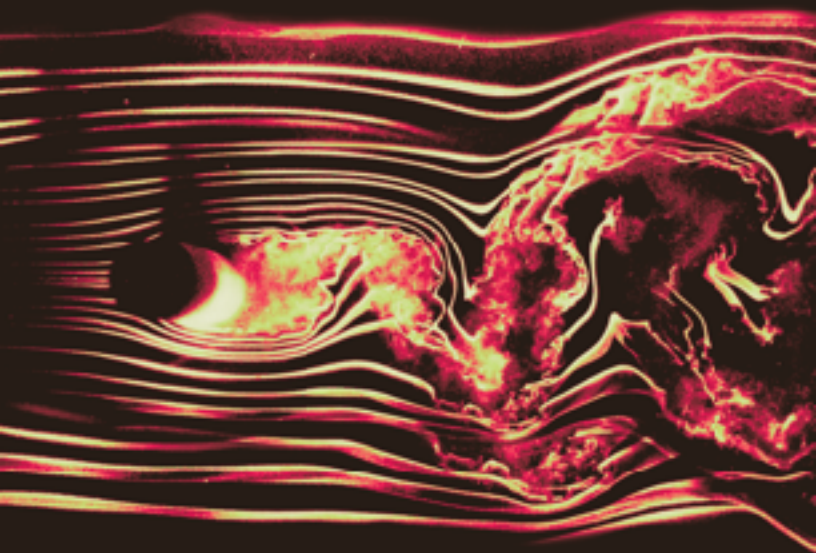


SUMMER CULLING



A COLLECTION OF SHORT HORRORS BY
JON SMITH

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SUMMER
CULLING

VOLUME ONE

BY

JON SMITH

*This collection is dedicated to my mother and father,
without whom I would never have had the opportunity to
rediscover that I enjoy living.*

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THE END

Todd Lund sat in the wooden chair beside the couch in his mother's living room. The blinds were drawn, the room lit only by the television. She had called him in a minute earlier, hadn't told him why. If he asked, it would make her angry, so he just sat there and waited, hands folded in his lap.

She had a fresh pack of cigarettes, and her two-liter of Pepsi was half full. *Maybe she's hungry*, he pondered. It wouldn't be the first time she demanded food after having just eaten. The five-hundred-and-sixty-three pound woman was puffing away at a Red, ashtray resting on her substantial gut. Her sweaty, swollen brow furrowed as she flipped back and forth between channels. Mary Anne Lund grunted, finally turned to look at her son.

Her eyes were yellow, her chins aplenty. Todd's focus flicked down without thinking, checked the ventilator tube that wrapped around her ears and delivered oxygen to her nose, made sure it was snug.

"Lookit," she said, waving a massive arm towards the television. Todd looked. The screen was black. She flipped up and down through the single digit channels twice. A fair number of them weren't broadcasting anything.

"Weird," Todd said, no clue what it meant. "What time is it?"

"The five-a-clock news was suppose ta start couple a minutes ago. FOX, CBS, ABC, NBC. They ain't there. And only two a them're local." His mother was wheezing, but she always did that. The rhythm did seem faster than average, which was deeply concerning to Todd.

"Momma, don't get yerself worked up." She shot him a dirty look at the admonishment.

"Shit ain't right. One channel, sure. But *all* the bigguns? What? There's just no news t'day? An' even if'n them newsboys ain't ready, they'd run Seinfeld or some shit, right?"

She had a point, but Todd didn't think it mattered. She was gonna get her heart going too fast, one thing would lead to another, and a week from now, she'd be right here on the sofa like nothing happened, while Todd would have another fourteen grand in medical bills to worry about. "Momma, please."

Before the woman who lived on the couch could rebuke her child for his insubordinate waggling, staccato horns blared over a rapid chiming. The room lighting up blue with a graphics package. When the three-dimensional globe spun off the screen, the live video wasn't swooping in from the ceiling showing the whole cast of reporters like it usually did. Instead,

the shot was static, and it was tight—too tight—on the one and only Chuck Feller.

“Evening, Greenville.” His chiseled face was deadly serious. It awkwardly filled most of the screen like he’d set the shot up himself, couldn’t adjust it now that they were rolling. He was slightly out of focus. “We apologize for the delay. We hope you are still with us, as this information is incredibly important. We have gone to great lengths to ensure you are receiving this message.” *That’s a weird way to start the news*, Todd thought, intrigued. He leaned forward, squeezed his knees back and forth, a nervous habit.

“Ain’t he juss the sexiest man alive,” Mary Ann asked her son, to which Todd’s automated system replied, “Yes, Momma.”

“I don’t really know where to begin, or how long we’ll have control of the board.” There was a pause. The professional newscaster seemed to melt away, leaning half out of the zoomed-in shot. He who returned to the screen was not a veteran news man, but the *real* Chuck Feller. *He’s scared*, Todd saw. “The second cloud we reported on this morning... it’s much larger than the first.”

Uh oh, Todd thought. Like many people who spent the entirety of their waking life on the internet, he’d recently become obsessed with auroras, coronal mass ejections, plasma, the whole shebang. He knew what this meant.

Two days prior, Earth had been engulfed in a giant cloud of plasma, expelled by The Sun. Though a fairly common occurrence, the ‘coronal mass ejection’ was much larger than average. The last time a storm of this scale had hit our planet was before

electricity was a thing, back in 1859. An English astronomer named Richard Carrington had witnessed the even in real time, as he was actively studying Sun spots when the mass of plasma shot out of our home star. As such, this new storm was being called a 'Carrington Level Event' by all official channels.

Before the storm hit, online fearmongerers had told Todd the world was about to end. *A storm of this scale is going to cause smartphones to explode in people's hands, they said! Every transformer on the planet is going to blow simultaneously, they claimed! The Eiffel Tower is going to look like a goddamn Telsa coil, they lied!* He believed it all, prepared for the end. Faced hard truths about his situation, made even harder choices.

It took sixteen hours for the system-spanning cloud of gas to reach their little blue dot. Todd felt a fool.

There were no explosions. The night's sky went red instead of black, with green and red auroras being seen worldwide, even in the middle of the day. It had rendered GPS entirely unreliable, caused some delays at the airports, but apart from that... nothing major had occurred. Nada.

When the storm passed in another day, the satellites would be fine. Everything would be right as rain.

The apocalypse has been reduced to a fart, one meme said. It was paired with a gif of The Sun ejecting plasma. The rainbow coloring of the scientific footage reduced the cosmic giant down to a simple sphere, the system-spanning cloud just a quick puff. The first reply had been another gif, this one a thermal recording of a man's ass passing wind. They were identical.

Last night, another mass of plasma had been ejected from The Sun, was also on course to cover the Earth. *They told us it was just more of the same*, Todd thought. *Just another cosmic queef.*

“At approximately five-o-eight,” Chuck looked off-camera, then back, “four minutes from now. The world will suddenly be without power. This will not be resolved any time soon, as the infrastructural damage will be substantial. I assure you that this is not a drill, this is not a test, this is the real fucking thing.”

His curse had gone out on the airwaves uncensored. *What the flippin’ heck??* It was all Todd could think. Beside him, his mother scoffed. From her place on the couch, she’d only seen the auroras on tv.

“I repeat, in just a few minutes, the *second* solar storm heading for our planet is going to eliminate all electrical systems across the entire country. The world. There will be no more electricity. There will be no more internet. We must assume that the distribution of other resources like water and gas and food will be heavily impacted. The times ahead are going to be tough.”

“Bullshieht,” Mary Anne said. She stretched the word out like she always did. The sour-faced woman followed her remark by throwing back the large bottle of lukewarm Pepsi, chins bobbing rhythmically as she chugged.

Todd kept his eyes on the television. He couldn’t believe it was actually happening. Suddenly, his leg felt fiery hot. *Oh god, my phone is exploding!* It wasn’t, and his leg was fine. He tossed the device onto the carpet, well away from his crotch.

Chuck delivered an inspiring speech about banding together during hard times. Asked people not to resort to looting. Todd had been to enough Black Fridays at the Greenville mall to know the man was wasting his breath. *Heck, he just gave them all the idea.*

Something behind the camera drew the newsman's attention. *Bang!* When Chuck's eyes returned to the screen, he wasn't a scared human anymore. He was once again a professional, invincible broadcaster doing important and necessary work. To Todd, that had sounded *very much* like a gunshot. *That couldn't have been a gunshot. No way.*

"The last thing we need to report is rather concerning, but I feel it is necessary out of respect for the dead." *The dead?* Chuck steeled himself. "Earlier today, an unauthorized report was sent out by an intern at NASA. The file included the truth about this second CME, but it also held something... sinister. An image, a phrase, we don't know. Whatever it is, the information causes individuals to lose their minds. They are taken by a violent mania." Todd's face scrunched together as he tried to comprehend what he'd just heard.

"We were having an all hands when the report came in. They opened it up on the big screen. I..." Chuck Feller swallowed, shame washing over his features for but a flash. "I went to the bathroom in the middle of reading it. I'm one of the few sane people left in the building." The man's giant face was covered in sweat, glistening in HD. The station had upgraded the resolution of their broadcasts only a month prior.

Todd's face scrunched together as he tried to comprehend what he'd just heard. Chuck deflated like he'd crossed a finish line. The fear returned in droves. "Please pray for me. Please, Lord Jesus, help us in this time of need."

The camera shot was still tight on Chuck's handsome, middle-aged face. Because of this, Todd and Mary Anne were thoroughly surprised when the man's right eyeball exploded from his face and a metal rod appeared through the hole. It dripped a hunk of brain as the tubular object extended toward the camera lens like a 3D movie. The newsman's head flopped out of frame, replaced by a chest and two hands holding what appeared to be a stand of some kind.

Mary Anne began screaming and flailing on the couch. The room shook with the force. It smelled like she'd shit herself. Todd's eyes dropped to the floor. His features went from pinched to slack as his brain shut off, unwilling to deal with the madness any longer. After a moment, he came back to himself, at least partly.

On the screen, the shot had widened. Chuck Feller's impaled skull was resting on the glasstop news desk which was now pooled with blood. The piped legs of the metal stand pressed against the back of his head. It gave the impression they were growing out of Chuck's brain, the whole rod having been pushed through.

Another man was there. He mounted Chuck's corpse like he was playing horsey, grabbed the ends of the metal legs like they were the handlebars of a beach cruiser. He sported mutton chops, a Def Leopard tee and jeans, and a backwards cap over a

mop of salt and pepper hair. He wore a back brace that obscured the lower half of the shirt's graphic and fingerless gloves. His eyes were wide, mouth blowing raspberries. Todd realized the man was making sound effects and looking around the room. *He's playing like he's in a dog fight, flying a plane.* Todd's active mind receded back into itself at the horrific glee being broadcast to thousands of homes across the county. *This isn't real.*

The camera jerked, spun left, away from the violent scene. It stopped on a bright green wall. *That's where they do the weather,* Todd thought, dreamily. As he was unable to look away, he convinced himself the violence he'd just seen was theater. The sound of heels on concrete were a short prelude to Ruby Biggers stepping into frame. She was as beautiful as ever, her bright white, lead anchor smile shining through, despite all the blood matted into her normally voluminous hair. Mary Anne was still wobbling and wailing on the couch beside him.

"Well howdy, Greenville!" The salutation was delivered with the joyful energy and cutesy Southern charm she was known for. Her eyes went wide, her head snapping sideways.

The screen went black, as did the light in the kitchen down the hall. The television crackled with dissipating static electricity. Something exploded out on the street. More than one thing. Mary Anne's voice went up an octave.

The room was dark. Todd looked down at his phone. The black rectangle had yet to explode. He stood, ignored the protests of his mother as he headed for the front door. "Get the bucket and the wipes," she wailed before falling back into a heaving sob.

Outside, Todd discovered a strange addition to the other-worldly sky of green and red. Among the auroras were dozens of perfect rings of black smoke rising up in a grid like pattern across the horizon. He followed the center of the ring directly above him, traced it down to the telephone pole just up the street.

The trash can looking transformer twenty feet up the pole was smoking. He jumped back with a yelp as the dozen or so cables running the length of the street melted apart, fell to the asphalt sizzling. No sparks flew. *Huh*, Todd thought. *I wonder what the Eiffel Tower looks like right now...*

He crossed back over his neighbors' lawns, stepped lightly through the front door. His mother didn't see him pass through the room, her face was buried in the folds of her elbow, body jiggling.

Todd found his room dark, the switches unresponsive. *Gotta check*. He pulled up the blinds, began to pack. He'd come to a decision out on the street. The same one he'd made a few days prior.

Is this really the end of the world? No explosions, no zombies, no flood? Todd pondered the anti-climactic nature of this *supposed* world wide disaster. Then he accidentally recalled the five-o-clock news, the man driving Chuck Feller like a bike, the joy on Ruby Biggers' face. His mind recoiled like he'd touched fire. He did not think of that stuff again.

Eight minutes later, Todd returned to the living room. His mother had been shrieking his name for the better part of five.

“The hell ya gotta backpack on fer??” Todd produced the pistol, placed it just below Momma’s left eye, pulled the trigger without hesitation. Her head barely moved, all the force exiting out the back of her skull. Ignoring the shockwave that rippled down through her mass and wobbled her many folds, it was almost peaceful.

“I love you, Momma.”

Todd was afraid his car wouldn’t start. The forums had gotten a few things right, maybe the stuff about computers in cars was true as well. A knot that had been living in his gut for the better part of three decades unwound itself when the engine came to life.

Todd was finally, finally free. He’d transferred most of the pantry into his trunk. He had a week’s worth of clean underwear. The man who had been a prisoner his entire life was ready for this new, exciting chapter. *Maybe I’ll meet a girl.* Todd couldn’t help but smile.

He placed the thick three-ring binder on the passenger seat. It was chock full of survival tips he’d printed and organized back at the height of his panic a few days prior. Back when he’d first decided to kill Momma. Tucked into the plastic sleeve of the cover was a hand-drawn anime version of himself holding a pair of daggers. The words ‘Todd’s Guide to the Apocalypse’ were written in ornamental block lettering above and below the muscular avatar.

Todd took out his phone, mounted it to the dash. He opened the map app, tried to search ‘nearest beach’. *No signal,*

right. He took a moment to laugh at himself. *Guess I need to find a real map.* He didn't know where to look.

Todd adjusted the PRNDL, made his way west on a full tank of gas. His plan was to find a boat out on the coast, make for an island or something. *Or something,* he thought, grinning as he accelerated above the speed limit for the very first time in his life.

The fool was dead in a week.

THE HUM

*The boy rode cross-legged atop the great beetle
as they marched triumphantly toward a new town.*

"This isn't gonna work," Stig muttered, well aware his protests would-not-could-not change a thing. Herc was stubbornner than all heck. *All heck, indeed*, the boy whispered in his mind. Best to measure one's thoughts around an immortal telepath.

The sun beat down upon the red dirt road as the child (who was quite small for the age of twelve) swayed with the beetle's steps. He wore a simple white shirt. The back of his knickers were clamped betwixt Herc's wingcaps, holding him in place. Wingcaps was what Stig had named the part of his master's shell that could pop open like the hood of an old world car, revealing ineffectual wings. The wingcaps were a rich, glossy yellow thoroughly flecked in black spots. The rest of the too-large insect was black as ink, including the giant pair of spikes

protruding out the front of its head, one atop the other rather than side by side.

The enormous horned monster stopped short at the last bend, just before the main road came into view. It folded up its wingcaps, freeing the boy's shorts. It tittered expectantly. Stig sighed. *How many more times will we try one of these ridiculous schemes?*

"This ain't gonna work!" He crossed his arms. The beetle clacked its mandibles. "We're better off in the woods anyway. People only bring trouble." Stig knew he had the right of it. Herc didn't care, clicked a final warning. A sharp, psychic pain at the base of his skull told Stig that he didn't have a choice.

With an even greater sigh than before, one that grew into a hearty, unceasing groan, the boy obliged. He moved the satchel from his back to his lap, stubby fingers fiddling with the belt latch. He took out the brilliant cloth of red and purple woven silk they had chanced upon when digging up graves a few towns back. Standing, the boy draped the cloth longways along Herc's back, like a cape.

The big beetle clacked once more.

"Fine," Stig hissed down at the giant beetle he stood upon. Defeated, the frail child produced a tiny tasseled cap from his bag and placed it atop his head. The hat had once belongs to a street performing monkey. Herc ate it.

The boy hopped down from his master's back, took his place in the front of the *royal* procession, cupped his hands to his lips, began tooting the song Herc had been humming since they met. He tried to make his voice sound like a trumpet.

A spike jabbed at his backside, so Stig began to march as he sang into his hands, projecting his voice into town. He could hear the exaggeration in Herc's steps behind him, the kicking up of dirt and small rocks as his long insect legs flicked about, the mutant thing trying to look majestic.

As they edged into view of the town proper, Stig was alarmed at how lively the morning market was. Dozens of patrons milled about the long canopies of vendors. *I thought this was a small village??* All previous attempts to bring Herc into a public human space had gone one of two ways: either he was a god, or he was a devil. Both paths had their perks, but it always went sour. *And then people get hurt.*

Heads turned, villagers stilled. Stig knew that he was red from top to tip, but he didn't stop humming. He focused on maintaining a steady rhythm, an even tune.

KNEES UP, BOY.

The message pierced his mind much like the point of a pickaxe. Like a rogue tree branch in a storm, appearing from the dark, penetrating your skull and burying itself inside your brain before you can even flinch. His knees rose. His song faltered.

They marched into town, stopped short of the square. Herc changed the rhythm of the hum, which was Stig's cue to speak.

Everyone was watching, unsure. *People aren't running, or attacking, so that's a start...* He cleared his throat in a dramatic fashion, straightened his pants.

"Listen up!" Stig tried his best to sound confident. "This here is Lord Dynastes, The Defender of The Realm, within his

Holy Vessel." *Bullshit, more bullshit.* "It may look strange, a giant beetle, but this is merely an advanced automaton. A machine made of metal—and more!"

The crowd looked about, collectively befuddled as to what the hell was unfolding before them. *Just follow the script. When it blows up in our faces, Herc can't blame me, because it was all his stupid idea.* "Come one, come all! Only two pennies to receive a blessing from Lord Dynastes, and a nickel for two!"

And now to be run out of town. The angry child cupped his hands once again, joined in the cheerful hum. He began to circle his master, who rose up on his hind legs and thumped his wing-caps. Herc increased the pace of the tune, forcing Stig to step faster.

To the boy's utter surprise, the lie worked. Children swarmed the great beetle, and adults soon followed. They held faces of wonder and glee, rather than rage or terror. *Well I'll be darned,* Stig thought.

He wasn't humming anymore. He held a bag and people were tossing coin after coin into it. The bag was made of fine leather, the stitching better than anything he himself had ever owned. *Where did this come from?*

A trio of stout siblings stepped up to Stig. Two sisters and a brother, round of face and frame, plain attire, each holding what appeared to be homemade country instruments. Herc's great eye fell upon them and he began to hum his heart out. The ground shook and the crowd cheered. The eyes of the musicians glazed over. They fell in line beside Herc, perfectly in rhythm with their strumming and slapping.

The world seemed brighter. The colors, richer. Stig sang and danced and reveled in the communion of rhythm and sound. He didn't think about the whirring sound that came when Herc moved his limbs, the rivets that appeared on his shell, which was now a shiny copper. *The lie worked.*

The inquiries came by the dozens, though they were mostly all the same. *How is it powered? Steam! Will Lord Dynastes leave the vessel? No! Is he single? He's married to the Realm! How does he shit? No more questions!*

Stig found himself no longer in the town square. The small boy with the pale complexion was stepping out into a cool night air. Hours had passed. *Hours?* Herc's merry tune echoed out from the Andersons' barn, which had been appropriated for a party in honor of the esteemed guest, Lord Dynastes. *Oh, that's right,* the boy thought, unsure who the Andersons were. *I serve... a Lord Dynastes? That doesn't seem right.*

Stig tried to swallow, was shocked to find his throat ablaze. A thrumming came, his whole body lighting up with aches and pains he hadn't felt a moment before. *What in the heck??* The boy gasped for air, then grunted at the effort, which tore his throat to shreds.

He stumbled to the well pump, struggled to activate the lever, fell before the spout as it kicked up lumps of cold, clear water. His head was spinning, but his throat was soothed. Pieces were coming back to him. Real pieces, not the lie they'd sold. *How long has it been?*

With new eyes, the boy looked about the yard. *Bodies. Nonono.* He approached one, poked at it with a tentative toe. It

moaned. He brought it water. He brought them all water. *Nobody's dead yet. I can fix this.*

Stig, an undersized boy of but twelve, forced himself to march back into the barn. *It's been a night and a day, at least.* The band drew his eye first, the main source of the hypnotic rhythms. The siblings were there, but more had joined. Their fingers were bloody nubs, the necks of their respective instruments stained black with dried blood. Their faces were gaunt, eyes rolled back, slacked jawed, loose tongues wagging about as their shoulders jerked awkwardly with each beat.

The room was dark, lit only by a few lanterns. Stig climbed atop a table to get a better view of the room. Lowered heads were bobbing in unison, arms swaying, hips shaking. The townsfolk danced on broken feet, sobbing with the effort to keep in step with the *thrum, thrum, thrum* of the eternal rhythm. At the far end of the barn sat a giant mechanical beetle made of polished copper and brass. Two women were stroking his shell, his face buried in the carcass of an ox.

Stig hopped down from the table, put on a brave face, and approached his master. "Alright, Lord Dynastes, I think it's time we called it a night. We need our royal rest, don't we? Let's let these good folk head home."

Herc's head rose from the chest of the dead animal, mandibles dripping, but the song remained. His eyes bore into Stig's. The boy held firm.

After a long moment, the great beetle stopped his humming. The band followed. The party people collapsed. The sound of a hundred bodies flopping to the dirt was followed by a wave of

gasps, moans, cries, and curses. Stig's heart sank as he watched the musicians drop in unison, instruments clanging. Not all of them were moving. *The drummer's just slouched down... he's staring right at me...* The corpse was, in fact, staring at him.

Shouts came from outside. Stig found a mob of townspeople armed with farming tools, charred spears, and torches. Stig tasted something sour, perhaps bile. A short, slender man with a gargantuan nose and small, black eyes pointed a bony finger at Stig. His other hand held a scythe.

"Tell the sorcerer to come out of his evil contraption, or we're going to tear him out ourselves!" The mob roared at the suggestion. Stig was distraught.

"Listen, maybe y'all just turn back. Just let us go." This angered the mob. Stig was not good with words. "Please. I didn't want anyone to get hurt. I don't want anyone to get hurt. Please." He started to cry, words leaving him.

"The boy's got nothing to do with this," someone yelled, and the crowd burst like a dam, washing over Stig as he grabbed at the adults, trying to save them, trying to stop what was to come.

Stig was shuffled into the barn along with the mob, though they paid him little mind. He hopped up onto another table, tried to project his mind at Herc like the beetle did with him. It didn't work.

The boy cupped his hands and wailed, "we can just go! HERC! WE CAN JUST GO!" Whether or not the great beast heard him, he did not know. It mattered not. *Would-not-could-not.*

Half the mob was helping the injured dancers vacate the barn, while the other half positioned themselves around the giant, mechanical beetle in the back of the room. The same man from before stepped forward, now pointing his boney finger at 'Lord Dynastes'. "Vacate the vessel, sorcerer! Your spell is broken. You will face judgement for your dark deeds!"

The giant machine ticked as it idled, the man within seeming to consider the proposal. Stig knew how Herc was going to respond, and therefore curled up beneath a nice sturdy table. The blast came a second later—a terrible *HISS!*

Choosing a sturdy table turned out to be a mistake. Whatever the beast just did, it snapped the legs off his cover, and Stig's small frame was suddenly being crushed.

He wiggled out from beneath the solid block of wood, found his breath, then his footing. The room was unnaturally humid and blazing hot. There were far fewer moans. Stig looked around. A misty haze obscured the room. *It's sizzlin' in here!*

Looking closer, Stig saw the truth of it. Whatever Herc had done, the result caused everything level with the giant beetle's mandibles to be sliced clean in two. All the chairs were now half backless, as were many a pair of human legs. They laid in heaps beside their upper halves, both ends spewing fountains of blood.

A line of empty space spanned the wooden planks of the southern wall, level with the trimmed chair backs. The gap was barely an inch tall, but he could see the corn stalks through it. Stig turned and saw the opposite wall had an identical line of missing material. *Huh*, he thought. *That ain't good.*

Almost in response, the whole structure groaned, the roof twisting as the walls bent in on themselves, snapping apart, blasting the room with splintered shrapnel. A cacophonous rumble filled Stig's ears as his vision darkened and his body was crushed beneath the barn.

The young boy awoke in the rubble. His body was broken. The smoldering beam directly in front of his face shook, then slid out of view. The pressure in his chest lessened as shadows shifted, cut by slivers of light. Daylight. *So much pain.*

Eventually, a great horn swooped across his line of sight. *Oh yeah, I remember.* He was in the air, tumbling over and out of a black wreckage, and then he was crashing into the red dirt. Charred skin slid from tender flesh. The boy screamed at the white hot pain, didn't even notice his collarbone snapping with the impact.

Stig just wanted it to end. The great beetle was standing over the boy's mangled body. It'd just catapulted his burnt remains from the rubble of the building with its horn. *This is hell.*

After a moment, the beetle began to hum. It was a softer song, different from the lively thrumming that inspired dancing and worship.

Stig felt his shoulder shift and crunch as his skin begin to crackle and pop. He moaned as his bones begin to knit back together, the violent snapping and ripping that caused the injuries experienced in reverse. He winced as one of his legs whipped straight with a loud *CRACK!*

Eventually, the pain was gone, and his body was whole again. The memory would remain. He remembered them all.

Stig stood up, looked around at the destruction Herc had caused. *They* had caused. The boy shook his head. "I told you this wasn't gonna work." He was concerned with how little he felt for the dead around him, though in his defense he'd long lost count of how many corpses he had seen. Heck, how many times had he himself been a corpse?

The beetle thumped, sending a message, less intrusively than usual. Stig sighed at the stubbornness of the remark. "How many times do I have to tell you—it doesn't matter how you dress it up, that song doesn't work on humans. Everything goes topsy-turvy, they retaliate, and you lose your cool. Now let's go back to the forest; I miss my squirrel butlers."

The giant beetle—who was no longer made of metal or powered by steam—huffed and stomped his feet, but followed the boy down the path they had come in on. After a short while, it buzzed an insult, to which Stig spit.

"Don't start that shit. I followed the plan down to the word. You were the one who, as always, lost track of time."

The beetle clicked its rebuttal, a remark so crude the boy did not validate it with a response. When the beetle repeated itself, the boy sighed the deepest sigh.

EGODEATH

If I had known the devastation that a stupid little video could cause, I never would have made the damn thing. I need people to know that. I didn't want any of this to happen.

I'm writing this from my laptop. I feel I should disclose that I have taken an Adderall and I might be more verbose than one should. I'm telling you this because whatever is happening isn't over.

Stay high, stay alive.

+ + + + +

On May 26th, 2012, a man ate another man's face on the streets of Miami, Florida. The police suspected a new designer drug known as 'Bath Salts' to be involved. This caused a paranoid panic across the country. "There is a drug that turns people

into flesh eating zombies??" was the question that gripped a nation of house moms and retirees for the following weeks.

My friends and I have all tried bath salts. That shit doesn't turn you into a cannibal—that shit sucks. It's made for losers who are still pussyfootin' their way around trying hard drugs, or suckers on parole who don't have a clean piss connect.

It's just a cheap, chemical alternative to uppers like meth or cocaine. Gets you high but doesn't show up in normal drug tests. Thing is, just like with spice and boner pills and salvia and all those other gas station drugs, you're likely to experience a subpar high with a wicked come down. Technically, they're designer drugs, but that term sounds too cool for bath salts.

Anywho, before we begin, I feel like I should introduce all the key players so I don't have to worry about doing that during the recap. Sorry, addybrain. Bear with me.

I'm Ricky, and I am a bartender at Coconuts. That's a club in Key West, right on the strip. It's packed half the year. It comes into play later but for now, you just need to know that my core group of friends (and the people in this story) all work there. We all came up together in school like everybody here but didn't become friends until a few years back, thanks to Coconuts.

Dave is the Assistant Manager but basically runs the whole show for our absentee manager, Big Dick. I live with him and one of the cooks, Reggie. Darla, the fourth wheel of our friend group, said the three of us balance each other out, like the little bears. Dave is a neurotic mess, Reggie is a deadbeat, and I'm just

right. Writing that now, I am wondering if Darla was flirting with me. I'll never know... Fuck.

Anyways, we're a tight unit. *Were* a tight unit. The only other person you really need to know about is Hunter, our local dealer. I could write about this guy forever. He's like a real life Hunter S. Thompson. He even carries his wares in a friggin briefcase.

Okay that's it for introductions. I know I shouldn't be writing so much but I am having trouble discerning relevant information from crack rambling.

* * * * *

On the night of June 19th, my friends and I made the very stupid decision to piggyback off the hype of the Florida Face Eater and make a fake video of another zombie attack. Do it Blair Witch, Marble Hornets style.

We went to the magic shop and got fake skin, had Darla do the makeup to match Dave's actual skin tone, then Reggie pretended to be all fucked up and 'bit a chunk' out of his face. He had a mouthful of cherry filling when he chomped down onto the fake skin, making it look like the wound exploded with gore, but really Reggie was just spitting food onto Dave as he pretended to bite him.

The real magic came with how we shot it, which was a complete coincidence. We wanted to shoot it on a phone, but we didn't have the cable to plug it into the computer and get the file. The video would be too big to send as an attachment over

email, which only Reggie had on his phone. The rest of us still hadn't gotten around to smart phones.

The only way we could record a video and then get it onto the computer to upload to Facebook was by using my dad's old Hi8 camcorder and ingesting it with a FireWire cable. The last time I'd done that was for a project in high school when I turned in a documentary short on DVD instead of writing a paper. My teacher was not amused and failed me without watching it.

I firmly believe the analog feel of the video is what made it so believable and, inevitably, caused so many people to die. That and whatever cosmic fuckery made everyone go batshit insane.

Using the "Night Vision" mode, the little camcorder shot the whole thing in infrared, casting the world in a green-tinted monochrome and making Reggie's eyes reflect light like a wild animal. The lofi aesthetic of recording to tape masked how amateur the special effects were. Despite minimal efforts on our part, the short nine second clip ended up looking straight out of a found footage indie horror.

The following morning (a Florida morning, so, like, noon), I uploaded the video to my Facebook with some bullshit about how I was really scared because I had been sent this clip last night from a friend and now I couldn't get in contact with them. I tagged the location as Key West, Florida. Then I went to a cookout at our drug dealer's house.

It's probably the greatest thing about Key West, in my opinion, that the drug dealers throw their own parties. In New York and Hollywood it's celebrities and politicians putting on grand

events in their megahomes. You have to be part of the upper crust to get into a party at a mansion. Down here, all you need to do is take a shower and not dress like a full-on redneck and you're in.

Hunter's place has been dubbed The Party Dome, despite it being a normal three-bedroom house on an acre of land. Not really a mansion, but it's a whole ass house on the main island. Shit is prime real estate.

The sun was low and I was extremely wasted when I found out that our little video had gone viral. Reggie had been droning on and on about something called iDoser. It was supposedly music that made your brain high with frequencies. He would not shut the fuck up about it and I was all too glad to have an excuse to get away from him when Darla called me over and delivered the good news. I celebrated by hitting Hunter's six-foot bong and getting royally cross-faded.

One of the last things I remember clearly was Darla explained that the video had been picked up by the local news and a fresh wave of paranoia was spreading amongst the older, retired community of Key West. "It's a modern day Reefer Madness," she had declared before throwing back a shot of Jack.

Shortly after, the world turned upside down. I don't have a super clear memory of this time, thanks to brownout. From what I am told, a new arrival who was taking a line of shots in an effort to catch up got violent and tried to bite somebody, but they chilled out after another two shots.

A few minutes later, there was a banging on the front door. An unsuspecting partygoer opened it to find two mormons in

crisp white shirts and red ties. They pounced on him and ate his face off. Most of us were out back when this occurred.

A handful of blood-soaked, face eating zombies scaled the back fence and that was when the party stopped being fun. Somebody fell onto the sound system and Saliva's *Click Click Boom* began blasting out to the neighborhood as I watched a group of pastel-wearing women bite the faces off of my dealer's friends.

Not everyone made it inside. I honestly don't know how I survived. I was beyond intoxicated at this point, but I have a vague recollection of helping move furniture to barricade the doors and windows. I vividly remember throwing up into a couch cushion and turning it over so nobody saw. Everything else is blurry.

There were maybe fifteen of us inside the house when I started coming down from too-drunk-to-remember to only very-drunk status.

There was no cell coverage and no internet. The landline didn't work. We were cut off from the world. A dozen rabid, old white people were trying to break through the windows when the music cut off and then shots started popping from outside. It turned out that we were saved by a band of rabid methheads sporting tactical shotguns and multiple crates of ammo in a stolen bus.

After a lot of confusing back and forth, we eventually got the junkies to explain that people were turning into cannibals, and for some reason, it was only happening to sober people.

Then they drove away in their van, hitting their pookies and chanting “Stay high, stay alive! Stay high, stay alive!”

We didn’t believe them at first. Half the surviving partygoers either left without saying anything or declared various plans like ‘find a boat’ or ‘get to the Overseas Highway’.

We decided the responsible thing to do would be to sober up and hunker down. Half an hour later, Reggie bit into Dave’s face for real. Just like in the goddamn video. The blood was bright red like cherry filling.

Hunter saved the day when he blew a palmful of cocaine into Reggie’s face. Dave was also dosed, the coke seeping into his open wound. Reggie was immediately apologetic and helped patch Dave up. Dave was alternating between scream of rage and testaments of love, both directed at Reggie, who was shirtless and wrapping Dave’s head in a shirt.

Hunter whipped out his briefcase full of illicit materials. “Those junkies were right: stay high, stay alive.” He let everyone pick their poison.

I opted for copious amounts of weed and a pot brownie, as it would last the night. Hunter opted for two tabs of acid, same reason. Darla took a few baggies of coke and opened a fresh bottle of whiskey. Dave—who now had a ripped up t-shirt tied over half his face—took the oxy. Reggie decided that ecstasy laced with speed would keep him awake and loving. He was ashamed of his former show of violence, and wouldn’t shut up about it.

Hunter cut up five small lines of coke. “For solidarity,” he said with reverence before bending down and snorting the first

line with a rolled up twenty. He spun the mirrored Lazy Susan upon the table, passed the bill to me, and we each snorted our own line in turn like some sort of ritual.

The drugs began to fuel our decision making. It was determined that sitting ducks get their fowl asses roasted. We were first adamant about escaping by boat. The vote to leave was unanimous, the destination was not. There were five of us. Votes were split evenly between our apartment three keys over, Miami, Havana, Jamaica, and cutting through the Panama Canal and sailing to Japan. After multiple ties, Japan won with two votes.

We did espionage on the way to the pier. This consisted of sneaking around and whispering “espionage” to each other. We made it to the pier without incident, successfully slipping past multiple groups of face eating cannibals. They had resorted to speed walking around aimlessly in groups, but were easy to avoid.

Apart from a bunch of blood smears, there were no signs of life on the docks. Half the boats had already been pilfered. We ended up finding a running yacht, lights on and smooth jazz playing over the speakers, just sitting there idling. There was probably a story there. We did not feel bad about stealing it.

It took us longer than I'd like to admit to realize what was happening. Just because something is easy to explain in hindsight does not mean that it is easy to figure out, especially when you have *high sight*. ... sorry.

The easy to explain hindsight version is that we're cut off from the rest of the world. Only the keys exist. You drive out to

sea and you come right back. Our drug-addled minds kept blaming each other. We repeatedly traded off driving responsibilities, assuming that the person steering must've been too high to navigate. Those of us not driving continued partying, so as not to turn into zombies. We had to have driven out to sea and come back again upwards of twenty times before the idea that we couldn't leave was even posited.

When we tried to instead go up and around the keys, the US Navy prevented it. A lot of people don't realize there's a sizable Naval Air Station in Key West. Those bastards declared a quarantine and threatened to sink us if we didn't sail back to Key West. Fucking pigs.

Back on land, we raided a pawn shop and tooled up with guns and blades and blunted weapons. We all made sure to peer pressure each other into doing more drugs. It was the responsible thing to do.

Because we were jazzed out of our minds, we ended up destroying half the store in a manic frenzy. I blame Reggie for turning on the music. It's hard not to smash stuff when you're coked the fuck up and *Talking Heads' I Zimbra* comes on.

The noise attracted a group of vacationing baby boomers who were feral for face meat. Although initially frightened by their arrival, we soon discovered they were old and slow. We took them out with glee. When more arrived and Darla almost got got, Hunter moved like a secret agent kung fu master, took them all down. We were convinced the LSD gave him super-powers.

It was only after we had ended the active threat did we realize that we could've cured the raging cannibals of their hunger with drugs instead of violence. They didn't need to die. Whoops!

We all felt like shit, we were all crying, but then Dave stood up and gave an extremely emotional, heartfelt, inspiring speech.

He said he did the math on the amount of drugs we had left, how many people were on the island, and how much of the drugs we ourselves still wanted to take, and determined that violence was the only option. Writing it back now it sounds... uh, selfish, but he made it sound a lot more noble.

Geared up and inspired, we realized we were starving. Reggie hotwired an old Civic and we went looking for the best restaurant to loot.

We then discovered a Sonic's that was seemingly unaware of the nightmare that had befallen the island. Based on our roller-skating waiter's bloodshot eyes, it was concluded that every customer and employee was either drunk or high. We ordered from our car and ate there as we devised a plan and did more drugs. A lot more drugs.

Hunter concluded that we needed to cure everyone by getting the entire island high. He reiterated our previous assessment that one could be cured of their cannibalistic nature through the consumption of drugs. He said it was wrong for us to forget about our duty to saving mankind. He was inspiring as fuck and got us hyped the hell up to save everyone.

When Dave brought up the fact that less than an hour ago he had given a speech about the opposite thing, and everyone

had been *equally* inspired... well, there was a moment when we thought maybe we were bad people. But then we realized *Dave* was the bad person, and everything was good.

Hunter had extrapolated from our previous experiences (his words) that loud party music attracted the hordes, while lame ass music was an active deterrent. I was skeptical, but Hunter pointed out that James Blunt was currently blasting out into the Sonic's parking lot and everything was peachy.

Using a greasy fry like a pen on the passenger window, Hunter drew up an elaborate plan using his acid washed super brain. He said we needed to use music to lure the entire island to Coconuts—to which Dave had the master keys—then hotbox the building with multiple pounds of weed. We first needed to steal the pot from his dealer's dealer.

The plan was perfect. Every minuscule detail—anything that could go wrong—had been thought of and accounted for on the greasy sketch. The acid really had turned Hunter into some sort of superhuman secret agent. When we pulled out onto the road, he rolled his window down, stuck his head out and cheered. None of us could recall what exactly we were supposed to be doing.

We'd tried to reconstruct the plan on a piece of paper, each of our high ass brains remembering only fragments. The only thing everyone could agree on was that Dave was a piece of shit. Eventually, we thought we had it, but it didn't feel right. We decided to roll with it anyway. We needed to save the world.

First stop was the cartel. They owned one of the biggest mansions on the main island. Like on the docks, we found the quiet aftermath of violence. Unlike the docks, there were quite a few corpses.

We determined there had been a bloodbath after seeing all the bodies bathed in blood. We found more than a dozen faceless dead men holding weapons dotted around the first floor. There was a strangely sparse amount of casings and bullet holes, despite the victims being heavily armed.

We'd entered through the back, found the bricks in the tv room. In the front foyer, just as we were about to leave, Reggie literally said, "Huh, I wonder what's in this room," then opened a door just to the right of the entrance. This was when we learned what had happened.

Many of the cartel members' abuelitas had been staying with them. The men must've been unable to shoot their grandmothers, as half a dozen acrobatic old crones hopped and cartwheeled into the room. Their faces and clothes were bloody, but none of them appeared wounded in any way. We don't know why they were nimble as fuck.

Having to kill a bunch of crazed elderly women took a toll on our group's morale. Having been taken by surprise, we'd once again forewent the option to dose the zombies, despite that being the larger plan. Also, Dave got another chunk of his face ripped off by a grill-sporting grandma.

After the final grandma fell, we started fighting. Everyone decided to point their finger at me, as I was the one who had come up with the idea to make a viral video about zombies.

Nobody was sure how or why it had happened, but the fear our little video had stirred had somehow become real. There were too many coincidences to claim otherwise. I didn't disagree, but the making of the video had been a group effort. I argued this point but it fell on deaf, drugged-up ears. Finally, I blamed it on Dave being a piece of shit influence, and we stopped arguing. Dave was not pleased.

We took the bricks of weed to Coconuts but the downtown party strip was overrun with facemunchers. This looked like it was ground zero when the festivities popped off. There were hundreds of crazed people packed into the wide street. They meandered and growled and sometimes tripped over the faceless corpses that no longer interested them. Many of them would've looked like wholesome family vacationers if it weren't for all the stains. And the bearing of teeth, that was another detractor.

We posted up on a roof overlooking our destination and tried to come up with a plan. Many snorts and rants and fights and hugs later, we landed on espionage. We put our hands together and all whispered, "Espionage!"

We played our sneaky game across the rooftops, whispering the word periodically as we snuck towards the club that housed the outdoor speakers. "Espionage!" one would hiss as they rolled from one place of cover to the next. It was all fun and games until Reggie stepped through the skylight of Teaser's. I tried to catch him, but only managed to pull off his jacket as he fell.

We looked down in horror and incredulity as his face was devoured by three topless strippers. Losing a friend was hard,

but our drugged-up minds mixed up our priorities, causing our focus to shift to a prolonged discussion on the probability of any stripper in Florida being 100% sober at any given moment. Three sober strippers in one club seemed an impossibility.

We continued to debate these odds for upwards of ten minutes until we looked down and noticed that the strippers—as well as Reggie’s corpse—were missing. Thoroughly unnerved, we decided to get back to the mission. I put Reggie’s jacket on, smelled him on it.

Once we made it to the roof of Coconuts, we repeated the plan. We would split into two teams. Hunter and Dave would head to the ground floor and set a bonfire with the bricks of weed, then close all the doors except the entrance. Darla and I would head for the DJ booth overlooking the street, get the music bumping, attract the town into the largest hot box in history.

The moment Darla and I made it to the balcony, things went wrong. It turned out these fuckers knew how to climb.

I used a pair of vuvuzelas to bash the climbing zombies off the balcony. Darla tried to figure out the DJ’s laptop password. Our only clue was that his desktop background was the cast of Jersey Shore. I beat back cannibals as I shouted things like “Pauly D!” and “Gym Tan Laundry!” as Darla typed. It was all in vain.

I chanced a few glances down to where Hunter and Dave were as I held the balcony. I saw Dave drop his lighter into a puddle of blood. He couldn’t get a flame. Hunter’s acid-infused martial arts skills were being put to the test as an entire horde

swarmed into the club's interior. He used the well-stocked bar to hold them back, flinging bottles and knives.

When more zombies appeared from the other side of the room, Hunter leapt across the bar to protect Dave. He channeled Jackie Chan as he used various environmental objects to fend off dozens of zombies at once. It was majestic. At some point I swear he was spinning a ladder around his head. Dave got the lighter working.

I heard Darla scream and turned to find her face being actively peeled off by an old white guy in golf slacks and a tucked-in polo. I bashed the guy in the face but he didn't flinch. I hit him again, and his feet slipped. I grabbed Darla's hands, played tug of war with the white haired monster still attached to her face.

I looked down to see a mass of zombies swarm over Hunter and Dave before they all collectively caught fire. Most of the room lit up in an instant. The various liquor bottles Hunter had smashed over the cannibals' heads were to blame. "Huh," I said as the flames licked at the walls. The fire was lit, but it would all be moot if we didn't attract the whole horde.

The zombie attached to Darla fell from the balcony. The force ripped her hands from mine. An electronic snap painfully pierced my eardrums and vibrated my entire skull as the speaker right next to my face sounded the severing of a connection. I saw Darla go over the side, down into the street. Her foot had caught the AUX cable, ripped it from the DJ's laptop. I focused on the little headphone jack on the floor, tried not to hear my friend's dying screams.

The speakers were on. I just needed to plug it back into the laptop and start a song. I turned to the laptop, saw that Darla had been locked out of the computer for five minutes.

We were fucked. Every one of my friends was dead except me. There was no time left to do anything.

I remembered that I was wearing Reggie's jacket. He'd had an mp3 player. He'd shown it to me when he was monologuing about iDoser.

I rifled through the pockets and found it. It was small and yellow and brick shaped with a simple LCD display. I snatched the AUX from the floor and jammed it into the mp3 player.

I was then grabbed from behind and learned firsthand what it feels like to have your face bitten by a small little fat boy. I pulled the kid off of my face, a good chunk of skin coming with him, and then I yeeted his tubby ass off the balcony by his ankles. I watched his round little body spin out into the darkness, a child's shriek fading as he fell.

Flames were licking up onto the balcony and The Sun began to rise as I reclaimed the mp3 player and tried to find a track to play. It was all goddamn motherfucking iDoser tracks, and one Enya album.

"Fucking Reggie," I said to myself. It all came down to this. I bit my lip and selected 'iDoser – xXxST@CY'.

Weird tones and pulsing beats rang out from the expensive setup on the balcony, vibrating my skull once again. I leaned over the DJ booth and cranked the volume, nearly blowing out my eardrums in the process.

It turned out, Reggie was right about iDoser. Or, half right maybe. That shit worked. Everyone up and down the block stopped their manic sprinting. Those actively scaling the walls of Coconuts jumped down and looked around in confusion. I don't think it actually got anyone high like they were on E, but the weird tones affected people's brains just enough to trigger the off-switch on their crazy.

As people came back to themselves, a new horror set in. They remembered what they had done. What they had eaten. The vomiting was an avalanche. It was like that scene from *Stand By Me* times a hundred. In this instance, the substance everyone was regurgitating was not blueberry pie.

I found the baggie of coke Reggie'd nabbed at the beginning of the night. I snorted a fat knuckleful. Little did I know that a rising sun does not always mark the end of a nightmare.

It has now been three full days. The sober still turn feral for face meat. We've got iDoser blasting from every speaker system across the island.

The Keys are the only thing here in this strange world. You still come back to the islands if you try to leave. Sailing out during the day is a lot more disorienting because even though you can't feel anything, you can most definitely *see* the moment the boat does a magical u-turn. I threw up the first time it happened.

The military has set up food and water stations. Thank fuck the base had plenty of alcoholic cadets. Despite the initial chaos, people have really come together. More than half of the sur-

vivors are tourists from all over the world. Long term plans are being drafted. Farming initiatives have begun.

Despite the power lines running off into nothingness, we still have electricity. We're making the most of it while we can but everyone expects the power to drop soon. Still no phone or internet.

I went back to my apartment and got my dad's old Hi8 camcorder and my gaming laptop. I think I'm going to start documenting everything that's happening. It will give me something to do.

Thankfully, nobody knows that I'm the person who made the video that inexplicably caused a drug-fueled cannibal apocalypse. Maybe this time, I can make something to take people's minds off of what's happening. I can't change what happened, but maybe I can make things a little brighter. Or maybe the next video I make will change the world again. There's only one way to find out.

But first, more drugs!

OH, DOCTOR!

The doctor entered the room of his last remaining patient in what had felt like a never ending series of back-to-back shifts. Nearly two-thirds of the staff were likely bent over their toilets that very moment, a coin flip on which end was facing the bowl. At this year's Summer Gala For The Kids, the doctor had forgone the salt-encrusted fish bites, and had therefore not consumed whatever demonic stomach bug turned out to be lurking within. But that also meant he hadn't left the hospital since late Friday night. Finally, *finally*, one of his colleagues had recovered enough to relieve him of his duty, at least for a few hours. *What day is it?*

His glassy eyes glossed over the patient's file, seeing little as he half moaned, "howdy." He glanced to make sure there was a patient sitting before him, which there was. The doctor resisted the urge to rub at his lids, dared not think of his special pillow he kept hidden in the break room.

"Oh, doctor, thank god! You have to help me." The patient looked as tired as the doctor felt. "I think I'm losing my mind.

I'm having the most realistic nightmares." His eyelids were large, dark pillows cushioning bloodshot slits for eyes. His skin was sickly pale beneath a thinning mop of wet brown curls.

The doctor was not pleased by what he heard, nor what he saw. "Dreams are merely in one's mind, no matter how real they might feel in the moment. I can prescribe you a sedative to help block them out."

"No!" The man ran a clammy palm up his forehead, wiping the sweat into his already glistening hair. "That just makes it worse. Listen to me, I know what I'm talking about. I'm the only one who knows. I'm the only one who *knows*."

The doctor frowned as the patient's head lulled back and he began to sob in deep, frog-like moans. *This is far worse than mere nightmares, this person is showing signs of extreme mania, perhaps even active psychosis.* "I'm going to recommend you to a specialist, he's only a few towns over. I saw him give a speech on this very subject but four years past."

He remembered that particular Health Summit, how cold it had been up the mountain. The explosive lecture: Lucid Dreaming During Active Psychosis. The lecturer himself was utterly average in dress and appearance, but his story enraptured the attendees. *Funny enough, he looked a fair bit like the man before me now, only taller, more whole.* "Yes, I have just the man for the job."

The patient, however, was none too pleased at the prospect of being passed off. Before the sad little man could verbalize his discontentment, the doctor persisted. "Trust me, he's the best in his field. He's written multiple books on *exactly* what you're

describing. It's uncanny. You've probably heard of him: Dr. Pagliducci."

"Oh, doctor, you don't understand! *I'm Pagliducci!!*" The doctor felt his palms snap up to his face as his patient's did the same, their eyes locking as jaws went slack. A hollow scream rattled his teeth, tore his throat, tickled his nerves as the man with the puffy eyes began to change. His neck ballooned as his skin went slimy, and his eyes bulged beyond reason. The shrill scream bent low into a rumbling croak. The patient had become some sort of slimy brown slug thing with noodley arms! *Gah! It's revolting!*

The doctor looked down to see that he too was a slugboy. He'd always been a slugboy, *and proud of it*, he remembered. They were in the bog, the sky thick with dark clouds, the walls of his office a series of half-submerged rocks. *These rocks were chosen well, for I have important slugwork to do.* Just because he was a slugboy didn't stop him from being a doctor. "What seems to be the problem, my boy?"

"Well, Doc, I've been having this crazy dream lately. Totally not something this slugboy wants to even think about. A *dry* place."

Doctor Slugboy couldn't help but recoil at the thought. A place that *wasn't wet*? "Pardon my reaction, that's quite the terror. I've got just the thing: wigglewort. It'll knock you the fuck out—zero dreams."

"Oh, Doc!" The patient slapped his slug palm against a slimy forehead.

The world blinked and the doctor was human again. He frantically pawed at his body with feeble fingers, ensuring to himself he was no longer made of slime. The doctor shrieked, "WHAT IN THE FUCK WAS THAT, PAGLIDUCCI??"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you," the patient hissed, more alert than he had been a moment before, "the world is slipping!"

Before the doctor could comprehend the outrageous claim, he was once again a slugboy. The sun was no longer hidden behind the clouds. *Gah! It burns!*

The doctor spun about, searching for the scumline, all other thoughts evaporating in the sizzling heat. "This rock is a grid-dle! We'll be safe beneath the scum!"

His entire body vibrated as a deep honk shook out across the bog. *No*, the doctor thought, but it was already too late. He turned his slug head up just in time to see a webbed talon blink past his bulbous eyes. He was then overcome by the very strong sensation that maybe his organs were being mashed between rock and beast.

The pain was bright and whole. Like staring into the sun, everything else blinked out. Lungs emptied of air, his mind screamed. As quickly as it began, the unbelievable pain dulled beside a new sensation that was exponentially stronger. A beak, tearing into his flesh—tugging, stretching him until his insides were spraying about the rock... *Wasn't there a tiled floor there? I'm a doctor. What is happening?*

The well respected doctor felt himself being split apart. Torn. Eventually, the world stilled. All was dark, and he was but a mess of jumbled bits within the stomach of a great bird. No

more sensations other than pain, the constant pain, and a slight rocking as his new home moved about the world. His flesh should be dying, his mind should be gone, but he persisted. The pain of being ripped into half a dozen pieces had not faded. Instead, the suffering became baseline as his perspective shifted.

He remembered now—he had been with a patient. *I must've passed out from exhaustion, right when I entered the room. In reality, I'm on the floor, the tiles cool against my cheek, likely with a very confused patient looking down at me.* He tried to feel silly as the pain flashed through his nerves brighter than ever. He tried to remember that this was all a dream. *But it feels so real. I must remember, this is all in my mind.*

Think, think! As a doctor, he knew that in the waking world, if a pain became too great, the mind could become overwhelmed and render the patient unconscious. *But this is a dream,* he thought in terror, *I'm already unconscious. Ah! That's it—I just need to wake up!*

Almost in response, all his little slug bits began to burn as the fowl's digestive fluids seeped out and over his mangled bits.

The doctor tried to will himself awake.

Wake up! Wake up!

The dream persisted.

The pain was bright and whole.

P I N C H

It was pure coincidence that Frieda was looking directly at the horse when it exploded. She had no prior knowledge that the mount of Captain Holland would bloom across the square like a bright red flower. She was simply seated where she always was at this time of day, rain or shine: atop the rampart of the north tower, watching idly for fires in town. There was also the unlikely appearance of bandits in the surrounding wood, the sign of which would also be a pillar of smoke.

All the same, Frieda Grainger had watched the supernatural event (of a horse exploding) play out in realtime right before her eyes. She had seen the belly of the beast press together from top to bottom, ribs snapping, neck bulging, the instant before the majority of its vessel was turned violently into shrapnel.

From her place in the tower, she'd watched the band of rangers return from the woods to the north, just as she'd watched them set off that morning. The regiment maintained a strict schedule. She didn't need to check the position of The Sun at her back, as their return meant Frieda's shift was nearly over.

Furthermore, the fact that the party had done a midday outing meant it was Tuesday, because each day of the week in this stupid town was the same the same the same.

The monotony of the routine that was Frieda's life had festered into a psychic rash—an ever present irritation she had to make the conscious effort not to scratch at. If it'd had any corporeal form, it would've been seeping pus.

She had been studying the horse, genuinely pondering stealing off with it in the middle of the night. *That's the next logical step*, Frieda told herself. Over the past year, she'd developed an appetite for burglin'. She had a collection of increasingly valuable objects hidden beneath a secret hole she'd dug in her hovel. She referred to them as her *little delights*. The woman dreamed of danger. Yearned for it.

Frieda was only six when Darren, the innkeep's son, had shown her how to get into his home through the bat roost. She was now thrice the age and no longer the size of a child, but she could still scamper up the maple tree, hop over to the roof, and squeeze down into the second floor utility closet. The boy had also shown her the door beneath the rug which led into the first floor pantry.

That fateful day, he'd taken her on an adventure to pilfer peanut brittle and dried mango, and they'd both gotten a terrible wallop for it. She'd avoided Darren and his ham-fisted mother since.

More than a decade later, she met a man in the street, a wealthy traveler. One thing led to another and they returned to the inn where Frieda had played as a child. She recognized Dar-

ren, and he her, but they didn't say anything. He had grown quite fat.

The man she came with was drunkenly demanding access to his belongings. Darren obliged, removing the large lock from the heavy door behind the bar. This was when Frieda learned that the pantry from her youth also served as a safe room of sorts for guests' oversized luggage.

She followed her suitor in, watched him squint and struggle to set the three-digit combination on the front of his expensive chest. He finally got it open. He was grabbing a bottle, but Frieda only saw the cash. Ribbonded stacks of old world money. Thousands. *No good here, but up north in the States...*

When the daring young woman returned to the pantry through the roost the following night, the chest full of money was gone. She'd come intending to use the lock combination she'd spied, had no success getting into the other boxes. Frieda settled for some peanut brittle and went home.

She'd since found someone to teach her lockpicking. A year later, she'd learned to move without making a sound, had a little hidey hole full of other people's belongings, and she was once again bored.

Ergo, it was in a daydream about riding off into the sunset on a stolen steed wherein she witnessed the majestic creature separate into a hundred pieces, its head rocketing up and out over the town square like a flesh missile.

All about the center of town, rangers, soldiers, and citizens fell away from the sudden blast of blood, flesh, and explosive

energy. From her vantage point, Frieda watched it all play out as a single scene, time stretching out into a nearly flat curve.

What stood out to her first were the intricate lines that formed across the masses, connected by entry and exit wounds as bits of bone pierced flesh and fabric like wartime shrapnel. The expanding lines all connected by its source, the exploding horse corpse.

Then came the blood. So much blood. It covered everyone, everything, flying in big, gushy waves. The blood flew so far that it even splattered in a shower of *thwacks*—like hard rain, but for a moment—on the side of the very tower she was seated in.

Finally, the flesh. Frieda saw half a dozen people get slapped in the face by literal flying steaks. It would've been almost comical if the meat bricks hadn't been moving so fast they busted through bone and tore flesh upon impact. Some were taken off their feet by force.

There was a stillness in the immediate aftermath, the brief moment between material occurrence and cognitive reaction. The closest to the pile that was formerly a horse—the majority of the rangers—their bodies were still. The rest were moaning, screaming, crying. Some began helping the wounded, while everyone who was injured but mobile made the effort to distances themselves from the mass of blood and corpses.

What in the holy fuck was that? Frieda looked down and figured those below her were likely too busy pulling the viscera from their hair to be worrying about the why or the how of the situation. She remembered now: the half-second, maybe less,

before the horse came apart. *It looked like... like it had been crushed in midair. But that's impossible.*

Frieda recalled the time she'd been shoved over by a passing guard in the crowded market, landed chest first on her produce. *This looks like that*, she thought.

The horse was still there, part of it at least. So was the saddle. They look like they'd been run through a press. The saddle had widened into a flat rounded cross. What was left of the hide looked like a gruesome floor decoration. Before Frieda could process what she was seeing, the gate into town exploded.

Though further from the tower, this blast threw Frieda from her chair. She landed on her back, nearly tumbled off the side of the landing. There was only a railing up here. A roof but no real walls.

She heard a rolling sort of sound, felt it through the wood on her back. She looked to see her most recent burgled treasure a foot from the edge of the balcony. "No," she cried as she reached out, nabbed the spyglass just as the ass end of it tilted off into open air. She brought it back to her, squeezed her prize to her chest with both hands, cradled it. This was the reason she could finally leave.

After a year of sneaking into the pantry of the inn, riffling through the belongings of others, she'd found very little of worth. It seemed most guests took their valuables with them to their rooms. No, not most, *all*, apart from that landlord with the small cock that gave her the idea. Nobody else was that careless. Last night, her luck had finally turned.

In her hands was a genuine relic of the old world. *Maybe even the older world, whatever you call that*, she mused. It had been close to half a century since The Reckoning. Being a watcher, Frieda knew her way around old world objects. There was a pair of decrepit binoculars hanging just to her left. *But this, this*, Frieda thought, turning the object in her hands, still laying on her back.

This wasn't one of the mass-produced products the people of the modern world had been relying on since everything failed. It had to be centuries old. *This thing is worth a pretty penny, that's for damn sure*. She tucked the cylindrical contraption made of glass and wood and metal back into the pocket within her jacket.

The comm on the small desk chirped with the shrill feedback of an analog connection, and a tinny voice commanded, "North Tower, check in."

Frieda righted her trusty wooden chair and took a seat. She brushed frazzled hair from her eyes and unclipped the receiver. "Frieda here. The gate just fucking exploded. All I see is a giant cloud of smoke. Are we under attack?"

There was a pause before the hollow voice on the other end said, "you tell me."

"Like I said, I can't see shit because of all the dust or smoke or whatever. I have no visual on the road or the forest."

The only reply was the click of a disconnection. That was the first time Frieda had used the radio for anything other than gossip. This was a small town, and she herself had never been on duty when anything had happened. *That's because nothing*

happens here. The closest she'd come was when a bakery burned, but it had been on the south end of town. When she'd still called it in herself, they laughed at her. *Nothing happens here,* Frieda repeated in her mind, panic rising.

It didn't sound like a battle was going on down there, like her neighbors were being massacred. People were clearly disoriented, but nobody was fighting from what she could hear. She looked down on the square, struggled to see through the haze of dust. Only then did she remember the whole exploding horse preamble to the gate's destruction. *What is happening??*

The wind picked up, and suddenly Frieda was engulfed in the thick cloud coming from the gate. The square disappeared below. Then the haze was past, and she saw the decimated gate.

Its walls had been made of thousands of stone bricks, the doors made from some of the original trees harvested during the resettlement. It took the town of Harlan five years to complete. It was grand, and now it was gone.

The wind died as quickly as it had arrived, like some forest spirit had wanted a better view of the town. *A better view,* Frieda thought.

She pulled the binoculars from their nail, looked out past the missing gate. She could see the forest, but the magnification wasn't good enough to see much else. There definitely wasn't an army of ten thousand soldiers.

Frieda grunted a frustration, dropping the binoculars into her lap and reaching for her magical spyglass from the past. She awed at the detail of the craftsmanship as she extended the three-chamber device to its full length. She held the smaller end

up to her eye, marveled at how far she could see. *It doesn't seem real.*

The first thing she'd done after scaling the tower was try out her new toy. She'd used it to look all over town. By extending the tube further, she'd been capable of zooming into anything she wanted. It seemed impractical, but everyone knew the old world's technology was far beyond what they had today.

But that had all been in town, Frieda thought as she pushed into the forest on the horizon. *The woods don't start for miles.* Frieda got an uneasy feeling when only a slight tug of the spyglass caused the image within to expand beyond what should've been capable. *It doesn't seem real.*

Then she saw it, a smudge of pink against brown and green. *It's a man,* Frieda remarked. She honed in on the shape, focused the lens. *An old man, in his chonies.* "The fuck?"

On the outskirts of the forest was indeed a senior citizen wearing nothing but dirty white briefs. He was facing town, hands on hips. She watched curiously as he stretched his arms to his sides, elbows straight, then violently clapped his hands together before him.

A thunderous crack echoed down from the north, folding over itself many times. It sounded less like the beginnings of a storm and more like a gun being fired inside a cave. The reflective nature of the sound didn't feel right in the open space. Frieda's sense of *unreality* strengthened, her mouth going dry.

She lowered the spyglass, looked down to see the entire town pausing their recovery to turn and look out toward the

source of the impossible sound. Even the injured were twisting their broken bodies to investigate.

Screams and a spray of blood announced another living thing exploding, just like the horse had. Frieda hadn't seen this one happen, but she saw what looked to be the remains of a human pancake. Another person exploded, and all attempts at crisis recovery were gone. Everyone fled in panic. A third person exploded into mist.

Frieda pressed the monocle back to her eye, scanned road for the old man. He was still there. She saw now that he was standing a short distance from a horse hitched to a packmule. And beside the mule, just there on the ground...

Oh god, no. There, beside the man was a simple satchel with its contents strewn about the dirt path. The very satchel that Frieda had found last night. *What luck,* she'd thought, *no locks to pick!* Apparently, her luck *had* turned, but not for the better.

Frieda looked back at the old balding man. He was laughing his ass off, face red, body bouncing. *What is he doing?* She pushed the lens further, zoomed into the face of the wrinkled terror. The old man had one hand extended out and one eye squeezed closed. He was pinching his forefinger and thumb together. Each time he did so, Frieda heard the same wet crunch from the street, then more screams. *This can't be real!!*

She watched the man frown, stop his murdering. His eyes began to dart about wildly in the direction of the town. They stopped. *He sees me.* She didn't know how, but the wrinkled bastard was staring directly at her as a dreadful smile stretched

across his face. When his lips parted, he bore no teeth, only gums.

The man with the spindly arms waved a hello, pointed a finger right at her soul, then reached out. Frieda felt a sharp pain in her right eye as her vision went dark. She fell backwards, once again going over the chair onto her back. The next thing she saw hurt to look at. The spyglass was frozen in the air, just where she'd been holding it. From the small end, a wrinkled hand stretched out, then an arm, then suddenly the entire upper half of the old wizard was protruding impossibly out of the narrow hole.

The man began to cackle, his sudden appearance causing Frieda to scream at the top of her lungs, all presence of mind dissolving at the nightmare before her. Her wailing waned when she realized the man had stopped laughed. He was now struggling with something at his waist, which was still back at the forest.

"Gat damn sumbitch motherfucking ass taint bitch ass motherfuck," she she heard him mutter. A sharp ripping of fabric came just as the rest of the old man popped through the floating spyglass, splatting to the ground. The moment his last toe appeared in the tower, the monocular stopped floating, dropped onto the sweaty, flappy wizard.

Frieda wanted to run, but the man was between her and the stairs. He growled like a feral animal, nearly hopped up to his feet as he snarled and glared.

She saw that he was naked. He was also covered in something slick. It hadn't been there when he was on the road. Small,

stringy globs dripped and stretched off of him as he took a step forward.

“I’ma teach you a lesson, girlie. Bout takin’ other people’s thangs.” He took another step toward her, lifted the spyglass over his head like a cudgel. Frieda’s mind had yet to recover from this predator’s magical arrival, so all she did was resume screaming.

The man took another step. His cock swayed, his balls much longer than any she’d seen before. Frieda put the toe of her boot into them with a kick, causing the extended sack to pendulum up and slap the old fart in the gut.

The wizard winced as he yelled, “goo!” He dropped the spyglass, which fell behind him. Then he took a step backward. His heel rolled over the monocle, and suddenly his torso was bending backward over the railing, legs flipping up into the air. Then he was gone. He did not scream as he fell. The spyglass spun over to her, stopped against her palm.

Frieda heard the crunchy splat, but she didn’t look over the edge. Instead, she tucked the spyglass back into her pocket and made her way down to the street as calmly as she could. Everyone had fled. Only corpses were there now. She did not look at any of them, though she confirmed the wizard was dead from her peripherals. *Just another casualty*, they’d say. *Not sure why he’s naked*.

Frieda made for the collapsed gate. She saw the inn just beside it. She knew Darren would be fretting over the substantial damage, but for now he was hiding like all the rest.

The sun was nearly gone by the time Frieda made it to the horse and mule. She considered returning to town then riding out west instead, but decided she didn't need to be so literal.

After mounting the horse, she took one last look at the small, boring town that was her hometown. Curious, she held up her hand, pinched her fingers together over the north tower. Nothing happened. Frieda shrugged.

She rode north, not *into* the sunset, but on a stolen steed. That was good enough for her.

PSYCHO SEXY CLOWN GIRLS

Craig and Rico were both four beers and half a bottle of whiskey deep.

They were doing donuts in the massive parking lot of the defunct superstore when they encountered three of the hottest bitches they had ever fucking seen.

“Oh my FUCK! SWEET MEAT!” Rico barked, squeezing his crotch over his sweatpants with one hand, pointing across Craig’s face with the other. Craig slammed on the brakes and whipped his head left, following his partner in crime’s finger. Rico was an annoying asshole, but he didn’t fuck around when it came to pussy.

Lowering his knockoff Gucci sunglasses, Craig licked his lips and let out the same low, husky chuckle he always did when spotting fresh meat. “Oooh, they comin’ back from a costume party or some shit. Sluts’re barely wearing clothes.”

“Like they’re wearin’ nothin’ at aaaaaaall,” Rico replied, doing his best Ned Flanders impression.

Across the vacant plane of faded asphalt, three voluptuous figures were sauntering their way towards the horned-up men, semi-silhouetted by the roadside lights down the hill. Their path was taking them between the glow of the flood lights dotted across the lot, so the guys didn't get a super clear look, but they were definitely wearing little to no clothing, and one other thing was obvious:

"They got curves for fuckin' days, bro. I can see 'em jigglin' from here!" Rico barked like a dog and slammed his hands repeatedly on the dash. "Let's go hit some slit!" Craig looked over to see his friend was actively rubbing himself.

"Dude, patience, please! We've talked about this!" Craig revved the engine of his modded Toyota Corolla, dropped the clutch, and peeled out into a steady drift, making their way over to the trio of beautiful tail at an angle.

The girls stopped walking as the car neared. It produced a trail of white, acrid smoke as it edged towards them. Rico leaned out the window and whistled at the attractive young sluts as Craig expertly performed a few donuts, circling their prey like the pussy predators they were proud to be. He deftly brought the car to a halt and cranked up the stereo to give themselves intro music.

Tech N9ne blasted out across the empty parking lot as Craig and Rico exited the car, swag on full display, and posted up on the hood looking like a couple of bad asses. Rico had brought the twelve pack of Bud Light with him and cracked a fresh one as he undressed the women with his eyes and quite literally licked his lips.

In the flood of the headlights, the men could see the ladies in all their glory, and... they were clowns? Hot clowns, sure, wearing little more than technicolor lingerie, but they were still *fucking clowns*. Red noses, big shoes, face paint, pointy hats with bells... all that dumb shit. Craig didn't care. Hole was hole.

"Is the circus in town? Y'all definitely ain't local. We'd surely recognize three fine ass females such as yourself." Craig crossed his arms as he lobbed a playful opener. He was confident he sounded sexy and masculine. These girls definitely wanted to fuck him.

In response to his compliment, all three clowns smiled. Their teeth shone bright white. One tilted her head like a puppy. Another twirled her finger in a pigtail. *Oh, shit, they really do wanna fuck*. This was surprising to Craig, though he told himself it wasn't.

Rico added, "You bitches are stacked the fuck up!" With a knowing sigh, Craig looked over and was not the least bit surprised to see that Rico was fondling his boner over his sweat-pants.

Craig resisted the urge to slap the back of his friend's head. Rico had zero charisma when it came to women, which always led to them having to *take* what they wanted. Of course, they would always *ALWAYS* get what they wanted, because that was their right as men, but *just once* Craig wanted to successfully woo a woman *before* he dominated her.

Without skipping a beat, Rico continued, "We got the music bumpin', put on a show for us!"

Fuming, Craig opened his mouth to speak over his dumbass friend, try to salvage the pathetic suggestion, but he was halted by the sound of laughter.

The clown girls were giggling with genuine delight. They looked to each other and traded shrugs. Craig couldn't believe it.

"Holy shit, Rico, that actually worked," he hissed excitedly into the other man's ear. "These bitches gotta be coked out of their minds or something—obviously—but that shit *worked*."

Craig bawked a laugh and slapped his dipshit friend on the back, then turned back to the clown girls as they began moving sensually to the beat blasting from the car. Rico's back was warm, his shirt damp with sweat. His hand lingered.

The trio of sexy ass females twirled about, rocking their hips and sliding their hands over their plentiful curves. *They're like the three bears. There's a short one, a normal one, and a crazy tall one*, Craig noted with wonder. He'd only seen one other girl that tall ever in his life, and he'd fucked her too. A working skirt a few towns over. The memory of their nights together made the present situation sweeter.

Rico let out a hoot and reached up to twist one of his nipples. Craig pulled his eyes away from his friend and tried to focus on the beautiful women. Sure, they'd fucked each other in prison, but that was *prison*. The last thing Craig was was a fucking queer.

He couldn't take his eyes off of the middle clown once he saw she was staring right at him. She twirled her tongue around

her lips as her hands explored her own body. Craig replied with a politely whispered, "Oh, fuuuuuu..."

He was simultaneously titillated and alarmed when the woman squeezed one of her substantial breasts and it straight up honked like a bicycle horn. *Ee-Ah!*

The shorter, slighter clown girl with the pigtails leapt into the air, casually executing an elegant, tumbling twirl, and landed in a crouch before Rico. She was definitely Rico's type: party sized. Young and nubile.

She settled onto her knees and licked her lips, eyes locked on Rico's bulge like she was starvin' for it. The man responded by frantically attacking the string keeping his tented sweatpants secured to his waist. The clown girl giggled maniacally and reached up to help with the knot.

Craig pointedly ignored the wet sounds and breathy moans now coming from his right, even though a part of him wanted to watch. All thoughts of Rico's red hot throbbing cock fled his mind as the other two clown girls pressed their bodies to his, chilled fingers snaking their way beneath his waistband.

He closed his eyes, leaned his head back, and reached out with his hands, discovering their soft flesh surprisingly cool. Craig could not believe this was actually happening, but he wasn't going to question it. *Sometimes pornos really do come true*, he thought. *I'm about to get my dick sucked by two sexy clown girls that I just met.*

Craig moaned with pleasure as their hands found his cock and he delighted in the secret he and Rico shared. After these dumb cunts willingly sucked their dicks, Craig and Rico were

going to drag the walking, talking slits out to the abandoned steel mill—whether they wanted to or not—and fuck them again, and again, and again, night after night, day after day, until they were quite literally fucked to death. Having served their use, Craig and Rico would drop their bodies down the rusted out elevator shaft like all the others.

The knowledge that these dumb sluts didn't know what was eventually going to happen made the blood rush to Craig's cock all the faster.

The killer duo had been doing this on a near-monthly basis for almost a year, and no one was the wiser. Sheriff Cole had vague suspicions about where they got their drinking money, but he also never graduated high school and had yet to connect a single dot.

The trick—which Craig had come up with—was to pick up hookers from neighboring towns and drive them back up the mountain. Local pigs never looked too hard for whores, and Mungo Junction was nearly a ghost town at this point. Craig and Rico had already been squatting in the Steel Mill for six months before they started bringing home guests. Not once had a single soul come out to visit the site, including the dipshit sheriff.

Craig flicked open his eyes when he felt fingers clamp tightly onto his thinning head of hair. The lead clown girl was easing him down to his knees. He was thrilled to discover the destination: the taller clown girl's crotch. She smelled like cotton candy. Titillation and confusion coalesced once again as the tall

clown pulled her polka dot panties to the side, revealing a red cloth protruding from her lady folds.

Intrigued, Craig reached up and tugged on it like he was under a spell. As he pulled, he heard a rising, whirling tone, like those whistle toys from when he was a kid. *The fuck?*

The red rag turned out to be tied to another square of fabric, this one blue. Craig immediately knew the bit, but felt obligated to see the gag through. He used both hands to yank as a never ending stream of hankies continued to explode out of the clown girl's crotch, the whirling whistle sounding the whole time.

After about fifteen seconds of this nonsense, Craig ceased his pulling. His hands were covered in the sickly sweet smelling fluids of her downstairs. The once enticing smell was now making his stomach do cartwheels. *Hole is hole*, he reminded himself. He looked up at the tall clown girl, and asked with incredulity, "How big is your fucking vagina?"

The clown girl threw her head back in uproarious laughter before grabbing Craig's head and burying his face in her crotch. *Yes, fuck yes*, Craig screamed in his mind as he opened his mouth to receive her wetness.

Despite *smelling* like candy, her cunt tasted like rotting *fuck-ing* meat. After a singular lick, Craig involuntarily dropped to the asphalt and began spitting and dry heaving while scratching at his tongue with all ten fingers.

The two clown girls found this endlessly amusing, and exploded into cries of joy. Women laughing at his expense triggered a whole lot of shit in the dark recesses of Craig's mind,

and he was instantly thrown into a blind rage. His nausea forgotten, Craig shot up to his feet and swung hard at the face of the tall bitch with the necropussy.

Craig was then reminded that he had consumed four beers and half a bottle of whiskey when he wasn't able to compute what had actually occurred following his attempted punch. The next thing he knew, he was pressed against something hard and warm.

After a second of reflection, he understood that he had swung and found only air, his body continued turning, and he ultimately fell face first over the hood that he was just leaning against. He was on his knees.

Craig spun to face the clown bitches, now fully intending to strangle the whores to death and *then* fuck them, steel mill be damned. He froze when a pained shriek pierced his ears.

Craig hadn't realized that falling to his knees had placed him eye level with his friend's ongoing blowjob. When he turned his head in response to the scream, all he could really see was the side of Rico's hairy ass, the clown girl's face, and an explosion of blood spraying from where her mouth met his crotch.

Craig felt the hot red liquid coat his face as he fell onto his back and began shuffling away on his ass, wanting nothing more than to flee, unable to pull his eyes away from the horror playing out before him. *She's biting his cock off!*

Rico's extended wail petered out in a frail wheeze as his lungs exhausted themselves of air. His arms curled up and into his chest like a dying spider as he tipped sideways and collapsed, his head kissing the pavement with a terrible *CRACK!*

Craig saw that his friend's body was actively seizing. There was nothing he could do. The short clown girl with the pigtails whipped her face in his direction, eyes locking with his, the swiftness of the motion sending a rope of blood whipping off her chin like paint from a brush.

When the terrible woman smiled, her lips spread, the smile stretching beyond what was normal. What was possible. Craig heard a moaning sound, understood it was his own voice trying to scream and failing to do so. He couldn't control it.

Though they were painted crimson, Craig could see that the dear woman's teeth were not... *well, not human*. It was the only thing he could figure. Her whole mouth was comprised of crooked fangs.

The crouching clown girl who'd just bit off his best friend's cock—who was now smiling at Craig—casually held up her finger in a 'wait' motion. She sprang to her feet and daintily bounced over to stand before him, hips swaying, hands flat at her side like Betty *goddamn* Boop. She bent at the waist and presented her open mouth to him, tongue out. "Aaaaaahhhh," she moaned.

The undead circus freak was pushing her breasts together with her elbows. Craig wasn't thinking about sex anymore. He didn't know how to respond, or if he even should, so he just stared wide eyed. His lower lip quivered, though he was not aware.

The cannibalistic clown girl held up her finger again as she rose back to standing. She pumped her hands in the air and

smiled out to an imaginary audience as though beckoning them to wait, to watch, as the trick was not finished.

The clown then bent her knees, tilted her head back, and made a terrible grunting sound. Something shot up into the dark night from her throat. The object twirled as it rose into the sky, miraculously silhouetted by the full moon from where Craig was laying. A black cylinder spinning within a bright white circle.

When it returned to Earth, the clown girl caught it in her teeth. Only then did Craig realize what he had just witnessed: she had just rocketed Rico's dismembered cock out of her stomach and caught it in her teeth like it was a goddamn party trick. The clown girl then spread her arms and tipped into a deep, dramatic bow.

Craig screamed and rolled onto his stomach, struggled to push himself up onto his feet. He attempted to break into a sprint, but neglected to fully stand up before doing so. This caused him to only make it a few steps in an awkward crouch-run before tumbling back down to the pavement, landing hard on his left knee. He caught his bearings immediately, turning the tumble into a roll back up to his hands and knees, preparing to jump to his feet.

He wasn't fast enough. They'd surrounded him. He remained on hands and knees, studied the dirty pair of women's feet before him. He couldn't bring himself to look up.

Craig was well aware that he had spent less than a second with his face to the ground. Somehow, in that instant, these bitches had it made all the way over to him? That was impossi-

ble. This realization was somehow even scarier than the prospect of getting his dick bitten off, because it informed his subconscious that something out-of-this-world was actively unfolding.

Of course, Craig wasn't smart enough to realize this for himself, but a new, intangible fear stretched out and enveloped his mind. Craig's elbows began to wobble as his jeans went warm and piss puddled at his knees.

The man clasped his hands, rose to kneeling, and tried the only thing he could think to do. "Please don't bite my dick off, please!" He then wailed like a toddler, hands unfolding, arms flopping to his sides.

The *just-right* clown girl who had locked eyes with Craig stepped forward, pressed her big toe to his chest. With a flick, the sniveling serial killer was thrown onto his back, legs kicking out from under him. Her casual use of such unnatural strength caused Craig's dwindling Fight or Flight respond to dissolve into a cowardly acceptance of his fate. He did not run or fight or plead for his life. Instead, the quivering of his lower lip increased its speed while the rest of his body remained locked in place.

The head clown girl smiled as she placed one of her giant red shoes onto Craig's chest. Her shoe squeaked like a toy as Craig's ribs groaned, threatened to snap. With horror, he looked up her skirt to see a *wriggling mass* in the dark crevice where her crotch should've been. His eyes whipped back to the tall clown and he discovered with even more horror that the

rope of handkerchiefs he'd pulled out of her were retracting back up into her *all on their own*.

"What the fuck even are you bitches? Fucking demons?? Aliens?!" Craig was shrieking, finally aware this wasn't just a random act of violence from some psycho sexy clown girls—this was some genuine ass nightmare shit.

The monster crushing his chest responded with a wide sweeping of her arms and a dip to the side that seemed to say, "Great question, thanks for asking!"

She showed him her forearm. The glowing white skin was puckered with more than a dozen cigarette burns. He remembered giving those to one of the girls he and Rico brought home. One for each day she survived the torture. "No, no! You're dead! I killed you!"

His head whipped about the women, and he saw the clowns for what they were. Rotten skin hung from exposed bone. Their faces were gaunt, hair missing in clumps. Not one of them still had eyes, the sockets merely black recesses.

"This isn't happen-HUH!" Her foot pressed harder, and his lungs emptied. He felt a rib crack, pain flaring. Craig continued to squeak breathlessly in terror.

The head clown kept her foot on his chest as she removed a small, bedazzled purse from her shoulder and began to rummage through it. Craig's mind threatened to implode in on itself as her entire arm descended into the tiny handbag, all the way to the shoulder. A second later, she was pulling something out.

A red rod rose from the tiny handbag, far too long. After she'd pulled out a meter of the thing, Craig heard what sounded

like balloons rubbing against each other. He stopped breathing as the tiny purse stretched like it was putty, and the oversized head of a carnival hammer popped from the pocket. The handbag was once again tiny.

The head of the hammer was clearly just a length of tree trunk that had been sanded smooth. Craig could see the rings. It was painted red and featured a big yellow star on the flat end. She smiled down at Craig, long tongue lolling about as she lifted the massive hammer over her head with ease.

“You’ve gotta be fucking kiddi-” Craig was not able to finish the sentence, as his entire skull, throat, and collarbone were turned to paste.

A wave of cackles echoed out across the small mountain town. Others joined the call. By morning, not a single man in Mungo Junction was still breathing.

S U M M I T

It was the fifteenth spring of The New Beginning. The first decade had been ripe with famine and disease and desperate conflict over a perpetual scarcity of resources. The last five years had been more promising, with the people of the South banding together to reclaim their sense of civility and honor.

Things were looking up for the one-hundred-and-sixteen settlements dotted across the southern United States—now known collectively as The Great Confederacy—but there was one outlying problem that threatened their newfound stability: domestic terrorism.

In response, dozens of major players involved in the founding of the new Confederacy had gathered at Governor Culp's private manor in the wilds of Tuskegee under the guise of negotiating nationwide trade agreements between the major guilds. The real reason was to figure out what to do about the terrorist militia that referred to themselves as The Worthy. Everyone seemed to have an opinion on the matter, of which they had been voicing for the better part of an hour.

Charles Durr's official title was Director of Media Operations. His job was originally to work with Culp drafting slides for his speeches. When the governor took ill with scrub typhus, Durr took over writing *and* presenting the slides that he formerly only illustrated.

Two years later, and Charles had positioned himself closer to the governor than all but one of his superiors across the entire cabinet. The key had been discovering Culp's fascination with inventions. Young Charles believed deeply that they were doing good, rebuilding a great nation of free men.

A white haired mummy of a man shouted through a small silk face mask stuffed with medicinal herbs, "what they doin' is they floodin' the mark't with a sub-standard praw-duct!" Charles recognized him as the senator of Jackson, which had the third largest seaside port in the confederacy. The act of projecting his voice proved too much for the old politician, who promptly keeled over into a coughing fit in his chair.

"Have they really not responded to our proposals to negotiate?" This came from a bald, pink, portly man with a walrus-like moustache and matchingly voluminous eyebrows. *King of the Ozarks. I can't believe they approved his petition to keep the title of king*, Charles thought to himself. *What a strange, new world we're living in.*

General Pike—old world politician from Texas, now defacto leader of the confederate army—turned his hands over on the table, shrugging without his shoulders. "They've responded, just not in the traditional sense. The first messenger was returned via trebuchet. We believe they ate the second."

“Don’t they say ‘third times the charm?’” This comment came from a long, deeply tan, leather-skinned man in a simple suit and glasses with such an extreme prescription they enlarged the man’s irises to the point where that was all one could see in the lenses. The suit clearly wasn’t fitted for the thin giant, as evidenced by the hairy forearms visible on the table. His dark hair was greased and combed flat against his head. Durr wasn’t sure who this man was, which he found rather odd, having met most of the leaders already. *Probably from one of the new midwest colonies*, he surmised.

General Pike was not amused by the question. The large man clenched his square jaw into a perfect right angle before hissing, “Those are my MEN yer yappin’ about! Say somethin’ else. I dare you.”

The narrow man with the giant bug eyes smirked and opened his mouth to speak, but Governor Culp interrupted with the clanking of a glass. “Gentlemen, gentlemen, please. We have a lot to discuss. We’re all on the same side here. The *Worthy* are the enemy.” He spit their chosen name like it soured the tongue when spoken aloud. The governor continued.

“For those of you not fully acquainted with this band of ne’er-do-wells, my media man has prepared a brief presentation. Charles?”

The room turned to look at Charles Durr. They saw a young, dapperly dressed gentleman with a pair of unruly chops that covered most of his cheeks. He stepped up to the device on the far side of the long room. A wide pipe extended down from the ceiling to an odd metal box. The governor spoke up. “That’s

a new contraption from one of the bright boys down in Narlins. Uses mirrors to funnel The Sun wherever you want it. See for yourself."

The room full of politicians and business leaders all collectively tilted their heads in intrigue. Charles ceremoniously turned the large dial and a circle of light telescoped into existence on the wall. A wave of subdued wonder passed over the room.

Charles let them settle, waiting an appropriately dramatic amount of time before reaching up and slotting the first slide into the machine. *Ka-Chunk!* The circle of light on the wall became a series of hand drawn illustrations. The room exploded in applause. It had been fifteen years since the old coots had seen anything like this. Shadow puppets were a far second.

"It's juss like the old movies!"

"Daggum, that's amazin'!"

"Okay, boys, calm down, calm down." General Culp smiled earnestly as he tried to quiet his guests. He loved showing off his gadgets. "Let the boy speak."

The rabble dissipated as Charles turned to face the room. He'd been presenting on the governor's behalf for a while now, but this was the first time he had been asked to do it in front of such a... powerful audience. *Every single person important to the confederacy is in this very room.* After a moment of reverence, Charles cleared his throat and shook the nerves away. On the projector's image, the words "The Worthy" were written, beside it a rather detailed, well-drawn sketch of the group's flag, as

well as a rough sketch of their de facto leader with the long nose.

“The group known as The Worthy are a nomadic band of slavers that have been in operation since shortly after The Reckoning. They first formed in central Louisiana and have been wreaking havoc across most of the country for the past fifteen years.”

Charles whipped out his pointer with a flourish, used momentum to extend the tool. He tapped the projection of the man’s face. “This is Dirk Wilder, their leader. He runs the show. And I mean that literally.”

Charles pressed hard on the finicky button and the slide frame shot out of the projector. In its place, he slotted the next, illuminating the wall with an illustration of a gargantuan, multi-tiered stage with curved backslashes and hundreds of geometric wedges for feet.

It looked like an impractical contraption, a mobile amphitheater, but Charles’ sources had assured him it was functional. Dozens of sails extended out from each side. Atop the various landings were close to a dozen men and women, wearing little, covered in red, green, and yellow body paint. Each one held a different instrument. The politicians all balked at the lewdness of the gang’s illustrated attire.

“This is their stage. It is some sort of wind-powered vehicle. We do not know *precisely* how it works, but enough reports verify its mobility. We believe those sails catch the wind, which turns a gear, subsequently powering those small triangular pro-

trusions on the bottom to cycle in a sort of stepping motion. Like a krill, or crawfish.”

The mix of reactions around the room made it clear that for many of the leaders here, the years of outlandish, unbelievable rumors they’d heard and shared were being confirmed. The tan, thin man with the terrible sight spoke first. “So it’s a giant mechanical crab thing that can go anywhere. That’s actually kind of bad ass.”

“Y’all’re sayin’ the tales is—is real?” This came from the King of the Ozarks. He didn’t appear to expect an answer, let alone knew he’d spoken out loud. Few others were taking the image in stride.

“Wilder insists the wind carries them and they do not control their path, but we highly doubt these claims. He has convinced his people of many falsehoods, the most glaring lie being that both he and his son are immortal.”

A wave of uncomfortable chortles made its way through the men. Since *The Reckoning*, the rumors that spread back and forth across the country had taken on a supernatural undertone that frustrated Charles, a man of science.

There were a fair share of fables regarding people who could not die. These talltales had never been confirmed, of course, and most believed them to be fantasy. At the same time, since *The New Beginning*, a ‘hesitant open-mindedness’ pervaded the people. Hubris regarding what could and could not be had been the downfall of civilization. *People don’t want to make the same mistake, so now everyone half believes in magic and vampires*, Charles always grumbled.

He struggled once again with the eject button before inserting the next slide. Only writing spanned the wall, organized into a loose timetable. "This is a rough approximation of what occurs when The Worthy *skitters* into a populated area." The whole room groaned.

"The Culling is the first phase, wherein his army razes the land, maiming and raping and burning down everything in their path. During this time, Wilder and his bandmates perform an hours-long ritual on stage. The Culling ends when the music stops. We are assuming that the performers take stimulants of some sort as the musical ritual has been known to last upwards of twenty-four hours."

"Jesus Christ," one man muttered.

"Fuckin' hell," said another. General Culp lifted his hand and wagged it in a shushing motion. Charles continued.

"The second phase is referred to by The Worthy as The Reaping. When the culling ends, all survivors are rounded up and forced through a series of trials for the army's entertainment. They essentially throw a giant festival that can last anywhere between a day and a week, depending on how many individuals survived the initial culling."

"These trials vary widely but are generally designed to pit the survivors against each other in various kill-or-be-killed scenarios. Oftentimes, parents and children are forced to fight each other for survival."

The King of the Ozarks had gone from pink to beet red over the course of the past few minutes. He was fuming and sputtering with rage as he interrupted. "You-you-you're telling us, yes?"

That this man has child soldiers? Yes? That he makes f-families kill each other?? YES??" The fork he held was bent irregularly within his white-knuckled fist.

Charles nodded solemnly. What he showed them now was just the surface of the dark, terrible acts of violence and depravity he'd read of The Worthy. "Yes, sir. The large majority of The Worthy are below the age of twenty. We believe the trials are designed for such an outcome. Despite Wilder's claim that anyone can be worthy, few adults are ever deemed as such. These children are often presented with two options: do nothing and die, or live by killing your parents, your siblings. It's an impossible situation they're put into."

The thin, unserious man spoke up. "This also means that any military action taken against The Worthy would mean we'd be... *killin' kids*." He rolled his eyes when he said the last part. The whole room grumbled in response.

None of them *really* had a problem with children dying, as that was just the reality of this harsh world. Plagues were a very real possibility again, cropped up every few years. Everyone who'd grown into adulthood Post Reckoning likely had siblings that hadn't made it. Charles himself had been seven and the oldest of four when the world fell. Today, he had six dead siblings. He lived with his parents and single surviving sister, who was eight. She used crutches, having contracted polio two winters back.

The real issue with The Worthy using children as human shields was that the stability of the past half decade had brought about a number of advocacy groups, and Mother Against Child

Endangerment and Labor was notorious for sticking their noses into every single thing.

More than half the leaders in this room had seen their profits slashed because of the banning of children working in mines and factories two years ago, the rest suffered because of the new sanctions on brothels. If MACEL caught wind that military action was being planned against The Worthy, they'd fight it tooth and nail. It would be a legal nightmare for these men.

General Culp spoke up. "This is why none of what we discuss here is to leave this room. Do not share this information with anyone, even upper management. We're here to figure out a solution and act upon it before anyone else has a say. Snuff out this problem once and for all." He motioned to the boy to continue.

Charles switched out the slides once again. This time, it was a genuine photograph. A wave of murmurs cascaded across the hot, smelly room packed with civilized gentlemen. This was likely the first time most of them had seen a photograph that had been taken *after* The Reckoning. The photographic arts were only just now making a resurgence.

The sepia image depicted a line of prisoners bound together by a long rope, young boys with rifles on either side of them, looking darkly into the lens. "This photograph was provided to us by an agent of the States." A series of jeers and taunts rose up, which Charles knew was coming. He smiled, waited. Even General Culp participated in the hollering. Nobody liked the States.

“He infiltrated the group under the guise of being a journalist. He traveled with them for two weeks, documenting everything. Most of what we know comes from his time within the organization.”

“And they just let him leave of his own volition?” This came from the stranger with the ill-fitting suit and giant glasses. Charles noted his lack of an accent. *He must be from one of the metropolitan cities. Kansas City maybe?* Charles nodded in response.

“Yes, oddly, they let him go. The agent described the leader, Dirk Wilder, as a strange, jovial, highly charismatic person. Nothing like how one would think the leader of a murderous child army would act.” In response, the narrow man smiled like Charles had made a joke. He ignored it and moved on with the presentation.

“This is an image of what The Worthy call ‘A Holy Pilgrimage’. The two boys on either side of the prisoners are members of The Worthy looking to move up the ranks. The people between them are individuals who survived the culling, but lost their trial during the reaping, and were thus deemed unworthy. Their foreheads are branded and they are taken by the two aspiring soldiers away from the main procession to be sold to major slavers in Narlins, Natchez, and Alexandria. If the two boys can successfully trade their slaves and make it back, they earn a place of honor within the army. These pilgrims are, of course, how most of us know of The Worthy’s existence in the first place.”

The room collectively nodded. For most of the Confederacy, these pilgrims were the only contact anyone had with The Worthy. The existence of a giant, wandering tower that brought death and destruction wherever it went was mostly a myth before today. Many of these young pilgrims would end up causing trouble and getting themselves locked up before finishing their missions, which would in turn mean they were unworthy to return. MACEL had implemented reintegration programs across the confederacy to combat the growing gangs of young dissenters popping up all across the countryside.

Charles continued, "General Culp and his advisors have been speaking with agents of the Union." This caused another raucous interruption, but Charles soldiered on. "They agree that The Worthy need to be taken care of. There appears to be copycat militias composed of failed pilgrims popping up in every major metropolitan area both here and along the southern edge of the northern territories." The room groaned again. Culp took over for Charles.

"They believe that taking out Dirk Wilder and his son would put an end to everything," the aging general said with as much gravitas as he could muster. This stilled the room. "Most of the army is comprised of children and young adults who were enslaved and forced into service against their will through torture and brainwashing. If we kill the leader, we will still have the copycats to deal with over the coming years, but the *maker* of these copycats will be gone, and no more will be created."

The room all nodded in agreement. The red walrus king spoke up as he rubbed his scruffy chin. "So instead of a large

offensive comprised of thousands of soldiers, we put together a small covert team of killers. They move in under cover of night with a single target: this Dirk Wilder."

"Two targets, but yes. The Union is insistent the son would take the throne if left alive." Charles said.

The half-blind narrow man said, thick with sarcasm, "But how are we to kill two immortal beings?" This got a laugh from the room.

The King of the Ozarks smiled wryly. "Well, I have two men who absolutely adore the shadows. I'm sure they'd love to lend a hand in this matter."

The ghostly senator from Jackson wheezed through his mask of herbs, "I got just the man fer the job." Half a dozen others chimed in with their pledge to lend an assassin or two to the cause. General Culp put out his arms, taking control of the room again.

"Alright, so we have a basic plan. And it sounds like we have enough men to do the job. That's probably as much detail as we should know. The specifics can be worked out by the executing team. Who do we want to lead it?"

The room erupted into chaos as every leader spoke at the same time. One voice broke through the noise. It was the tall man with the thick spectacles. *Who in the hell is even that?* Charles was frustrated with himself for not thoroughly memorizing the new wave of representatives. *The elections were over a year ago!*

The man with the too-long limbs stood to tower over the table, removing his glasses. *He must be one of the tallest people still*

living, Charles realized. His demeanor had shifted, and he suddenly had an energy about him that quieted the room.

The glasses had pacified the man. Without them, he was hard and dark and imposing. Politicians and moguls alike slowly lowered themselves back into their seats with only a hard stare from his icy blue eyes. The near-giant took long strides until he was beside the projector. Beside Charles.

Everyone stared. Culp looked annoyed. Charles stopped himself before involuntarily gulping with fear.

“Who the hell’re you?” the old governor asked.

The tall man with the strange smile stretched his grin until it looked almost painful. Charles had to crane his neck just to look the man in the face. “You don’t recognize me?” Two massive fists rose up and ruffled the greasy hair until it was a wild knot of curls. “How’s about now?”

The general glanced about impatiently, but nobody’s face registered the man’s identity. The tall man frowned. “Okay, I’ll give you one more hint. BOY!”

The portly walrus king gasped and jiggled in his chair just as the man beside him did the same. Nearly all the guests seated at the table reacted as something skittered past their legs. A small, pale, malnourished blonde boy who couldn’t have been more than eight popped up beside the narrow beast of a man. The child’s limbs were rail thin, as was his waist, but his chest was bulky, barrel shaped, and his head was disproportionately large. The tall man patted pale hair. “There you are, boy.”

The room exploded into shouts as the group of wealthy power players realized they were in the presence of Dirk Wilder, leader of the murder cult known as The Worthy.

Blades were drawn, as were pistols, as were curtains. Sunlight filled the room, dimming the projection. Immediate surrender was demanded as allies clustered into a ring before the man, the long center table cutting the mob in half. Charles was the only one that remained where he was. *I was in the middle of a gosh darn presentation!*

After a tense moment of silent, Dirk spoke. "Not that it matters, but half the shit this kid said was wrong." The madman used his son to motion toward Charles, who was actively quivering in professional embarrassment. He'd been doing so well, and now this?

Two of General Culp's oversized security officers peeled off from the huddle, advanced toward the terrorist with sidearms trained. While far wider than the knobby intruder, they were each a head shorter. "On your knees, now!"

Charles looked between them and Dirk, relieved. *Maybe I should step back*, he thought.

Before the young man could do so, and before the agents could close the distance, Dirk hoisted his son into the air, yelled, "You're gonna wanna be careful where you aim those things!" He lifted the boy's shirt, revealed a bulky vest stuffed with tubes and wires and blinking lights.

The brutes stopped, put their hands out, and reversed their approach on bent knees. The powerful men behind them dis-

solved into whimpering children. They dared not move, a room full of quivering, moaning, staring statues.

Dirk held his boy bomb above his head with both arms and cackled, drool slipping from his mouth as he slowly turned and made eye contact with each and every person present in the room.

When his large head finally swiveled on its thin neck to look back and down at Charles, the boy realized how close he still was. Instinct drove him back into the corner of the room before his knees went soft. His ass hit the floor as his legs kicked out before him. From this perspective, the man was half giant. *He's so, so tall.* It was all his mind could conjure.

The madman turning away from the Leaders of The Great Confederacy allowed their paralysis to shift to panic. The collective desire to be away from an active explosive took root in their minds. The men abandoned their weapons as they turned to the windows and doors, wanting only to escape. They discovered every one of them to be sealed shut.

Respected leaders from across the confederacy began trampling each other in their mad, ineffectual race to find an exit. Dirk just stood there, holding up his pale-faced boy, cackling away. Charles saw that the boy's face was devoid of expression, head rocking as he was shaken about. He did not appear present, his gaze a million miles away.

The main clump of aristocrats were shoved against the double doors, the lot of them trying to force the path open with their collective might. All they accomplished was to crack the ribs of those at the head.

“Gentlemen! I must say, you are all very quick to judge.” Dirk was yelling over the chaotic rabble of fear and failed escape. “Do you really think I would strap a bomb to my only son?” The panicked bureaucrats slowed their fevered shoves, turning to regard the mad man.

“Yes! We very much think that!” The walrus king yelled before the group of men broken back into futile pandemonium.

“Y’all’re gonna wanna watch me.” Dirk shouted, but nobody listened. He huffed and grabbed his lower lip, pulling it up to his front teeth and sucking in a powerful whistle. The loud, shrill tone pierced the room.

Dirk pulled at one of the vest straps and the contraption flopped off the boy’s thin frame. The booby-trap-looking device plopped to the floor with a hollow thud. Dirk then placed his son to stand on the large conference table. The sweaty men piled around the main doors exuded a mix of embarrassment and rage.

The momentary sense of calm and relief quickly fled as Dirk hopped up onto the table himself, produced a blade and buried it into the neck of his offspring. The boy’s only reaction was a slight lifting of the eyebrows, an opening of the mouth, nothing more. Blood began to leak from where knife met nape, but the boy stayed on his feet.

“By the Gods, man! That’s your son!” The walrus king belowered.

Dirk smiled, wiggling the knife. “I know, right? You’re gonna wanna see this next part. Don’t look away!”

Before anyone could react, the tall man pressed his long thighs around the boy's torso, blood pouring over his pants and into his socks. He grabbed the boy's forehead, forced the knife forward. The result was a partial severing the boy's head from his body. Dropping the blade, Dirk tucked his forearms under the boy's jaw and gave it a hard yank. The crowd all screamed as the child's eyes bulged and his neck snapped with a terrible crack. Flesh tore free.

Everyone in the room, including Charles, had been watching when Dirk Wilder beheaded his only son right in front of them. The moment the boy's head was separated from his body, a bright light filled the room. For but a fraction of time, Charles swore he saw shapes and colors pouring from the boy's neck.

* * * * *

Dirk Wilder sat in lotus position upon the conference table and breathed in the sweet carcinogenic scent of blood and ash. He felt a poke on his bum. He cracked an eye open to see his son standing below him, head attached to his shoulders, his throat unsevered. The boy's face held no expression as it looked up.

The old man smiled down at the boy. "That might just be the last time we ever have to do that. We just wiped the entire fucking slate clean, my boy. Isn't that great?" Dirk patted his son's shoulder encouragingly. "We did it." The boy did not react.

Dirk leaned down, "We *did it*, boy." Still no response.

The father backhanded his child, sending him stumbling across the room. His shoe landed in a puddle of pale grey mush

and he lost his footing, falling hard onto one of the dozens of corpses now littering the room. Their eyes were burned black, with what remained of their liquefied brains leaking out into the cracks of the hardwood floor.

The boy simply sat in the mess, stared at the floor. He did not cry.

EXCERPT

The following is a chapter from the forthcoming novel, Blessed Vessel. It was originally a novelette written for Summer Culling but has since been expanded into a series that follows a core group across the entirety of The Carrington Event. It is expected to release Summer 2027.

A sound came. It was a sound that Luna had never heard before. It was an inexplicable, indescribable polyphonic hum that seemed to come from everywhere all at once. It felt as if the cosmos itself was vibrating, like she was hearing some divine tone. It was all consuming.

With the sound came a nauseating disorientation, like her consciousness itself had done a barrel roll, and then Luna was no longer looking up at the tall boy, but instead looking down at her short self. She pulled back with a start, and so did her doppelganger. They stumbled on unfamiliar legs.

The other her spoke first. "What the shit?" The voice sounded like her, but not the cadence. Luna's mind reeled as she

discovering her hands were larger than they should've been. Beyond these strange hands, Luna saw now that the woman before her had a finger hooked into the belt loop of the pants on Luna's... *current* body. Just as she'd done to the cute boy with the serpentine features a second earlier. *What is happening?* Screams rang out around the room.

The doppelganger spoke again, "Luna?"

She replied without thinking. "Cute snake boy?"

"Uh, what?" *OH GOD, NO!* Hot shame washed over a body that wasn't hers.

As making eye contact with her reflection had been difficult, trying to meet the eyes of her doppelganger turned out to be impossible. The thought sent Luna's head a-turning, where she found the room in utter chaos. Nearly every guest was falling over, running like a muppet, or screaming whilst staring at their hands. Her sight landed on the old playboy, the one that had whispered in her ear. He was screaming. The moment their eyes met, Luna was overcome with the same otherworldly lurching as before.

An instant later, she found herself staring at the beautiful boy she'd nearly kissed. She was seeing him from across the room. He dropped to the floor, appearing to faint. She was thoroughly confused, her train of thought not having made the journey from one brain to another. Beside the boy, there Luna stood. *I'm supposed to be over there. That's me, over there. What in the world?* Before she could surmise what was occurring, her

mind was teleported again and again around the room as she looked for an answer to the impossible situation unfolding, involuntarily making eye contact with others in the process.

Luna wasn't sure how long her mind had been bouncing around the room once she figured out what was happening. It had finally clicked when she locked eyes with Miss Shivers, her mind and stomach spun wildly for a fraction of a second, then her neck became uncomfortably warm. It happened the same moment that her vision changed from Miss Shivers to that of a middle-aged Latino caterer. The same caterer she had locked eyes with only a handful of seconds before.

Luna forced herself to look down. *Stop making eye contact*, she told herself, not entirely sure why. Her hands were gloved in emerald silk. She felt at the thick, furry scarf around her neck. She was inside of Miss Shivers' body. *This is really happening.*

Luna tried to comprehend the impossible, but was distracted by the reality of how old and broken down her employer truly was. It took an effort not to keel over onto the floor, her spine flaring with pain in multiple places. *Oh, and my joints, just moving them is utter agony... No—focus, focus!* Focusing, Luna determined that, for some reason, whenever she made eye contact with anyone their minds swapped bodies. It had first happened with the boy.

The phenomenon was not unique to her, as the entire room had erupted into a feverish panic. Luna raised her eyes ever so

slightly, trying to use her peripheral vision to assess the situation. *Damn it, the old bat is half blind.* Some guests were sobbing, curled up on the floor. Many a fight had broken out. The one thing everyone had in common, including Luna, was the wailing in existential terror.

"Muh bones, muh boooones!"

"Jesus Christ save me!"

"GAAAAAHHHHH!"

She watched as one mind—no telling whose—seemed to be going for "most swaps", pouncing on person after person, grabbing their face and locking eyes, then leaping away in their new fleshsuit, giggling all the way.

Luna felt a tightening in her throat, found herself suddenly in need of oxygen as a pair of thick, moisturized hands wrapped around her frail, elderly throat from behind.

"Get. Out. Of. My. Body!" A male voice bellowed, emphasizing each word with a rattling of Luna's head. The owner's screams tickled the backs of her ears. Thick fingers tightened around her thin neck, their tips digging into her throat like dull daggers. Luna tried to turn her head—technically Miss Shivers' head—to see her attacker, but it was no use. "Get out of my body!" the voice repeated.

Holy shit, Luna thought, *that's Miss Shivers.* The old bag had figured out the what of the situation, but not the how. Luna tried to croak out "Look at me!" but no air came. Her windpipe was being crushed. *She's going to kill me. Miss Shivers is going to*

crush her own windpipe trying to get her body back, and I'm going to die because of it.

Luna clawed at ironclad fingers as her vision began to blur. She began frantically darting her eyes, trying to connect with another person. Nobody looked her way, everyone wrapped up in their own crazy shit by then. Just as Luna's vision began to narrow and darken, just as she gave up, she felt her mind twist, her perspective shift.

Luna didn't realize she had made eye contact with anyone, but she was now staring out at the dark blue face of Miss Shivers through a haze. Whoever she was in now had even worse eyesight than her boss. Behind the old woman was none other than Dominic, the stripper security guard. *Evelyn!* she tried to yell, but it came out all garbled. *What the...* Luna realized she was standing on a table. She turned her head down, inspecting herself, and was overcome with a fresh layer of existential dread.

She was in the body of a dog. She could see two beige paws and an out of focus snout. Turning her head, she saw she had an enormous gut. Though her sight was poor, *very poor*, it seemed less a handicap than it would've been in a human with her nose working overtime. She had a sense of the whole room based on the fact she could smell many things. *Many, many, many things.*

She realized in the back of her mind that she was now seeing the world in a shallow mix of yellows, blues, and grays. At the same time, it was difficult to comprehend the colors she was

no longer seeing. The concept seemed to hurt to think about. Most thoughts seemed tiresome. She smelled the catering most of all. *Ooooh, sausaaage...* That was the dog brain. The human part of her brain thought, *shit shit shit*.

Luna's mind chased a proverbial tail as she struggled to focus. She needed to get back into her body. *But there are so many wonderful smells!* She looked back over at the struggle she had just escaped. The body of Miss Shivers was now limp. Her head was swollen and near black, but the hulk of a man continued to choke her. He was sobbing uncontrollably.

Without thinking, Luna dove off the table and was surprised when she landed deftly on all fours. She bit hard into the leg of Dominic, who was currently possessed by the *mind* of Miss Shivers. The large figure let out a yelp and the *body* of Miss Shivers fell to the floor. *That's the best I can do*, Luna thought as she darted under the table before the roided-up old woman in the man's body could retaliate.

Luna wasn't sure if it was the dog brain, or maybe shock, but she found herself... not panicking. She seemed to be able to comprehend the crazy, inexplicable nightmare that was occurring collectively for everyone with a strange amount of nonchalance. All the screaming was troublesome, of course, but she found she was taking the crisis in stride. *I'm jitter free, Tia!*

Luna padded her way through the chaos, weaving under tables, making sure to keep her dog eyes low to the ground as she searched the room for her body. She found her physical

form curled up in the corner, close to where she'd been when this nightmare began. The body of Luna Ramirez was shaking in a silent display of tears. *Damn, I look thin.*

She approached her body but did not make her presence immediately known. She had no idea whose mind was stuck in there. *Am I condemning this person to the body of a dog if I make them swap with me?* She watched for a short time, but was then struck by the realization that whatever was happening could end at any second. Fuck whoever was in there—she would *not* be stuck in the body of a dog forever.

Luna pawed lightly up to the crying individual that was currently within her body. *How do I get their attention?* She decided to do what a dog would do: she licked the girl's ankle. The crying young woman opened her eyes, meeting Luna's, and suddenly she was staring at the ugliest little dog she had ever seen in her life.

It lasted but an instant, and she was back in the dog. She tried to curse, but it came out as a long bork. She looked away then back again, and the swap occurred, but this time it repeated back and forth a handful of times in rapid succession. When she pulled her eyes away, she was once again in the ugly-as-fuck mutt. *Fuuuuuuck*, she howled.

Whoever was in Luna's body said, "One more time, and we both close our eyes. Okay?" Luna borked her ascent. The person in Luna's body nabbed up the tiny dog, twisting her sausage

shaped body to the side as they did, then turned her forward, locking eyes.

The lurch came quickly, and Luna forced her eyes shut. *It worked!* She dropped the mutt and spun away from it, away from the room, found the wall with outstretched arms. She felt her way along it, crawling on hands and knees, not daring crack her lids in the slightest. She felt something smooth, realized it was the green curtains surrounding the Honduran bat display. *A corner!*

She knocked over multiple potted saplings as she blindly felt her way to the small table that was also draped in fabric. *No one will see me behind here.* A thought occurred to her then. *The bat...*

Luna knew she should just hide, but maybe she could get the bat first, keep it safe. She owed it that much after the week it'd had. She'd have to keep her eyes closed though, as being stuck in a dog was bad enough.

Luna rose up on her knees, hobbled her way to the cage, felt for the little door. After fumbling far too long with the latch, she hesitantly reached her hand into the cage. "Please don't bite me, please don't bite me."

Her hand touched something wet, and she hooted before remembering the banana she'd pressed through the bars. "Sorry!" She yelped, just as loud. Then whispered, "oops, sorry." She felt around the cage, but found only lettuce and paper. *Maybe its hanging from the top like bats do.* Eyes still squeezed shut, Luna

slide her hand up the side of the cage, but when her fingers reached the top, they found only air. "What the..."

After a few seconds of daring herself to do it, Luna cracked one eye open. She was staring at her hand. The roof of the cage was missing. The cage was empty. The bat was gone. "Uhhh... okay?" She kept one eye cracked as she dove into the safety of the far corner of the room.

Once she was out of view of others, Luna opened her eyes. She looked down and made sure that she was, in fact, back in her own damn body. She felt around, matching the visual confirmation with what her hands were feeling, making double triple sure it was her. *This is my scar. The left one's slightly bigger than the right. My cheek still hurts from when I bit it this morning. Everything seems to be where I left it.*

The odd sense of *nonchalance* she had felt inside the dog was gone, but she was still glad to be back where she was. *What in the actual fucking fuck.* Luna reached up and rubbed the charm around her neck. Her great aunt Elia would protect her. She took a deep sense of comfort in the thought. She ignored her mother scoffing. Didn't look Tia in the eyes, for she had none.

A familiar nuzzling came at her hip, and Luna instinctively reached for the comfort of a canine friend. Eyes closed once more, she brought the ugly pup to her chest, squeezed it tight. She felt a strange kinship with the elderly pet. "Are you... some senior politician?" The dog growled. "Are you... the cute boy from the patio?" The dog barked, licked her arm.

This is all kinds of fucked up. "Do you want to go find your body?" The dog made a sound of indifference, then nuzzled his snout into her shoulder. She laughed, jerking to the side, "Hey, that tickles!"

Luna quietly concluded they would wait out the horror here, tucked safely behind the table of the mysteriously empty bat cage. She tucked the pup under one arm as she repositioned herself, swinging her hips out to lay down on her left side. She curled up into a ball, the fat dog acting as the core.

It sounded like most people had caught on to the situation, immediate terror curdling into ineffectual attempts to organize, strategize. Based on some of the things she heard, it seemed as though many of the older folks—or at least their bodies—were seizing, or their hearts had simply stopped. *Oh dear...*

The cute boy in the ugly dog relaxed, breath slowing, and Luna felt sleep take him. He lazily kicked his stubby little paws, perhaps dreaming a dog dream. She matched her breath to his, *in, then out, in, then out*, and despite the people shrieking at each other, the terror of the situation that was still unfolding, Luna felt a calm wash over her. It did not last.

In the stillness of her mind, she heard that sound again, the impossible, indescribable sound coming from everywhere all at once. *The humming of the universe*, she decided. She made the mistake of focusing on it, found her mind unable to pull itself away as the thrum pressed at the edges of her mind, looking for a way in.

Hello there.

Thank you for downloading and reading my first release. I am so very fortunate to have had the opportunity to entertain you. I hope to publish much more in the coming years.

Since March of 2025, I've spent nearly every single day writing my heart out, and I couldn't be happier. Prior to last spring, I had been struggling with depression for more than a decade. In the past fourteen months, I've had very few bad days. I'm still a crazy person, but a happy one.

When the floodgates first broke, I was writing six to ten hours a day. By the end of May, I'd written a five-hundred page novel. The book is called *Spring Peeling*, and it will come out... someday.

Despite eating and sleeping regularly the whole time, I was afraid this newfound inspiration was merely a manic episode in disguise. To prove that wasn't the case, I challenged myself to write a short story once a week. Four months later, I'd drafted close to a dozen new works, with outlines for a dozen more.

My one-off novel had blossomed into an entire world of stories, all existing in the same century-spanning timeline.

At the beginning of this year, I began the process of editing all of these works into an anthology that would be known as *Summer Culling* and contain about two dozen microshorts, short stories & novelettes. I was immediately sidetracked when I realized I wanted to flesh out one of the stories.

I then spent the better part of 2026 expanding *Blessed Vessel* from a novelette into a full novel. Around the eighty-five percent complete mark I found my interest waning, and progress slowed to a snail's pace. I still wanted to finish *Blessed Vessel*, but was finding it hard to focus on a single project for multiple months straight.

After more than a year of consistent productivity, I was suddenly struggling to focus. After more than a month of stagnation, I decided to take a day off from *Blessed Vessel* and look back at some of the other works from *Summer Culling*. My regular zing and pep returned like an inferno.

Because of this, I made the rather abrupt decision to once again pivot. It was too late to edit all of the *Summer Culling* shorts, as only half of them had even been drafted.

The truth is that I'm still figuring everything out. I'm still learning how to do this right. I'll likely fuck up again in the future, but I am just as thrilled to be living and breathing this project as I was during that first blitz back in March of last year. I know it will all work out.

I hope this collection is substantial enough to prove my potential as a crafter of stories, a teller of tales. I feel my purpose

in life is to provide joy to odd fucks like myself, those who are entertained by demented nightmare shit. My dream is to continue doing this for the rest of my life. I hope you'll join me for the ride.

Sincerely,
Jon Smith

P.S. — If you enjoyed yourself and would like to see more stuff like this in the future, consider becoming a member of the Post Carrington Preservation Society at ko-fi.com. Members get nothing but the satisfaction of having funded the arts.