of working retail. “So what was your question about the stereo?”

“Well, you have this 15% off coupon here.” She tore off one of the paper coupons that were hanging from metal rings and placed at random intervals around the stereo display. “And this one is from your ad that was in Wednesday’s paper,” she held up another 15% off coupon which she had retrieved from her purse. “I want to know if I can use both.”

“Shit,” Cliff thought, then took a deep breath, preparing for the fiery onslaught. “I’m afraid not, ma’am. We cannot ring up two of the same coupon.”

Dragon Lady’s glare sharpened in the perfect, did-you-just-devolve-into-a-monkey gaze. She had to have practiced the thing; it was flawless. “They’re the same coupon. One is from the paper and one is from right here in the store.”

Cliff sighed through his nose. “They are from different places, yes, but if you look at the numbers under the barcode, they are the same. We put them in the store and in the paper for customer convenience. Those who read the paper can get it there, but those who don’t can still get it here in the store.”

Dragon Lady fumed. “That is just ridiculous! I drove half an hour from home in here thinking I could combine 15% off and 15% off. I want my 30% off that stereo.”

Cliff’s jaw clenched involuntarily, and he heard a momentary whining in his ear. “It would actually be 27.75% off,” he replied.

“What?” Dragon Lady asked, honestly caught off guard for a moment.

“Two 15% off coupons,” Cliff responded, knowing he should not pursue it, but enjoying his momentary advantage, brief though it may be, “would bring down the total 27.75%.”

Dragon Lady blinked, the math completely lost on her. “So you’re telling me that I can have 27 point whatever off? Why not 30?”

Cliff’s palms were searing under the digging edges of his fingernails now, but he managed to force his cool. “No… I’m sorry, I didn’t mean…” he stopped, took a breath. This was pointless. “I’m sorry, ma’am, the stereo is only 15% off. I cannot reduce it any more than that.”

It was just then that he was sure she was going to snort fire, flap her leathery wings, and release a battle cry in the form of The M-Word just before unhinging her jaw and swallowing him whole. But
she didn’t. Throwing her hands up, she said, “Ridiculous. SaveRite across the road would’ve done it. I should’ve gone there! Just forget it. I’m not paying twenty dollars for a stereo. Absolutely ridiculous.”

Stepping out of the way, Cliff motioned that she was free to go by. “I’m sorry to have disappointed you, ma’am. Hopefully we can be of better help nex—”

“You can help me right now by checking out my groceries,” she barked.

Swallowing back the bitter rage in his throat, Cliff simply nodded politely, led Dragon Lady to the register, and spent the next seventeen minutes ringing up her items, three of which she demanded he call other departments about because they weren’t ringing up right, one differing by just seventy cents. Cliff passed the entire time making a mental list of horrible things he’d like to see done to that reptilian beast.

Finally, upon sending her off, Cliff issued his obligatory wish of a good day, to which Dragon Lady responded with a promise that every day after this would be good for lack of returning to this store. As a final goodbye, her Pomeranian, which had been let down to wander on the end of its sparkling pink leash, piddled on the linoleum just inside his department before she sauntered off with it in tow.

Now, in the SaveRite bathroom, Cliff realized that during his quiet rumination the restroom around him had cleared out. Deciding to leave the clog for some poor sap, he snatched up his groceries and hurried out of the facilities.

Two minutes later Cliff stepped out of SaveRite, his breath becoming fog in the chilly December air. It was only mid-evening but still quite dark, save for the Christmas lights all around, both on the building he had just exited and his place of employment across the highway. He made his way to the other side of the parking lot where his beat-up old car sat, fiddling with his keys to find the right one as he walked.

Reaching his vehicle, he jammed the key into the trunk lock, gave it a quick turn, and then smiled as it popped open. There was Dragon Lady, wrists, ankles, and mouth tightly bound with duct tape. Squinting up at him, she began to wriggle and issue muffled screams from beneath her gag.

“Now, now. No sense in fretting yet. That’s just ridiculous,” Cliff said. “I bought a few things for you and me to have fun with tonight.” He opened the bag for her to see inside. “And you know the best part? They let me double up coupons on the Tabasco sauce! Isn’t that neat?” He then offered her his big customer service smile and slammed the trunk shut.

Cliff was already pulling onto the highway and whistling Jingle Bells before the first startled cry came from the SaveRite restroom, where a man stepped into the handicap stall to discover an overflowing toilet with a waterlogged Pomeranian stuffed down inside.
George sat in front of the full-length mirror and watched himself pet the sleeping fox. It was a guilty pleasure of his: putting on the tweed coat, the one with the leather patches on the elbows, and sitting in front of the mirror while he petted the fox. He thought it made him look distinguished.

Maxine would never have let me do something like this, he thought. She would say that I was being self-indulgent. Then, as an afterthought, he realized it was true. George felt a pang at the thought of Maxine. Now that she was gone, he could indulge his guilty pleasures, but it was hardly any relief from the pain of losing her.

It happened not long ago.

She was out riding her horse and fell. When George was asked to identify the body, the damage to Maxine’s face and head was almost more than he could bear. Only a small tuft of dark, curly hair was left on her head—George had touched it tenderly as he stood in the morgue. He remembered thinking that he would never get to see her gray fully set in as it was starting to on the day that she died. His hair was almost entirely gray now, but he didn’t mind. He was old, but not elderly, and in his many years he had only lost a few people close to him.

The loss of Maxine was the worst.

She had loved the horse, but George took it around to the back of the barn and shot it the day after she died. He thought about keeping its body, as he was sure Maxine would have wanted, but instead he burned it. First he clipped hair from the horse’s mane and tail, and removed some of its teeth. Then, he watched the body slowly reduce to ash. He didn’t have the right facility for burning a horse, and it took most of the day. George cried the entire time. After he was done, he took some ash from the pile, said goodbye to his wife, and walked away from the smoldering stack.

That night, the goat that lived in the barn bleated throughout the entire night. Its cries eased George’s pain. He found solace in knowing that he wasn’t the only one on the farm who was lonely.

It was the goat’s moans that finally put him to sleep.
The doorbell rang and George snapped into consciousness. He was expecting the man, but not for another hour. He looked at the clock, surprised to see that his visitor was on time. George had been stuck, as he often was, thinking about Maxine for nearly three hours. His cheeks flushed and he felt embarrassed by the coma-like state he had just emerged from.

George picked up the fox and set it heavily on the bedroom dresser where it belonged. Some fur near the tip of the fox’s ears was starting to thin; George made a mental note of it.

The bell rang again.

“I’m coming,” he said, although there was no way the person at the door could have heard him. He took the steps downstairs slowly, his knees aching.

“This it?” George asked.

“Sure is. It’s a pretty big project. You sure you can handle it?”

“Oh, sure,” George said. “I’ve done plenty of these. Gonna be a while before you get it back though. I’ve got a lot on my plate and if it’s as big as you say…” George trailed off.

“Not a problem. I’m not in any real hurry. Just call me as soon as it’s done.”

“Will do,” said George as the man turned to leave. “I require half before starting though. Sorry, it’s just my policy.”

“It’s okay,” said the man. “I think I remember you telling me that on the phone anyway.” He wrote a check for five hundred dollars and handed it over.

George took the check and quickly put it in his front pocket. He would go to the bank later today—probably even before starting.

“Well, if that’s everything?”

“One more thing actually,” said the man, opening the top of the bag. “I just wanna be sure because I shot this guy pretty close to the neck and I want his face comin’ out right. See here?” The man pointed to the mass of fur inside the sack and rustled around with it like he was looking for something at the bottom of a grocery bag. He grabbed the cougar’s neck and pulled its face out to show where the shot had killed it. It was close to the face, but it wasn’t anything George would have a problem with.

“Oh, that’s fine,” said George.

“Okay then, call me in…?”

“Two weeks probably. Or sooner. Two weeks should be plenty of time.”

The man was happy with the timeframe—George knew because he reached out to shake his hand. When they shook George felt the oil from the cougar’s fur transfer to his palm.

“Have a good one,” said George, walking out the front door. He grabbed the sack, worked it into a wheelbarrow, and made his way to the garage where he worked. He waved at the man as the truck pulled out of his gravel driveway.

Inside the shop, George lifted the sack onto his largest workbench and worked to move the cat out of the bag. By the end, George was sweating. The animal was only a little over a hundred pounds, smaller than most adult mountain lions, hardly the “big kill” the man said it was. Even so, it was laborious work and George’s heart was pounding by the time the animal was out on the table.

I should get it skinned and tanned as fast as possible, he thought, but not right now. He ran his hands over the animal’s body, marveling at how powerful it was, even in death. He inspected the coat, the large pads on its feet, and finally, the head.

The cat’s eyes were beautiful.

It always pained George to remove the eyes and replace them with glass orbs, though it had to be done to preserve the animal’s expression. “If the face isn’t lifelike then it doesn’t matter how
well the rest of the work is done,” he once told Maxine. She agreed and often praised him on the work he had done on the sleeping fox they kept on their bedroom dresser.

George looked at the clock. Still plenty of time to make it to the bank, he thought.

He didn’t want to get overexcited, but his pulse quickened as the inspection moved closer to the cougar’s mouth. As he lifted the cat’s lips carefully over the teeth, his heart leapt.

The teeth were perfect. White gleaming cones, free from any imperfections, glistened inside the cougar’s mouth.

George almost cried.

He worked quickly to remove the two largest teeth, pulling them from the cougar’s powerful jaws. George would replace them with the clay and glass that was customary in a lot of taxidermy jobs. The man would be none the wiser.

They’ll look just as real as the original teeth, he thought.

After removing them George felt a wave of relief even though his hands had started to shake. He sat down on the bench to calm down.

After a while he decided to go to the bank. He needed the money anyway, and now that he had the teeth he was as good as done.

It was the happiest George had felt in a long time. With each new job, the promise of finding the right teeth was a possibility, but more often than not he was disappointed. Today, however, was different, and George took this to be a sign.

I’m so close, he thought.

“Hiya George, how’s everything?” asked the teller at the bank.

“Real good Frank. Rita doin’ better?”

“Oh yes. Had the grandkids up last weekend—that always lifts her spirits. So what d’ya got for me? Makin’ a deposit?”

“Yes. Got a job, so…”

“Well let’s have it then,” Frank said.

George handed over the check. With his hand at his side, he tapped his pocket and fingered the teeth from the outside of his pants.

When he returned home, George was starting to feel anxious. It would be dark soon, and he could start working.

He went back to the workshop and cleared away the things he didn’t need. He dumped the cougar into his large freezer and worked on the mold for the cat’s skin, but it was a half-hearted effort.

A few minutes after five the sun was down, but George still hadn’t begun. He waited another half hour for the darkness to settle in, and by this time his heart was pounding. He sat down on the bench for the second time that day to calm down.

Finally, George opened the closet door and pulled out the gurney. The cold air rushed into the workshop, but George hardly cared. He loved that closet. Maxine had it built for him at the height of his business.
“You can’t just keep throwing animals one on top of the other in your old freezer,” she had said. “You need something more professional. You need some modern technology.”

George had disagreed. “I got a system and it works. Besides, those are expensive.”

He never knew how she had managed it, but while he was away at a taxidermy conference—another one of Maxine’s ideas—the freezer-closet had been installed.

“I love that closet, you know,” he said to the form on the gurney. Then he leaned down and kissed Maxine’s cold face.

“Now we begin,” he said with a smile.

He ran his fingers through her coarse hair. “You won’t love this, but it was the best I could do. After your fall, I had to reconstruct your head and face. You didn’t have much hair, so I used the horse’s.” He felt proud of his work as he fingered the strands. Although the hair felt different, he had the color right. He knew she would approve.

He pulled the teeth out of his pocket and opened Maxine’s mouth. It was stiff from the cold, but he had done an excellent job in the preservation. A mouthful of teeth, save for only a few in the front row, were visible.

He held the cougar’s cone-like teeth up to Maxine’s mouth and was happy that their color matched the others perfectly. “That old horse of yours had terrible teeth, and after your fall, you didn’t have many of your own. Now you’ll have your smile back.”

George walked over to the bench and broke the teeth in half. He looked at the framed picture of Maxine on the small mantel, but hardly needed the reference. He knew her smile better than anyone in the world.

He glanced at the suitcases near the door and took a mental inventory of everything he had packed. After tonight, we won’t be able to stay here, he thought, but with the money I’ve saved there will be enough to live on for a while. Then I’ll just get some more jobs.

George continued molding Maxine’s new teeth from the cougar’s canines. It took him longer than he had expected, but when he was finally done, her smile was as perfect as it had been on the day she died.

George thought about the teeth for a moment. He could have made glass ones, but Maxine needed to be able to chew, didn’t she? At least he thought so. He couldn’t really be sure until after. He was confident, though, that he needed real organic material, and he wasn’t going to risk it, even if he could have brought her back much earlier.

With the teeth in place George felt ecstatic. He touched Maxine’s arm and told his wife softly that he loved her.

He took the horse’s ashes that he kept in a small tin on the bench and sprinkled them on top of a caramelized liquid that was heating on a stove in the room. He turned off the burner, let it cool, and then slowly drew the syrup into a large syringe.

It was the middle of the night now.

“We can spend the rest of the night talking,” he said to his wife’s body, now fully clothed and made up. “You have a lot to catch up on.”

George found a cold vein and pushed the amber-colored liquid into her body. He dropped the syringe on the floor and stood back from the gurney, holding his breath for what seemed like forever. Three long minutes passed.

An eyelid fluttered.
Ooligan Press and the Publishing Program at PSU

Ooligan Press is a general trade press founded at Portland State University. In addition to publishing books that honor the cultural and natural diversity of the Pacific Northwest, it is dedicated to teaching the art and craft of publishing.

As a teaching press, Ooligan makes as little distinction as possible between the press and the classroom. Ooligan Press is staffed by students in an apprenticeship program under the guidance of a core faculty. Acquiring, producing, and publishing profitable books in real markets become projects where students combine theoretical knowledge and practical experiences.

Publishing courses are open to both graduate and undergraduate students. The core curriculum leads to a Master’s in writing with a concentration in publishing, through the English Department’s Center for Excellence in Writing. Various levels of participation and responsibility in the press are available to degree candidates and other students.

The press is open to book proposals from inside and outside the university. Special editorial interests include

• writing and the teaching of writing, editing, publishing, and book arts
• new or rediscovered works with a social or literary impact and a Pacific Northwest connection, especially those giving voice to the frequently unheard
• works for young adults and middle-grade readers
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