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NOTES FROM THE EDITOR

One year ago we published the first issue of Factor Four Magazine. I was nervous about starting a flash fiction publication. I knew I loved to read science fiction and fantasy that was short and bite sized. There is something to be admired in the ability to tell a fulfilling story in so few words. I still see it as an art all its own. But just because I like something, didn't mean the world would.

But, it turns out I was worried for nothing, as the reader and writer seem to have embraced us. We have some milestones we'd like to achieve, namely in increasing our reader base. In just a few weeks, we gained more subscriber income in 2019 than in all of 2018. I hope that is a sign of our continued success. Please consider a subscription, I've strived to make them as reasonably priced as I can.

I was asked last week what plans I have next. The main goal of this next year of publication will be to spread the word about our publication. You can help, give us a share on social media, do a review of our magazine, blog posts are always welcome, and of course keep reading.

Happy Reading,

Richard Flores IV
Editor-in-Chief

AT BELLEVIEW HOUSE

by Harold R. Thompson

“Who are you talking to, Henry?” Alice asks me.

I’ve just hit my head against the open closet door in Katie’s room. My eyes are squeezed shut against the pain, my hand pressing the contusion. The pain has made me angry, and I want to snap, to ask who does it look like I’m talking to? But as usual I control myself.

The pain remains a dull throb, but I open my eyes.

The room is empty. Nothing but an old brass bedstead without bedclothes, a stained ticking mattress. The walls are bare.

“What?” I say.

I’d been talking to my sister Kate here in her room with its heavy oak furniture.

I look out the window, just to get my bearings. The green curtains are gone. Outside, everything looks right and correct. I’m at Belleview House. I’m always at Belleview. I’ve lived here all my life. This is my sister’s room, here at the top of the turret, with the view of the wide front lawn, sloping down to the trees, and the valley below, all clothed in mist as usual.

I see my daughter run by, bright pink shorts and an apple green t-shirt, a stick in her hand. I’m home. I’m in Belleview.

So where is Katie? What happened to her room, to her things?

I turn to look at Alice, who stands in the doorway.

“Who were you talking to?” she repeats, eyebrows raised.

I don’t know what to say. It’s not that I’m afraid that she’ll think I’m crazy, but that I’m too flummoxed.

“I need a cup of tea,” I say.

I’m in a daze. My head hurts. In the kitchen, Alice puts a cup of tea, with milk, on the table in front of me. The dog settles at my feet with a thump and a groan.

My hands shake, my heart pounds, but I sip my tea and my head clears just a bit.

“At least Mopey is real,” I say.

Alice sits across from me. She sighs.

“Okay, who’s Mopey?”

“Don’t do that!” I say, but a sudden pang, a stab of fear, hits me in the stomach, and I feel under the table with my foot.

No dog.

I look under the table. Just bare floor. Over by the sink, no water dish, no supper dish.

“Mope!” I call, shoving back the chair as I stand. My tea spills.

I whistle for the dog.

“What are you doing?” Alice half laughs.

“Where’s the dog?”

I’m at the kitchen door, looking out at the side garden. Belleview has beautiful gardens. Black-eyed Susans sway.

“Where’s his rope?” I say, turning.

I’m alone in the kitchen. My cup of tea, spilled, sits on the table. There’s no second cup.

“Alice?”

I run back upstairs, past what should have been Katie’s room, down the hall to the room I share with Alice.

The room contains a single bed, unmade. None of Alice’s things. As if she never existed.

I almost fall down the stairs, stumbling over my own panicked feet, to the front hall, with its dark wood. The wardrobe full of coats is gone. The shoe basket is gone.

The door bangs shut behind me.

“Marion!” I shout as I run into the middle of the lawn.

I hear birds, I hear wind, I hear the rattle of the poplar leaves. I hear no human voices.

I turn and look at Belleview House. The paint is brown and peeling, not deep yellow and fresh, as it should be. But the house is there. Belleview House is real.

I sit on the front step. The lawn stretches ahead of me, and the trees, and the valley, and I notice something. The mist is gone. The mist has blown away. And in the valley stand the broken bones of the ruined city.

“No,” I say. “I don’t want these memories. I don’t want to go back

there.”

I don't want to be alone. Alone forever.

I touch the place where I hit my head. It still throbs.

“Come back,” I whisper. “Come back, I need you.”

Did the blow to the head wake me, or is this the hallucination, is this the false world?

I squeeze my eyes shut, but tears stream down my cheeks. I rock as I sob. After a minute it passes.

The pain in my head is gone.

Opening my eyes, I gaze toward the valley.

The mist. The mist is returning.

I feel the gentle touch of a hand on my shoulder.

SEEDLING

By V. Medina

There's a young god standing in my doorway. He has torn his way through worlds, ripped apart the fabric of reality to find his way here.

It's remarkable to see him once again, to see how far he's come in such a short time. He's grown from the seedling he was and come into his own, broken down a universe and turned it into fertile ground for another to grow. But when he raises his head and looks me in the eye, his expression tells me how far he still has yet to go.

"I made it," he says. "I made it here and now you owe me."

I smile and don't scold him for talking to his elder that way. He doesn't know who I am, not really. He doesn't know that one day he'll fall into the ground and return to me.

"I'll give you a cup of tea," I tell him, "and I'll tell you a secret. How does that sound?"

He nods.

I don't tell him that he won't like what he learns. I don't tell him that he's bound to fall into the the floors of the world sooner rather than later. I put the kettle on; I tell him to sit at my table and eat my bread and honey instead.

He wolfs down his food, crams every scrap into his mouth as if he had not eaten for days, as if that would even matter to him. I let him; after all, it's rude to refuse a guest. I fix him his tea. He doesn't tell me how he takes it, but those who find me are often predictable. I bring him more bread, some meat and cheese.

Once he's finished his meal, he levels his gaze at me, expecting

something that I'm not giving him.

"Ah," I say. "You want your secret then?"

He shrugs. "If that's all you've got, I suppose. Though I feel like you're really not giving me my due."

I shake my head, laughing just a little. "I'm giving you what I see fit to give you and you can take it or leave it. Remember, though, that you found shelter here, you found food and warmth and an open door. Don't be so quick to turn your back on it."

"Just tell me," he snaps, eyes narrowing. "I have places to be."

I sit across the table from him, fold my hands and watch him for a long moment. "This is the end."

"What?"

"This is the end. You've come to the end. I know you thought you had more, but this is it."

He shakes his head. "No, you're wrong. I have more to do, I have a world to—"

"Your world is dead." When they're kind, I hate this part; but he has been less than pleasant, and I don't mind informing him nearly as much as some.

"You're wrong." He grinds his teeth and gets to his feet, his eyes narrowed at me. "You don't know anything."

"I know more than you think."

He growls under his breath, stepping closer to me. I don't flinch, I don't even blink. I know what he's going to do and there is nothing to be afraid of.

He raises one hand, trying to conjure something from deep within the world that he once claimed as his. When nothing comes of it, I see the fear streak across his face.

"What," he starts, but I cut him off.

"I told you."

I can see him wobble, his legs wanting to give out on him, and he reaches for the tabletop to steady himself. "I don't understand."

"The world that you came from is gone. It was taken down too soon, I know, but there was nothing to be done about it. You're all that's left."

Something in my words makes him sink to the floor, pale and small and terrified. His hands shake and I can taste his anxiety in the air. He's not ready for what comes next, but I expected as much.

"You're going to come with me now." My voice is gentle, more so than I meant it to be. I get to my feet, walking over to him and resting a hand against his shoulder. "I'll show you my garden."

He looks up at me, confused and aching, but he rises nonetheless. There's nothing left for him and he knows it; he can feel it now that he's

looking. It hurts, it always does. A god without a world is hardly anything at all these days.

I guide him to the back garden. He steps out into the sunshine and turns to look at me as I move closer. "Why are we here?"

"I'm going to help," I whisper, my words gentle against his ear. "I'm going to make it better."

He catches my eye, a question on his lips, but I'm already moving. My hands coax the world around us to bend and twist, reaching up to him and pulling, gentle and but firm.

His eyes widen, his hands reach out to pull at the grasping vines of the earth, but he knows it's no use. His eyes meet mine, tired and scared and pleading. I smile, reach out and touch his lips. "You'll be fine."

I let comfort fall from my fingers into his skin, soothing him as the land pulls him into the darkness once again.

FORWARD, INTO VIOLET SUNSET

By Deborah L. Davitt

I picked up the sword as it fell from my brother's dying hands.

Tears burned in my eyes as I caught it, and it rose without my volition, swinging my arm back through the motion that had taken a king's head from his shoulders. I saw blood unspurt. Light return to his eyes.

So much for the rebellion we'd fought.

Well, that *William* had fought. I'd just followed alongside, a healer's oath binding my hands as I bound the wounds of rebels and kingsmen alike.

And yet, as I stepped backwards, I saw my brother's wounds knit, too. Saw his struggles for breath ease, and I rejoiced. "We can *fix* this!" I called, but then we backed out of the throne room, away from the tyrant.

I fought the sword as we retraced steps I hadn't taken—I'd never been its bearer before this moment. I was a *healer*. If we were walking backwards through time, how was the sword still in my hands, and not in William's?

I struggled, and every foe I fought was *born*, reeling into new life. As a physician, this should've made me rejoice. But it wasn't under my control, not the result of my skill or determination. It just *happened*, and I was as helpless to see them live, as I had been to see them die before.

Away from the palace I backed, watching blood and mud dissolve into grass and flowers, the craters from the cannon smoothing back into untouched lawns. I saw armies disassemble, returning to their homes, their wives, their children. And I went with them, parting ways with

William. “Wait!” I called after him as he receded. “William! There has to be another way!”

He smiled, heedless, my words like the twittering of birds.

I fell into crimson sunrise as the sun marched backwards across the heavens. Red always behind me, the future violet at my feet, but I couldn’t move forward.

Then again, how many of us had been able to move forward when time tugged us that direction anyway? Had I always been lost in the past? In memories like . . . these?

I relived all the misery the king had caused—starving children in the street. The way I’d given them half my food each week. As if that could make up for the way I’d failed before. Their mothers had died of the plague. Exhausted from tending their sick families.

As our own mother had.

Her funeral, in the rain. Tossing lime over her form in the mass grave.

Then back in her house. The shock of suddenly hearing her breath, sucking and wet in her lungs. She’d been tending to me, when I’d been a fresh-vowed healer. It should have been my job to tend to her, but I’d been shaking from the fever in my bed. I hadn’t been able to save her.

Gods, the *relief* of it as her eyes opened. “Mother!” I cried, trying to embrace her.

But time was inexorable. And speeding up, it tore her from me once again.

Then Father, who’d brought the plague home from one of the king’s wars, fought against a foreign enemy to distract us all from hardships at home. Like so many others, he’d come home missing an arm, coughing, feverish. Our soldiers had been deliberately infected, it was whispered, by the king’s own men. So that they’d spread the disease among the enemy.

I remembered laughing at those rumors. Why do that? I’d asked, the sensible apprentice healer. Who would forge disease into a weapon, especially one that could recoil on our own?

Father got up from his deathbed, vanished back into his ship, and then returned from the war, his limbs knitted whole again.

I couldn’t stop staring at him, marveling to see so few frown lines, so little gray. Couldn’t stop drinking in the sight of him and Mother embracing as if they’d never let go of each other again.

And now, they wouldn’t, would they? Not until they didn’t know each other again.

I tried to release the sword. Surely, this was far enough. If I could speak to them all now, make them understand what the future held? Except . . . they wouldn’t believe me, would they? They hadn’t lived all

the losses. Not yet.

And the sword clung to my hand, relentless. Or I clung to it. I knew I wasn't ready. Not yet.

I watched young men and women dwindle into children. Everything became impermanent; everyone I'd ever known, I lost to birth.

The king was uncrowned, and his mother-regent ruled again. I'd been told her age was a golden era, but famine stalked the land in rotten harvests.

The blade drew me back to when there were no kings—just petty chiefs, each protecting a tiny scrap of land, defending those bound to them against other petty lords. And in the faces of those lords, I saw the same lineaments as our king's. His ancestors. And ours.

And yet, in each generation, despite it all, people still found joy. Stood up from their deathbeds and went to work, kissed their families. Lived.

When I looked up again, I stood in the throne room as my brother lay on the floor, holding up a hand to fend off the killing blow. The king stood over him, demanding, "What good did you think you'd do?"

But the sword still hung from my hands.

Because it had always been mine. This rebellion wasn't William's alone. It was mine, too. And by my choices now, it would succeed or fail.

I stepped forward and cut the king's head from his shoulders.

"Perhaps I cannot heal our land with surgery," I said as every soldier stopped fighting, shocked. "His death will bring back none of those whom we loved. But we have a *chance* now. To make it right. That's all we ever have. A chance to decide our future."

And we moved forward into violet sunset.

UNNOTICED

By K.G. Anderson

It wasn't that people deliberately ignored me. They just didn't notice me. Or half the time they thought I was somebody else.

"Why did you guys make me so...average?"

My parents exchanged glances. Mom flushed, licked her lips, looked again at my father.

No way would I tell them what had happened. How Maia Dangerfield — tall, muscular, flame-haired Maia — had almost asked me to the dance. The key word here was "almost."

Maia had made the suggestion in the hallway between classes. Before I could answer, the bell rang and traffic swept us apart. I'd fidgeted through math class and rushed to pick up my communicator from my locker as soon as the bell rang. But when I texted Maia "sure I'll go," their answer came back "huh? who? where?"

Turned out Maia had confused me with another classmate, or confused another classmate with me, and, anyway, the other one who looked and sounded just like me was in Maia's language arts class and had accepted the dance invitation 10 minutes earlier.

Burning with embarrassment over my stupid text, I ran to the skyway and rode home. It was awful, but it was true: On every possible measure, from intelligence to looks to artistic and physical abilities, I was completely undistinguished.

~

"It seemed like a good idea at the time," Mom said. She looked across the dinner table at Dad for help. He was working as usual, scrolling on

his tablet. "Roger?"

He finally looked over at me and sighed.

"Your mother and I were ignorant," he said. *Wow. For once, Dad was actually admitting fault.* He explained that, like most prospective parents, they'd met with a counselor and had their embryo's genetic material improved using robust DNA selected from the databanks. "We thought we were making the best choice by giving you popular, well-tested genes. We wanted you to be healthy and happy. We just wanted you to fit in."

I put my elbows on the table, and buried my face in my hands. "I can't stand it. You made me *nobody*."

"Cait, we were immigrants!" My mom leaned forward, elbows on the table, her dinner forgotten. "We'd been on a waiting list to get out of Mardour for years. We knew that if we were accepted for immigration to Savania we'd have only one child license. That meant only one child. So we wanted you to be perfect."

"But not to stand out," Dad cut in. He rationalized, "We made you pretty, and healthy, and smart."

"But not so pretty, or healthy, or smart that the Savanians would be envious." Mom's voice rose, trembling. "We didn't want...trouble."

"We didn't know." Dad took Mom's hand and squeezed — probably half to comfort her and half to get her to stop babbling. "It didn't occur to us that you would want to be, in some way, 'distinctive.'"

"So I look like five other kids in school. I even have the *same voice* as 40 of them!"

I'd tried writing, singing, and artwork. But, no surprise, my so-carefully-selected genes made sure that I had no particular talents in any of these areas.

"I don't want to be nice! I don't want to be average!" My voice rose into a scream, and my Dad, ever the meek immigrant, looked with concern at the door of the apartment, worried that neighbors might be listening. *Hey, at least I wasn't speaking Mardourian.* Maybe that was why they'd never taught it to me.

"We could buy you more interesting clothes," Mom said, her tone conciliatory. "You could get more tattoos. Or dye your hair."

"Mom, *everyone* has tattoos. *Everyone* dyes their hair," I grumbled. I shook my head at their cluelessness, but I'd stopped shouting.

Dad went back to his tablet and Mom gave me a brave smile. "Sweetheart," she said. "We love you. We love you just the way you are."

We ate dessert, a Savanian pechta torte — because *Sens* forbid we should eat Mardourian food — in silence. I cleared the table and Dad did

the dishes.

~

"I want cosmetic surgery," I told them a few days later, on my way to the curtained hallway nook that served as my bedroom. I looked straight at Dad, keeping my voice modulated and my tone reasonable. "You owe it to me. I'm Mardourian. I want a Mardourian nose. And someday I'll get contacts so I can have green eyes. And a treatment to have curly hair."

"But, honey, your hair is so nice," Mom began, starting as usual with the most trivial issue.

"Lily," Dad cautioned her. He and Mom gave each other the look parents exchange when their child brings up a topic on which they have long-held and differing opinions. She furrowed her eyebrows. He arched his. She pursed her lips. He tilted his head inquisitively. Mom raised her eyebrows, and he furrowed his. Then they both shook their heads, and Dad sighed.

"Cait," he said. "We need to explain."

"Yeah. You did that already."

"No," Mom shouted, tugging Dad's arm. "Cait's not ready."

Dad stepped away from her and crossed his arms over his chest. "I think Cait is. I think we *all* are."

Wait a minute. This was supposed to be about me, about my miserable, average, life in school. But suddenly, in a moment, it changed. I'd never seen my father so serious.

"We didn't want you to look like us, to look like Mardourians," he said. "Countries were closing their ports to Mardourian refugees, accusing us of war crimes. We had to bribe the peacekeepers to even get on the resettlement list for Savania."

"It was the right decision," Mom said. "Your father and I have suffered terrible discrimination, even here in Savania. Even after changing our names to Savanian names."

"There's still political unrest, even though you might not hear much about it," Dad dropped his voice to a whisper. "Think about it, Cait. Do you have any Mardourian friends in school?"

"Sure," I started. *Dem Baxter, but, wait, they were adopted by a Savanian family. Maryanne Thompson — but her dad was Savanian. I tried to think. There was a guy in my electronics class...*

"Special cases, all of them," Dad said, even though I hadn't answered his question. "Most Mardourian families have been settled in rural...areas. And now access to those areas has been restricted. Your mother and I have friends we haven't been able to contact for several months, except by printed messages that must be sent through the government security office."

Dad's face was twisted in a weak smile. "For the time being, we're safe. And what's most important to us is that you're safe. Always."

~

At the hastily called school assembly three weeks later, the government agents passed me by. They picked out Dem Baxter and two classmates I didn't know. Asked for their papers. Then the agents took them by the arm and led them out up the aisle of the hushed auditorium. I'll never forget Dem looking back, searching the crowd.

Almost without thinking, I threw up my hand and called out, "I—"

An arm yanked me down into my seat. It was Maia. They held me tightly and hissed in my ear, "Shut up."

After the Security Forces van left, the teachers sent everyone back to class. As if nothing had happened. We had a quiz in math, and I couldn't write a single answer.

Maia and Maryanne were waiting for me after school and said they wanted to go for kaffe, to talk about what happened. For some reason I couldn't reach Mom on the communicator, so they rode home with me on the skyway. They insisted on coming up with me to our fourth-floor apartment.

Embarrassed about my family's tiny unit, I suggested that I just drop off my backpack, check in with Mom, and then we could all go to the keffehaus on the next block.

"Sure," Maia said, looking over my head at Maryanne. We rode up in the dingy elevator and stepped out into the dim hallway. At the end of the corridor, the door to my family's unit stood open, and not in an inviting way. My friends followed me into the empty apartment.

My mother was gone. Her coat, and a suitcase, were missing.

"Look for a note," Maryanne said. She was sympathetic but her tone held no surprise. Under my pillow we found it, hastily scrawled, with the number of an attorney.

"Call Mr. Lampkin — he knows what to do. We made provisions for you. We love you."

We love you, I read. And I heard Mom's voice adding *just the way you are*.

A SEA OF MAUVE AND LAVENDER AND EYESTALKS

By Alexis A. Hunter

You chase a colored phantom on the air, in silence.

The thin clump of an audience fades to your periphery as you throw yourself into the poem. Moving one limb at a time, you linger on each step. You can't make them understand the words, but you can make them feel the feeling.

You mime sobbing.

You mime cursing.

A person's gaze may trip glibly over the words; they may pause in all the wrong places; they may not stop to investigate the meaning. That's what you're here for: blending the arts of interpretive dance and miming.

You fall and weep—and rise, one motion pouring into another.

There's a flutter at the edge of your vision, new audience members stopping on the busy street to watch.

You stumble pitifully, purposely; your eyes sting with unfeigned tears.

The new audience members creep forward. You can't help but notice them. Their pale mauve-and-lavender blob bodies clash against the black coats of the secret service escorts behind them. Their eyes, on stalks, bob over massive swollen heads. They're captivated by you.

You wrestle your soul back into Millay's work for the crescendo:

Once more you clasp, then—uncoiling your fingers slowly, with

dreadful hope—reveal that there's nothing there.

A skittering of applause from the humans in the crowd. You bow, then look fully for the first time upon the two Amboans. They stare back at you. One of the secret service women taps her ear and mutters something.

Since they first made contact with Earth, these beings have fascinated and terrified you. You've seen all the videos, hunched over your laptop on your bed, eyes narrowed and straining to read their expressions.

But they are unreadable, even to you.

The Amboans turn to each other. Then they *jitter*. It's the strangest movement you've ever seen. A strained gesticulation, a struggle?

You recoil.

The secret service woman touches one of them gently. "We must be going, Mx. Alihas."

Ignoring her, they nod their mauve heads toward you. "Again, again." Is that desperation in their voice?

Once more into my arid days... You begin again.

~

You want to see the world, but you can hardly afford your electric bill.

You spend your mornings on the street, miming and dancing poetry for people's spare attention, spare change. It gets harder all the time—often they don't look up from their phones. Nights, you bartend at a little dive three blocks from your apartment. You generally know what people want to drink before they ask—the tips are good.

There are two jars beside the sink—your travel fund. One is brimming with change, the other half-way there. You don't dare count their contents, afraid to know how little's actually there.

Your mother leaves messages asking you to call back. Asking you to give up and come home.

You do neither.

~

The next day there are four of them. Soon, you can no longer see a human face in the crowd. The mornings are chill—much cooler than Amboans typically like, but still they come.

Followed by the media, of course.

There's more change in your hat than you've ever seen. And bills too. And buttons—for the Amboans have an inexplicable love of buttons. (These offerings bothered you at first, until the volume of actual cash rose. Now they make you smile as you roll the marbled patterns against your thumb.)

After every performance, the Amboans wiggle and vibrate. Their

expressions are unreadable, but you begin to sense a hunger. Something the media doesn't seem to catch. They report about the Amboan's sudden, strange fascination with mimes—how they're flocking to street corners across the globe.

You try not to get involved. Your second jar is full. You've started on a third. But it's hard to concentrate—to really throw yourself into the performances when that *need* is vibrating through them.

One morning, you flub the finale of your favorite poem. So many unreadable, purplish faces staring you down. You never wavered under attention before—but this...

You step across the invisible border of your stage. The secret service agents tense up. They don't like that their charges are out in the open like this. They don't like you stepping nearer. But they don't intervene when you ask, "What are you doing?"

People have asked before, but the Amboans have never answered.

One of them drifts forward. Mx. Alihas, you think, from the first day. The others follow, surrounding you. They give off a faint, sour-metal scent. A momentary panic flashes through you. You get the feeling that they would touch you if they had hands.

Alihas speaks, quietly. "You speak the old language."

Another says, "You speak *like* old language."

A third presses near. "We had... forgotten it."

They jitter, almost as one. "We want to remember, but... lack the articulation."

"Articulation?" you ask, voice hoarse.

They bob, a sea of mauve and lavender and eyestalks. "No digits. No fluidity. We gave them up when we ascended."

There's a moment of silence, as you ponder this, as you feel their desperation to rediscover a long-lost part of themselves.

Mx. Alihas floats near your elbow. "Could we... borrow you?"

~

You're chasing colored phantoms on the air again. Not from Millay's sonnet, but from the Amboan's past.

Somehow, they borrow you. They take turns standing behind you: a faint hum in your skull, a tugging sensation, rattling your teeth, and then you are moving—but not you, them.

They move you.

They fall and weep and rise—

Daily, you grasp for the meaning of this old language of movement. The jars beside your sink fill up: a line of hope for future exploring. But possessed by them, expressing them, you're discovering far more than you've ever dreamed.

Once more
and once more
and once more, you clasp—
and there is something ancient, something forgotten, something
devastatingly beautiful there.

THE LAST TIME YOU'LL SEE ME. THE FIRST TIME WE'LL MEET.

by Stephen S. Power

Mt. Bethel, Pennsylvania didn't much care about the asteroid. Church attendance increased a bit. So did DUI stops. And warnings given to drunk drivers. A few people left for places they'd always wanted to see. Miller's crew went home to Guatemala, so he would have to replace Gayle Foster's roof by himself.

"See a job through," his father would say. "No matter what."

What Miller wanted to see through was the roof itself. He'd loved Gayle since seventh grade, but he'd never told her. Never found the right moment.

The morning he started, Gayle was wearing her prettiest outfit: faded jeans that had learned to fit her, flannel shirt, workboots, ballcap. "Still game?"

"Yep."

She smiled and left him to it.

Between cascades of pried-off shingles, Miller heard her cleaning. She hauled dozens of boxes and bloated Hefty bags to the curb, waving to him as she walked back to the cottage.

Around noon she asked, "How's it going?"

"Shouldn't take more than a couple days."

"That's good."

The asteroid would hit in 58 hours. It was 63 miles wide.

Miller worked till dark, replacing the drip edge, ice protector and

underlayment, then returned at dawn.

Gayle greeted him with coffee. She was wearing her prettiest outfit: leggings, tanktop, hoodie. Barefoot. Hair bunned. Yoga day.

The garbage men hadn't come.

"Done cleaning?" Miller said.

"'You're never done,' Mom would say." She left him to it.

He put on the flashing, then began shingling. Between hammer blows he heard Gayle's music. Motown, funk, reggae. The good stuff. Nothing slow. Nothing sad.

She didn't turn on the TV or radio.

At two Miller finished half the roof and ate lunch. Venison sausage. His own. It was a shame that so much more would go to waste.

Gayle raced out. She looked beneath the eaves, then up at Miller, relieved. "I was so used to the hammering, I got worried when I realized it'd stopped."

"Is it bothering you?"

"No. Keeping me company."

Miller wouldn't let himself smile. Instead he said, "Cookie?" and held one up. "From Middle Village. They're giving them away. Made tons."

Gayle cupped her hands.

He tossed it. Nice catch.

They watched each other nibble, savoring each crumb, then Gayle went in.

By dusk Miller had finished half the other side. He left Gayle dancing to "Thriller."

At dawn her house was dark. Miller didn't knock. Didn't want to wake her. Or discover she couldn't be woken. He'd heard gunshots all night long. Seen cops at the bakery. And his church. 16 hours left. Mt. Bethel had started to care.

Miller hammered quietly. Between shingles he checked the road. Gayle didn't come home. The garbage men hadn't come either.

Near midday, near the ridge, Miller heard the shower. He thanked the cloudless, incomparable sky.

As Miller finished installing the ridge cap, the back door squeaked. Gayle came out, hair bouncing. She was wearing her prettiest outfit: navy dress with white polka dots, white cardigan, pristine Keds. She carried a plate piled with bacon and a pitcher of lemonade.

Christ, she was perfect.

"All done?" Gayle said.

"Yep. Except for the mess. My father'd say—"

"'Job's not over till you've cleaned up.'"

"It'll only take a moment."

"It'll wait. Hungry?"

Miller swallowed, testing whether he could hold down food while eating with her, and said, "I'll be down in—"

"No, I'll come up."

She was sitting beside him on the ridge before he could protest. She smelled like Florida: bright water, brighter light, brilliant flowers.

"I've never been on the roof before," Gayle said. "It's weird being up here."

"I've spent so much time on roofs, I find it weird to be under one sometimes."

"You want to sit on the patio?"

"No."

They nibbled bacon. Her lips glistened. His dried.

Gayle drank straight from the pitcher and said, "Here."

He opened his mouth. She poured. So tart. So sweet. So much vodka.

"We should pace ourselves," he said.

Gayle snorted, he laughed and they guffawed.

The sun fell. Plate and pitcher emptied. The oven dinged.

Miller sniffed. "Apple pie?"

"Not a party without pie." Gayle went down. Carefully.

Miller collected the day's waste and his remaining supplies, heaved them into his dump trailer and went inside to wash up.

Everything gleamed. Everything was in its place. His mother used to clean like that before vacations. Wanted to come home to a "fresh start."

Gayle put on a CD. "So What." They didn't wait for the pie to cool. Ate it standing up and straight from the tin, slowly with spoons.

"Flamenco Sketches" ended, and Gayle turned off the CD before the alternate take. Then she wiped the counter and filled the dishwasher. Miller took out the garbage.

They returned to the roof and stretched out, the ridge cap their pillow. The sky turned red, gray, black. An extra star blazed beneath Venus.

"You did a nice job," Gayle said.

"Thanks. Tough to do alone."

"Most things are."

"But you manage."

"Still," Gayle said, "better to have help."

The extra star grew larger. The air, brisk. Miller shivered. Gayle slid against him.

Silence suited them. And the moment. So Miller didn't tell her how he felt. Didn't ask if she'd planned on him joining her on the roof. He didn't care. He simply enjoyed living happily ever af—

THE LIGHTS OF WONDERLAND

by Rebecca Birch

It's never truly dark here on Rigel Five, or Wonderland, as Alison and I re-christened it upon making landfall. Nighttime is a heavy blue blanket softened by the bioluminescent fungus forest, its mushroom caps gleaming rose, periwinkle, and violet. We wandered among the thick blue stalks, swathed in our enviro-suits, gaping at the landscape that seemed more hallucination than reality.

We used to sit by the viewport on those first long nights, fingers entwined, watching the colors throb, matching the steady thrum of Alison's pulse under the pad of her thumb.

She had finished a preliminary analysis within weeks. "It's perfectly safe," she'd said, a passionate gleam behind her eyes. "Oxygen levels are well within tolerance. The fungus isn't toxic. There's no reason to stay in these ridiculous suits. Just think, Jack. We'd be the first to breathe Wonderland's air. The first to really be a part of this place."

I overruled her. Our mission was exploration and study only. We couldn't risk cross-contamination, safe or not.

She disappeared less than a month later, and she's been gone for twenty days now. I've searched a full grid around the lander three times now and found no sign.

Supplies are dangerously depleted. If I don't leave in the morning, I won't make it home.

There's time for one last search. The pale blue of daylight is nearly gone, but the swiftly falling night doesn't frighten me. Not nearly as

much as accepting the truth that my Alison is gone. That I'll never again hear the sound of her quiet breath or feel her warmth draped close around me.

I walk deep into the forest, my shadow my only companion. Standing at the base of a stalk, I touch it with my gloved hand. The sturdy fibers sink inward and emerald light radiates out from the point of contact.

"You did it, didn't you?" I whisper, though there's no one there to hear me. "You couldn't resist the temptation."

I've tried to understand, but I can't. Alison was the impulsive one. The first to race toward danger. I always considered myself wiser. Careful. Deliberate. But even with all my caution, I owe my life to Alison twice over, thanks to her reckless bravery.

I've tried finding her my way. Maybe it's time to search with her eyes.

Before I can change my mind, I pull off my glove and rest my bare palm against the stalk. The emerald light pulses warm beneath my skin. *Thump-thump. Thump-thump.* The same sweet beat as Alison's heart.

My own heart races in response, fluttering at the base of my throat.

"Alison?"

Thump-thump.

I glance back toward the lander. Last chance. Put the glove back on and go home.

I retract my facemask.

The air tastes of moss and rain and something earthy I can't put a name to.

I yank off the other glove and press both hands to the fungal stalk.

Thump-thump! The stalk convulses and the mushroom cap releases a shower of gleaming golden spores.

I draw in a startled breath. The spores fill my lungs.

My heart slows, matching itself to the pulsing light of the forest. Colors I've never seen before dance in the air that had been empty a moment before. They swirl away in a breeze I can't feel, but smells like Alison's hair.

My feet move without volition, following the ghostly river of color. Even the ground is alight.

Time stretches around me like spider-silk, drawing me onward until I step into a clearing. She waits for me there. Her skin's the color of jade. Her arms, fingers, and hair are fungal hyphae stretching to join with the forest. Every pulse of light mirrors the steady *thump-thump.*

"Alison—"

Her head turns slowly and a beatific smile spreads across her jewel-toned face. Jade-green hyphae stretch toward me.

It's all right, Jack. Don't be afraid. Her voice is more a taste than a

sound.

"What happened?"

Wonderland. A single hypha strokes my cheek. *I'm so sorry.*

There has to be a way to bring her back. To return her to the Alison I know. The Alison I love.

There's no return for me. Sorrow tinges the lights to deep cornflower. *But it's not too late for you. Go back to the lander. Take the anti-fungal medication. Go home.*

"And leave you here?"

I will live. As a part of this place.

"Then I'm staying, too."

Are you sure?

"I love you, Alison."

Her hyphae sink into my skin and suddenly my senses broaden. I feel her thoughts wrapped tight around me. See, feel, and breathe through every fungus.

We are Wonderland.

We are one.

LIVE NUDE DEATH

By Patrick Barb

I lean against my puke-green sedan, as it sits parked behind Death's white Bronco, blocking them into their parking spot. "White Bronco. Pale horse. Nice touch," I say.

Death's head tilt is the closest they get to a smile. "The rituals must be observed, even if objects change."

At our feet, two rats fight. The rats don't wait for dark anymore.

The rats always know.

Over my shoulder, the blinking red neon sign above the strip club's entrance blasts an intermittent, undeliverable promise of LIVE NUDE GIRLS.

"I've killed the other three. You're the final one."

"Don't you know Heaven awaits after End Times?" Death asks.

"It ain't about me, or what I know. I got a job."

One of the rats—bleeding from a neck bite—curls up near Death, leaving its rival to enjoy victory. "Just following orders? Usually a sentiment expressed by those working with me rather than against."

"You wanna know why I'm doing this?" I ask.

"I've got all the time in the end of the world."

I laugh. It's not a funny line, but it's close. I hitch a thumb back to the sign. "Mind if we take a seat?"

They nod.

I turn on my heels, just like at boot camp.

Death follows.

I shove open the tinted double doors. The music's set to auto-play.

Walking in, trap music's throbbing bass slaps me in the face, travels down my legs and back up. I pull out a chair for Death at a table near a side stage.

"Can you turn that music off?"

"No."

Once seated, I pull out my cellphone and slide it across to Death. "Look at photos 1, 2, and 3."

As they look, I talk. "Growing up, I was never good at anything. Maybe, I never found anything to be good at, ya know?"

Death pauses to nod. From below, the photo of Pestilence, face stabbed full of needles—plungers compressed, medicinal contents dripping down, stares up at them.

"Middle-of-going-nowhere kid says, 'Fine, Dad,' and signs up at his local recruiter's. Things move fast and he finds that one thing he's good at isn't what they put in brochures or on billboards. It's the killing, stupid.

"So, he takes his talents to the private sector. And Malcolm Gladwells the shit out of killing. The more he does it, the better he is at it. Eventually, gets so good people with real money notice."

My eyes find the phone. Death's pale, wrinkled fingers hover over War—naked and bleeding out from a headshot. You can just see the other fleeing orgy participants.

"The people I work for heard about what's to happen."

"Signs and portents."

Death mutters the words, studying the last photo—the one with Famine and the chocolate cake.

(No one ever said art had to be pretty...)

"But my benefactors aren't Revelation-Truther types. Why would they be? Eyes, camels, and needles, right?"

I wait to see if Death will move. They stay still.

"They're paying me to kill you and stop the apocalypse."

Death claps their hands, the sound blending with hair metal keytar—probably used to introduce some sad girl named "Brandy."

"Curing Pestilence, loving War, feeding Famine. You must be proud."

"Of course. I take pride in my craft."

Death pushes my phone back to me. The music promises that we're "all gonna get laid, all gonna get paid tonight."

"You can't kill Death though. Can you?"

I stand, always ready to move fast. I sprint across the stained carpet to the DJ booth. I'm up the steps and yanking open the small half-door separating the DJ from the masses.

“Come down,” Death says, “I admire your work, young man. I’ve always admired the work of young men like you. Don’t end this as a coward.”

I press buttons, turn knobs, and pull sliders on the turntable. The main track drops, pounding drums fade to nothing. The other track—my hidden track—fills the club:

“You’ll remember your mother washing your face after you played in the mud. You won’t remember the mud, but you’ll remember after—and your mother...”

“What’s...what’s...”

Death’s question stumbles at the gate.

As our eyes meet, I tap the tiny earplugs, inserted back in the sedan. Years of sniper duty and artillery fire, I’m damn good at reading lips and feeling vibrations.

“You’ll remember your first kiss in the sixth grade. She tastes like cinnamon gum...”

Tears fall down Death’s cheeks, as my subliminal recording continues overwriting.

“You’re right,” I say, “I couldn’t kill you, Death.”

“Death?” they ask, familiar with the concept, but a stranger to their name.

I turn off the recording.

They insist their name is the one I’ve implanted. They say that they’re a life insurance salesman. But people aren’t interested in buying policies any more, they say with a chuckle. That chuckle’s a confused and helpless thrashing against settling brainwashed synapses.

They touch their face. Wrinkled fingers pull at the few wispy hairs on their head. This new life settles over Death. I watch them catch a glimpse of their reflection in the mirror ball spinning above the booth. I see them smile—really smile.

Only then do I reach for the Glock taped to the underside of the turntable.

I turn the music back up after I’m finished.

It’s night when I step outside again. I kick a rat, as its fat, pink tail slides across my laces. It lands hard, neck broken on concrete.

Death’s keys dangle from the Bronco’s ignition. Opting for an upgrade, I move aside the sedan and climb into Death’s driver’s seat. I turn the key and fiddle with the radio dial, landing on A.M. static. I peel out of the deserted parking lot and onto a deserted street, with more deserted streets ahead.

In the rear view, I see the top of the neon sign.

“LIVE,” it says.

For now. For now.

DONUT DIMENSION

by D.A. Xiaolin Spires

When Natalie Tsing bit into that donut at her desk, cradling her other hand underneath so the glaze flakes wouldn't land on her papers, she knew something was off. The skin was too supple and smooth, the inside dough too gooey, too lemony tangy. The donut from the corner store was never this good, never this fresh and tasty. It was fried to perfection, seared chewy heaven—and the moment she pulled back and ground it down with her molars, letting the sweet flavors roll over her tongue, it pulled her back in.

Cosmic thoughts whirled as she was lost in a euphoric haze. Drawn again towards this temptress of a pastry, she exhaled.

The newly-discovered rings of the possible life-supporting exo-planet. Synestia. Spinning vaporized rock formed into a halo. Ring nebula. The beautiful circlet of Lyra.

These images of round bands and their audacious curves pervaded her mind, cycled through like a looping flipbook, images spiraling out of control.

Captivating celestial loops gave way to the vacuous middle. It was as if she was traveling through time and space itself as a force greater than her dragged her lips towards the pastry center.

The emptiness within. The sheer force of its seduction.

The donut hole.

She disappeared right in, her body stretching, thinning out, from her lips, to her chin, to her shoulders and downward—until the hole had sucked her whole frame, her shoelaces going last, rushing in with a wheeling "swwwwifpppp."

She woke up in a gelatinous substance. She thrashed about. *I can't breathe. I can't breathe.*

Images came to her. Her sister when they were at Lone Beach. Kat and her favorite rainbow swimsuit. Her limbs flying about, engulfed in a wave, like a flag billowing from her vantage point on the beach. Diving in to save her, but not finding her. Finally, grasping onto her and Kat was choking and choking. When she revived, the doctors assessed damage to her lungs. Her active sister Kat became still as a rock, bedridden, her bubbly temperament turned morose. Her brain was addled, they said, and soon she would pass out of this world.

Natalie, trapped on all sides in this viscous goop, shook her head, transported out of that memory. Her tears didn't matter here in this fluid. When she stopped battering her arms and squirming, she found she could breathe. She was not reliving her sister's misfortune. That would've been too easy. A part of her wanted her guilt displaced by going through that terror. Natalie blamed herself. She was too slow. Too distracted. But, now her arms glided through this suspension. She was in some thick, translucent marmalade-like substance, but it was okay. Somehow her lungs worked, didn't get clogged from its viscosity.

She kicked her legs, one two, one two, propelling forward. Once her panic subsided and the devastating memory slipped by, she could focus. She saw the blurry image of large shadows darting. As she swam, her eyes adjusted. She realized they were people, wearing suits, all of them carrying briefcases in their hands, their legs scissoring in this purposeful fashion. An alien way of 'walking' through this dense world. She tried to flag one down, but they rushed by, barreling right past her.

A kick in the back jolted her. A garbled, muffled sound of shouting, a face contorted, obfuscated in the condensate. The features slithered away. She spotted brightness above and thought it was the sky. Instinct launched her upward. Self-preservation took over as she drove up and finally she could see the surface.

She jolted up into the world, took a deep breath and began coughing. It was air; but it wasn't. Water filled her eyes, as she reached for large, white birds, or some rough equivalent squawking above as they soared, against what might have been a sun. Tearing, she couldn't breathe.

She dove back in.

Her lungs adjusted to the gel. She took in mouthfuls of that fluid, her alarm subsiding. Leaving the gelatin and coming back in, she realized it tasted of raspberry.

So, this was the world my donut had pulled me into.

The donut hole where there might've once been jelly. It made no sense whatsoever, but there was a kind of calming resonance to it. She

could still taste lemon in her mouth, even as the raspberry gel trickled onto her gums.

Among the suit-wearing swimmers, she spotted a billowing rainbow swirl. The form of a little girl. Hazy. Indistinct. Like everything else. It went by so quick, it seemed almost unreal. She followed it.

A laugh echoed in her ears, distinct as tinkling bells. Her sister's laugh. She kicked harder, hurting her knees, throwing her arms out, her shoulders aching.

She felt like she had been swimming forever.

The attire of the shadowy figures gave way to something more casual. Flowing shirts and undulating sweatpants. Shorts with legs exposed. Children, her sister's age, some younger. All moving in that strange, hypnotic way through this clear slop.

What is this place? An alternate universe? Some real existing place aeons and light years away? A ghost space of drowned beings?

She followed her sister's rapid feet, not letting them out of sight. Kat led her to colorful coral-like rock, giant and towering, brimming with holes, as flamboyant as her swimsuit. Kat drew her towards a cave. Inside was a recreation of their bedroom.

It was all soaked in fluid, but there was Teddy Too-tums, the pink rocking chair, Legos and play cars. Artifacts from an excavation.

Her sister passed her a make-believe meal, an invisible thing Natalie accepted. Her sister was not really her sister, not entirely at least. Kat's eyes were cloudy, her lips bloated, but it was some phantasm of her. Natalie smiled and pretended to take a huge bite—and there was a sucking sound like her ears had exploded.

In her office seat, her donut with a hole burst suddenly with raspberry filling, gushing into her mouth—and Natalie chewed, tearing.

RECOMMENDED BY ALL GOOD MORTGAGE LENDERS

by Helen French

Mr. and Mrs. Roberts stared up at the house they yearned to buy. It had taken fifteen long years to save up for a deposit, and even that wasn't quite enough until an old aunt died and coughed up a further thirty grand in inheritance. The housing market was brisk and this was the only property that met their criteria for price, size and location.

The estate agent laughed when he found them. "Falling in love, are you? Dangerous business falling for houses, but this is a particularly nice one. Come and take a look."

They followed him into the double-fronted detached family home. Outside they'd been charmed by the curved driveway and row of trees behind it.

Inside it seemed smaller. "Cozy," said Jeff, the estate agent. "It's filled with natural light as you can see. Absolutely glorious in the summer."

He waved them into each room with a cheer, saying now and then, "haven't seen anything this lovely in years."

Afterwards, the agent sat them down at the wooden kitchen table with his papers. "You'll be aware," he began, "that the main mortgage lenders and building insurance providers have developed a new tool to assess their risk on each property sold. By law, we have to give prospective buyers access to this data."

Mr. Roberts waved the notion away. “We like the house. We don’t need to know anything else.”

Mrs. Roberts was not so sure. She placed a hand on her husband’s shoulder. “Do we really want the bank to have more knowledge about our home than we do?”

He sighed but gave in. “Very well. If only to stop my wife worrying.”

“Excellent, forewarned is forearmed, isn’t it? The good news is that there’s absolutely zero flooding in this house’s future. As you may know, the tool looks one hundred years ahead with 98 per cent accuracy.

“A few earth tremors are likely but only .5 and below - nothing to write home about and certainly less than fracking produces.

“The downstairs will suffer from minor smoke damage at some point in the next thirty years but nothing you can’t save up for - insurance won’t cover the things that will definitely happen, of course.”

“Anything else?” Mrs. Roberts asked with a smile.

“Nothing else to threaten the building. Naturally, there are a number of deaths predicted - all quite standard in a house this size over that sort of period.” He shut his documents folder as if that were it, case closed.

“That’s all well and good,” said Mr. Roberts. “But could you tell us more about these, um, these deaths?”

“They won’t affect the insurance premiums,” Jeff replied.

“Nevertheless...” said Mrs. Roberts. “If you have the information and we are entitled to it then you may as well share. It’ll come out through the lawyers otherwise.”

“Alrighty then. Best to do things without those legal folk when possible, isn’t that so?” He paused to reopen the document folder, his face falling as his gaze landed on the paper again. “A small number of deaths as I said. Two in the age 70-90 region, which will of course have no bearing on the resale value of the house. One murder of a middle-aged adult. There is one child death - maybe four or five years old, they couldn’t quite pin down the age or era - but no haunting predicted. All good really.”

Mr. Roberts had a furious coughing attack. “All good? Sounds awful.”

“A child?” his wife asked. “Oh. Oh dear. We want to start a family.”

“We don’t have to have children,” Mr. Roberts suggested.

“What?” she asked, appalled. “We want a large family, don’t we?”

“Do we?”

She ignored him and stared at Jeff. “We could live here until our child is three years old and then move out for a few years. They’d survive.”

Jeff shrugged. “What you do won’t change anything. If the tragedy is related to your family, nothing you choose to do will avert it. If not, it’s a

waste of time worrying about it.”

Her eyes filled with tears. “Then we can’t live here.”

It was her husband’s turn to place a hand on her shoulder. “Darling, they do these reports on every house. People die all the time. They couldn’t even pin down the date. Shouldn’t you be more worried about the murder?”

Her mouth fell open. “I know for a fact I’m not going to murder anyone and you love me too much to kill me, so that’s not even a concern!”

The estate agent laughed softly. “Look, this tool was created by the insurance men. Suits and brains, trying to reduce their costs. You can’t avoid what’s going to happen to you, so buy or don’t buy. The report won’t change and nor will you.”

Mrs. Roberts leant over the table and clasped his hands: “Please, you can run the report again. Double check. Ask for more information.”

He removed her fingers one by one. “That’s not how it works,” Jeff said with a sniff. “It’s a covenant between building spirits and insurance men. They run the spell, they get the info, then it’s set down in ink and blood. There’s never been a rerun yet. Nearly everything predicted has come to pass. 98 per cent success rate.”

He deposited both Roberts back outside with a stark warning. “If you don’t make an offer soon, someone else will. A house with only four deaths in a hundred-year period? They’ll fight over it!”

Mrs. Roberts didn’t know what to say once she was left alone with her husband. A possible death versus a definite home. How could she choose?

“Something else will come up, dear,” he said. “It’s not like we’re in a hurry.”

“Of course we’re in a bloody hurry,” said Mrs. Roberts, furious at his indifference. The house meant the world. Her future child more so. This was their dream!

She’d end up killing him if he wasn’t careful...

POWER JUICE!

by Andrey Pissantchev

“Power juice!” I yell, getting the attention of everyone in the cafeteria.

I tip the last precious drops in my mouth, then scrunch up the can into a ball. I feel the power juice work its way down my stomach and into my veins.

Power juice!

I put my hands at the bottom of my table and lift, toppling it over. I kick it for good measure.

I look around. My depth of vision changes slightly, making everything seem closer than it is.

I stand up, and the power juice makes moving around so easy, I decide to make it a jump halfway through. I balance on the edge of my fallen table.

Power juice!

Before I know it, I’m on the move. I pass the astonished faces of my coworkers so fast they meld into a single wide-eyed face-caterpillar. As I power down the corridor, I knock on each office door on the way.

I blink and I’m in the boardroom, an unhinged door several feet behind me. There is a holographic projector in the middle of the table. The presenter has gone silent, slack-jawed. I sweat dribblets. My attention is immediately drawn to a tablet at the other end of the room, which shows a bit of text saying: “purchase power”.

“Juice!” I add helpfully, pointing.

A Kevlar-clad security guard pulls on my shoulder and I fling him

across the room, through the bullet-proof glass which shatters with ease. I can tell from the reactions of others that I've committed a blunder so I lunge after the guard to even things out. The sounds of the city punch at my ears as I whirl in bracing mid-air. Behind me, shouts.

I twist and grab onto a passing delivery drone. It buzzes at me angrily.

I take hold of the drone's rotors at their base, and twist. The world turns into spinning. It feels like it's the world that's tumbling round an immovable me, and I laugh.

Power juice!

I hurl the drone away from me and it joins the spinningness, and all of a sudden I'm the one who's loose and everything else is stable.

I slap against the vertical side of a building and hold on.

I look back just in time to see the delivery drone hit a passing sky taxi, then take another on the way down. A crowd has gathered below.

"Power juice," I mouth at them. They're too far to hear so there's no point in shouting.

The moment of immobility is blissful, but then the urge to move hits me again so I start crawling upwards and only then do I realize the concrete is like putty and lets me knead it with my hands. I continue upwards, leaving hand and foot prints, then finally give up and break into a run.

Almost at the top, I hear a chattering sound. I look around. The glare of the holographic billboards, the incessant swirling of the clouds blinds me. Then I see the source. A swarm of matte black helicopters headed my way. A dark feeling rumbles my insides.

They're after my power juice!

I plunge my hands into the concrete, tearing a hole through. The building inside is dark. I jump in anyway.

I'm in a dusty storage unit. As I run further in, I fling any boxes I pass behind, trying to block the entrance I came through. I have no time for doors. I burst out of the room through the wall, leaving a me-shaped hole behind.

The corridor I'm in has no lights either. I run left, then next right.

Power juice.

It sloshes in my head as I sprint down corridors that all look the same. Why is this place so dark? I run as fast as I can, pushing through walls that seem like they hide safety behind them.

I've been stuck in this building for what seems like hours.

I turn around a corner, and encounter a group of black figures. They look at me with insect eyes, and then one of them shouts and they rush at me. I feel a cable grab hold of my arm and I grasp at it, trying to pull it loose, but then another cable gets my other hand.

“POWERR!” I bellow, “JUIIIIICE!”

I twist around to shake off my bonds. I ram against the wall, crushing one of the things, kick at another, lopping its head off, but then four others come in their place.

A cable slips around my feet, tugs. I lose my balance and hit my head against the wall. Before I can gather myself, something stings my neck. I panic. I flail my legs helplessly and my foot connects to something. One of my attackers flies through my field of vision, mangled and broken. More cables, another sting, then a third one. My thoughts become fuzzy and liquid and I start dreaming of power juice.

~

I wake up. It’s dark. I open my eyes and nothing changes.

My mouth is sticky and my limbs feel weak as if my blood is reluctant to flow through. My head, conversely, pulses with pain.

I stumble around in the darkness. The space I’m in is enclosed, and there’s no ventilation so my breathing is difficult. Somewhere outside, I hear muffled voices.

I stretch out my hands and run them over my surroundings, trying to find some clue about where I am and whether it’s possible to escape.

I brush up against something. A handle? I press and pull. It’s a refrigerated compartment of some kind. I reach inside.

Is... is that?

My hands grab a can on their own accord. My finger pulls open the tab. Tss. A too-sweet liquid burns its way down my throat.

Power juice!

I flex my fingers as the juice takes control of them. I want to grab things, to poke and tug. I still see nothing so I pretend my enclosure is all purple. I hate purple.

I grab the wall behind me, punching each of my fingers through. I pull, and tear the whole chunk out. Light streams in from behind me. I wield the piece as a weapon, grinning.

I swing it at the wall straight ahead. A few hits is all it takes. My freedom hole is complete, and I jump out feet first.

I find myself in a military compound, hot wind blasting sand in my teeth. My prison was a large crate. A spent parachute hangs off one side.

Then, I notice the shouting.

Men and women wearing fatigues are pointing rifles at me, yelling in an unknown language. I yell gibberish back at them. The attention is uncomfortable so I am ready to leave, but an explosion makes the ground tremble and we all look up.

A dozen crates just like mine fall from the sky, slowly drifting downwards. Another blast hits, closer to us. In between the rumble, I

hear a call, clear as day:

“Power juice!”

Elsewhere in the camp comes a response: “Power juice!”

The soldiers glance around, confused. I smile toothily, join the “Power juice!” cries with one of my own. The woman closest to me gives me a horrified look. I realize I’ve been grinding my teeth so hard I drew blood, and it all splattered dripping out of my mouth.

She lifts her gun at me and the power juice compels me to run in her direction, smiling wider and wider.

REMEMBER, REMEMBER

by Kat Otis

1645. Elizabeth, exiled Queen of Bohemia, leaned over the edge of the wherry to trail her fingers through the cold waters of the subterranean river. Part of her still couldn't believe that she was there, that the river was real. Already she could hear the distant crashing of the waterfall. If that much of her vision was truth then she knew, deep in her bones, that the rest must be true as well. Here was a place where she could reach through time.

Here, she could touch the past. Change it. Save her husband and sons and perhaps all of Europe with them. Surely, with the knowledge she had now, she could stop the war before it tore the Holy Roman Empire apart.

The wherry rounded a bend in the river and Elizabeth's breath caught in awe as the light from the lanterns suddenly illuminated a magnificent fall of water, ten times the height of any man. The rowers made for the grotto on the bank of the river then held the wherry steady while Dudley, her lady-in-waiting, helped her disembark.

A narrow rock ledge stretched towards the waterfall and beyond. The mist rising from the waterfall would make the rock treacherously slippery, but Elizabeth saw no other way to approach the waterfall. Her heart quailed as she considered trying to edge her way along that ledge. She wished she had worn sturdier shoes. And perhaps a narrower gown.

Dudley clenched her fists into the fabric of her own gown, no doubt hoping to hide the way they had begun to shake. "Your Majesty, perhaps you should reconsider-"

"Millions of lives are at stake," Elizabeth said, firmly, trying to convince herself as much as Dudley. If she thought too hard about what she was going to do, she would lose her courage so she lifted the hem of her skirt and began to inch her way along the ledge.

It was as slick as she had feared. Halfway to the waterfall, her foot skidded out from under her and Dudley cried out in alarm. Elizabeth dropped her skirt and used her arms to balance herself. Strangely, though, the misstep settled her nerves. God was with her – He would not let her fall.

As she approached the violent flow of water, the roar of the waterfall became deafening. The vision had implied she would see the most important turning point from her past in the waters, the moment where it all went wrong. Had it been choosing exile in the Netherlands instead of returning to her childhood home of England? Encouraging her husband Frederick to accept the pro-offered throne of Bohemia? Marrying Frederick and moving to the Holy Roman Empire in the first place? She kept waiting for the moment when all would become clear, but the water remained stubbornly opaque. Perhaps she needed to be closer? She edged into the rising mist, wincing at the damage to her poor gown, and searched for a sign.

Only when the first splash of water hit her face did Elizabeth understand that she must step *into* the waterfall.

Elizabeth hesitated, then drew in a deep breath and took one final step. God would protect her.

He would not have led her here, otherwise.

~

1635. Elizabeth, Dowager Queen of Sweden, found the subterranean river exactly where she remembered it from her previous life. The factious Swedish Riksdag had been glad enough to support her pilgrimage, each nobleman hoping to seize control of her sons in her absence and thus rule in their names. Let the Riksdag enjoy its petty victories while this lifetime lasted, she would be triumphant in the end.

Dudley helped her from the wherry then held her lantern high and peered around the grotto, wide-eyed and pale-faced. She whispered, as if the roar of the waterfall wouldn't prevent the rowers from overhearing them, "It's exactly the way you described it."

"Of course it is," Elizabeth said, impatiently. "Have I ever lied to you?"

Dudley shook her head, but Elizabeth could see that it was only now – in this place – that Dudley truly believed the story Elizabeth had confessed thirty long years ago, in those first shocked moments of finding herself once again a nine-year-old child. Still, whether or not she

believed, Dudley had faithfully devoted herself to Elizabeth's plans. She was a true friend and servant, and so Elizabeth had brought her once again to the waterfall.

Elizabeth had done so many things differently in this new life, focusing all her energy on creating bridges between the great Protestant powers, but the Holy Roman Empire had still erupted into religious warfare. As she lifted the hem of her skirts and made her way along the ledge – this time in sensible, sturdy shoes – she couldn't help but reflect upon her failures. She'd married the King of Sweden, over her Danish mother's strenuous objections, then struggled to end the enmity between her new husband and her maternal uncle. The threat of their Protestant armies combined could have forced the Catholic Emperor to terms, but Gustav had not listened to her and so her husband had once again died on a Saxon battlefield. Back home in England, her younger brother Charles would not listen, either, bent on the same path of self-destruction he had followed before. He would plunge his three Kingdoms of England, Scotland, and Ireland into their own civil war, before the end. Bloody, stubborn men.

No wonder God had entrusted this task to a woman.

She would not fail Him, no matter how many tries it took.

~

1625. Elizabeth, Princess Royal of England, wept as the rowers entered the mouth of the river and left the sunlit world behind. Dudley tried to comfort her, but her lady-in-waiting's words missed the mark entirely.

Dudley thought she mourned for her newly-deceased father. Elizabeth supposed that was not too far from the truth. She mourned the loss of his peace, for her elder brother Henry had taken England to war against the Holy Roman Emperor before their father was even laid to rest. But even more than that, she mourned the political capital she had spent to save Henry's life, refusing marriage after power-filled marriage to prevent the wedding celebrations where he had fallen ill and died twice before. Despite all her years of experience – all the lives she had lived – her childhood love had blinded her and she had foolishly believed her beloved elder brother would be a more reasonable King of England than the younger had been.

This time she had not dared confide the truth to her lady-in-waiting. Dudley was still an innocent – she couldn't imagine the pain and suffering Henry was about to unleash. And she was her king's loyal subject – she couldn't possibly understand the decision Elizabeth had reached.

Henry had to die young, as God had intended. Then all of England

could remember him as a shining hope, tragically lost before his time, and never suspect it could have been otherwise.

As soon as the wherry reached the grotto, Elizabeth leapt out, ignoring Dudley's cry of surprise. Grieving but determined, she headed towards the waterfall.

It was becoming increasingly clear to her that there was only one path that would save Europe from destruction. England had a queen once before. It must have a queen again. Both her brothers must die.

God so willed it.

~

1615. Elizabeth, Princess of Wales, sent Dudley away with harsh words the girl did not deserve. She had fought long and hard to hide her rage at her father's betrayal, but now she had no more strength for pretences. How dare he betroth her to a Seymour – as if that bastardy-tainted junior bloodline had more of a right to the throne than hers! – and have the gall to assure her that her husband would do a fine job ruling England until their sons came of age.

But I am your heir, she had protested.

He had given her a patronizing smile, as if she were still a small child, never suspecting she had lived a hundred years and more. If she had needed any proof of her fitness to rule – any proof that none suspected the role she had played in her brothers' untimely deaths – it was that smile. *England requires a strong king to follow in my footsteps.*

Her hands shook with fury as she strode into the waterfall.

God required otherwise.

~

1605. Elizabeth II, by the Grace of God, Queen of England, Scotland and Ireland, Defender of the Faith, etc., kept her head erect as the newly-appointed Archbishop of Canterbury placed the heavy crown on her nine-year-old head. The treacherous Guy Fawkes and fellow Catholic conspirators thought they had won a great victory by blowing up Parliament and bringing her to the throne, but she had already set a plan in motion to destroy them. This time, things would finally be different. And all of Europe would gratefully remember.

Remember.

The fifth of November.

