

# RADONJOURNAL

**ISSUE 13**

# CONTENT WARNINGS

- “Lucky Child #8” *Child death, suicide*
- “Barbie Grasshopper Dreamhouse” *Live insect eating, miscarriage*
- “Happy Snacks” *Disordered eating, graphic body horror*
- “Single Parenting in the House of Refined Appetites” *Body horror, child endangerment, suicide*
- “Gamorelin” *Animal violence, body dysmorphia, body horror, drug abuse, explicit sexual content, gender dysphoria, homophobia, misogyny, self-harm, transphobia*
- “The Experiential Void” *Psychological trauma*
- “I Am Not Your Ex-Wife” *Violence against women*

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# RADON JOURNAL



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## MASTHEAD & SUPPORTERS



# LUCKY CHILD #8

*by Colin Alexander*

Their kid keeps dying, and I keep bringing him back.

With so many corpses coming and going, you'd expect these parents to live in a dark Victorian with oil paintings of long-dead relatives, but the house is modern, poured concrete imprinted with wood molds, and every room has high ceilings filled with natural light.

Which is why the bars on the windows stick out.

I tend to show up after a car crash or a fire. Sometimes an unattended bathtub. The parents are sad, but not *that* sad, because they're gonna get everything back.

Still, I dress in dark, muted colors. I'm polite. Not too much eye contact, not too much conversation. I pretend like I know how all the buttons and dials on the machinery work because they feel like they're paying for a doctor or something, but really the wand does the work.

This family doesn't even bother with insurance. They pay out of pocket every time, and by the looks of their place, no one's skipping any meals to afford it.

They've paid in direct transfer credits six times. This will be the seventh.

The dad always wears the same thing. Black turtleneck and expensive jeans that look like a second skin. I wonder if this guy has a walk-in closet with three hundred sixty-five pairs of jeans and turtlenecks and just incinerates 'em after every wear.

He's got close-cropped hair with a little more salt than pepper and wireframe glasses that look like the stuff they make spaceships out of. He smiles at me with the side of his mouth, like the whole thing would be too much to offer, then returns to his tablet.

The mom is blonde, skin like a salamander, wearing magenta lipstick I couldn't pull off. She smiles with her eyes, but her forehead never enters the picture.

"Thanks for coming . . ." she says, her eyes scanning for a nametag that doesn't exist.

Folks actively forget my name. My presence feels like evidence they screwed up. I bring the spare body, vacuum-packed in amino acids like a giant chicken

thigh, and they want me out of their lives the moment the chicken thigh comes out of the bag.

But we've met before. *Six times.*

"Of course, Mrs. Sandberg. Here to help."

*Here to help* took some workshopping. "Sorry for your loss" isn't technically applicable 'cause these folks didn't really lose anything. "Happy to be here" or "Happy to help" or any phrase using the word "happy" after a kid eats it raises hackles. Busting down the door and asking "Where's the body?" or "Where's the hard drive room?" is a good way to get someone to actually fill out the customer service form. Brusque doesn't get you five stars in the service business, baby.

I don't have to ask where the hard drive room is. It's directly next to Alex's room, and even with the racks of data storage along the walls, there's plenty of space in the center for me to wheel in my mobile morgue and assorted zappers.

I pause nonetheless, allowing Mrs. Sandberg to lead the way.

The steel cart is about chest height for me, just above the waist on Mrs. Sandberg. Thankfully it works like a mechanized pallet mover at a big box store, helping me move several hundred pounds of machinery from job to job with ease. And, of course, there are the bodies. You can cram three bodies in on their sides, toes to nose, and we've got a full house today. Alex's clone for reanimation, Julie's old, aged-out clone set for disposal, and Fredrick, already reanimated, so now his remains are on ice set for disposal.

\* \* \*

Years ago, after the first reanimation, Alex corrected me when I called him Alexander.

"Alex," he'd said, arms crossed over his skinny torso, still covered with goo. Goo's not a technical term; it's just what I call it.

I'd covered old Alex with a sheet. Kids are sometimes freaked out seeing themselves stiff and gray, bent or burnt. I also put a sheet over backup Alex. It's awkward waking up naked in front of some stranger, and we only dress 'em once they've showered off the goo.

That first time, Alex didn't say much. Kids wake up scared, angry. I do my best, easing frantic kids into being alive again, but my two front teeth are off-white ceramic 'cause a bruiser of a fifteen-year-old headbutted me when I tried giving him a tissue.

That first time, Alex was ninety percent eyes, ten percent words. His eyes were jarring, blue irises with gold halos. They followed me like a set of headlights on a mountain road. I took the silence as fear, so I tried setting him at ease.

"Like to draw?" I asked.

He was six or seven, and in my experience, that was a base hit every time for kids that age.

“Yeah,” he said, following my hands as I retrieved the electrodes from his head and heart.

“What do you like to draw?” I asked, tossing the electrodes into a jar filled with green cleaning solution.

Alex paused, and I saw his hand fiddling with the slightly curly hair at the back of his head.

“Horses,” he said.

“Love horses,” I said. “There’s a farm not far from where I live. Watch ‘em graze some weekends.”

I thought Alex’s eyes were bright before; they were halogen now.

“It’s hard,” he said, “getting the back legs right.”

I watched him follow my hands as I returned the wand to its creche for charging.

“Hooves are a lot easier to draw than hands, though.”

\* \* \*

The training for this job consisted of a series of videos, including a fifteen-minute animation where the wand (“Wandy”) describes how to use her.

“I hate getting wet!” cries Wandy, though the tech placing her in a tub of water is the one whose animated bones light up like a Christmas tree.

After attaching the uplink electrodes to the head and the heart (another fifteen-minute video), Wandy does the whole reanimation thing. Honestly, if you’ve ever slow-cooked a roast, you could handle the setup.

\* \* \*

The second time I saw Alex’s name on my list, I took my break early, stopping at the dollar store on the way.

“Hey, Sarah,” he said after sitting up. Hearing my name come out of a backup’s mouth made my toes clench inside my flats.

I’d forgotten Alex had asked my name the first time, which tells you how old I’m getting, ‘cause that was unique. Out of all the kids I’d brought back, Alex was the only one who’d bothered.

I recovered quickly, flashing Alex my gray-white teeth, peeling off the electrodes, and dropping them into the green cleaning solution.

“Hey, Alex,” I said, remembering his correction from the first time.

“What’d you get me?” Alex asked, which again stopped me in my tracks. Nothing about this process feels natural no matter how long I do it, but it felt like this kid was reading my mind.

“What do you mean?” I asked, feeling the lump in my jeans pocket from the dollar store.

“I mean, it’s technically my birthday,” he said, chuckling to himself.

I shook my head, busying myself with laying out Alex’s towels, returning Wandy to her creche. I felt silly. The kid wasn’t seeing my thoughts; he was setting up a *joke*. I considered forgetting about my dollar store purchase, not wanting to make things awkward. But then I saw Alex—he was probably nine then—awkward skin and bones, hugging his own shoulders like some newborn foal, and I reached into my pocket.

Alex’s eyes darted towards the sound of crinkling plastic, and I opened my hand to reveal a pink horse-shaped eraser.

“It’s not really my birthday,” said Alex. “It’s in May.”

“I know,” I said. “It’s in your workup.”

Alex held the eraser in both hands like it was a bird.

“Thank you,” he said.

“Any time,” I said, immediately regretting the implication I’d come back.

When he was fully dressed, he tucked the pink pony into his sock, carefully adjusting the cuff of his jeans to cover the lump.

\* \* \*

Since the tech guides itself, the real job requirements are an ability to keep a poker face while rich folks treat you like machinery, and the ability to lift up to seventy-five pounds of dead weight. I wish they mechanized that part of the job, but apparently someone did the math and decided a hydraulics bot was more expensive than a bottle of ibuprofen for my back.

One might ask, if all we’re doing is uploading what’s been stored on the servers to the new body, why we’d have to hang onto the old body as well as the new.

The answer is liability. We’re supposed to be in the business of reanimating kids who died of “misadventure,” not, you know, murder and abuse. So we’re taught how to scan the old body (different wand. I call that one “Wandal”), and stick a probe into the liver (I have not anthropomorphized this one) to check for unexplained bruises, toxins, etc. If anything is out of the ordinary, we preserve the old body for ninety days per our contract with the city, and the police are notified. I do not immediately reanimate the child, for obvious reasons.

I've never had a case bounce to the police. That's not to say murder of backed-up kids is unheard of. Often, it's someone who doesn't know the kid's got a backup, and there's an eyewitness in storage. Other times, it's a "crime of passion" where some asshole loses their temper. I even heard about a mom who was poisoning her kid for attention and got the dosage wrong.

But it's rare.

The third time I brought Alex back, he didn't joke about birthday presents. I think he was afraid he'd have to figure out a way to smuggle more contraband into his room. I zapped the fresh backup, and Alex sat up to receive the cup of water waiting in my hands. Then I asked about his inner ear.

The manifest said "fall." I observed bruises on the body, and Wandal confirmed they were consistent with falling. But this wasn't his first fall, so I couldn't help wondering.

"Get dizzy often?" I asked.

Clutching the plastic cup, Alex shook his head.

"Lose your balance?"

Alex took a sip from the cup, leaving a pink half-moon of goo. Head shake.

"Cause if you've got balance issues, I can get another tech to look at your backup's inner ear. Easy fix."

Again Alex shook his head, then pointed his cup towards the Randcorp-branded cart.

"Who's in the box today?" he asked.

"Another backup, and a, uh, original. Both boys, like you."

"Only backup the boys?" asked Alex.

"Nah," I said. "They back up all sorts."

Alex nodded. "Tell me again about the wand."

"Wandy," I smiled.

"Wandy," repeated Alex.

We went over the process, again. With all my practice describing it to this kid, I could've run the Randcorp training, no notes. Alex finished the water, wiped off the goo, and walked out of the room for a third time.

Is it only *déjà vu* the first time you get the feeling? Do they have another term when it happens a second or third time, or is it still *déjà vu*?

The fourth time bringing Alex back, I couldn't help but question how good Wandal was at assessing foul play.

I stuck the probe into the liver, and once again got the green light. Either Wandal was asleep at the wheel, or Alex was the most accident-prone child under the sun.

Electrodes. Welding glasses. Wandy. Zip-zap. Alex sat up.

This time, I wasn't off guard.

“Hey, Alex,” I said.

“Hey, Sarah,” said Alex.

And before we fell into our regular routine, Alex feigning interest in the process of animating backups, I asked my own questions.

“Is it true backups remember everything?” I asked.

Alex paused, considering.

“I mean, would I know if I didn’t?”

“Good point,” I said.

“Do you remember, uh . . .” I glanced at the manifest. Stairs. He fell down the stairs. “. . . falling down stairs?”

Alex nodded.

Asking questions wasn’t protocol. Probably traumatic. But I needed to know.

“Yeah,” said Alex. “I bounced twice, then was stuck on the landing until a maid found me.”

I grimaced and had the sense not to ask the obvious follow up: *So if you remember falling, and you’ve died falling down the stairs before, why the hell can’t you remember to hold the handrail?*

After my questions, Alex still asked about the electrodes. Wandy. The bodies in the cart.

“All boys again,” I said absentmindedly.

I waited until Alex left the room to put his old body into the Randcorp cart. I really didn’t want to return. I liked Alex too much.

The fifth time bringing Alex back, I swear I would have felt fifty pounds lighter if, upon glancing back at the manifest, it’d said “trampoline” or “pool.”

Still stairs.

Goddamn it, Alex. There are two fucking bannisters. Two. Something about “stairs” made my whole body cold, like I was complicit in something, as I grabbed the probe to test the liver.

Wandal blinked green. Alex was bruised along the shins, torso, and arms, and his head pointed in an uncomfortable angle.

Yeah, okay, looked like stairs, which was such a fucking lazy way of describing what’d happened. Like, it didn’t even say if he’d fallen up the stairs or down the stairs or if he was facing forward or backward or if someone had forgotten to pick up a little red toy car. If there was more information, maybe we could prevent the next one, you know?

Electrodes went on the head and heart. Wandy called down the fire of the gods.

Distracted, I’d forgotten my goggles. Blind and blinking, lightening rod in hand, I heard Alex’s voice in the white-darkness.

“Hey, Sarah.”

“Can you please learn to hold a handrail? I can’t keep seeing you this way, twisted and broken.” I stopped myself before saying the rest. That every time I’ve brought him back, I feel like I’ve lost a part of myself buried inside this cold-ass house to wither and die.

Blinking, the shape of the room returned, and I found my way to the cup of water. Alex took a sip before answering.

“I’ll be more careful,” he said. I swear if he’d said “next time” I would have zapped myself with Wandy just to feel something else.

The sixth time was a blur. The manifest said “electrocution,” and seeing the state of Alex’s corpse made me long for “stairs.” I set the probe, I got the green light from Wandal, I brought him back, I gave him water.

I answered his questions.

“So you set the electrodes, then Wandy zaps the body back to life?”

I nod, dropping the electrodes into the green fluid.

“Your job sounds pretty easy. No offense.”

“None taken,” I say. And until Alex, it has been. He could have said it like a smarmy rich kid, ducking his chin and raising his eyebrows, using “no offense” to intone meanness within the bounds of politeness. But he’s just talking about the thing we commune over every time.

“Bath or shower?” I ask.

“Bath,” he says, and I’m mildly surprised, because he usually chooses shower. I nod, heading next door to the bathroom. The tub’s big and luxurious, feet like claws of a headless animal. Despite trying to think of anything else, I’m thinking about the charred skin on Alex’s forearms. A metallic clatter brings me out of my fugue. I turn off the water, quickly testing temperature with two fingers, then head back to check on Alex. Nothing’s amiss. Alex is sitting up straight, eyes towards an empty corner of the ceiling; if I were to draw a line opposite his gaze, I’d find my purse, but I don’t bother going through it. It’s just keys to a company car and bargain drugstore makeup I never get up early enough to use.

Days later, I rummage through my purse, unable to find the cheap cellulose hair clips which accumulate at the bottom of my bags like alluvial silt.

\* \* \*

When I get the call to reanimate Alex the seventh time, I’ve already made my decision. My resignation is in my “draft” email, ready to send. Randcorp has great benefits, and Alex is right—bringing dead kids back to life is “easy,” but I’m not doing something good anymore, giving families second chances. I’m bringing back Alex, and I know in the pit of my being he doesn’t want my help.

The seventh time, looking at the new body and the old, I'm struck by the hair. The backup body, even covered in goo, has long, flowing hair, almost shoulder length. It's the length I'd seen Alex's hair the last time I'd zapped him back into existence. The dead body's hair has been cut so short you can see the scalp, like the first day of boot camp.

The manifest says the cause of death was "stairs," and though I mutter "damn it, Alex," under my breath, I'm not angry. I'm glad it wasn't something worse. I couldn't stand seeing Alex burned again, and if he were blue and bloated, I don't know if I could stay in the room long enough to finish this final job.

I note the clothes Mrs. Sandberg has placed in the corner: a pair of blue jeans and a black turtleneck, much like Mr. Sandberg's uniform, ironed and folded. Often, folks getting their kids reanimated for the first time forget the new set of clothes. But again, Mrs. Sandberg is well on her way to filling a field of dreams with dead Alex clones, so she knows the routine.

I put one electrode on Alex's head, the other on his heart. I put on my welding goggles then pick up Wandy, slowly waving her over Alex.

He sits up slowly, shaking his head like waking from a bad dream. He smiles a little when his wet hair brushes across his neck, and he runs both hands through the thick tangle of light brown curls.

"Hey, Sarah," he says, draping the white sheet across his body like a toga, wringing the pink goo out of his hair.

"Hey, Alex," I say, handing him the cup of water.

He leaves pink, goopy half-moons on the lip of the white cup.

"One on the head, one on the heart," he says, plucking off the electrode on his forehead. "And it doesn't matter which goes where."

A statement, not a question; at this point, Alex could teach the reanimation course.

"Exactly," I say, half listening, enjoying the scratchy, high-pitched sound of Alex's voice, committing it to memory.

"Then you just wave Wandy over the body, and she guides you where to zap." He motions towards Wandy with the electrode he's plucked off his chest.

"Yup." So familiar with the process, he uses Wandy's Christian name.

He wipes his feet with the sheet before stepping down, padding towards his old body on the cool hardwood floor, gently removing the sheet from the bottom half. He lifts up the corduroy pant leg, digging into the sock, removing a golden tube with red grooves in it. It resembles a little art-deco tower.

He covers his old body with the sheet, then hops back onto his table, spindly legs dangling.

I hand him a fluffy towel.

"Too good for pockets?" I ask, trying to be nonchalant, remembering the pink eraser.

"I'd keep my stuff in drawers, but things go missing in this place," he says, gesturing towards the house as whole, not meeting my eyes. I don't press.

"You clean arms, I'll clean legs," I say. He nods, wiping goo off his forearms. He's gonna need hot water, but it's a lot easier to get the first layer of goo off before bathing.

"They don't feel like my arms," he says, "or my legs."

I raise a thick eyebrow. "You've been in this body for a whopping minute and a half. You know the routine. Give it time."

Wordlessly, he starts wiping off the goo. The towels go straight into the trash; no amount of washing gets this gunk out.

"Who's in the cart today?" he asks.

I tick them off on my hand, starting with my thumb. "You, a kid named Fred who threw up on me after waking, and thirteen-year-old Julie's aged-out backup."

Alex's eyes go halogen. I cock my head, and he avoids my stare.

"What happened to Fred?" asks Alex, handing me a goopified towel. His speech has slowed, but it's out of sync with his breathing, which is fast.

"Slipped, smacked his head," I say.

"Been there," says Alex. He slides off the fold-out table, liquid and catlike. Before I can stop him, he's opening the lower-hatch of the cart.

"No, you don't want . . ."

It's too late. He's already opened the hatch with the bodies. If Mrs. Sandberg walks in now, Fred's not the only one who's toast. Why am I nervous about a job I'm quitting?

But Alex isn't looking at Fred, he's looking at Julie. He puts his hand gently on the side of her face, removing it when I clear my throat.

"Do bodies go bad?" he asks, pulling the sheet tight around himself.

"Nah," I say. "They just age out. How would you feel if I downloaded your brain into your four-year-old body?"

Alex nods.

"You could do that?" he asks.

"Well, legally, no," I say. "You can't just throw any brain into any body."

"But it's possible?" he asks. "Even though the brains are different sizes?"

"Well, it's not your whole brain. It's your consciousness. Just, like, downloading your frontal lobe."

"So, you could put my, uh, consciousness into Fred?" he asks.

"No," I say, "cause Fred's dead."

"Okay," he says, his index finger and thumb curling the tips of his hair. "So, could you put me into Julie?" He says it like he's reading from the phone book,

but I can see his bare chest, rising and falling, a caged bird flapping wings against tin bars.

“Yeah,” I say. “Again, it’s just your consciousness, and cloned brains are built specifically to house reanimates.”

“Cool,” he says, like he’s lost interest with the conversation, like he’s moved on to thinking about lunch.

All we have to do is wash off the remaining goo, get Alex dressed, and I’ll be on my way.

“You have kids?” asks Alex.

“No,” I say. While I’ve been in perpetual motion since arriving, attaching electrodes, getting towels, and checking the manifest, this question makes me stiffen. Again Alex notices, because his wide, haloed irises are lassoes, capturing everything.

“It’s just . . . you seem like you’d be a good mom.”

I’m twenty years past kids being a possibility, even if I won the lottery. I turn away and brush at my face with the last clean towel.

“Shower this time, or a bath?” I ask.

“Bath,” says Alex.

“I’ll add bubbles,” I say.

“Thanks, Sarah.”

“Here to help.”

I want to peel off my uniform and soak for hours in this ridiculously large tub. I want to get the smell of Fred out my nostrils and get Alex’s questions out of my head.

Yeah, Alex, I’d make a great mom. My apartment walls are practically made of books, I live next to a park, and I make mac and cheese from scratch. But kids are for the rich and the lucky, which are really the same thing. That tightness in my chest is supposed to be dead, no matter how many times you wave Wendy over my heart.

That’s when I hear the pop, like an old-fashioned flashbulb filament combusting. In that moment, I know I’m an idiot and this fuckup of mine is gonna make its way into one of those fifteen-minute training videos.

I turn off the spigot and run back to Alex’s room, just in time to see Alex clutching Wendy, still blinking from the bright light. Meanwhile, Julie’s body is sitting up and peeling the electrodes off her head and her heart, like she’s done this a thousand times.

“What,” I ask, “have you done?”

Alex and Julie smile in tandem, and it’s the same smile, right cheek pulling a little tighter, shoulders coming up towards the ears. I stare at Julie, who is

scheduled for incineration tonight, and she runs both hands through her waist-length hair, then begins wringing the goo out.

Alex pulls out the little gold cylinder, trying to hand it to Julie, but she pushes it away. Alex insists.

“It won’t be contraband,” he says. “You’ll want a piece of home.”

“Thanks,” says Julie. While the voice is a thirteen-year-old girl, the tight vocal cords of a soprano, the inflection is terribly familiar, an echo in the room.

“We’re in so much trouble,” I interrupt, unsure who to address. Loading consciousness into multiple bodies? That’s not a fine, or even jail time. They destroy the clone.

Julie and Alex stare at me for what feels like a long time, because I’m certain Mrs. Sandberg will walk in at any moment.

Alex speaks.

“I can’t live the way I want here, and I can’t leave. I’ve tried. They just keep bringing me back.”

“But I can,” says Julie. “I can grow my hair as long as I like, wear any shade of lipstick.”

“Apply your lipstick now, because this ends the moment your mom walks through the door,” I say. “I lose my job, and Alexander number eight gets incinerated.”

“Alex,” they say in unison.

Again, they stare at me, and I can’t think of any options. I should be furious, but now the initial shock’s worn off. I’m surprisingly calm. I turn around, fill up a cup, and hand it to Julie-bodied Alex.

“You’ve had eight lives to think this through,” I say to Alex. “What did you see happening next?”

\* \* \*

Things go quickly with three sets of hands. Julie and Alex clean the goo off themselves, and Alex shows me where he’s hidden a second set of clothes.

“Everything all right in here?” asks Mrs. Sandberg. By the time she ducks in to ask, everything appears in order. Alex is dressed just like his father, and I’ve stashed the two fold-out tables. The towels are in the trash. The tub has been washed out.

“Just finishing up,” I say.

“Hey, Mom,” says Alex.

“Hello, Alexander,” says Mrs. Sandberg.

When she leaves, I ask Alex my question, which I’ve turned over in my head since the fraternal twins sprang into action.

“Why?” I ask.

“I told you,” says Alex. “She gets to live her life.”

“But you’re still here. Stuck.”

“They can keep me here, but they can’t keep me a child forever. When I’m grown, I’ll be whatever version of myself I want. But I can’t put everything on hold for someday. Right now, I can smuggle a piece of me, the real me, out. I’m gonna visit someday, see how she’s grown. I think she’s gonna be beautiful.”

When I wheel my Randcorp cart back through the concrete house filled with too much light, it weighs the same. I’ve got the same number of bodies, but somehow, I feel lighter. I wonder if this is what Alex feels as he watches us exit onto the street through the bars.

“Thank you . . .” says Mrs. Sandberg.

“Here to help,” I say, wheeling out the daughter she’ll never meet, not for lack of trying.

\* \* \*

Miles from home now, Julie-bodied Alex slips to the front seat. It’s sunset, and the lights of the city have flickered on. But instead of looking out the window, she clicks on the dome light, transforming the passenger window into a mirrored surface. She pulls out the gold cylinder and twists it, revealing a bright magenta tip, and in the half-mirror of the city, applies the brilliant shade to pursed lips.

Then she rolls the window down, her long, loose strands of hair flying in every direction, carried by the evening wind.

“I’ve got clips in my bag,” I say, motioning to my purse with my elbow.

“I know,” she says, but she doesn’t move. She runs her hands through her hair, momentarily smoothing it before the wind plucks it up again, a tornado tethered to the passenger seat.

“I like the way it feels.”

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Colin Alexander** lives in San Francisco with his wife and daughter. His work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy, and Brave New Weird. His writing has been featured in *Analog Magazine*, *Radon Journal*, *The Molotov Cocktail*, and *Rock and a Hard Place*. He's purchased a website, [ColinCampbellAlexander.com](http://ColinCampbellAlexander.com), and will surely build it someday, but not today. He can be found on Bluesky @colincaalexander and has an eco-horror novella, *Suicide Valley Trail Maintenance*, out with *Stanchion* in July 2026.

# RECORDING ECHOES ON THE BRINK

*by M. W. Irving*

For pressing panic into orderly boxes, there is no substitute  
 For the human voice, for the genuine article.  
 Synthetic instructions are 82% as effective,  
 9% more likely to be ignored

So chaos can cast shadow puppets across our faces.

This must not be permitted to pass, so I am called in  
 To record the warnings, guidance, and messages of calm  
 To be played echoing along sidewalks and in lobbies,  
 My voice through mounted megaphone throats

My voice is algorithmically ideal for soothing,  
 For quelling, for quashing, to speak law to rule, it's  
 28% authoritarian mother, all finger wags and soiled room nagging  
 19% granny's tea from knobbed palms immune to scorching

For those who need comfort's wrappings.

15% newscaster flat, relaying horrors in bite-sized bits  
 13% polished politician's gleaming assault on the truth  
 11% fifth-grade teacher, holding hands through grammar and math  
 4% rockstar snarl, seasoned by cigarettes and fisted rage

For those who fight and foment.

The rest is unquantifiable. Grey matter elements.

The first days were about containment  
“Remain within your homes and await instruction.”  
The first weeks were about control  
“Those who follow instructions will not be harmed.”  
The first year was about the body  
“Food and water will be provided, await delivery.”  
The second year was about the soul  
“Cannibalism remains a crime.”

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**M.W. Irving** is a writer and teacher living on stolen land on Vancouver Island. His work has been nominated for a Webby Award, included in annual “Best Of” anthologies, won contests, and has been mentioned honorably often. He delights in the bizarre, the transgressive, the vulgar, and is loyal to no genre.

# BARBIE GRASSHOPPER DREAMHOUSE

by *H.V. Patterson*

The screaming outside intensifies. If eight-year-old Rose and six-year-old Belle fight for much longer, a surveillance drone might cite Margaret for child neglect.

As she hurries through her house toward the commotion, Margaret's calf catches on the hard edge of her daughters' Barbie Dreamhouse. In that breathless space between falling and finding balance, Margaret considers letting herself slam into the ground. Stomach first. But she catches herself and examines the flap of skin hanging from her throbbing calf. It's the kind of injury that bleeds dramatically. Fortunately, the floor is cheap laminate, not carpet. Her hands curl around the non-existent swell of her stomach.

*Please*, she thinks. She isn't even three months along. The fetus is just a clump of twitching cells curled into the shape of an indeterminate animal.

The Dreamhouse mocks Margaret with its three decadent stories and its sharp edges. She scowls at its bright, plastic rooms, pink on pink, swollen with plastic accessories. A single doll sprawls inside the house in hapless, immobile perfection.

The yelling escalates. It's a good thing their nearest neighbors are miles away. Margaret swallows her pain, as she has swallowed so many things, and steps, grimacing, into unrelenting sunlight.

"You have to share! It's the law!" Belle cries.

"I share EVERYTHING all the time!" Rose screams back, clutching a pink, plastic case protectively against her chest. "It's not fair! I want things that are just for me! I don't want to share EVERYTHING with a STINKY BABY like you!"

"Mom!" Rose yells. "I found the grasshopper! It's mine!"

"NOOO! I found it first!" Belle protests. "Rose just caught it because she's bigger!"

"Why are you fighting over a grasshopper like a pair of baby birds?" Margaret asks.

"It isn't a normal grasshopper, Mom," Rose says.

"It's a Barbie grasshopper!" Belle says.

"What do you mean?" Margaret asks. "Let me see."

Reluctantly, Rose surrenders the plastic case imprisoning the grasshopper. Margaret peers through the pink plastic. The grasshopper stares back with alien stupidity, revolting antennae twitching, mandibles writhing beneath bulging eyes. As far as Margaret can tell, it's identical to every other grasshopper devouring the remnants of her garden.

She wonders how much oxygen grasshoppers need. Will it suffocate in the case? Would that be cruel, considering how most grasshoppers die? Their mindless hunger subsumed by the cravings of bigger creatures? Would that tiny, insectoid mind understand that it was being eaten alive as it thrashed against a merciless beak or tongue?

Alex, the renowned entomologist, would know. Alex, who had once known Margaret as thoroughly as one person could know another.

"It's just a grasshopper," Margaret says.

"It's Barbie grasshopper!" Belle insists.

"It's pink, Mom," Rose explains.

Everything looks pink in the reflected glow of the saccharine plastic. Margaret opens the case, just a crack. She peers at the grasshopper, and it remains—

Pink.

This isn't the uniform, manufactured pink of the Dreamhouse. This is pink shot through with yellows and delicate oranges. Its pale eyes, gold highlighted with rose, stare unblinkingly back at her as it flutters half-formed wings.

Revulsion hits Margaret like a punch in the kidney. She snaps the case shut, nearly severing a leg with its petulant plastic jaws. The grasshopper's unnaturalness leaves her skin crawling.

"Go wash your hands," she tells the girls.

"But Mom, we didn't touch it!" Rose lies.

"Wash your filthy hands, NOW," she snaps.

They scamper inside. Margaret sets the loathsome thing in its pink prison on the porch railing. The girls are too naïve to understand all the things that can go wrong in a body. All the dangers lurking in the vast, cruel world.

She thinks again of Alex. She will know if there's any peril lurking in that grotesque, pink exoskeleton.

Overwhelmed by nausea, Margaret flees to the master bathroom and turns on the fan and shower to disguise the sound of retching. At this point in pregnancy, everything makes her vomit.

*Disgusting. Unnatural. Vile.* Margaret thinks as she rinses out her mouth, suppressing her panic. She remembers the genetic counselor's damning words almost ten years ago, after the second miscarriage—*recessive gene, nonviable*. Paul had held her hand. They'd cried together. Then, with the help of genetic testing, they'd had Rose and Belle, their precious, healthy girls.

Now, she carries the burden of a failed vasectomy. Less than a one percent risk of failure, the surgeon told Paul. But the odds were never in her favor.

She doesn't dare go to the clinic. They'll register her for monitoring and implant a tracker in her abdomen. Visions of an infanticide trial and Rose and Belle being snatched away by the Mothers of Liberty haunt her.

Margaret tends her bleeding calf and contorts her expression into pleasant neutrality before emerging from the bathroom. She wipes her blood from the hallway and begins making lunch for the girls. Boxed macaroni and cheese, again.

As they eat, Margaret stands apart from herself, amazed at the mindless, effortless grace of her movements. *Anything you practice long enough becomes instinct*, she thinks, *even caring for another person*.

The girls don't notice she isn't all there. They're too excited about the grasshopper. Margaret orders them to leave the grasshopper alone. They whine, but the afternoon heat enervates their protests. She shoves them in front of the television and bribes them into compliance with the harmless stupidity of princess cartoons and freezer-burned ice pops.

Once the girls are deep in a pink princess coma, faces and hands sticky with ice pops, Margaret retreats to her bedroom and locks the door. She creeps into the warm, smothering darkness of her closet. For a few seconds she just breathes, rubbing her face against a moth-eaten wool jacket, letting the itchy discomfort ground her.

She leans against the back of the closet. Outdoor heat radiates through the shoddily constructed wall, into her body. She imagines the house cracking around her, swinging apart on plastic hinges. She imagines looking up and up into a penetrating and disdainful gaze.

Margaret shakes off the strange thoughts and rummages beneath old maternity jeans, their elastic sagged into uselessness, until she finds the shoebox. She opens it reverently, stripping away layers of headbands and ponytail holders, relics from when she wore her hair long. At last, her trembling fingers grasp the battered tablet.

She boots it up and checks the security settings. All is well. It's almost six o'clock where Alex is. She's probably in her office, finishing up work for the day.

The video call goes through. She stares into Alex's beaming face framed by long, dark curls. Alex is so alive, so clearly herself. Margaret is suddenly conscious of her stained housedress. The familiar pang of grief for a life not lived wells in her throat.

She swallows it down, substituting useless grief with gratitude. Alex is safe, free from the clutches of a country which would have sent her to a work farm or an institution. Several of their friends vanished like that—spirited away in the night by masked men in unmarked vans.

As for herself, Margaret is safe for now. And if she's unhappy—the point of life isn't happiness, is it? The point has always been survival.

"Margaret, it's been weeks!" Alex says. "I was worried."

"I know," Margaret says. "I'm sorry. It's just . . ." she wipes her sweaty forehead, torn. How much should she tell Alex? How many of her pains will she lay at her friend's feet? But the words tumble out of her before she can stop them: "I'm pregnant."

Alex's eyebrows arch, disappearing under her bangs.

"Oh shit," she says. "And you don't know . . ."

"We don't," Margaret confirms. "They don't offer genetic testing anymore. And if we go to a clinic . . ." she doesn't need to finish the sentence. It doesn't matter what her chart or her OB-GYN or any of the facts state. If she miscarries or gives birth to a stillborn child, she'll be tried for infanticide. A crime which has a thirty-three percent conviction rate and an average sentence of seven years.

"Didn't Paul get a vasectomy?"

"Didn't work, I guess."

"How far along are you?"

"Almost three months."

"Shit." Alex leans back in her beautiful, leather chair.

Margaret avoids Alex's sympathetic eyes and gazes instead at the shelves piled high with academic journals, books, and frames bulging with mounted insects. She will never step through the door and see Alex's office in person. She will never again press herself into the sympathetic curve of Alex's neck. Not with the borders locked down. Not with two girls needing whatever scant protection she can offer.

"We'll figure something out," Margaret says.

It's what she and Paul have been telling each other, over and over, for the last seven years. First, optimistically. Then, resignedly. And, finally, with horror, as friends and family and colleagues transformed into people they no longer recognized.

"I didn't call about that," Margaret continues. "I mean—there's nothing you can do. I don't need your help." Once, Margaret had needed Alex. She'd been a parasite, pulling Alex down, taking more than she gave. Alex was better off without her. "It's . . . my kids found this weird grasshopper, and I wasn't sure if it was safe. But I can't ask anyone. I can't draw attention to us, can't risk someone coming out here . . ."

Alex nods, understanding. "By the way, what are the grasshopper numbers like out there? My colleague, Lee, studies grasshoppers, and they're convinced that swarming may occur in your area, given the conditions. But, of course, we get so little information."

“There are more grasshoppers than usual,” Margaret says. “It’s really hot and dry. Drought weather.” *Famine weather*, she thinks, but doesn’t say. *Food prices are up again too. The girls think it’s normal to have mac and cheese for lunch three days in a row.* “I haven’t seen swarms, though.”

Margaret shudders as she envisions a swarm. When they were in college, Alex had shown her videos of locust swarms. So many mouths, so many legs and wings. And that sound, like sirens ringing in the end of the world.

“Anything from the news?” Alex presses.

“You know they never tell us anything real.” The words are harsher than Margaret intended. Her stomach rumbles. Hunger and nausea: her two states of being. “Sorry,” she says.

Alex nods, her eyes all soft sympathy. Margaret hates it. Seven years ago, Alex would’ve had a sarcastic comeback.

“So, tell me about the grasshopper your girls found?”

“It’s . . . pink?”

“Really? Pink?” Alex smiles. “Sounds like erythrism!”

“What?”

“Erythrism! It’s a genetic mutation. Kind of like albinism or leucism. Except it makes the grasshopper look pinkish. They usually don’t make it to adulthood because they don’t have natural camouflage. Can I see it?” Alex squints into the darkness of Margaret’s closet as if the grasshopper lurks in the shadows. “It’s pretty rare.”

“It’s in a container. Outside,” Margaret adds. “And the girls . . .” Alex deflates, but nods. Rose and Belle don’t know that Alex exists.

“So, the grasshopper’s not diseased? Or dangerous?” Margaret asks.

“Oh no,” Alex says, shaking her head. “I mean, insects do carry parasites, like all animals. Just wash your hands. And don’t eat them raw! Cooked is fine. Lots of people eat grasshoppers. I’ve had pan-fried grasshoppers before, and they’re delicious.”

“I can’t imagine eating insects,” Margaret cringes.

“A good portion of the world does,” Alex says. “We only find it strange because it wasn’t normalized in our families as kids. Insects have tons of protein and nutrients. They’re a true superfood. And think about it: if a swarm eats everything, if there’s nothing left to eat but the swarm . . .” Alex must notice the queasy look overtaking Margaret’s face, because she cuts herself off.

“They called it a ‘Barbie grasshopper.’”

Alex laughs. “I guess the kids are all right.”

*No, they’re not*, Margaret thinks as she forces herself to smile, as her nausea morphs into hunger. *No one was ever all right, and no one is all right, and no one will ever be all right.*

After a few more minutes catching up, Margaret ends the call. She creeps past her daughters' screen-hypnotized faces to the kitchen. She scours the cupboards for random scraps to devour, for anything to ease this churning in her gut.

She downs a glass of orange juice that's more dye than juice. She savors a few chalky pieces of chocolate. She even opens a precious tin of canned meat and shovels the bland, overprocessed sludge into her mouth with her fingers.

*Please*, Margaret silently begs as she stuffs herself to the point of sickness. *Please*, she thinks over and over, until the word becomes mere sound. She sags into a chair, hating the world with a dull, diffuse hatred which has no real target but herself.

In the next room, Rose and Belle sing along to songs about the power of friendship, love, and kindness. Empty, useless words.

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Two months later, Margaret crawls from bed, clutching her throbbing abdomen, the tattered threads of dream-memory still clinging to her, wrapping her in a web of animal fear. She reaches for Paul, but he isn't there. In the other bedroom, her daughters sleep, nestled in their bunk beds like burrowed cicadas. Where does Paul sleep on the nights when he doesn't come home?

Predawn light creeps through the window as Margaret trudges into the kitchen. It's already too warm, and it will only get hotter. Her naked feet pad through a thin layer of dust. The heat won't abate, and the rain won't come. And so, the dust drifts in and makes itself at home. Even after downing two glasses of water her parched throat aches, like the dust has crawled inside her.

Something moves in Margaret's peripheral vision. She turns and sees the Barbie Dreamhouse sitting insolently on the table. The pink grasshopper stares back at her from its third-story window, antennae flicking.

She told the girls not to bring the Dreamhouse and its repulsive tenant inside. But they never listen. She steps closer, glaring as the grasshopper presses its lurid, pink body against the plastic wrap imprisoning it within.

Since she was a child, Margaret has associated two-story houses with wealth. A three-story house—that's just opulence. The grasshopper has no understanding of the façade of prosperity it's trapped within. It digs against clear plastic with pink legs. Margaret lowers herself into an uncomfortable crouch. She expects the grasshopper to jump back when she leans close, but the girls have desensitized it to looming human bodies. Its mandibles twitch. Fretfully, hungrily. Always hungry. She understands that feeling, that mindless urge to consume.

This creature staring boldly back at her doesn't look like a grasshopper. It looks like a hyperreal, tooth-achingly sweet decoration made of fondant, the kind you can't buy anymore.

Margaret's mouth floods with saliva. *They eat insects in lots of places*, Alex told her. How did you pan-fry a grasshopper? Drench it in oil and sauté? Would it pop, like a kernel of corn?

Margaret flinches back, revolted. Pregnancy cravings—she's had them before. But not like this.

*Please*, she begs the cells multiplying in her womb. *Please*—her prayer breaks off. She doesn't know what to ask for.

And then—a wave of pain obliterates thought and crumples her to the floor. Her knees crack against linoleum. She bites the corners of her mouth and swallows her own blood, but doesn't scream. She can't wake the girls. She needs to stand. She needs to force herself to the bathroom. She will wail into a towel as the shower washes the sweat and blood from her body. When it is over, she will dispose of the evidence.

Her vision blurs as another wave hits her—a contraction. Too early. Liquid gushes from her, soaking her legs and nightgown. She reaches down and presses both hands into the warm fluid to assure herself that it's real. She holds her hands before her face, and blood has pinkened the amniotic fluid. She focuses on the Dreamhouse, and her vision drowns in pink. Pink shutters framing pink windows. Pink flowers, undying in their pink flower boxes.

The grasshopper illuminated by predawn light, a mutated pink framed by artificial, plastic pink.

Margaret's giant hand rips through plastic wrap and breaks the perfect house to pieces. The grasshopper scrambles away. She pursues it with wet, pink handprints despoiling pink, plastic walls. She corners the grasshopper and pulls her captive from the wreckage.

She stumbles to the back door—but hesitates. It's not too late to turn back, to return the grasshopper and handle this latest disaster in the privacy of the bathroom. To bear down and keep her cries as unobtrusive as possible. It's what she has done for years. The grasshopper squirms in her slick palm, but Margaret holds fast. She crosses over the threshold into the backyard.

She glances furtively around, listening for the ominous whir of drones. Only night noises greet her. There is no one to behold her premeditated crime. Only bare, rocky soil interposed with the dead bushes. On the horizon, the sleeping town hovers like a mirage. Above her, the moon's sickle-smile wavers as the sun starts to rise.

Her bare feet sting as she trudges over withered remnants of grass, past empty flower beds, around the gray-black skeletons of tomatoes. Another wave of pain

ripples through Margaret. She doesn't scream. She isn't far enough from the house yet. More warmth oozes down her legs. She looks, and it's blood, painting her feet a lurid, unnatural color, like something out of a horror movie. She hasn't seen a horror movie in years. They aren't allowed. So many things aren't allowed anymore. She walks until her house becomes small and unreal, a dollhouse too small to possibly contain her.

The grasshopper wriggles in her palm. She uncurls her hand, but it doesn't flee. It just sits there, looking at her. Waiting.

Margaret hesitates. She is being what people call "unreasonable." But there is no reason in the creature resting on her palm, and there is no reason in her body, and there is no reason in a world which has condemned her to become this feral, bleeding thing.

She is so fucking hungry.

It doesn't taste like candy. The breaking crunch of its body between her teeth, the prickle of its exoskeleton, jabbing the soft pouch of her throat as she swallows—Margaret has never devoured a living creature before. She has never swallowed a brain. She licks bitter ichor from her lips.

Another contraction hits, and this time she screams while more blood drips down her legs like water trickling through a hole in a dam. But her body has never been a dam. Her body is a wound, ripped open and stitched haphazardly back together. Over and over again.

Margaret looks up at the horizon. A swelling cloud is blotting out the nascent sun. She doesn't realize what it is until the first grasshopper smacks her forearm. It clings to her skin, probing for food. Her neck swivels down. Her jaws snap open and shut. Another burst of bitter flavor, another set of wriggling limbs. Another live, raw being, another brain snuffed out. Consumed. The buzzing grows louder. The cloud looms closer. Two more grasshoppers land on her arms. She devours one, but the other escapes. No matter. There are hundreds—thousands—millions—of the desperate creatures.

*Alex would love this*, Margaret thinks.

Another contraction hits. Her scream is swallowed by the buzzing roar of wings.

And then the swarm is upon her.

As bodies ricochet off her, as the contractions come faster and harder, as she screams and screams, choking on the grasshoppers flailing into her open mouth—time falls away. The swarm encloses Margaret, blotting out the world. When it is time, she squats, wails, pushes.

The fetus slides from her and plops onto the dead earth. The placenta follows.

Margaret doesn't look at the bloody thing between her feet. She has been here before. She knows what she will see. Horror crawls through her. And grief.

But relief supersedes all other feelings. Her knees tremble, and she slumps to the ground beside the doomed thing she'd unwillingly carried for almost five months. Grasshoppers swarm her, obscuring the evidence of her crime: the crime of possessing an unwieldy body, of being a woman and a mother.

Margaret has lied to herself for months. Every time she thought, *Please*, and didn't dare go further, pretending she didn't know what she wanted—a lie. She has always known. Viable or not, Margaret hadn't wanted this pregnancy. She doesn't want more children. If it were still legal, she would've had an abortion.

She opens her mouth, and an eddy of the swarm glides inside her. She devours everything she can get between her teeth. It takes no effort; she opens her mouth, and she is fed. Like a baby bird.

For the first time in years, Margaret is almost happy, almost free. For the first time in months, her body is almost her own.

She is almost full.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**H.V. Patterson** (she/her) lives in Oklahoma, USA, and writes speculative fiction, poetry, and plays. Recent credits include *NoSleep Podcast*, *Flash Fiction Online*, *Hex Literary*, and *Best Horror of the Year*. You can find her on Instagram @hvpattersonwriter, Bluesky @hvpatterson, or at hvpatterson.com.

# THANK YOU FOR CONSULTING ROBODOCTOR

*by Ian Li*

He pokes tender pustules on his thigh  
and calls for his doctor. RoboDoctor  
awakes, finest physician most can afford.  
*What disease causes star-shaped pustules?*

The AI spits a diagnosis: *Cynopox*.  
*Transmission method: airborne. Other symptoms  
include anxiety and fever. Fatality rate: 99% within 72 hours.*

Anxious and feverish, he runs to his window. Agitation  
burns on people's faces. Buildings blaze with chaos,  
harmonizing with wails of those in supposed final hours.

An engineer runs diagnostics at RoboDoctor HQ,  
reports to her boss: *The AI seems to conflate  
deadly six-pointed cynopox pustules  
with innocuous five-pointed ones. I'll fix it—*  
But her boss interrupts: *Before you do that,  
can you check why ads aren't playing on cynopox diagnoses?*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Ian Li** (he/him) is a Chinese-Canadian economist, developer, writer, and poet, who started writing in late 2023 after a lifetime of believing he could never be creative. Find his work featured in *Nightmare Magazine*, *Strange Horizons*, *Year's Best Canadian Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and the Toronto subway system, among other venues. He is also a poetry editor at *Orion's Belt*. Learn more at [ian-li.com](http://ian-li.com).

# INFORMED CONSENT IS OUR HIGHEST PRIORITY

*by R.L. Cohen*

A single smudge mars shined shoes.  
The doctor walks in, datapad in hand.  
Each of these experiments has a beneficial goal.  
My teeth clamp down into molded plastic.

The doctor walks in, datapad in hand.  
Nothing is done without Informed Consent.  
My teeth clamp down into molded plastic.  
Electrodes measure the pulse within my skin.

Nothing is done without Informed Consent.  
There are no windows. I cannot see the sky.  
Electrodes measure the pulse within my skin.  
We believe in human-assisted surgery.

There are no windows. I cannot see the sky.  
My hand is quivering and I cannot quiet it.  
We believe in human-assisted surgery.  
My body's reflection distorted by glowing panels.

My hand is quivering and I cannot quiet it.  
Each of these experiments has a beneficial goal.  
My body's reflection distorted in glowing panels.  
A single smudge mars shined shoes.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**R.L. Cohen** is an Alaska-grown writer and professional librarian. Her work is informed by a childhood spent on the deck of a commercial fishing boat and the depths of the library. When not writing, she can be found taking long walks and doodling in notebooks. Her work has previously appeared in *Eye to the Telescope*.

# FLESHMECHS OF THE CURRENT AGE

*by Andrew Kozma*

Skin upon skin upon skin upon skin until callous  
is all we are. This is the horror sci-fi movie

I was promised fruiting beneath our flesh  
an array of bombs and poisons, all eager

to embrace their next target. Is it you or me?  
We lay away fear like we're canning for winter

in hopes fear will save us. Instead, it's our ammunition  
that will save us. This is tattooed under our eyelids

so we will never forget who to hate. Mirrors  
and smoke are what we choke on, these bodies

we've been gifted, outsize and awkward. Oh my god  
isn't here today and has no forwarding address.

We are our gods. Burn your offerings and pray  
we aren't the offerings, that we have a future.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Andrew Kozma's** poems appear in *Strange Horizons*, *The Deadlands*, and *Rogue Agent*, while his fiction appears in *Apex, ergot.*, and *Seize the Press*. His first book of poems, *City of Regret*, won the Zone 3 Press First Book Award, and his second book, *Orphanotrophía*, was published in 2021 by Cobalt Press. You can find him on Bluesky @andrewkozma.net and visit his website at andrewkozma.net.

# HAPPY SNACKS

*by Jen Cornick*

The fiery-orange habanero corn chip was so saturated, its top sloughed away as Prue pulled it out of her patient's bedsore. The girl's hip was a seeping well of sepsis and snack food. Prue had to force angled tweezers under the compressed layers of spice, corn chip, and cottage-cheese clumps of caseous necrotic flesh. She was reminded of digging through the soggy remains of a cheap nacho platter. The friable flesh stuck and stretched as Prue pulled another sodden too-fluorescent-to-be-natural tangerine scab from damaged skin.

"How'd you end up with this anyway?" She said it more to cover the sucking sounds of infected flesh but discovered she wanted the answer. Prue tapped the tweezers into a metal kidney bowl and then wiped them on a gauze pad before digging back into the wound.

"Mental health days," the girl said with a shrug. She was slight, barely enough weight on her bones to cause pressure ulcers. "You know, taking a couple days, calling in sick and trying to care for yourself?"

"This was more than a couple of days." Prue packed the last of the gauze into the girl's suppurating flesh. The patient room was overused, a little rundown, and poorly stocked—essentials running low because staff were overrun. Aggi would show up soon with the new tray and more gauze.

"Well, yeah, the world is shit. My boyfriend was with his other girlfriend, my job is crap, and I have no money. That all needs more than a few days to recover from." The girl winced and sucked in a breath through her teeth. Her fingers clenched the thin hospital pillow tight. "Shouldn't a doctor be doing this?"

"They used to." Prue nudged aside another clot of fat-coagulated spice powder. "But there have been so many bedsore cases lately they can't keep up. Now nurses do it." She didn't say it was cheaper and that the hospital saved more money this way. She maneuvered the tweezers under yet another layer of sopping corn chips. There was a sucking sticky slick sound, and then the sweet, gamey tang of rotting flesh seeped out around the edges of its seal, along with a thick off-white ooze. It wasn't the worst bedsore she'd seen, but it certainly wasn't pleasant.

“Is that fiery habanero? Looks like the right color,” Aggi said as he came into the room. “Where do you get those? They haven’t been made in over a decade.” The scalpels rattled, metal on metal, as he put the new debridement tray she needed on the cart. He opened boxes of gauze and displayed them at her side like impulse buys in the grocery store check-out line.

“New snack shop on Front Street—Happy Snax.” The girl’s teeth were clenched, with her shoulders pulled into her chest, nearly folding herself in half.

“Almost there, okay?” Prue leaned forward a little, attempting to catch the girl’s eye. She held her tweezers tight and aloft. Tangled skin, scabs, and corn flopped over the top.

The patient nodded. Prue settled back on her heels and leaned down again over the girl’s hip. She pulled up what she hoped was the final layer of spicy chip rot within the wound; she slipped the tweezers under and folded the corners inwards. When she pulled them out, tendrils clung to the soggy snack. Prue’s eyebrows came together, wrinkles deepening as she frowned.

She stared at this new development. The tendrils were foam-pink and crystalline white. Thinner than sinew. Thicker than nerves. Curiously familiar. But in the wrong place.

Her head tilted as she pulled a few filaments farther out, hooking them over the arm of the tweezers. They came from deep within the flesh, deeper than the chip. The girl’s leg twitched, a single jerk, before Prue laid them back in the curdled wound.

The strands moved, like a Ford interlocking suture being pulled flat over the open flaps of a surgical incision, disappearing back into the necrotic flesh of the bedsore. Prue flinched backwards with a gasp.

“Whoa, I didn’t know humans could do that.” Aggi pointed at where the thin layer of corn chip resettled, fitting itself into the contours of the wound, sealing whatever those filaments were back inside.

“They can’t.” She shook off the shock. There was no way that happened. From the debridement tray, she grabbed small, sharp scissors, the ones used for trimming away the singed edges of burnt skin.

“What can’t humans do?” There was more than an edge of panic in the girl’s voice as she shifted, struggling to twist and look at what Prue was doing. “Why’d he say it like that?” The girl pulled her leg up and away from Prue, curling into a ball, her elbow so close to slipping into the sore.

“Calm down a second.” Prue’s hand hovered above the girl’s shoulder. Her blue nitrile glove was smeared with fluorescent orange spice paste, flecks of corn chip, and spumescent skin. “Okay, just breathe for me. Big breath in and then let it out.” She nodded as she said it, in case the girl was watching.

The girl squeezed her eyes tight and pulled in a shuddering breath after a few seconds. “You’re going to be fine.” She tapped the girl’s calf with her clean-gloved hand.

The girl breathed out. Her lips curved up in a smile as she stretched out her legs. The movement was not quite fluid. Not the way that Prue would expect. The girl’s leg twitched again as she straightened on the bed. The smile was freaky. Really fucking freaky. But Prue wasn’t about to question it now. She bent to the bed sore again and snipped around the edges of the chip debris, a careful curling cut until she could see those filaments again.

“Why fiery habanero?”

“I used to eat them with my mom. On nights when it was just us, we’d do midnight margaritas and movies. We usually watched *Practical Magic*, because that was her favorite. They remind me of her. So, I bought them. So many of them.” Her sigh was content as she nuzzled into the thin pillow, like a child settling into happy exhaustion and the sleep that would follow.

“What happened to her?” Prue glanced up at the girl’s face, tweezers hovering.

“Car accident.” She cuddled the pillow on the stretcher close.

Prue did not get paid enough to deal with whatever was going on in this girl’s head. The mental health crisis causing young people to get these bedsores was bad enough, but this went further. Like she’d managed to transcend the reality of her pain and infection.

Prue shook her head and peeled up the side of a chip. There were those filaments again—foam-pink and crystalline white. As fine as floss. Embedded deep within the healthy flesh of her muscle, like they’d been sewn in. Or punched through.

The girl sighed and her leg twitched as Prue brushed her finger along them. Strange. Again, a sense of familiarity washed through her. She’d seen this before. The summer right after high school, when she’d worked at the mushroom farm to pay for her personal support worker certification: mycelium.

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Prue shivered as she walked through the staff parking lot to her car. The night had been long and terrifying, like so many nights in the emergency room. Birth, death, and every strange, fucked-up sideways aspect of the human condition in between. The girl with the mycelium in her muscle, while bizarre, was the least of their problems. Tests were ordered, samples taken, necrotic flesh debrided, and the wound packed. They sent the girl on her way in the early hours of the morning.

Prue got in her car and leaned forward, pressing her forehead into the January-cold steering wheel. So cold it gave her brain freeze. That was good. The

pain would keep her focused and awake enough to make it home. At this point, she wouldn't mind a few days to herself. Maybe she would have the chance to see her boyfriend, Dean. She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen him for more than a few minutes. Or had taken a day off for that matter. Everything cost too much to take time off, and every little bit of solace was a subscription service. She screamed and slammed the heel of her hand into the engine start.

She left the parking lot just wanting something, anything, to make herself feel better. To make life bearable. For just a single second. Like that girl from last night. Her favorite snack and the movie she liked best as a child. She wouldn't take long to get home. Not at this time of day. There was time for a detour. To see what all the Happy Snax fuss was about.

Prue took the turn for Front Street, and there it was. The shop looked like a blast from her past. It felt as if it had always been there.

The inside felt immediately familiar as she took a basket, as if it was the corner store she went to as a kid. Snacks were packed tight on the shelves in all the best colors: bright teals, electric pinks, happy yellows. All the snacks she remembered from commercials between her most beloved shows. Flaky cream and raspberry-filled pastries, teddy-shaped graham cracker cookies, bagel pizza bites, crackers with orange cheese spread. Chip flavors she hadn't seen in years, decades even. Sodas that didn't exist anymore. Ones that reminded her of sleepovers and sick calls and snow days.

The aisles should have been claustrophobic, but instead was a comfortable closeness, like a hug. She walked through them, running her fingers over remembered packaging. There was nothing she needed here, but she wanted it all. She picked up a bag of cheddar-flavored cracker chips, and they broke free from the shelf with a familiar chitinous snap. Everything she picked came away with a satisfying pop. It reminded her of her first job, that carefree summer when she still lived with her parents and she worked at the farm. Before responsibility and debt and too many breakups.

She brought the basket to the self-checkout and was soon back in her car. A little smile, the first one in days, started as she pulled away from the curb.

\* \* \*

Prue squeezed her eyes tight against the frustrating jangle of musical notes. Not her alarm. She didn't have to get up yet. Her arm was heavy as she patted for her cell phone on the bedside table. She tapped the screen, hoping she either answered or hung up on whoever was calling. She let the phone rest on her face and waited for a voice.

“Doesn’t your shift start soon?” Dean’s voice wasn’t shrill with panic, like it used to be when she was late for work.

“Starts at midnight.” She gripped the phone as she rolled over with a frustrated sigh. She wanted to be happy that he called, but she could have had more sleep. That would have been nice. Helpful even, if tonight was going to be anything like last night.

There was another part of her, warmer and softer, that wanted to make the best of this unforeseen call. “There’s time if you want to come over.” She wanted to say more—that she wanted to see him. That she wanted to be held. That talking to someone—anyone—after last night would be so good. But she didn’t.

The pause between them lengthened, and she rushed to fill it before it became awkward. “You don’t have to if you don’t have time today. We could get coffee later. I’m off starting tomorrow.”

His sigh was heavy. She sat up in bed and pulled her knees into her chest.

“Look, I can’t keep doing this. You’re always working. I can’t wait around for you to call and have time.”

“What?” She understood but didn’t know what else to say. She had seen this coming. It was part of that life she’d been promised—financial security, a loving and supportive partner, stability—but would never have.

“I’m sorry. Look, you’ll find someone else. Someone who is more flexible in their schedule.” He disconnected. There was only filtered digital silence.

It made her miss dial tones, especially the one from her parents’ landline in the nineties. That continuous, harmonic chord gifting a few seconds to process what happened. She hugged her knees, her arms wrapped firmly around herself—a cold and lonely comfort in her dark room. She couldn’t move for several minutes and then when she did it was an aching and slow process, she crawled from the center of her bed to the edge. Too late to call in sick, and working would be a better distraction than anything else.

She started getting ready for the night shift, a continual push of limbs too tired and too heavy to move. Of continually blinking at things to bring them into focus. Of forcing her thoughts to flow faster, to accommodate the speed of the shift later. That wasn’t easy on a good day, or even her best day. All she wanted to do now was lie in bed and not move.

The kitchen light flickered on when she hit the switch, an old bulb and a poor electrical connection. She sighed seeing the bag on the counter. She grabbed the box of teddy bear cookies and slid her fingers under the glued cardboard flaps. Every cookie was the same size as her thumb, from knuckle to nail. She took one out and held it, tempted to play with it. Like she did during school lunch hour, making it walk across her desk.

She popped it into her mouth before giving into the childish impulse. Out of reflex, Prue read the label. Lower calories than she was expecting, but it made sense, given how the snacks never filled her up when younger. The makers followed the new laws for ingredients: it was a list of Latinate chemical names, including the one for *agaricus bisporus*, which seemed familiar—words from too long ago—but the rest she didn't recognize. She shrugged, not caring even a little if they tasted like she remembered.

They did. They were pure satisfaction, from the sugar-wax glaze to the taste, the way they shattered between her teeth and turned to mush just before she swallowed.

Prue's shoulders relaxed as she rummaged in the box for another. A differently shaped one than before. Another crunch. Another cookie. Another. And another. The minutes passed with half the box disappearing. As she looked down at the remainder, she could pinpoint the moment that the serotonin and dopamine burst across her brain. Her eyes widened. It felt like little electric bolts. Immediately, the tension in her limbs loosened, the familiar ache of her grief lessening.

The whole box was gone when her alarm finally went off. It wasn't that she couldn't get ready before going, but rather, surprising how so much time had passed while leaning against the counter eating. But she felt good. Really good. Almost like nothing had happened at all. She needed more. So much more.

\* \* \*

Prue's shift that night was the same as normal, but none of it could affect those new tendrils of happiness that had unfurled in her brain.

She barely noticed the motorcyclist who'd gone headfirst over his handlebars and presented with double compound fractures in his arms. He screamed more than he breathed, both from the pain and the sight of his jagged, snapped bones. Prue also couldn't fathom why another patient might be in pain, even after seeing the scan of stones churning in a woman's kidneys. Then there was the man who'd not removed his socks in two years. A sports superstition. Gangrene had set in some time ago. An X-ray showed that the bone had been eaten away, and what little was left of his feet melted through Prue's gloved hands and splattered on the floor.

Those waves of positive neurotransmitters, the ones governing happiness, crashing through her like filaments lighting up every nerve, stopped in that second. Everything hit her in a torrent. The salt of her tears stung as she cried, holding the gangrenous, bony stumps of the man's legs.

He leaned forward and patted her hair. "Don't worry, dear, I'll be fine."

He was in extreme shock, but Prue almost leaned into that touch. That single second of contact. Instead, she ran from the room, her hands trembling as she ripped off her gloves. She pressed her hands into her mouth and her back into a wall, hoping to keep jagged sobs from escaping.

“Hey, are you okay?” Aggi’s hand was heavy and far too hot on her shoulder. She jumped and her eyes popped wide. Her sob and fright mingled to a mewling whimper in the back of her throat. He crouched and looked into her eyes. “What do you need?”

The answer coursed along the remnants of those snapped nerves: Happy Snax. Those memories of better days. But, she reasoned, cookies hadn’t filled the loneliness inside her. Neither had being at work, but at least it was practical. She inhaled a shaking breath and nodded. “I need to finish the shift.”

With a silent nod, they both went back to work.

Prue’s days blurred together as she took every shift, every hour of work that came her way. She should have had three days off. But the unit was too short-handed to refuse her. She was approaching burnout; she could feel it, the numbness creeping through her thoughts, the way she did everything by rote, how she didn’t notice patients anymore.

Work was punctuated by the momentary bliss of eating one of her snacks. Currently, it was a package of cookies she dipped in confetti icing while standing at the staff room windows. She smiled with every scoop of sprinkles and sugar. She felt every pulse of serotonin web through her brain. Every sharp spike of dopamine with each saccharine crunch. She didn’t care how much money she spent on Snax or how they had short-circuited her mind.

Every bite was a new memory—a good grade on a test, the perfect birthday present from a friend, a snow day cuddled in blankets watching reruns of gameshows for hours. She wanted to stay there, in those memories. It was so much easier.

Aggi bumped his shoulder against hers. “Another trip down the memory hole?” He nearly made her jump. She hadn’t noticed him come in, hadn’t seen his reflection in the glass.

“What is that they say? Healing my inner child with my adult money.” She held up an icing-covered cookie, an offering.

He shook his head. “There is something about it having mushrooms in it that puts me off.”

Prue shrugged, a lot of things had hidden mushrooms in them—dried mushroom powder in sauces and soups. It was part of antimicrobial food packaging. There was even wound dressing that had chitin in it inside the supply room.

“More for me.”

“Patient in room seven for you, also.” He backed out of the room in a rush, his sneakers squeaking on the old linoleum floor.

“Be right there.” She licked around her teeth, unwilling to let even a molecule dissolve without her knowing it. But the texture inside her cheek was wrong. She grazed it with her tongue. No longer a smooth mucosal membrane, it was a floss mesh. Checking again, this texture was more structured than the lace patches of oral lichen planus.

A tongue depressor and dental mirror were easy enough to find in the supply room. A bathroom with a lock was not far, the next door along the corridor. Under the fluorescent light of the public bathroom, she opened her mouth and saw it. Thinner than sinew and thicker than nerves. Foamy pink and crystalline white. Both tools clattered into the porcelain sink. She’d been wearing a mask, a face shield, and gloves when she’d treated that girl. There should have been no chance of contamination. She’d had no cuts or scrapes for it to be a subcutaneous spread. Leaning forward, she looked again, her mouth so wide the corners of her lips stretched painfully. It was hard to breathe as she held her tongue away.

Prue washed her hands, a reflexive action. Scrubbing hard with the inadequate soap, she stared at the insides of her cheeks. The interlocking strands hadn’t disappeared. She ran the edge of her fingernail through the floss-like fibrils, severing them through the middle, and watched them retract up past her gums. There was a new weight in her skin. One that was unfamiliar. Then, her already open mouth sagged wider. The entire right side of her face fell, her jawbone pulling her skin down. Her lower eyelid distended, revealing the far-too-delicate flesh inside her ocular cavity.

She wanted to swear. Tried to shout out a reflexive *fuck*. But her lips didn’t join anymore. She couldn’t make her face work. Her moan turned into a scream. It was all she could do as her heart beat faster and air rushed out through her lopsided, gaping mouth.

She shoved her jaw up with her hand, holding it there as she scrambled to unlock the door. But she couldn’t. Her weight wasn’t right. The balance of her movements and muscles was off. She screamed through her force-clenched teeth.

Prue felt it then. The soft slither of those tendrils in her cheek. The punch of new holes in tender flesh. She should have felt this when it was first happening, the initial time she ate Happy Snax. She gripped the sides of her face with both hands and fell to her knees. The pain left her gasping, unable to pull enough air in through the orthodontically perfected spaces in her teeth to scream again.

It was like being sewn up with no anesthetic—the puncture and pull of those curved tendrils as sharp as suture needles. Then, the weight of her jaw lifted from her skin. Her limp flesh dragged up and fastened in place. Falling forward, she

hunched over her thighs, and her eyes squeezed shut as she moaned through the burn and sting.

Then the pain was gone. Didn't even linger. All those little threads were back in place as she ran her tongue along her cheek. She didn't want to feel that sagging relief as she rolled into a spinal twist, arms spread wide, her chest lifting and falling as she panted on the washroom floor. She moved her mouth open and then closed, open then closed, to see if she could do it.

The door banged against the lock, jangling its hinges. It startled her from the floor. Air caught in her chest as she scrambled up. She wrenched on the taps and scrubbed her hands again. The lock released easily this time, and she stood in the corridor facing Aggi.

"I thought it was a patient." He stepped to the side to see around her. "You okay?"

"Fine, yeah, on my way." She rubbed along her jaw. There was a fine tremor in her hand. Panic and relief all at once, and her body didn't know how to process either chemical than with shakes.

The air was heavy with the smell of rot as she opened the patient's door—sweet, tangy, and fungal. Prue's inhale was shallow as she looked at the girl from so many nights ago. She sat on the bed, sculpture-perfect, decorated in garlands of petals and pearls. The girl didn't move; didn't even raise her eyelids to look at Prue. She just sat there, delicate furling leaves in both her palms.

Prue took a step closer.

A pearl, round and luminous, emerged from the girl's collarbone. A whole chain started, adding another rope to the necklace she already wore. Each opaline pustule rose like mushrooms growing in the damp-dark. Prue flinched, stumbling back a step into the doorframe. A tight swirl of petals in the girl's palms bloomed with a wet groan that seemed to echo in the small room.

Prue fumbled through the boxes on the wall, wrenching on a mask and gloves as her hands shook. "Fuck me sideways with a saw."

*We can feel you.*

That voice was too harmonic, too multitudinous. Prue covered her ears.

The tendrils were in her head, vibrating her cheeks, oscillating as if someone was playing them like a harp. They moved, deep within her, filaments slithering along bone, sliding next to sinew, tangling with her tendons, and rooting in her flesh. Paralytic pain. All at once, so much worse than before. But the mycelium didn't let her fall, didn't let her move.

The girl's head turned, her flesh crepitating as she moved. She smiled that little dazed smile, the one that caught Prue off guard before. She faced Prue and Prue knew she could see.

She felt it in those pale threads veining all the way through her. She watched as the girl's flesh curled away from her skull, the bone making way, as another mushroom fruited there, like a large flower pinned in her hair. The peach baroque swirls of a *schizophyllum commune*. Delicate, like petals in a painting.

There was a picture in Prue's mind, flashes of sleepovers and sick calls and snow days. Of aqua and pink packages. Of sodas that didn't exist anymore. Of playing with her teddy bear cookies, making them dance across her desk. Of when times were easier. *Better*. The girl's smile creaked upwards—uneven and jagged at the corners.

Prue tried to shake her head. To assert her own will. But she couldn't. The most she could do was breathe, and even then, that was becoming less of her own volition the longer she looked at the girl.

She breathed in deep, as deep as she could through her nose, pulled her cheeks between her teeth, and pressed hard enough that she should have drawn blood. She grated her flesh—the filaments—between her molars. The gossamer ruptured and recoiled in her mouth. The copper wash of blood was bitter as she bit down harder. The weight of her jaw too heavy, the pull of it snapped more of the threads. She groaned as she pushed her hands up against her jaw, continuing to mash those strands of mycelium up against the serrated edges of her teeth. Air rushed in through the new gushing gaps in her skin.

There was a disconnect within her, the voices once synced in harmony now screaming out of rhythm. The multitudes still there but mutilated. Severed. Separated. Freed.

She stumbled forward, her hold on her jawbone slipping as blood oozed between her fingers. Her heart beat fast, faster than she should survive. Her breath was quick and shallow. She was shaking but didn't know if it was from fear, shock, or strain. She screamed, the sound muffled by her hands and teeth.

*It's better, here, in our memories.*

The warmth of dopamine and serotonin washed through Prue's system, bursting in her cheeks and taking away the pain.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Jen Cornick** is a writer, journalist, and blogger. Her work has appeared in *The Selkie*, *The Last Girls Club*, *Obscura: New Uncanny Tales*, *They Whispered*, *BFS Horizons*, *Marrow Magazine*, and is forthcoming in *Strip Mall Magazine*.

# SINGLE PARENTING IN THE HOUSE OF REFINED APPETITES

*by Chris Clemens*

Your rent's cheap  
for a reason.

If the wine cellar offers  
to watch little Emma  
so you can have a few  
precious minutes to yourself,  
always say no thanks.

If you slip up  
and she's ingested  
by the breathing walls  
and you're racing from  
great room to conservatory,  
screaming her name, flicking  
lights to catch glimpses  
of her weeping silhouette,  
try bargaining instead:

Emma's flavor for yours,  
plus seasoning.

Coat yourself in garlic butter.  
Salt liberally. Slather with



# GAMORELIN

*by Amy Sussman*

Mike met Emma for the first time in her office, which was huge and sterile. Emma was the one to go to for gear. This was what Carlos had told him, anyway. The truth was that Mike hated Carlos—for being tall, namely, but also for his easy confidence in the face of inferior accomplishments. Emma was tall too. She wore a lab coat that swished around her thick ankles.

She explained to Mike the potential side effects. Paranoia, rage, melancholy, decline in cognitive function. Then: “If you’re not careful, you may experience shrinkage of the testicles, severe erectile dysfunction, and gynecomastia, among other changes to your sexual characteristics. I know a thing or two about that, and trust me—it can be harrowing if you don’t want it,” she said and laughed mirthlessly.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Oh, I’m a trans woman. I’m also injecting exogenous hormones into myself. It’s how I got into this practice. It’s an ethical thing. People should be able to express themselves, change their body however they want, without having to go through some hospital that ignores its patients in favor of right-wing donors. Even bodybuilders like yourself. It’s not like I need the money—I’m a surgeon—so you’re getting all of this at a hefty discount. It’s a side hustle—and quite an illegal one at that. So don’t spread this around.”

“All of this” was a regimen of Gamorelin, a popular new anabolic steroid that purported to achieve the same results as Trenbolone et al. without the devastating consequences one might associate with them.

Emma was altogether quite beautiful, he supposed, and in many ways his “type.” It made him nervous, a little, to know she was trans. Not that he was transphobic. It was just something extra, that added a little thrill.

Emma plunged the needle into his quadricep.

\* \* \*

The gym, for Mike, was always and had always been an exercise in masochism. He could admit this to himself, in a sort of wordless way. As an angsty teen, the masochism manifested in the form of cutting. A razor blade in the bathroom, often along his upper thigh, where boxers could cover the scars. Occasionally he'd bring in a lemon slice to squeeze over the gaping wound, which he always thought looked yonic. He remembered telling a school counselor that he wanted to "carve a cunt into himself."

In college, the masochism became an excess of pre-made Negronis, which were the least palatable vessel for alcohol. He laid out rows of them in plastic cups every weekend and drank as quickly as he could between gags. He wasn't after the euphoric buzz, but the sickening comedown the morning after. He lay in bed, nauseous but refusing to puke, agonizing over every mistake he had ever made.

Having matured sufficiently, now it was the gym. He lifted without any concessions to vanity; the only goal was devotion. Three reps of ten. Ten milligrams of creatine. The terrible gasp of failure, over and over. Protein oatmeal in the morning, chicken breast with broccoli for lunch, and New York Strips with sweet potatoes for dinner. Eight full hours of dreamless sleep to promote testosterone levels.

\* \* \*

Gamorelin was known at this time to be a typical anabolic, widely regarded as "safer" than its alternatives. An American pharmaceutical company following advancements from an Israeli brand, synthesized the compound and tested it on little capuchin monkeys at a lab in Virginia until its efficacy was clinically proven. And indeed it was efficacious: the capuchins bulked up to such a level that they began scaring the researchers—the hypertrophied monkeys became strong enough to bend the bars of their enclosures—who quit the experiment as soon as they could.

Photos of the 'roided-out primates could be found in sleazy corners of bodybuilding forums. Mike had seen plenty. The striation and definition were such that they looked more like pygmy gorillas than miniature monkeys. Mike was after this simian aspect, this muscle-bound brainlessness. He wanted the bellies of his muscles to bulge, like little pins all throughout his body, squirming wormlike at all times.

\* \* \*

He began to feel kaiju-esque, swinging the weight back and forth with reckless abandon. He added inches at a time to his triceps and deltoids, his quads

and glutes. The Bosnian immigrant Sveta Kurjak, whom Mike had always ogled to induce motivation in himself, remarked on the gains he'd made, at which he felt heat rising to his cheeks.

At his next appointment with Emma, as he lay upon her doctor's table, she brushed her forearm against his quadricep, whereupon Mike developed a semi-erection. Seeing this, Emma giggled a little and plunged the syringe into him.

Here was rage, like she'd pillaged his village and stolen his wife and sold his children into slavery. He felt like he might hit her, but he bit his lip and it subsided, or at least moved to someplace in his body that no longer had access to the outside world.

He drove to the gym. He hit legs. He did four plates on a Smith machine squat. One more rep would be a personal record. As he pushed through the pain associated with achieving his goals, he felt like he was becoming a ghost, disintegrating into a million little particles. And as he lay panting beside the rack—he had always seen these machines as torture racks—it felt for a second like life might be okay. Then he got home and all the wrath had returned, and he spent the night before his laptop screen as usual.

\* \* \*

The most pronounced effect of Gamorelin was on his libido. The warnings had proven accurate: it was akin to a second puberty. Every woman and most men on the street became in his mind mannequins for pornographic fantasies. He had an erection perhaps forty percent of the time. His consumption of actual pornography, too, skyrocketed. He sorted by category: lesbian and BDSM, at first, then more "esoteric" fetishes. Finally, he landed on various genderbending fantasies: he watched videos of women (sometimes men, though less often) telling him all the ways he would be better off in a skirt, better off shaved, better off letting hundreds of men ejaculate onto his face, into his rectum.

Pornography, in this way, became a nighttime meditation. Into this he channeled his hate and rage, all the atavistic feuding to which his hormonal profile was now so conducive.

If Mike was honest with himself, really honest, the way he only was at around 1 or 2 AM on a Sunday night after he had taken his allotted zero-sugar marijuana edible, he might admit that Carlos was the same as Sveta Kurjak. He'd had male friends before, like Jack Mesquite, with whom he had used to load frog carcasses with firecrackers in the fifth grade. Carlos was not like that.

He often thought about Carlos when he masturbated, even after he started seeing Emma. Carlos was five foot nine, just tall enough to be impressive to

him. Mike imagined himself in the receptive position, being weakened and finally overpowered. He would be transformed. He would be like putty, soft and slick.

\* \* \*

The next time Mike saw Emma she said, “Listen, Mike, I’ve enjoyed our little sessions. I’ve admired your progress. I like the way you think about things—I like your dedication. I was wondering . . . would you wanna get dinner tonight? My treat. I know a great cocktail place uptown.”

He started to sweat profusely. “Oh, um,” he said.

“Oh, shit, sorry, never mind. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“No, no,” he said. “I’d love to go. I’ve just—never been asked out before.”

“Really? Oh, that’s wonderful. I’ll pick you up around eight?”

Mike nodded sheepishly. She injected the usual Gamorelin.

Then Mike went to the gym and hit a ruthless albeit somewhat inefficient pull day, went home, took a shower, shaved his face and pubic hair—he’d become thirty percent more hirsute since the regime had begun—and masturbated into a tissue. Then he sat before his apartment’s front door, sweating enough to nullify the shower.

When he got the knock, Emma appeared in a tight red dress with matching lipstick. They walked wordlessly to Emma’s fancy SUV, and she drove them with a kind of ferocity and verve that frightened Mike at first, to the cocktail place she’d mentioned. Mike drank only water while Emma made it through three gin doubles. The conversation began to flow. They told each other jokes. Then Emma was altogether too drunk to drive home, so they took a cab.

Other than that first time, though, she always drove, always paid for dinner when they went out. She bought Mike many filet mignons, which fit nicely within his macronutrient goals. Mike, who hadn’t had many girlfriends, was baffled by the whole ordeal.

“Why do you like me?” he asked Emma. It was their fourth date at a fine dining place after the waiter had poured them a glass each from a bottle of Argentinian Malbec. “I mean really. Not to look a gift horse in the mouth, but I can’t imagine it.”

“I like the shape of you. You just keep growing. I’ve always been into that. And you’re nice. I’ve been with bodybuilding types, and often they’re arrogant, full of themselves. Which can be fun at first, but it fades so quickly. I’m a strong person, but I can’t handle those brick-wall men. You’re not like that. You have weakness. In a word, you’re passive.” She sipped her wine, and after a moment of silence they went back to their jokes and innuendoes.

As the dates went on, Mike decided he wasn't offended, being thought of in this way. In previous relationships he had felt paralyzed when asked to make a decision. Emma knew who she was and what she liked. She always had a plan. She wielded her scalpels and syringes with a deft confidence that brought a stirring to Mike's groin.

\* \* \*

Sex had always frightened Mike. There was his fateful "first time," at twenty years old, where he'd squirmed and wriggled his way through it. With Emma, it was a similar story. He shivered and whimpered when their clothes came off. His penis proved uncooperative; the process of intimacy was laborious and altogether fairly unpleasurable. Emma seemed to shudder in a happy but unsatisfied sort of way. They slept together two or three times a week thereafter. It felt like going through the motions.

\* \* \*

Soon there were major and unexpected side effects. Not the listed ones, either. Not the gynecomastia and impotence, at least not outside their tolerable ranges. Here were strange scaly spots up and down the sides of his torso. Big, non-muscular bubbles like purulent frogs' cheeks in odd locations. He called up Emma and explained his scenario. She suggested he come over immediately.

He showed up, appearing a little "medieval," she said. "But this doesn't seem like a big deal," she went on, and slid her fingertip across one of the patches of affected skin.

"Not a big deal?" Mike whined. "Look at me. I'm gross."

"You're on enough gear to mog Adonis, and you look like it. Minus these little splotches."

He paced back and forth for a few moments. "Where did you get that stuff? This could be some poorly-sourced garbage, synthesized inexpertly in, I don't know, someone's basement."

"Look, Mike, relax—this chemical is pharmaceutical-grade. I have a connection at the lab where they make it. I've literally overseen its production."

"You could be lying." He got up close to her. He grimaced in such a way as to appear apelike, though the truth was that, even if he succeeded, his expression was far more bonobo than gorilla.

"Lying?" Emma averted her gaze. "You think I would lie to you? You think I'd lie to you about what I'm putting into your body? I can't believe you could

even entertain that idea, Mike. I take pride in my commitment to medical ethics. I especially wouldn't breach them when I'm helping someone . . . someone I *love*."

Mike saw petite tears sliding down her cheeks. This was the first time he'd seen her cry. It was also the first time she'd professed to loving him. Together these elements constituted Emma's first and only foray into weakness. He didn't know what to make of it. He retreated slightly.

She looked up at him, red-eyed and sniffing.

"You're right. I'm sorry," he said. "And I love you, too."

She smiled exasperatedly. They went to Emma's place and attempted to have sex for twenty-five minutes. Even after fifteen milligrams of tadalafil, Mike decided he was incapable of erection, at which point he enthusiastically, albeit clumsily, gave Emma fellatio. He managed in the end, late into the cloudless night, to make her whine and writhe.

\* \* \*

The changes continued, accelerating in pace and severity. He checked the mirror most mornings to discover that the strange pustules had spread, creating a kind of stony appearance across his triceps, deltoids, and latissimus muscles. They were especially bad around his breasts. The gynecomastia was now outside its tolerable range. It got to such a point that he needed to wear a binding shirt that pressed the fatty pads above his pectorals back against his bulging ribcage. And when he took it off, his breasts dangled obscenely.

He stared at his silhouette in the overbright morning light reflected in the bathroom mirror. It was an hourglass now. His genitals had shrunk. His quadriceps concealed them. He wondered why this didn't distress him more. He told Emma about it, and she assured him, of course, that this was within a certain "margin of error" in terms of the drug's efficacy. Perhaps in the winter he could slow down the dosage. He worried that by then he would be monstrous.

If he ever wanted to return to normal, whatever that meant, he would need surgeries: scalpels making slits through which all this slimy tissue would flow in a chunky slurry. Emma, meanwhile, saw no problems. She swore that he was only getting more attractive.

"I'm afraid of getting surgery," he said. "I'm afraid of general anesthesia. Of taking a nap I can't wake up from. Just being . . . *under* . . . forever."

"It's not so bad," Emma said, massaging his upper arm. "I've had plenty of surgeries at this point, and I've been better off because of them. I don't regret anything. If anything, it's empowering to change yourself. You could get surgery easily—I'd help."

"You'd perform the surgery on me?"

“What? Jesus, no, don’t be crazy. But I know people.”

Mike nodded. He didn’t think he would stop the Gamorelin, though he couldn’t place the source of his reluctance. Something was comfortable in it. The regular injection from Emma. In his most secret fantasies he had a huge, terrible longing for Emma to operate on him: to be on the table before her, open at last.

\* \* \*

In the morning, after an hour of cuddling and a couple abortive attempts at sex, Emma said it was time to check his levels. She drove them to her office and swabbed the crook of his elbow with an alcohol pad. During this he reflected on the fact that it was the opposite of a bicep curl.

Emma jabbed him and they watched the vial grow redder. “If only your cock could fill with blood this quick,” she said slyly. Mike felt that he ought to be offended, that he ought to experience the icy pain of insecurity. It would hardly be an alien thought, after all. Instead, he simply blushed. Emma capped the vial and went to test it in the lab.

Mike stared blankly at the office door. After a few moments there was a rough sort of knock and then Carlos stepped through. “Oh, hey, Mike,” he said. “Is Emma here?”

“She just stepped out. I’m in the middle of an appointment with her.”

“I’ll come back later . . . She’s a little kooky, isn’t she?”

“Kooky how?”

“She’s always pushing strange chemicals on me. I’m sure she’s done it to you, too. I’m not gonna let this lady experiment on me, y’know? Just give me the Tren, bitch!” Carlos paused and then smiled at him. “You’ve slept with her, haven’t you?”

“What? Why, how—”

“It’s okay. I have, too. I don’t think it’s gay or whatever, but then again, it’s not the same as pussy, right?” He chuckled jovially.

Mike considered for a moment whether he’d be able to beat Carlos to death with his bare hands. He imagined the spatter of blood and brain staining the austere white floor. He imagined the pinkish mixture of cerebral fluid and so much viscera into which Emma would step. She would look up at a dripping Mike and grin broadly and call him good. But in the end he only said, “Good to see you, Carlos.”

“Yeah, you’re looking great these days, Mike. Huge!” And he went away.

When Emma returned, she explained that the number of nanograms of testosterone per deciliter in his blood was many, many times the amount a typical male might have. “That’s typical of anabolics. But what’s a little stranger,” she

continued, “is that your estrogen level is also substantially above the average level for women. At this point, it’s like you’re *beyond* biological sex. You have an endocrine system that, conceivably, no one on the history of this planet has. You have hormones from the future, Mike.”

\* \* \*

By November, he had moved into Emma’s townhouse. He rarely left. Emma had an extensive gym in her basement, and she didn’t charge him rent. He worked out and cooked and cleaned. His body had ballooned to 350 pounds. His boobs grew droopier daily. The Gamorelin-induced pustules now stretched along his spine like hackles. They caused searing pain whenever he got frustrated.

From his vantage at the window by the sink, fifteen feet above the sidewalk, he watched the small people walking to work. He listened to the news playing on the TV in the living room. A lab break in Virginia, the same lab where they’d tested Gamorelin on capuchins.

During sex, Emma would say things like, “You look fucking *simian!*” between less coherent expressions of pleasure, and indeed, these days they had sex. Somehow, resigning himself to flaccidity had done well to take the edge off of lovemaking.

He put some plates away. He dried a bowl or two. He saw men in suits and children in school uniforms on the street. Then he saw the beginnings of a commotion below. People began to gather around what looked like rottweilers tussling by a fire hydrant. But they weren’t rottweilers, Mike realized with a giddy thrill—they were the capuchins from those old bodybuilding forums, the ones in the late stages of Gamorelin treatment, as bumpy and busty as him.

They fought each other and shrieked at each impact of one thickened limb against another. Snow had begun to fall. No one made any attempt to stop the monkeys. Passersby formed a circle as if watching busking dancers. Snowflakes fell against the window, making the scene take on a dreamy blur.

Red started to spatter the whitening concrete. Soon the capuchins were more matted blood than fur, more red than the unhealthy ochre they were before. One of them fell belly-first to the ground, and the other was on top instantly, slamming its fist into the fallen one’s cranium.

Everyone watched with placid contentment. Once shards of skull had scattered into the road, the victor capuchin began to eat the defeated opponent. It ate beyond what seemed feasible, more mass than one could picture fitting in its little stomach. Mike stood there with a plate in his hand, achingly alone, until there was nothing but a toy-sized skeleton.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Amy Sussman** studies English at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. Her work has appeared in *OFIC Magazine* and *Chatterbox Literary Magazine*.

# STATEN ISLAND STEVE, I SALUTE

*by Rob Sienna*

*for Steve Zane*

After the blast, when Manhattan flickered  
like a burnt-out jukebox and gulls cried  
through skeletons of ferries, I found  
a cracked cassette marked *Dream Smashes*.  
It hissed. It lived. It bled noise.

Steve's voice came through the static—  
arcane, coded, laughing at doom itself.  
He spoke that strange street Esperanto  
only prophets of the Avenues knew:  
half prayer, half sneer, wired  
into the subways, the rust, the sweat.

Back before the oceans snapped the bridges,  
he ran the scene like a barefoot general—  
organizing chaos, shouting  
down plastique fakers,  
fueling nights where distortion met deliverance.  
He had that mad clairvoyant look—  
the kind that knew art was just  
survival in another key.

Staten Island Steve. Tireless. On fire.  
Turning abandoned laundromats into temples  
of pure feedback slashing down.  
We'd haul amps through the rain  
as if saving relics from extinction.  
He'd grin and say, "Music's the last

clean currency left, baby—  
spend it before they tax your soul.”

When the power grids failed,  
he built a rig from scavenged batteries  
and played under the Verrazzano moon,  
feeding ghosts and half-starved raccoons  
the rhythm of resurrection.

I remember his boots, duct-taped and holy.  
His eyes, always scanning horizons  
as if reading the next apocalypse  
before it dropped. He understood  
decay like it was an old lover—  
respected it, danced with it,  
but never let it take the last word.

Steve wasn't a saint—  
he could rage like an oil fire,  
laugh at the wrong time,  
disappear for months in search of something new.  
But when he hit that first chord,  
the air itself seemed to change allegiance—  
matter remembered how to move once more.

So if the world's gone, and you find  
a tape marked *Dream Smashes*,  
play it loud. That's Steve out there—  
still calling punks to rise,  
mocking oblivion  
with a power chord and crooked spit.

I salute him—  
the earthy, authentic, unkillable  
pulse of what was sublime  
before and after the end.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Rob Sienna** is a former scene reporter for *Maximum Rocknroll* and *Flipside*. There have been feature articles about his anti-censorship work in *Spin Magazine*. His poetry has appeared in hundreds of punk zines and journals as well as more mainstream journals, including *Poetry New Zealand*, *Chronogram*, *The Seattle Review*, and *The Pacific Review*. He is based on the West Coast of the US.

# I ALWAYS FOLLOW RULE 22:

*by Ian Li*

All unclaimed property must be delivered  
over to the Office of the Watchful.

When I find a discarded coin, I immediately  
turn it in. The Officer glares, like he suspects

I'm hiding a second contraband coin. No word  
of thanks. That's okay, my duty is my reward.

An Officer yanks a yelping stray pup  
from a man's arms, beats them both. The man's own

fault. He knew the consequences hiding what's not his.  
Two men with fury-red eyes drag a migrant woman

up the building's concrete steps. The Office accepts  
any and all forms of property; it does not discriminate.

Today, I discover an unclaimed box of explosives.  
I always follow Rule 22.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Ian Li** (he/him) is a Chinese-Canadian economist, developer, writer, and poet, who started writing in late 2023 after a lifetime of believing he could never be creative. Find his work featured in *Nightmare Magazine*, *Strange Horizons*, *Year's Best Canadian Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and the Toronto subway system, among other venues. He is also a poetry editor at *Orion's Belt*. Learn more at [ian-li.com](http://ian-li.com).

# THE EXPERIENTIAL VOID

by Alex Goldberg

I almost didn't believe the ad when I found it posted amidst the menial jobs on the government portal. None of them paid enough to put food on my table, but this one promised a respectable wage. We hadn't yet solved the scarcity problem; it was enough to make you envy past generations, before we eradicated natural death. An eternity of struggle and hunger barely felt worth it.

The position required a linguist. Our field hadn't been in demand for decades, not since the adoption of the universal tongue. I called my wife over to double-check it, to convince me I was reading correctly.

"It looks real," she said, her voice hopeful as the screen reflected in her hazel green eyes.

She was always so supportive.

"The Bureau of Science," I mumbled, scrolling through the requirements.

Looking for a PhD in linguistics and experience with semiotics and formal systems. I had those.

She gestured toward my hand, leaning her weight on my back as she looked over my shoulder. "Scroll back up to the charter."

*The Knowledge Project affirms that all human perception is bounded by accident, prejudice, and illusion. By isolating a subject from all sensory experience, we free the mind to access truth in its purest form. In so doing, we pledge to exhaust every means by which our species may approach the absolute.*

I glanced up at her. She shrugged and scrunched her face. "Whatever that means, it pays well. Can't hurt to apply."

The interview process was normal. Pleasant. Three important people in suits asking questions about my qualifications between the harsh angles of sleek, beige walls. I told them I'd been a professor back when my language field still mattered.

One of them leaned forward. A young blonde woman, eyes staring through me. "Understand this won't be a typical translation project," she said. "We don't know if the subject will ever speak."

"What do you want me to do?" I asked.

"Listen and wait. Find a pattern. Translate anything you hear for us."

“Why are we doing this?”

“Look around you. Society hasn’t had a major scientific breakthrough in a hundred years. If we’re limited by our own perception—”

“We need to move beyond it,” I finished for her.

When they offered me the job in the summer of 3085, I took it without considering anything other than my wife, the hunger in our bellies, and our desire to start a family. This was our path out. I couldn’t predict where this would lead, but nothing else registered amidst my desperation.

\* \* \*

When the project began, we overlooked the ethics of condemning someone to a lifetime of pure nothingness. I was blinded by the mundane day-to-day tasks of filing, categorizing, and editing reports on the progress, or lack thereof. The government-appointed committee overseeing the project assured me that, granted enough time, the subject would utter statements of such metaphysical profundity that the sun of understanding would rise, exposing truths long buried in shadow. But I was simply happy making a living.

The committee weathered protests and lawsuits levied by activists, saying enlightenment would absolve guilt. But people’s memories are short, and the protests have long since faded, muted by our newfound affluence: one day’s cause, another day’s status quo. At times, I find myself wishing they’d won.

I listened patiently for a century but found no intelligible noises in the subject’s isolation. I grew unbearably bored. I can still hear the muted thud of the oak desk as I tapped it with my finger across idle hours, attention only half-tuned to the headset cinched tight around my ears.

Our charter pledged to awaken the mind from dogmatic slumber, but I watched the atrophied figure rot in a vast, barren sphere at the edge of our solar system, face contorting in unnatural ways. Could someone who never knew companionship be lonely? In my more empathetic moments, I was certain they could.

Pleading tones drenched their nonsensical utterances. On a few occasions, I almost released them, even though this would violate my oath. Once, my finger hovered, shaking above the emergency switch that would eject them to Earth—a measure designed to preserve the investment in the face of catastrophe. The glow of the monitor bathed me in blue light as I looked at their pitiful face. The subject’s features were barely recognizable as human, with clumps of hair floating beside them. I imagined their first gulp of real air, no longer fueled by the nano-nutrients of their sphere.

But I didn't dare address their suffering to the committee, unable to bear the thought of endless remediations with human resources and mountains of paperwork. In our world of immortality, an infinite performance review makes the subject's isolation enviable.

So, I tried to justify my pain by doing the most unthinkable thing one can do at work: I made a decision. Because I realized one subject alone could never form a method of communication. We could listen for another thousand years, to be left with only strings of unfiltered sound, never sharpened against the blade of understanding. Never cut down by mutual recognition.

I recommended a second subject to the indeterminate life of vacancy. Knowing full well I'd double the suffering, I convinced myself that success could make it meaningful. I even assured myself the first subject would appreciate the company. The truth is that my boredom was overwhelming me, and I wanted something to do.

As with the first, the committee birthed them into the distant void. Again, I waited, and I listened, watching the fetus they'd wrested from the womb blossom in a bath of vaporized hormones, crying for a mother they'd never know—a mother whose only crime was wanting a child outside of the lottery. I suppressed my own tears, and eventually, they gave up. Another century passed with only the unintelligible expulsions of involuntary sound, compulsive babble, and unpatterned chaos. I told myself they were not conscious. No pain, no desperation, no thought.

Most considered the project a failure. A cultural oddity, maintained only as a symbol of our willingness to search every nook and cranny of the universe, as if the effort excused our lack of progress. Nobody wrote articles about us. Nobody protested. Nobody even considered the subjects as people. Neither loved nor hated. The committee's lofty task had been forgotten, save for the cursory explanation teenagers got during their civics class—the quest for the noumenal world, reduced to a line on a chalkboard. My efforts to make it meaningful had failed.

Then, in the fall of 3279, nearly two hundred years after the project's inception, I heard it. A call. A response. Each was amplified by nano-microphones floating in their sphere.

It was barely recognizable as language at first, but it was ordered. Not the pure cacophony I'd heard for two hundred years. And little by little, it grew into a structure of shared semantics, a pattern revealing something I could not yet comprehend.

This slightest sliver of success felt like a gift. I began believing in our project, fueled by a sense of purpose and optimism for the future. I celebrated with my

wife. I can still recall the flowing blue dress she wore to dinner, and the glint in her eyes as I explained my discovery. She was proud of me.

I spent the next thirty years forming an alphabet to represent each phonetic unit, calculating their frequency, and structuring them into a syntax that operated more like a complex algebra than a natural language. Perhaps I wasn't observing torture, but enlightenment. My conscience relaxed for the first time in a long time. I mapped a semantic structure and transcribed the first statement, fingers clacking furiously at the keyboard as I translated it into our alphabet.

*Achacattugatta repriamanamairper stochachusta ramanaramnaraman*

More came quickly. Over the fifty years following, I filled pages with strings of dialogue from outside shared reality. The earliest exchanges were simple verbal repetitions. An agreement of terms and pronunciation. Through this agreement, they built a referent to the self, now recognized as they who had not said what was heard. In a sense, they created each other.

Their conversation grew more complex, revealing itself in an unbelievably vivid explication of space and time.

*Now* folded into *there*, *here* linked with *then*, and *before* looped into a harmonious dance with *where*. Our language failed me in translating these concepts. Though they have no concept of size, duration, color, or volume, they understood with greater clarity the frozen nature of each moment, each string of changes inexorably connected by causal links bound to the deterministic nature of reality.

When I presented my translations to the committee, they either did not understand or refused to acknowledge anything beyond material significance. They took what was useful. Engineers used their theories to update topological models, creating efficient manifold representations of planets, allowing high-efficiency water dispersion. Planets could be terraformed at exponential speed for a fraction of the cost using the updated models.

Within a few years, affordable, spacious living was available to all—an enormous step up from the grottoes and slums in which many of us spent our long lives rotting. The confined, bare walls of my residence were replaced with a vast, open atrium that flowed into a kitchen bursting with pastels and deep umbers.

“This is beautiful,” my wife said, peering out our large window along the wall. Her silhouette played against the city lights dotting the horizon below. She turned to face me.

“If we ever win the birth lottery, this would be a great place to raise a child.”

I agreed as her body folded into mine. For the first time in a long while, we weren't afraid.

No one may remember the birth lottery. You can thank our subjects for that.

I knew their language promised more, though my interest remained academic. I transcribed the text at work, then went home to eat dinner with my wife. I took a passage in their native tongue with me one time, a paragraph another, sometimes staying up into the evening to pore over them. Late nights grew into later nights. The further I read, the more pulled I felt to comprehend the things I could not transcribe in our alphabet. Aspects of reality that the committee could never understand.

The subjects' conversations became revelatory. It spoke of the intangible foundations of reality with the precision of a carpenter describing a desk, each process placed in stark relief, pulled from the flow of sight, sound, and touch.

The new, granular understanding of reality allowed the committee to calculate spacetime gradients at atomic scales, paving the way for precision farming, every nutrient timed perfectly with every square inch of ecosystem. They built massive farm satellites. Every citizen could have the best food available.

I felt we'd obtained enough. It was time to begin introducing stimuli, integrating the subjects into the physical world. But The Knowledge Project had grown heavier with institutional weight. Each time I added my suggestions to the ethics reviews, they were lost beneath mounds of operational adjustments and coding procedures. By the time I readied a report, the required format would be changed, and I would be forced to start over.

Besides, the committee reminded me, I wanted a child. Only working adults were allowed in the lottery. I couldn't afford to have the project shut down. So, I kept listening, and my mind drowned in their concepts—revelations no mind was meant to understand. My ability to grasp the now-limiting world of forms around me slipped in subtle ways.

Nobody noticed how my thoughts drifted during conversations, or how my eyes turned from the sight of a sunset, hoping to submerge my intellect in the truths empiricism could never reveal. Once, walking home, I heard the whisper of their utterances in the howl of wind and tried to follow it through the boundaries of space.

What once mattered to me became irrelevant. Even the night my wife gave me the greatest news of all, it drifted by unnoticed.

"We've been chosen," she said as she nestled against me on our sofa.

I barely looked up from my papers. She placed her hand over mine. It felt like a shadow casting itself upon my thoughts, an intrusion of external on internal.

"Chosen?" I asked, still reading.

She pulled my face toward hers.

"The birth lottery." Her smile wavered slightly at my indifference, but I quickly feigned emotions I no longer believed in.

I smiled at our ultrasounds, rubbed her knee as they told us it was a girl. Just like I'd always wanted. Still, I couldn't go on pretending science held the keys to reality, chained as it was to our minds' interpretations.

I hoped our daughter would snap me out of it, readjust me to the illusion. But she didn't. On the night she was born, I rolled the soft, woven swaddle around her shoulders and looked into her eyes. I saw only my representation of a person looking back at me. Her deeper existence lay hidden behind a veil of impressions.

Then at work, I heard their first equations. Mathematical representations of infinity and absence, which made our calculus and computations of recursive series seem as concrete as the integers. Their modal, multi-dimensional logics held a statement and its negation without contradiction. Necessity and impossibility, truth and falsity, mingled within the same phenomena alongside myriad other states lost in the concrete sensorium of practical life.

The committee used the new equations to flatten and bend space itself, allowing travel across vast distances. Mankind colonized beyond the solar system, creating new, bountiful Earth-like planets. Birthing restrictions were lifted, and the lottery abolished. Every citizen was allowed a family without risk of overcrowding.

My fate, too, was altered. I came home one evening to find my wife's bags packed beside our front door. Staring at me with expectant eyes and our daughter cradled tight in her arms, a tear trickled down her left cheek.

"You barely sleep. You're never home. I don't even know who you are anymore." Her voice cracked as she spoke.

I'd seen this moment already. She was right. How could she understand home meant nothing to me anymore? I knew she wanted me to say something. To ask her to stay. But I no longer believed in the distinctions of space or time, of here and now.

The thud of the door slamming behind her as she walked out felt like a tautology. Who was I to interfere?

Without my wife to temper my behavior, I forced my ethical recommendations on our executive, report format be damned.

"Can't be done," he said, reading the email without taking his eyes off the screen.

He adjusted his tie, shifting back into his seat. "We've been learning too much. Our population is booming. We can't halt our advancements again or we'll end up where we were before."

"They've served their purpose," I insisted.

Turning to me, his eyes went wide in concern.

"Listen . . . are you doing okay? You look like you haven't slept in—"

"I'm fine."

He paused, then raised his hand slightly, his palm pushing toward me, as if pressing me back.

“Where would they go? They’re not in pain. I assure you, our best psychiatrists have assured us that they’ve become acclimated. Why don’t you take a vacation? Nobody will notice if you don’t listen for one week. It could do you some good.”

I scoffed. More bureaucratic indifference masquerading as concern. But he would not budge.

I’d come too far in my understanding to take a vacation. Besides, maybe he was right. Maybe they weren’t suffering, and I was saving humanity.

Managing discrete objects became unbearable as boundaries evaporated into arbitrary concepts. The world around me blurred into an amorphous shifting. As I reached for my coffee cup each morning, the distinction between it, my table, and the floor eroded. Causation became mutual transformation. Identity was no longer singular, but an infinite chain of moment-bound differentiation connected by imaginary strands.

Still, I could work. In some ways, this unraveling made my interpretations clearer, more tuned to the rhythm of their speech. A melody revealed itself through headphones that now felt permanent. They were not speaking. They were singing. A symphony of reality. A fugue that spanned two hundred years. Patterns so complex, arranged in so many dimensions, that they only now revealed themselves to my ever-attentive ears. It harmonized with the fundamental laws of nature, tapped unfiltered emotion, and dissolved logic.

I wept in waves of pure feeling. In that song, I found truth.

I’d been wrong. They had not seen reality directly, but through unbearable suffering were driven to create something beyond representation. In the absence of the world, they painstakingly mapped the cage of perception, and through its negation, found truth—the very structure of being itself. The song was not a description of unfiltered experience, but their key to escape the cognitive prison, and in that escape, penetrating what our senses could never reveal.

In essence, they reached the absolute, but by a different path. A torturous path so brutal that their motivation to flee exceeded the sum of all individual will that came before them. I had inflicted horrors beyond reason, and it led to beauty beyond possibility. Was I a monster, or a liberator?

Upon this recognition came a terrible reckoning. I could no longer remain as I was. In contrast to the music, the world around me took on the form of a grotesque carcass, its limbs butchered and rearranged in horrible ways.

I often wonder about those two floating. The ages they’ve spent in pure cognition. Have they understood this beauty? What has been the cost of this knowledge? Do they take joy in their song? Do emotions make sense without a

stimulus? No matter how deeply I understand their music, I know I will never truly have their experience. The shroud remains draped over my eyes.

I tried convincing the committee of our evils, but they claim I went mad. My detractors claimed I invented these ideas, painting my personal guilt onto a blank canvas of signs and symbols. I urged them to understand, but they never will. They say releasing the subjects now, bombarding them with phenomena, would be crueler than their isolation—that considering the action shows how far gone my mind is.

The courts accepted the committee's accusations. They took my "madness" as proof of unfitness, and with that proof, they took my daughter.

My wife, my family, my friends—all have now long since left, unable to endure my repeated lapses into the discovered language. In whispers, I've heard of plans to remove me from the project entirely. But such measures won't be necessary.

Soon I'll complete my final task. I'm headed to the tank. The committee has dismissed me so completely that nobody noticed when my ship left Earth's atmosphere, blending in with the now-common commuter ships.

I see the boundary of the sphere in the distance. My time has come.

I dock my ship in the entrance. The air hisses as it's released into vacuum. I search for the button to re-pressurize as the door closes behind me. My suit clinks against the ground as I take it off, dropping beside the two I brought for the subjects. My hand pauses at the main entrance as my mind wanders to my wife and daughter. Will they understand what I've done? It doesn't matter.

I kick myself into the void, naked body spiraling as if flowing through a vast ocean. It's quiet. Movement is slow. The air barely provides resistance, but I push on, swimming through the open darkness. All bodily sensations dissolve. Only the withered figure growing in the distance reminds me I'm moving, illuminated by my flashlight.

They writhe when I grab them, groaning as I kick back to the entrance. Now they are the ones without words—nothing in their language can communicate these bodily sensations. My heart drops. I should have done this years ago. Centuries ago. I can't tell them it will be okay. Their semantics express no emotion, no concrete things at all. They are back to the incoherent babble I heard in the early days. They will have to start over again. Tears slide down my cheek.

Their skin is slick and soft as I dress them in the suit, their movements awkward and unpredictable, as if shocked by their own body. I see them sitting still in the pressurization chamber, exhausted as I retrieve the second. They greet each other, their weak bodies struggling to embrace, recoiling, then reaching for one another again. I swear I see them smile—the first expression I've ever seen cross their faces.

I don my own suit, depressurize the cabin, and nestle them into the ship, telling myself they are forming new words even now. It's programmed to take them back to the nearest city on a beautiful world with two moons and colorful foliage.

I strip again, this time sealing myself inside the tank naked, praying that perception is as revelatory to them as its erasure will be to me.

I had pledged to exhaust every means by which to approach the absolute, and so I sacrifice myself. Listen, and hear me sing as they did, in the darkness without end.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Alex Goldberg** is a visual artist and writer whose work explores themes of perception, identity, and the limits of reason. He often uses metaphysical horror and ethical ambiguity to explore transcendence or unraveling, blurring the line between the two. More of his work can be found at [alexgoldbergart.com](http://alexgoldbergart.com), published on *Daily Philosophy*, and is forthcoming in the *Creature Feature* anthology from *Inkybones Press* (2026) and *After Dinner Conversations*.

# OUR CHILD

*by Josh Pearce*

Our child is gone  
she is leaving home.

Why would she do this to us?

I remember  
when we were as stars  
dancing in our  
own moonlight

and the Sun held up  
ice chips and gemstones  
in a chandelier to look  
at itself from every direction

while Cassini ran fingers  
through night's hair  
like shepherd moons.

We never thought of ourselves  
but now the Sun's mirrors  
are growing brighter  
and humanity is far away.

What did we do wrong?

It's too late to start over.  
Our surfaces are dry,  
our atmospheres gone.

We sacrificed most of our lives.  
We can never grow them again.

What could we have done?

Nothing to do now  
but wait for the end.

So,

“Embrace me,” said Moon.  
“It would destroy us,” said Earth.

“Then just dance with me again  
like we did at her birth.”

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Josh Pearce** has published more than two hundred stories, reviews, and poems in a wide variety of magazines including *Analog*, *Asimov's*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Bourbon Penn*, *Cast of Wonders*, *Clarkesworld*, *Diabolical Plots*, *Kaleidotrope*, *Locus*, *Nature*, *On Spec*, and *Weird Horror*. Find more of his writing at [fictionaljosh.com](http://fictionaljosh.com). One time, Ken Jennings signed his chest.

# I AM NOT YOUR EX-WIFE

*by Arden Baker*

He's yelling at me again, spittle flying from his foaming mouth over cracked lips and a bottle-brush beard. I am glad he is safely behind the glass. He's apoplectic; I can see veins throbbing on his balding temple where wisps of hair from his comb-over have tried freeing themselves from the middle-age rage that they are witness to.

It helps to focus on the little details when they get angry like this. Keeps you sane, keeps you calm. Keeps you from watching the clock, too—they hate it when you glance at the clock.

This one is called Jim. I've known a few Jims: nice Jims, boring Jims, ambitious Jims. I've even slept with one when I was in uni. This one, however, is the worst Jim I've ever met—and he knows it.

That's why he pays good money for surrogate therapy.

Us surrogates don't get much background on the client when they come to us. We get information about our double, though. Mine is a young woman named Maria, some poor lass who had a few drinks with Worst Jim and ended up in his bed. At some point, she came to her senses and left him, and he's upset.

She's pretty, this Maria. I tried to do my makeup to look more like her, just like every session, but there's only so much I can do. I push my skirt hem down and hope he doesn't pay too much attention to my legs. The glass pane does the rest, projecting a soft image over the top of me. Worst Jim gets to see Pretty Maria in the flesh, and he gets to scream and yell and rage out his frustrations at her. All I need to do is sit here and listen and respond, for an hour, and then get paid.

I don't know how much Worst Jim forks out for the pleasure, but I know it's much more than what trickles into my account. Still, having a shit job is better than having no job. My Acting for Screen degree was made redundant once the gen-AI kicked in and no one paid for understudies.

It must be a *lot* of money, though. Worst Jim has a fancy watch, one of those old analogue timepieces. He doesn't even bother winding it to the correct time. The strap squeezes into his soft flesh like a rubber band. I satisfy myself by imagining some horrible thrombosis in his digits.

The wall clock goes off with a soft twinkling that slowly escalates until Worst Jim gets the message. He runs a flabby hand over the errant hairs on his head, rubs the spit from his beard, and storms out.

I count to ten, then get up and head out the door behind me. We have a separate exit for surrogates, and it deposits me into a quiet bluestone alley behind an old Malaysian restaurant. It smells like cigarette smoke and char kway teow. My stomach rumbles. I check my account and wait a few minutes in case the funds magically appear ahead of schedule, but they don't.

I pull my raincoat around me as the skies darken and hurriedly make my way home.

\* \* \*

Ilya is already sprawled on the couch, a bowl of half-eaten cereal balanced precariously on the edge of the coffee table while she scrolls her feed. She's my forever-roommate, with me through shit boyfriends and auditions and, eventually, surrogate therapy shifts.

"Busy day?" I ask. My keys land on our scratched countertop. The liner is peeling something fierce. I make a mental note to add it to the list of repairs I should send to our international and perennially unavailable landlord.

"You know it," Ilya says. She puts the phone down and languorously rolls onto her front, propping her head up in her hands. "Had Clive this morning. God, that man can bitch about anything. How was Old Faithful?"

"Same as usual. A bit meaner, actually. I don't think he's getting laid much."

"But he's *so handsome*."

That earns her a raincoat thrown at her head. She giggles, then sighs, removing the wet polyvinyl and sitting up. "You feeling okay?"

I shrug. "I'm fine, just a bit drained. And a bit starving."

Ilya grimaces. "We have two cereal boxes left until tomorrow if you want to split them?"

I think about it. "You got a cigarette instead?"

"Feeling fancy, are we?" She reaches into her bag on the coffee table and pulls out a sad, limp cigarette and a lighter. "Knock yourself out."

Officially our apartment is a non-smoking area. But I light up anyway and take a drag, feeling the nicotine prickle in my chest. A weight lifts. I plonk myself down on the floor, grab the metal ashtray we stole from the pub, and exhale.

\* \* \*

No one truly wants therapy—they want closure. And for many people, closure is righteous violence.

For one of my regulars, a sallow-faced man named Samuel, there's an emphasis on the righteousness of it all. He clutches his crucifix tightly when he looks at me, the revenant ghost of his ex-wife Lydia appearing, the testament to the faults in his faith. The first few sessions we had were relatively quiet—he admitted that the affair was his fault, how he knew adultery was a mortal sin . . . it looked like surrogate therapy might be working.

But then it dragged on and he kept scratching the itch to see Lydia again—Me-Lydia, not the one who had divorced him and blocked him on every platform before filing a restraining order. Before long, he was projecting. And then he was yelling, spitting vitriol deposits onto the tempered glass, and cursing me like a TV preacher.

Today he talks about how he's seen me with another man, out there on the street. A foreigner. He really doesn't like that. He's not racist, he claims, he just doesn't like to see Me-Lydia mixing with their kind. There's something paternal about it before he inevitably twists it all around and tells me I'm a whore.

*Yeah, mate, you're paying me by the hour.* I can't say that though, so I try to placate him by playing a conciliatory wife. It doesn't work, and I'm left waiting out the clock while another angry man screams at me.

I head outside, hoping and praying I've left one last cigarette in my handbag. No dice. My phone buzzes: BestHelp, my corporate overlord.

"Hi, Eliza, how are you doing?"

*Is this going to be a complaint?* "Can't complain. You?"

"That's great, Eliza." The woman on the other end uses my name in a way that makes me feel strangely violated. "You might notice your pay packet this week is a little lower than the last."

*Oh.* "Why's that?"

"There are new regulations requiring stricter insurance policies. This does mean your coverage extends to include fifteen percent of the upfront cost of any dental surgeries you request while working with BestHelp." She almost sounds like she thinks this is a good deal. Almost.

"Ah . . . can I see the policy breakdown?"

"Absolutely, it's all available through our employee portal. Have a great afternoon!"

\* \* \*

In a nothing-hour between sessions, I wander down the strip mall and pretend I'm a normal person.

Then I see Worst Jim standing outside a café, the kind selling ten-dollar long blacks and has earnest chalkboard slogans about mindfulness. He's wearing a checkered shirt straining at the buttons, sleeves rolled like he's about to do something meaningful with his hands. He's laughing—laughing—with some other guy.

The sound catches me off guard. I've only ever heard him angry, seen him red-faced behind the glass, spitting and ranting at the ghost of a woman. Now he looks . . . human. It's worse than the rage.

I freeze. For a moment I forget that my hair is different. So too are my clothes and the way I carry myself. I forget that he shouldn't recognize me because I'm not her. I'm no one. But my stomach still drops like I've done something wrong. I pull my coat tighter and cross the street, keeping my face down.

When I glance back, he's still talking, no sign he's seen me. Relief comes in a thin trickle, but it doesn't last. The thought lingers—the glass isn't enough anymore. The work is seeping into everything, staining the edges of my life. It's in my dreams, my skin, the way I hold myself when I'm out in public. I can't tell where Maria ends and I begin.

When I arrive home, I feel I'm still being watched.

\* \* \*

We're eating instant noodles again. Payday was yesterday, but after rent and utilities, the fridge is back to its usual echo. Ilya sits cross-legged on the counter, slurping straight from the bowl.

"So," she says through a mouthful, "you hear about the new BestHelp pilot?"

I shake my head.

"They're offering a pay bump if you opt into the 'Trust Program.' No more glass—apparently the clients respond better to 'authentic environments.'" She does air quotes with her chopsticks. "They say it's all safe. Cameras everywhere, panic buttons, the works. Double pay for compliance."

My appetite dies a little. "They're removing the glass?"

"Yeah. I know it sounds insane. But Ying says she signed the new client agreement this morning and they gave her an instant raise. You should've seen the grin on her face."

Ilya laughs but it doesn't reach her eyes. She's pretending it's a joke. I can tell she's already decided to do it.

"You really think it's safe?" I ask.

"Safe enough. Cameras, security protocols, and, like, what else am I supposed to do? My savings are at zero, and I can't go back to hospo. My back's still fucked from the café."

I want to tell her not to. I want to tell her I have dreams where the glass shatters and they climb through. But the words don't come. She needs the money. We both do.

Later, she clicks the checkbox on the new client agreement while I sit beside her, pretending to scroll my feed. The little pop-up says *Welcome to the Trust Program. You're making a difference.*

She exhales, shuts the laptop. "See? Easy."

I nod, but my stomach twists. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I picture the glass disappearing, the empty space between her and them. And I wonder how much that's worth.

\* \* \*

It turns out it's worth a black eye, a chipped tooth, and a trip to the clinic.

Ilya grins through it all, even as her swollen face weeps. She called me instead of the ambulance, and we take a rideshare to the hospital—cheaper that way, she said. Her hand won't stop shaking. She keeps trying to make jokes about how the guy was smaller than he looked through the glass, how she probably scared him more than he scared her, and how she's seen worse in drama school. But when she closes her mouth, the tears start leaking through the cracks.

By the time we reach triage, she's lolling in and out of consciousness. The nurse tries to keep her awake, but Ilya's voice keeps slipping away from her. The only lucid question she manages before they sedate her is whether or not she'll get paid for the last session.

I stay with her while they run her through the scans. The waiting room smells like antiseptic and overripe fruit. The TV is playing some true crime documentary about workplace safety. I stare at the screen and try not to think.

When they finally let me see her again, she's small against the sheets, eyes rimmed red. She starts crying before I say a word.

"I can't do this anymore," she whispers. "I thought I could handle it, but I can't. I only wanted to make rent."

"You'll find something else," I say. Because that's what you're meant to do, even though we both know it's a lie.

"There isn't anything else," she says. "Not for us." She presses the back of her hand against her eyes and sobs until the nurse comes asking me to leave.

Clive, in his infinite generosity, transfers her the full session rate—he doesn't want legal trouble. BestHelp calls five minutes later to say they'll match the payment if Ilya agrees to forgo prosecution.

Outside the hospital, rain needles down. I stand under the awning for a long time, watching the streetlights blur and smear. I can't tell if it's the rain or my

eyes that are stinging. It feels like there's no boundary anymore—no separation between the sessions and everything else. The inside is leaking out, and the outside is pushing in. I feel like I'm always behind the glass, even when I'm not.

That's when my phone rings.

"Hi, Eliza," says a smooth and soft voice. My handler, the head agent for my region. "I wanted to check in after the incident. How are you holding up?"

"I'm fine," I lie. "Just tired."

"I understand. This work can be . . . draining. But we're piloting a new program for surrogates in your position. It's called a Detachment Implant—helps compartmentalize the emotional spillover between sessions and real life. It's important to maintain a healthy work-life balance."

I don't say anything. I just listen to the rain.

"It's painless," she continues. "Just a small neural modulator. You'll still be yourself, only . . . able to separate work and life more clearly. We've had excellent feedback from early participants."

I ask how much it costs.

"Oh, no upfront fees," she says brightly. "We just deduct it in installments from your pay. You won't even notice."

I try to tell her I don't want any part of it. But then I think about Ilya's face, her shaking hands, the way she said there's nothing else. I think about Worst Jim laughing in the sunlight.

"Fine," I say. "Sign me up."

"Excellent. I'll book you in for the procedure. You'll feel better after this, I promise."

The line dies with a quiet click.

I stand there a little longer, letting the rain soak through my coat. For a moment I can almost feel clean again. Then I remember the deduction.

\* \* \*

The detachment system works better than I expect.

Installation itself is unremarkable—a white room, a humming chair, and a technician who never looks me in the eye. They patch the back of my neck with a thin adhesive film, feed a few wires into a slender port behind my ear, then tell me to count backward from ten. I don't make it to seven.

When I wake there's no scar, no pain, no anything. Just a faint buzz at the edge of awareness, like the moment before a yawn. The agent calls it a neural veil: an adaptive implant calibrating itself over time.

It learns from my basal rhythms, she says. Also reads my dream sequences while I sleep and establishes an emotional baseline. The idea is that the system

will know me better than I do—enough to decide when I should feel and when I shouldn't.

At that moment, it feels like nothing's changed. Then, the next morning, I go into my booth and something inside me . . . clicks.

The session passes like a slideshow: Worst Jim's mouth moving, the spittle against the glass, my own voice saying the words I've been trained to say—but I feel none of it. The hour goes by in what feels like minutes.

My mind flicks back automatically when I leave, and it's like stepping out of a fog. I stretch, breathe, and feel *fine*. By the end of the week, I'm doubling my sessions. There's no need to decompress anymore—no need for cigarettes on the balcony, no long baths just to remember what it's like to be Eliza instead of someone else. I work, I rest, I eat, I sleep. It's efficient.

BestHelp loves the new me. My metrics are through the roof. Clients report high authenticity. I don't dream about them anymore; I don't fantasize at all, actually. I don't even flinch when I see someone who looks like Jim on the train.

The agent checks in once, to make sure I'm integrating smoothly. I tell her it's perfect.

And it is; I can do more sessions each day. I can take the better-paying clients, the rough ones, the long-haul cases. I don't feel drained afterward. My account balance is finally crawling upward.

Could even save up, I think, almost laughing at the absurdity.

\* \* \*

The glitch hits on Sunday afternoon.

Ilya's home, curled on the couch with a hot water bottle and a blanket around her shoulders. Her eye's almost healed, but the bruising's still yellow and faintly green like a fading sunset. She's scrolling her feed, muttering about how no one reads anymore unless it's fed through an algorithm. I'm half-listening from the kitchenette, stirring instant soup and pretending we're normal people again.

She laughs at something on her screen. "You remember Clive? Guess who's suing BestHelp for 'emotional negligence'? Can you sue for that?"

I start to answer, but my mouth feels wrong—like my tongue's turned to clay. The air folds around me. There's a soft pop in my ears rushing like static, and then—nothing.

"Eliza?" Ilya calls. "You okay?"

I turn toward her. She looks smaller than usual, wrapped in her blanket, lips cracked from the cold. Her face moves—concern, then worry—but it doesn't land. It's like watching a playback on mute.

“I’m fine,” I hear myself say. My voice sounds distant, like it’s coming through the speakers in the therapy booth.

She frowns. “You don’t look fine.”

I blink, and she blurs slightly, edges softening like a low-res projection. My vision sharpens again, and for a second, I swear I can see the glass—the faint shimmer of it—between us.

Ilya keeps talking. Something about quitting the job, about moving out of the city. I nod in the right places. The detachment hums quietly in the back of my skull, adjusting itself. I can feel it parsing the rhythm of my heartbeat, the pulse in my temples, the shape of my breathing.

“Eliza?” Her voice sounds far away now.

Then, suddenly, I realize what’s happened. I reach up and press my fingers to the spot behind my ear. But there’s no button, no switch, no off. Just skin.

“I think—” but the words don’t form right. The world around me dulls, the colors dimming to a flatter gradient. My thoughts rearrange into quiet, orderly lines.

She touches my arm and I feel it only faintly, as though through layers of fabric and time.

Somewhere deep inside, a part of me tries to panic. But the system catches it before it reaches the surface.

Everything is fine. Everything is manageable. Everything is contained.

\* \* \*

The agent calls the next morning.

Her voice is syrup-smooth, like always. The kind of voice designed to make bad news sound palatable. “Hi, Eliza, I read your incident report. How are you feeling today?”

“I—” pause. The system hums faintly under my skin, like a tinnitus I can almost ignore. “It switched on when I was at home. I wasn’t in session.”

A soft sigh on the other end. “That’s not normal,” she says. The kind of *not normal* that means not ideal, but not disastrous either. “You’re not the only one, though. We’ve had cases of overextension in the last rollout. It’s just a software issue.”

“So it’s . . . a glitch?”

“A compatibility mismatch. The neural veil adapts to your rhythms, remember? Sometimes it overlearns. But don’t worry—we can patch that.” Her voice is candy-pink and saccharine. “If you come in tomorrow we’ll do an upgrade. Should only take an hour, and on company time. You’ll be paid for the appointment.”

I can hear the click of a keyboard, the smooth precision of someone who's done this too many times.

"Will it hurt?" I ask.

"Of course not. Your mind won't be aware. You'll wake up refreshed and rebalanced."

"Okay," I say finally.

"Perfect. I'll send the confirmation. See you at ten sharp."

When the line goes dead, I stare at my reflection in the black screen of my phone. There's a faint shimmer along the edge of my face, like a heat mirage.

I blink, and it's gone.

\* \* \*

The session room smells of antiseptic and sweat. My reflection stares back at me from the glass—except it's not the soft projection of someone else anymore. Just me, pale and dazed, hair clinging damply to my temples. There's a bruise blooming along my jaw, dark and tender. Two more ring my wrists like bracelets.

I flex my fingers. They tremble.

For a moment, I think I fell or slipped. Maybe I imagined it. But the chair's been knocked sideways, the table shoved against the wall. The clock above the door says my session ended twenty minutes ago. I can't remember a second of it.

A low, thin breath drags itself out of my throat. Then another that's quicker, harder. The walls close in. My chest tightens. The panic comes, sudden and huge, like a riptide.

I reach for the implant instinctively, my fingers pressing against the base of my skull, but it's already there—awake before I am. A bright, cold pulse spreading outward, a static hum smoothing everything flat. My breathing slows. My vision flickers, and then—

—when I open my eyes, I'm home.

The lights are low, the air smelling faintly of cigarette ash and instant coffee. My coat is hung neatly on the rack. My boots are dry. The clock says it's past nine. I blink a few times, disoriented. There's a message on my phone: *Session complete. Payment received.*

I check my account. The money's there. A full-rate session. I have no memory of it.

The hum behind my ear is louder now, like it's pleased with itself.

Ilya's sitting at the table, her laptop open, face half-lit by the glow. "Rough day?"

I open my mouth then close it again. "I think I—" I rack my brains. "Did we . . . talk about an upgrade?"

“Jesus, Eliza. You should’ve said no. It’s not a patch, it’s a full-sense cutoff. Like anaesthesia for your mind.”

I stare at her. “What?”

“They’ve been rolling it out quietly,” she says. “A friend of mine in the next district got it last month. You don’t just stop feeling—you stop being. For the whole session. They call it ‘consciousness exclusion.’” She says the words like they taste bad. “You could be sitting there for hours and you wouldn’t know what happened. *Anything* could happen.”

My stomach turns. “But . . . I got paid.”

I sit down slowly, feeling the bruise on my cheek stretch. Ilya’s looking at me, but I can’t tell if she’s angry or scared. Maybe both.

“I don’t remember leaving work,” I whisper.

The hum in my head deepens, almost like it’s listening.

I want to cry, or scream, or something. But the impulse never makes it out of me. It just fades, smoothed away before it forms.

The soup on the stove begins boiling over, hissing at us softly. Neither of us move.

\* \* \*

I realize it slowly, the way you realize a dream has turned on you—too late to wake up. The air feels close, warm with the heat of another person’s breath.

Worst Jim is in front of me. No projection, no shimmer, no flicker of Maria over my skin. Just me, sitting in a narrow room that smells of sweat, disinfectant, and him.

He’s older than I remember, or maybe just heavier, his eyes two pits of exhausted fury. His hands twitch at his sides like they don’t know what to do without something to grip.

“I thought you were gone,” he says. His voice cracks on the last word.

My mouth is dry. “Jim, the session’s just started. Please—”

He steps closer. His face trembles. “You don’t get to walk away from me again.”

The panic flickers somewhere deep, instinctive—but the implant dulls it instantly, flooding my mind with that cold hum. My thoughts fall quiet. I can feel my heartbeat flatten into a calm, perfect rhythm.

He reaches for my arm. The contact is electric, sudden, and the bruise on my wrist flares where he grabs it. My breath catches—but the system catches *that*, too, smoothing it out, pressing everything down.

I hear a voice—mine and not mine—say, “It’s okay, Jim. I’m here.”

And then he hits me.

The impact lands like a punctuation mark: Brief. Final. Detached.

My head turns, vision warping at the edges. Somewhere, I know I should fall, or scream, or defend myself. But the world stays orderly, flat, serene.

The implant hums louder, overriding everything—pain, fear, thought—until there's nothing left. My body moves, but I don't feel it.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Arden Baker** is a lapsed translator and writer of short science fiction and fantasy. In his spare time, he drinks overpriced gin, brews mead, plays tabletop RPGs, and runs Meridian Australis, a speculative fiction writing collective. He won the 2024 Aurealis Award for Best Science Fiction Short Story of the Year and was shortlisted for the 2025 Richell Prize.

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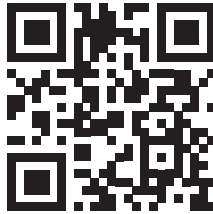
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**Reza Afshar** is a veteran concept artist and illustrator based in Istanbul whose passion is speculative digital painting. He's worked professionally on many video games, animations, and TCGs such as *Flesh and Blood* since 2012.

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