

Neon Origami

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I Owe Someone A Chicken

By Dave Hunter

Literary Fiction

Come on USA take a chance on freedom. I figure I'm well over twenty-one with no obvious evidence of insanity, so I should be able to walk into a drug store and say "I'm about a hundred and ninety pounds and I'd like enough morphine to get me out of here with say a consolation glass of brandy." But, of course, I can't, and you can't. We can go to a sporting goods store and buy a gun with a magazine that'll hold enough bullets to wipe out the neighborhood with a swastika tattooed on our forehead because that's second amendment freedom. Anyway, I already have guns. But the thought of pressing the barrel against my skull makes me squeamish, but I'm not in constant pain and humiliation, and that might change if I were, but I still might not like the idea, and I shouldn't have to. Television news tells me Americans are dying all over the place because of overdoses, but they aren't trying to die, mostly, it's just that there's no quality control in the dope they buy so they don't know what they're getting and the only thing the official fucks can think of is more extreme penalties. What if they could have walked into a drug store and bought what they needed? How many more would be alive today? Let people have what they want, such a novel idea. Yes, some would still die, but it wouldn't be because they bought an adulterated product. It would be more their choice. Choosing. Free to choose, I guess that's okay when it's a political bumper sticker. Stop it you lawsuckers, you're killing people who don't want to go.

I don't know any heavy drug users or drug dealers any more. I did fifty years ago, but I don't now because they're all dead. So, I thought I'd go looking for some morphine or heroin even if it was adulterated because I was just going to put it away for a really, really, rainy day. I went to a bar down town where I'd seen the young people standing out front taking smoke breaks with the purple hair or the shaved heads and the stretched out ears and the tattooed snakes crawling around their necks and I bought a few rounds at the bar and asked the young dudes beside me quietly if they could connect me to some heavy downers, like pain killers, and they quietly moved away from me, and pretty soon there was a big empty space all around me in the crowded bar.

Years ago, or once upon a time, Jumbo Jim told me about his uncle who liked his brandy and one Saturday morning he was having his glass and his wife was polishing silverware and the silverware polish looked like brandy and uncle picked up the wrong glass and tossed it off and gave a gasp and fell down dead on the kitchen floor. Well, that's the right stuff. So, I called up Jumbo to see if he had a clue about the brand of silverware polish. But Jumbo didn't even know who I was and didn't remember anything about his uncle and had never even heard of silverware. Then his wife got on and said she didn't have Alzheimer's like Jumbo but didn't remember me either, and that surprised but didn't humiliate me, not enough to get me off the phone, so I asked her if she'd heard anything about the fatal polish. She had heard something about something like that years ago, but didn't know the details, and even if she did, she wouldn't tell me, because it smelled like I was up to some kind of evil, and now she thought she did remember me and I was the guy who was always leading Jumbo astray, and she hung up most righteously.

I have a sister that's very smart and she had a painful operation and both the clinic and the hospital gave her the oxy pain killers but she gritted her teeth and saved the pills and she figures with the pills and a farewell drink she can scoot on out of here whenever she wants. But I haven't had any painful operations lately, and if I had the closest clinic is so afraid of the DEA that about all they'll subscribe is Tylenol and yoga. Hard to tell if the doctors or the cops are running medicine these days.

I don't dwell on this, day in and day out. because then I'd think I was nuts

You can stop here for a couple years and think of this as "An Advance Health Care Directive" that the clinic always wants me to fill out, though what I'd want is not what they'd want or allow.

Later, though not as later as I thought. Seems I forgot to pay my property taxes and forgot to get new plates for two years in a row and once I set my house on fire (which is not true; I left a roast in the oven and went fishing. Smoke damage is all there was, and no danger of house on fire) and now some kid I don't even recognize is going to court to get what's called, a conservatorship, or something like that. So, I forgot. I think after a guy retires along with a prescription for any pain killer he might want, he should quit paying taxes, because, not me, but some of my neighbors are being driven out of their homes by the property taxes that only go up every year. And then the city tears up the street and puts in another one and sends everyone a bill for about four grand, and who the fuck asked them to do that, no one, but it's part of the City Manager's management plan and I guess a plan just cancels any rumor you ever heard of DEMOCRACY. I think using capitals like that in abstractions is a sign of dementia, but I didn't use any exclamation points. But I might just stick one finger in my nose and another in my ear and shout freedom! Freedom! Freedom!

I don't know what the proper terminology is today for rest home, retirement home, old folks' home, those one level structures where they take all your assets and give you a fucking rocking chair or wheel chair in exchange, but I'm not going, and no kid I hardly recognize is going to manage my funds or dribble my social security out to me. And I still don't know any drug dealers, and I think I look less like a doper than the last time I tried the capitalist underground way.

But I've been fishing the streams all my life and I've noticed the last few years that water hemlock is getting, not really common, but not hard to find along the streams. And, yes, I know what it looks like, and if I didn't, I could take its picture and find out for sure from PlantNetPlant Identification app. In fact, I did, but it embarrassed me to be second guessing myself. And it's a spooky plant because its veins don't run out to the points on its leaves, but to the grooves between the leaf's fingers. What do we call the grooves between our fingers? I've either forgotten or maybe never knew.

These days I don't expect people to know the differences between an elm and a maple, or a grackle and a crow, but when I was a kid, way back when, it wasn't uncommon for boys to know about the natural world. Boys hunted and trapped and fished and hid in the poison ivy, and some caught butterflies and moths and stuck pins in them and put them under glass with their labels, and some hunted fossils and knew about dinosaurs and all those past ages. Some

boys were players of sports, and some were bullies, and some just worked for their folks and played board games and did jigsaw puzzles in winter. Some were called Nature Boy and it wasn't a sneer like today when young women say "Mister Natural."

In high school I did some of the survivalist things, living in the woods with as little as possible, and finally, in the winter. In winter I used to kick muskrat houses apart and eat the roots, tubers and stems that the rodents had stashed in the wattle walls and figured it was safe because wild animals instinctively knew what was safe and what wasn't. I didn't know then that squirrels gather angel of death mushrooms and sun dry them and eat them, but don't die because of some enzymes they either have and we don't, or the other way around. And I hadn't read yet, and didn't until after it didn't matter, that muskrats frequently die from eating hemlock roots. Wouldn't that have been something? Like pre-ironic? A new age: the Age of the Pre-ironic.

I'm still interested in when the wood ducks arrive and the warblers pass through, and I annoy the trout, so I notice mayfly hatches, though they are not like they used to be when there'd be heaps of them under the streetlights that had to be hauled away in dump trucks. My morning walk is more nature walk than exercise, and I get a chuckle watching the kids who zip past with eyes focused on a phone with something playing tunes in their ears and a gadget like a wrist compass that tells them their heart rate and oxygen content and calories burned. They certainly aren't bored with themselves.

I went out on the river with some of those yellow, dish washing, rubber type gloves in my creel and I found it, mucked the roots out and put them in my creel. I was hanging the creel up in the garage when the kid, a relative I think, but not even like the son of a cousin, but the son of a son of a son of a cousin or a niece or a nephew, showed up. Maybe the famed seventh son of the seventh son. And damned if he didn't look in my creel without permission and I've never seen anyone do that without asking, not even a game warden. Guess what? The roots became more evidence of my failing brain.

"What is this?"

"Roots."

"I can see that, but what kind of root is it?"

I could tell this wasn't from a healthy curiosity. "Some kind of relative of queen anne's lace, I suspect." I could tell he didn't know the queen's lace from the king's horse's ass.

"Great. Got any berries? Grandma told me you used to be the know it all of the family, and now here you are dragging home roots and berries you don't even know the names of."

He left without saying goodbye. I knew he'd be back with companions and some paperwork in his hand. I went to bed. These days I get tired after wading. I went to bed thinking I'm going to jump. Dreaming of drifting in America where the deer and the antelope don't fence me in underneath the stars at night and seldom is heard. I will miss my piano and my stereo and my books and my bed.

Up with the sun like all old men for my oatmeal with raisins and walnuts and a quick stroll around the block and then a cup of coffee and a thermos for the trip and I pack, throw the fishing tackle in the SUV and a towel and some changes of clothes and I feel I'm forgetting something, but I've always thought that, and I remember Jumbo back when we were going somewhere and I thought I was forgetting something; "Do you have your passport and a credit card? Then there's nothing else you really need." And I'm off, on the road, like Jack London, Jack Kerouac,

and Willie Nelson. Thinking Arkansas, because I've never been there, and I've heard there's a mountain range there and I never heard of it or saw it on the mountain range maps on the walls in jr. high geography, and it calls itself The Natural State, and I've heard it has trout fishing, but of course they were stocked, but even intelligence is artificial now days.

It is pleasant. Despite the Arkansas asshole in Twain's Huckleberry and the foibles of Faubus and the raging faces reflected in the school bus windows. You all don't remember that, and you're lucky. But they were adults and I was a kid then, so those dipshits are mostly dead. I checked into a motel that looked more like a lodge when I got to Lakeview, and I'm thinking after a few more days, I'll look into renting a small house, or cabin, or apartment in town. I got myself a three- day fishing license the first morning and I'm sure I'm going to be upgrading that too. I haven't even annoyed the trout that I know are downstream, but I've been catching sunfish and bluegills on my flyrod and it's a gas and reminds me of when I was little and staying with my uncle and went to the creek that flowed thru his pasture and caught bluegills one after another they were so plentiful and hungry that if I ran out of worms I could just pick most of the petals off this little daisy type flower and stick the hook thru the yellow center and pitch it out on the creek and bam catch another one. The creek still exists but it's not as healthy as it was when it held keepable bluegills. What was I talking about? Oh yes, I like it here.

Pop. Poof. Oh shit. Another American dream deflates.

Right when I went to the desk to tell Red I was reupping for another week because I never seem to be getting around to looking for cheaper digs and where I could do some cooking. I was reaching for my credit card when Red said, "I can't accept that, Sir." I didn't understand that. Red says, "I'm sorry Sir, but it just gets worser and worser. Your account is closed, so technically, the last time we accepted it, you were technically attempting to defraud, and the nice man behind you is here to arrest you. I want you to know, we, the staff and I, had nothing to do with this."

But this doesn't make a goddamn bit of sense. It's not supposed to work that way. The credit card company doesn't say whoops, no fucking money; arrest that man. It sends me a bill, and if I fail to pay that, then they may start thinking fraud, but more likely how much interest they're going to charge me for the loan they're about to make. No, this is some kind of fucked up bullshit. I think I said something like that, maybe not so polite.

The cowboy hatted deputy said "There, there, old feller, it's not as bad as it seems. You're not going to be charged with a felony. No. That's just some legal stuff so we can hold you until your friends get here. You know there's been a missing -at- risk adult warrant out on you for weeks. You really worried a lot of people."

And I'm like what the fuck are you yammering about? What's this at- risk-adult bullshit? Just how am I at risk except from young fucks trying to steal all my shit?"

"That's just it. You've got it. You're an adult who needs to be protected."

"I don't need protection. Do I seem mentally deficient to you? "

"You seem kind of excitable, Sir. I'm sure this is all in your best interests."

I can see I'm not going to get anywhere rational with this law dawg. So, I go into schmooze mode which I just hate, and say how I know law officers have a hard and important job to do and the public just doesn't understand how much we owe them for the safety we enjoy and I'm sure that he, like most, got into the peace officer line to protect the unarmed helpless

citizens. And he's liking this, and I get more disgusting and go into pity me mode and say I'm just an old man who gets confused about things and I wonder if I couldn't just go up to my room and study my hymnal and ask for guidance.

Turns my stomach, hurts my pride, but it works and he sez he guesses that'd be okay, because remember, he'll be down here. And I thank him and head up to my room where I grab my ditty bag and some clean underwear and I walk down to the end of the hall where there is a door that says Emergency Exit and I know there's a fire escape built into the wall that goes down to the parking lot, and I'm going to slip slide away. The door doesn't even take much of a push, but then loud buzzers go off on my floor and on the one below and people are sticking their heads out of the rooms all down the hall but they're just gawking, not moving, so I yell FIRE! FIRE! hoping for pandemonium with everyone rushing out of the building and in the confusion one man would get away. But they don't move, this is the damn crew you want to be in the crowded theater with, so screw it, I climb down the iron rung ladder. And there's the deputy dawg waiting and saying how disappointed he is in me. I've just dug myself in deeper, now guilty of setting off a false fire alarm and attempting to create a riot and he just can't trust me anymore. The cuffs go on. Good thing I'm white, otherwise he might have shot me being such a desperado.

After about an hour of sterile silence, he turned me over to his clone from closer to home who asked, "Has he been any trouble?"

"Not really. But he's a foxy old geezer and he tried to make his get- away. So, keep an eye on him."

A cop and someone sent to drive my vehicle and possessions back. Can I ride with my possessions? No, because I'm officially the cop's prisoner.

Skip all the machinations, I end up in what is called a nursing home. Come on and nurse me honey. That'd be a great rock song. And it's all smiles, not crocodile smiles, the croc has a certain honesty in its toothy smile. The ever so pleasant director, Mr. Hellevicke, told me I was going to enjoy it here, they had ever so many activities fit for all levels and whatever might I be interested in? And I asked "Do you have karate lessons? Because I'm pretty sure I'm gonna want to kick some serious ass before I get out of here."

Then I remembered my teenage buddy, Kyte, who worked part-time as a night watchman in a private psychiatry hospital where he claimed the doctors hid their mistakes and rich relatives kept their embarrassments while they looted them. He warned me that in that place any time a "patient" showed any signs of normal human outrage over being kept hostage, it was taken as another proof of their madness.

So, I stifled myself. Even when the friendly psychologist asked me to count backwards from one hundred to zero by sevens, I thought about all sorts of smart- ass things; like sitting silently until she says can't you do it, and then saying, I've been done for a long time, where were you? But I couldn't entirely resist an inner smurk (I like that spelling) when she gave me a carpenter's pencil and paper and told me to draw a clock with the hands at a quarter past ten. I drew a rectangle with 10:15 in the middle and cartoon hands on each side pointing a finger at it.

She laughed at that, and looked like a real person for a moment. She made some notes in her phone. And that was that. And I'll tell you, posing all the time and not daring to speak the truth, I swear it makes you nuts. And all the time thinking fuck this place. But I've been given to

know that whether or not I get my car keys back depends on how I “adjust.” Because I’d sure like to go and annoy some trout, and I’ve been mentioning it in what I hope was a polite and non- confrontational manner and planting the idea that if I could just do that, I’d be at peace. And when the librarian asked me if there was anything that I particularly wanted, I could have said all kinds of weird shit like I’m looking for “A Thousand and One Ways to Escape a Bad Dream, or I Was a Prisoner in an Oldster Unconcentration Camp,” but I didn’t, I said “I wonder if there’s any Ernest Hemingway books about fishing? I’ve heard of him and I heard he was a fisher of great fish.” Of course, she brought me Old Man and the Sea, not bad, and short.

Part of getting my keys back depends on me successfully adjusting to my new circumstances. How fucking stupid do they think I am? I know that my keys are just the carrot at the end of a bullshit stick. I doubt the vehicle is even legally mine anymore. So adjusting. A long time ago, like after high school, I had a girl friend who was a nurse in a nursing home and she told me that women adjusted and made friends and took part in the arts and crafts stuff, but the men just turned into depressed, angry, old guys with no friends and no interests, just waiting to die. So I made friends. Ron Holbrick I used to work with and I didn’t recognize him at first because he had always been an energetic fellow with many enthusiasms, and now he stared at his shoes. I got him talking, mostly about the past, of course, but soon he started coming back. And, I was a hit with the women right off, being male and standing upright without a walker with no bristles sprouting out my nose and ears and not drooling. And there was Rita and Cheryl, two gals that didn’t look like gray haired gunny sacks, and they loved to dance, and it wasn’t anything I’d ever done completely sober, but, hey, I’m trying to adjust to new circumstances. Ron said he didn’t dance either but I remembered him as a dancing fool back in high school, and I said help me look adjusted and dance man, and he winked and the four of us became friends, dancing and playing five hundred and rummy, and they were trying to teach me bridge.

I’m sowing these seeds of the need for fishing confirmation of my existence and one day on our morning walk I pretend I’ve just now noticed my vehicle just beyond the lilacs and I say to the orderly, like enlightenment has just struck, there’s my van and my tackle is in the back, and couldn’t I just have my flyrod which is really valuable and my creel that was hand woven by a Chippawa woman to take to my room just for decoration if nothing else, trying to sound like his nostalgic grandfather. He says he will retrieve them and I believe him because our orderlies are college kids working parttime for minimum wages and they’re pretty decent except for being blind to fascist reality. And he does and I find my tackle sitting on my bed. Thanks young person. Sorry about your job.

The next day I hang the creel on my shoulder and pick up my flyrod and waltz down to the psychologist/counselor’s office and have a seat at her desk and say, you know I believe I’ve adjusted and reached a reasonable level of acceptance of the situation, and I really, really miss fly fishing, and it always helps me relax and examine my thoughts. So, could I have my keys, please.

But she said she didn’t have the authority, and she didn’t have the key, but it sounded good and she’d propose it to Administration. But Poof. Two days later I get a note she wants to see me and I’m trying not to cry or swear, but here’s how it comes down. Admin thinks it’s a great idea and they’re putting a sign-up sheet for a fishing trip in the lounge. So, what she’s saying is I’m not getting my keys, and pretending she’s done me a favor, though she’s smart enough to know that I know better.

It's smiling mush smothering your face forever. I'm bummed. I never fished in a group and I hadn't planned on it now. I knew they weren't giving me my keys, but I'd hoped an orderly could drop me off somewhere and then I'm off to the woods and living on my wits. But no, ain't gonna happen. I'm bummed. I like to look at my flies, the little masterpieces of feather and fur. It used to make me feel better when I was young and a pretty girl ignored me. I 'spoze that's the creeping nostalgic infantile dementia. I sat on my bed and opened my creel. And there they were! The hemlock tubers, a little dried out. I used my needle nose to crush about a half inch of it into a fine powder. It was such a little amount I thought it would be like what the junkies call teasing the tiger, at least in movies. I went down to the kitchen and got a paper cup of warm decaf and let the powder dissolve in it until bed time. I drank it, put on my blue pajamas and lay down on my bed to rest perhaps forever. I forgot that the famous Socrates walked around and paid off his debts, I remembered from Miss Burns in high school. I remember because I said, well, he was sort of a dumb worshiper of the city state. Miss Burns says no, he was more of a secular Jesus. And I said he was sort of a dumb shit too, or had a really vicious father. And she sent me to the office. POW! I'm gone. I'm not back in high school and I'm not in the damn institution. I'm in a full -scale flashing coral reef exploding endlessly into the stars. A purple hippo with a big smile floats past and thinks to me, look down, look down Bucko. I do. I trip off the cliff and fall and fall, fall, fall, like Coyote beep beep and when I hit the canyon floor, I bounce up doing figures eights and all sorts of slow motion tai chai movements, and I'm way up in the sky and I think this must be the part where I look down and see my body and I do. It's translucent. I can see the organs. I can see the plaque in my brain. I can see the grainy limestone along my spine and in my left knee and a voice tells me you can remove that junk if you focus your thoughts and I did and it was true, I watched it all dissolve and I dissolved. When I woke, it was the next day, I was alive, and I felt great, and I really believed a miracle had occurred. I went down and signed up for my mangled fishing trip. Saw some more mangling; they had to have at least six to make the project economically feasible, and so far, I was it.

I told Ron and Rita and Cheryl about the magic effects of the root, and yes, yes, they were game, so I said "Go and sign up my breathern and sisteren." And they did, but we were two short of six and I didn't want to include anyone else in the plan, especially in a place so short of interesting dramas. But you know I had planted the story of my devotion to the fish so well, that when I offered ten dollars to anyone that signed up, they were all pretty sure I was desperate enough to pay a bribe, and two nearly dead oldsters, Albert and Stella, signed on for ten bucks each.

When the day arrived the dancing four of us all went to the kitchen and got thermos of coffee. We were driven with Albert and Stella in a white van by one of the college boys and delivered to one of those public fishing docks on a bay in a small lake. I was worried about the kid thinking he had to stick around and chaperon, or play life guard, and maybe he was expected to, but he didn't. Right away I got the roots out and cut off a piece like I remembered and ground it up with my needle nose and put it in Ron's thermos, and Rita's and Cheryl's and then mine. The two shills Albert and Stella started asking what we were doing and I told them we were about to take a trip, and they started whining, oh no they hadn't signed on for this. Oh boy. But I got them calmed down and said they should do some fishing since that's what they'd signed on for, and that's what they did.

Meanwhile it's like those 60's movies with the four of us laughing and chuckling and I imagine trying to fix ailments with mind power and just digging the scene with the two straight gray cats Albert and Stella looking like cartoons at the end of the dock pretending to fish.

The college kid came back it seemed like only minutes after he'd gone and Albert and Stella started yelling about drugs and the kid started herding us stoned cats onto the van and it was a rollicking wang dang doodle all the way back to our cage. There was a very concerned looking gang of management sorts and the shrink and some college orderlies. They treated us like drunks and put us all to bed. I smiled myself to sleep.

The tiger sprang. Ron and Rita and Cheryl were dead. Stella and Albert were famous as witnesses for a few days. The judge who sentenced me said, he was only sorry there was no death penalty in our state. Oh shit shit shit. On the other hand, there's dope all over the place in prison.

Cue the music – all I wanted was to be free and that's the way it turned out to be.

The End

Shark Teeth

By Nicole Haley

Literary Fiction

Very soon into the apocalypse, Drew finds he can carry a good number of cans of beans in three large canvas totes. There is no need for him to run except he enjoys the feel of it, his legs pumping beneath him as he sprints to various Whole Foods and Erewhons and Aldis and then back to his apartment. He might be the only person alive, but the solitude feels more like when he was in high school at home on a Saturday night, knowing his friends were hanging out without him.

A month or two before the apocalypse, Molly pulled him aside at the wrap party for season three of Beach Party and told him his teeth were showing up a little gray on camera. "You know I love your smile," she said, smiling herself. "But we should probably get you to a dentist before we start shooting next season." Drew agreed. Molly was his favorite producer, even though she was eight years older than him and married and they didn't, at first glance, have very much in common. She had kind, tired eyes that reminded him of his favorite teacher and bright white teeth.

It was her idea for him to get to know Amy better. That was how she put it. "Have you thought about getting to know Amy better?" He hadn't thought about Amy at all in his weeks at the Beach Party Chateau. She was petite, with a short neck and wide brown eyes, a degree in anthropology and a job selling vitamins on social media. But as he did get to know her better, he found she laughed at everything he said. The week before the wrap party, they hooked up for the first time on camera. He lost his erection twenty seconds into the act, if he even had one to begin with, but Amy moaned for the benefit of the night vision camera lurking in the corner of the ceiling.

They cuddled every night after that and Drew found it pleasant to have Amy's curly head on his bicep, to wake up to the acidic smell of another person's body odor, to be ribbed by Aiden and Rachel and the others as Amy emerged from Drew's bedroom each morning. It felt like something was beginning even if it was artificial. Though they never spoke about it, he knew that once the season wrapped Amy would go back to being a distant if friendly colleague. He still looked forward to her warm body next to him every night, even if all they did was sleep.

But he most looked forward to the moments when Molly the producer pulled him aside to "have a chat," to debrief about a fight or a party. He thought she was beautiful, with a narrow, pointed chin and dark roots perpetually grown in, lines around her eyes that scrunched up when she smiled at him, which happened often. She was always reading something interesting, a book poking out of the overstuffed bag at her feet. He wanted her approval, sought it out.

The night of the wrap party before she told him his teeth were gray, she said her husband was mad at her because she talked about Drew all the time. "That's why he's not here tonight," she said, laughing. "I told him to come to show him how ridiculous he's being." She gestured at Drew, at his body, for the benefit of four or five crew members standing in a circle

with them. "Like, hello! Different species here!" The group laughed, uncomfortable. Molly was quite drunk and a little high. Drew laughed, too.

She invited him to split an Uber to get back to the hotel paid for by the network. They both ignored the party buses idling outside, or that all it would take was a text to get him the name of the dentist.

"I have it written down somewhere in my room," she explained. They stood in the night air, the sea breeze oddly sweet.

"Is Gil texting?" Drew asked. He had never met her husband, but knew from Instagram that he was an attorney at one of the biggest entertainment law firms in the industry, a drudge contract lawyer who resented Molly for her ambition and her success. Drew assumed that last part from how tired she was, how often she was late because her husband backed out of taking their daughter to her Latin tutor, how she was always apologizing on his behalf.

"Ugh. Yes," Molly said. "Let's send him a selfie." She turned her phone around and Drew leaned in, his cheek close to hers, careful not to touch. "There. Serves him right."

Her tongue was in Drew's mouth, past his gray teeth almost as soon as he shut the sedan door behind him, her hand in between his thighs. As she stroked his crotch, his chest under his thin t-shirt, he thought about the first day she touched him, during a talking head interview where, at her prompting, he admitted it was hard for him to commit because of his parents' divorce.

"How can you promise someone forever?" he had said, choking back a sob. "The most romantic thing I can think of is promising someone now, right now." He wiped away a tear and laughed at himself. Crying, like a girl, in his first season of a dumb reality TV show.

But Molly furrowed that brow of hers (he would find out later she'd gone to school to be a social worker but dropped out when she met her husband and got pregnant), reached out, and squeezed his knee. "That was really good, Drew," she said. "Thank you for being so open."

A month after she'd first touched his knee, half an hour after their first kiss, a minute after they had sex in her hotel room, she started crying and threw up twice. Drew fell asleep to the sound of dry heaving in the bathroom. In the morning, he was alone, left with a text that contained the contact information of Dr. Burt Simon.

Dr. Burt Simon had rumpled, curly white hair but a face oddly free of lines. He smiled throughout the whole appointment, his teeth (it need hardly be said) perfect, straight, and electric white, the same as each young, attractive woman who seemed to comprise the total of his staff. The effect made Drew feel like he was living in a catalog.

"We can certainly help you out," Dr. Simon said once Drew's chair was raised back upright. "I'm glad Molly sent you our way. You're a great candidate for our procedure."

The procedure involved multiple trips to Dr. Simon, including a placement of temporary veneers after Drew's teeth were shaved down. He was surprised and a little horrified to see the drill the dentist planned to use to shape his enamel. For some reason, he thought that the offending parts of his teeth would be gently shaved away with a tiny, tooth-sized straight razor.

Before the dentist installed his temporary veneers but after his teeth were shaped, Drew took a selfie in the chair of his gummy smile, his little nubs. “Is this better than the gray?” he asked in a text to Molly. She responded with a thumbs up emoji.

The last of the temporaries popped off a month and a half after the apocalypse. Drew was careful never to eat food that would exacerbate the issue, was careful to continue brushing and flossing. It was somewhat of a relief when the last one popped off – they’d started to ache and to discolor worse than his original teeth.

He thought a lot about those horror movies where evil people shaved their teeth down into the sharp fangs of sharks to demonstrate their lack of humanity. He brought it up in a video call with Molly early on.

“I think you need to stop watching so many movies about the world ending right now,” she told him, gently.

But he couldn’t stop. He watched fast zombies overtake city blocks in seconds and slow zombies lumber towards horrified onlookers. He watched skinny people wake up from comas, dazed, walking around once-bustling metropolises, he watched starlets choke on their own breath as some horrible disease took them. He watched aliens explode every conceivable cultural landmark, he watched mountain-high waves of water crash into lighthouses, he watched asteroids flatten cities. He watched nuclear bombs and their mushroom clouds in the sky and he watched people starve and kill each other for food or fun.

He grew so engrossed with these movies he didn’t notice when Molly stopped returning his texts, and when she sent the inevitable (“Hi, sorry I’ve been MIA. This whole experience has really put into context what’s important, and Gil and I have been talking...”) he texted her back, genuinely, that he wished her all the best. He sent her this as he heard an emergency crew taping plastic sheeting around his newly deceased neighbor’s door. He sent her this as he gnawed at an extremely ripe peach until the juice ran down his chin.

Drew swims in the ocean when he can. What once took him an hour or more by car now takes him maybe half an hour, as he weaves around cars on the boulevard, goes wherever he wants, just points his bicycle west and pedals until he gets to the boardwalk.

He will normally make a day of it, packing the cans of beans in his backpack. Today he packs a can of salt-free lima beans and garbanzo beans. Since the apocalypse he has grown lean. He stopped counting macros when his phone died, though he continues to drink protein shakes regularly. Bottled water remains plentiful, since he is the only thing consuming it.

He finds a stretch of pier that is relatively free of human body parts and opens the lima beans. His feet are in the sand and the sun warms his calves. He thinks of Amy, her curly head on his arm. He thinks of Molly and wonders if she made it to her family’s cabin with her kids like she planned to. His skin is brown – he stopped wearing sunscreen once there were no more people to tell him to wear it. His hair is long now, past his shoulders.

He pulls the beans one by one out of the can and deposits them on his tongue, moving them around in his mouth until they are pulp, mashing them with his tongue and cheeks against what remains of his teeth. And then he swallows them.

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Bodies of Evidence

By Dax Gove

Poetry

(with excerpts from Elizabeth Anne Brown's Jelly Fusion)

I. "...after sustaining injuries while being collected the comb jellies fused overnight in the researcher's tank to become one creature joined at the midbody..." Teaching your stepchild to stir the blonde roux. Arm skin after a soup scald, mother's cold rag did soothe after all. Letting bare feet aerate the lettuce rows. Warm belly smile sausage collard denial stew. Bald heads glistening the morning and sobbing and bearing the pall. Orange cat curled behind the knees. Old man's dog dies and he buys another and adds #2 on the name. Roadtrip to Oklahoma City burger joint's fat pile of fuming onions frying in the cramped steam damp wooden trophy room where heads at the window seats sit close enough to kiss construction worker's buttcheeks at the pale worried barstools. Static touch's dragged feet goings on. Square dance lace brushing arms.

II. "...when the scientists poked one side both bodies flinched, suggesting that the two had joined..." Protests progressive as ruffled cat shit fungus on a tree limb. Losing campground card games to a two year old's furrowed sure-eyed poker face disarming all chagrin. Like any health system ever did. Patriotism means dissent. Your first beagle's cuddled licks and the defiance of a goat kid. Love happens as a septic pit. New Year's Eve sweat alcohol fogged shindig yelling here's to another one. Fisherman's pass by hey good luck hope you catch one. Stars and wild garlic close as knives laying on the soccer field with the alium smelling friends of all time. Going in the back room to kiss a life support breath goodbye. Remembering him figure skate backwards and gliding on that sunshine ease we rise and find again. We aim to please.

III. "...in the grafted jellies, food eaten by one mouth was shared between digestive tracts. There was only one holdout of each animal's individuality. Comb jellies have a transient anus: meaning the opening only appears during defecation. Each body formed an anus and pooped, but they did not do so simultaneously..." T-shirt over the nose means Aunt Vanessa has thunderously won the ripping contest. Feeling the warmth of responsibility as the dog turd through the blue bag. Drink too much and act lonely and sad and learn it from your dad. Lost and found water bottles in the library what it's like to remember. Glad to be not meant to sit in traffic. Holiday litter held to crumpled tatters. Giving up a bus seat. Teaching your sibling to swear. Watching the curled knot of garter snakes under the deck. A carnivalesque churning. A naked yearning. At least Eve and Adam got their nudity right.

IV. "...comb jellies lack allorecognition—the ability to distinguish between self and no self within the same species..." Stoner thoughts what are we when are we who are we get me french fries and hot sauce and a Hubble telescope. Looking like mom pulling a pillow ugly scrunchy face with what were once her lips. Annotations in used books. Marker sticker scarred concert halls. Looking out the window with the cat at grasshoppers and that underground dream

called nothing at all. Students who nod their heads in class. All of us common alumni,
storyworlds of tensile delight like free ice cream walking in the rain. Cool and pleasing and
fleeting as grandma's porridge and the milk poured from the porcelain cow. Teaching a kid how
to fist bump. Doing your own first gas pump hip on your hand. A beginner's chord pinkening
every print but your thumb. Mom said you can't skip without smiling. There are many different
sorts of songs. Road rage, wheel slaps, letting go of all that. Waiting for some walk now
brightness. A clean haircut. Bad jokes at a catholic funeral mass why does Christ have
washboard abs. Cuffed flannel jeans and scrapes of snow. Morning sex and morning breath.
Altogether not so bad.

Epilogue. "...simple organisms [hold] clues to understanding our own complexities as
well as treasures that can benefit our lives..." Comb jellies look like vaseline saucers—water
boogers with rainbow spines, looking not so much molded shapely by a god or an entropy or
whatever as dropped from a height and left to swim. Like me, like you; our own assholes,
strangers all strange, feeling music in the current, nothing simple as one and the same.

Orange Morning Sky

By Nicholas Baldwin

Poetry

I rose before the sun,
before the alarm could croak its ritual reminder
that today will echo yesterday, more misses than hits.

I skipped the shower—
my roommate sleeps, or more likely,
lies marinated in the soft silence
of a two-week alcoholic relapse.
The stillness from his room is a kind of mercy.

Outside, in the car, the sky offers
a palette of forgiving oranges, and
hope spread thin across the clouds.
But a patrol car hovers behind me too long—
my chest tightens,
my medication untouched in my pocket.

At work, the fluorescent lights are too white,
too clean, too awake for me.
A flock of geese
ambles across the parking lot—
one at the back drags a crooked leg,
and I feel strangely seen.

I make the coffee.
I wait.
Everything feels like waiting now.
Work once had edges,
now it's all the same soft ache.
I watch the hours drip off the clock
like rust from a leaking pipe.

One more day
of rehearsing the same false stories:
what if, what could've been—
but none of it matters.

Time doesn't rewind.
It lurches forward.

And I,

a cog dissolving
like salt on the back of a slug,
am overtaken with it.

Gentle Bends

By Serayah Silver

Genre Fiction

Yemaya groaned as her children churned within her belly; anxious to meet the world once more. How long has it been since last we seen you? On Ibo Landing? Or on the decks from which we leapt all those years ago. We have waited here for you, beneath the surface, breathing in the tears of our Dark Mother. Yes, we have been waiting here for you. You who have heard the call.

When we arrived at shore, Elenor was the first to go. She came out in her robe, as she did every morning, cup of tea steaming in one hand, in the other, a word puzzle or a book to be ignored as she looked out into the water. That day, there was only fog. And from it, the cool, soft voice called to her from the gloam. "Return to me, My Children. Return." Elenor walked away from herself that morning; leaving her plans, her worries, and her slippers in the sand.

Her husband did not wake, though the call disturbed his dreams. If he had stirred, if he had stood to step sleepily toward the window, he would have seen his wife, Mrs. Elenor Rhodes, walk wordlessly into the waiting water. By the time he reached for her, alone in their bedroom, Our Sister had already gone.

When they interviewed him next day on the news, he spoke slowly to the correspondent, his back to the shoreline, barely in frame. The camera focused on the wide white wall that curtained the ocean. Mr. Rhodes turned to the cameraman. "You hear it too, don't you?"

"Yes," he answered, breathless.

The Blonde News Anchor looked between them in confusion, "Hear what?"

As the camera looked on, folks walked one by one, or hand in hand, out into the ocean. "I'm afraid to go in after her." Confessed the husband, "But I'm afraid of her absence too."

In the silence that followed, the cameraman bent to lay his burden down. The focus shifted; first a pair of shoes, and then the full body of a man, back to the camera he had been holding. The correspondent called his name, but Our Mother's voice was louder. By the time the feed was cut, and the busts of shocked News Anchors returned to the screen on channel four, he and three others had disappeared into the brume.

This was how you heard The Call; you and your partner sat on the couch at home, her turning the channel to find breaking news of similar scenes all along the coast. The Atlantic shoreline obscured by fog, people walking out, and disappearing. This was when you felt the churning in your belly, the voice stuck in your head like a caught breath whispering, "Come home, My Children, Come Home."

When Denise clicked off the TV, you looked at each other and knew. It wasn't until you stood, reaching for your purse and keys that either of you began to feel what you are feeling now; the calm, cool sensation of water poured over your heads, falling down your necks into your open palms. There was nothing else to say.

Denise took up both your coats and drove the hundred miles to the ocean in something close to silence. She drove the speed limit all the way down. No need to rush. Home is here no matter when you come.

Leave your phone in the car when you arrive. Leave your wallet, and your shoes behind. As you move toward the edge, shrug first from your coat, and then your sweater. When it falls behind you, dusted with sand, Denise may reach out to touch your shoulder. Turning back for the first time since you heard The Call, you realize your partner is afraid. When was the last time you saw this look on her face? Eyes wide, and wet, face set as if a statue carved in mourning. You aren't sure if you mean it, but you say it anyway, "It's okay, Baby. It's okay." When she asks, "How do you know?" look around at all the others; scattered crowds and huddled groups clutched close along the sand. Watch a woman step away from her man. See another walk away from her children, while someone else goes forward, holding their baby to their chest. Watch as so many walk out alone. It is then you realize you have no idea where you're going. Pause here if you must, Denise's hand still on your shoulder. Consider her question.

"How do you know?"

Tell her the truth. "I guess I don't...but I hear them..." The way she looks out into the abyss, you know she hears us too, and though you are not able to voice the reason, she can see you are resolved.

When you hold out your hand, you know you will go whether she takes it or not. Instead, she takes her time. Allow her this. You sense the water is patient. When she accepts, and takes your hand, as she has done so many times before, walk together into our midst.

Your feet will meet the water before you see us clearly. Our bodies stark and grey, standing still as stone, all along the shoreline. If you think, What are they? Hear us ask, What are you? Take another step to release yourself from reason. Some have stopped where you are standing, though none have turned to run. Our swooning swells the closer you come, a familiar sound; a low and droning hum.

You move toward us, still holding your lover's hand. Remember, you are not here alone.

Look into our faces, find the features of your kindred; arms stretched toward you; a posture held in welcome. Do not turn away when you see what is left of the whites who wandered in, their bodies bloated, pale and floating. Do not be afraid. They cannot come where we are going.

The Plight of the Rabbit

By Lance Kayser

Genre Fiction

Trevor never met a mirror he didn't like.

His tanned hand carefully maneuvers some stray hairs to their proper place, and then he rubs his front teeth with his finger, as if this will shine them to a glossy white.

He smiles at himself just before leaving for work.

At 25, Trevor believes he will get the promotion that is beyond his experience. He is young, handsome and knows he impresses his coworkers and boss.

His good looks are attributed to his parents. One Anglo father and one Chicana mother coalescing to form a perfectly bronzed son with hazel eyes that mix golden brown and forest green.

Despite his mother's nagging, Trevor is deliberately single. The last woman he dated wanted to "get serious," so he dumped her. He's got to think about his career before he can think about marriage or kids. As his best bud, Rick, so eloquently told him, "You can't marry any of the sluts you've dated!"

At work, his tidy cubicle is only adorned with one picture of his family—his parents, sister and himself—when they were on a cruise in the Caribbean. It is conspicuous and lonely on his desk next to his computer screen.

Being a PR Assistant is just a small stepping stone for him. Dreams of management and later being CEO of a large firm swirl within his mind often.

So when his boss, Charles, calls him into his large office with floor-to-ceiling glass doors, Trevor grins with pride and a hint of envy as he peers at his large, private office.

"Trevor, your work here has been very good. As you know, Diana is leaving for an opportunity at another company, so her management position will be open."

"I heard. So any advice on how a promising PR Assistant can become a manager?" Trevor winks after he says this to Charles.

"That's why I've asked you here. We must go through the proper hiring process, of course, but you are one of the main candidates I am looking at. It would be a big promotion for you, but during the last four years here, you have proven yourself."

Trevor beams with the arrogance of men who have only seen open doors in front of them.

"Thank you, sir. I am honored. And if I'm given this opportunity, I will not let you down."

Charles retorts, "You better not. If I throw my support behind you, you need to deliver results." Charles pauses, smiles, and then says, "Maybe then you'll be able to afford the stakes at our weekly poker night."

Charles sputters out a guttural laugh, and Trevor mimics him as best he can.

The poker nights are high stakes, and six months ago Trevor was ecstatic to be invited. They are exclusive and sometimes he had to borrow money just to be able to play. Only the “real men” of the company are invited, according to Charles.

After work, Trevor calls Rick and yells into his phone: “We need to go out drinking tonight!”

“What’s up, Trev?”

“My boss practically guaranteed I would get that promotion. I’m in, man!”

“Nice! Ok, let’s meet at the bar.”

In the downtown area of their mid-sized, Midwestern city, they stroll into a sports bar. They find a high table and order their draft beers. Scanning the room, past men cheering and jeering at the game, they notice a table of giggling girls sipping mixed drinks.

They grin at each other, and Trevor knows that later he will get another notch in his bed.

Then they perform the male conversation ritual in their natural habitat—a collection of back-and-forth news with few details, in a rapid-fire “man-speak”.

“So you’re getting a promotion, dude?”

“Yeah, it’s in the fuckin bag, man!”

“Cool. So more money?”

“Of course. What do you think I am? A woman?”

They laugh and then Trevor calls over the server and sends a strawberry margarita to the blonde at the table of young women. A drink he scores with every time.

When the server delivers the drink and tells the blonde, she turns toward Trevor, and he immediately nods and smiles at her.

She smiles back and then turns to whisper to her friends.

After more truncated conversation and four beers, Trevor and Rick finally approach the table of girls.

“Hey ladies, how are we doing tonight?”

The ladies smile and offer pleasantries.

He turns to the blonde and declares, “Did you get my gift?”

“Yes, thank you. But Jessi drank it cuz I don’t like margaritas.”

He frowns and then proclaims, “That’s too bad. But how about I get your number?”

She looks down and fidgets. Then she utters, “Sorry, I have a boyfriend.”

He looks at the other girls to read their reactions, to see if what she said is true.

“Are you sure?” he asks her and then places his hand on her shoulder.

“Um, yeah. I’m just out with the girls tonight.”

“You know, I don’t think you have a boyfriend. And I know you’d like to go out with me. I can tell.”

She recoils and everyone notices.

“Hey, I’m just trying to give you a good time.” Trevor laughs after he says this.

“Dude, let’s just go.” Rick says.

“What, and deprive these pretty girls of my presence?” Trevor laughs again.

“Look, I’m not going out with you. I told you already. I have a boyfriend.”

Trevor’s face scrunches up and he spits out, “That’s your fuckin loss, bitch. You’re not that pretty anyway.”

After Rick drags him away from the table, they leave the bar.

"Let's go somewhere else. Maybe there's women who are not so fuckin uptight."

"Dude, I think you've had enough. Plus, I need to get home. We both have to work tomorrow."

"Whatever, fag. You're such a lightweight."

Just as Trevor says this, two men passing become wide-eyed and glare at him.

Trevor and Rick look up to see the glowing sign above the one gay bar in the city: Rainbow Lounge.

"You'll fit in here nicely, Rick," and Trevor cackles into the open air.

Rick groans but ignores him, and they stroll towards the parking lot.

He argues with Rick about whether he should be driving home. In the crisp air of the night, Trevor believes he has sobered up.

Before he reaches his car, he notices two men...kissing.

He squints to make sure he's seeing this correctly and stops.

"What the fuck do we have here?" he sneers as he thumbs towards the two men.

They stop and then turn towards him. One is pale and fear rests behind his blue eyes. The other looks "native" as Trevor's father would say. His carob-colored eyes pierce the air between Trevor and him. His black hair falls to his shoulders but is tucked behind his ears.

The man takes a few steps in Trevor's direction and his earring—silver in the shape of a feather—swings back and forth, catching the moonlight. "Do you have a problem?"

"Me? Well, I don't like seeing two fags sucking face. It's disgusting."

"Then don't look, asshole!"

"What the fuck did you say to me?" Trevor's tone twists into a fomenting rage.

"You heard me!"

The pale man behind him whispers, "John, just leave it."

"Yeah, listen to your little boyfriend," Trevor demands.

"I'm tired of dealing with straight, homophobic assholes like you."

"Well, John, I'm tired of you butt-fuckers always shoving your lifestyle down my throat."

"Why, you jealous? You want some?" John is fearless and determined—storm winds gather strength within him.

Trevor steps toward John and then suddenly his fist meets John's face.

The punch knocks John back and he rubs his chin, the point of contact.

Then he stands up straight and stares at Trevor. Finally, he declares, "I am John Enapay, a Shaman of my tribe, and I curse you. You will know fear. You will know oppression. And you will deserve it. May it change you forever."

The power in John's voice, in his eyes, causes Trevor to falter.

Renders him silent.

After several seconds, he simply waves them off and then makes his way to his car. He convinces Rick that he is sober enough to drive, and he makes his way home.

That night Trevor is plagued by a disturbing dream.

In the dream, he is a rabbit. He's in a dry, desolate land. He feels an acute sense of fear, always on guard, always looking to avoid the next danger. The next predator ready to devour him.

He traverses the dirt and sparse shrubbery in search of food. But there is nothing.

The fear transforms into desperation. He must find food.

A strange feeling, like eyes peering through the darkness. He senses danger, but sees nothing in the scant light.

Suddenly, he leaps, just out of reach of the fangs of a cottonmouth snake.

He feels his heartbeat pounding in his chest. He can hardly think. Instead, he hops away instinctually.

The venomous danger is now behind him, but his hunger pains increase. The search starts anew.

A smell in the air, like a wild musk and a deep hunger.

Wolves.

The fear overtakes him again.

A pack is much harder to escape than one predator.

They catch his scent. The chase is on.

He hears the whining and snapping behind him. This only makes him more frantic.

He turns left and they follow.

Then right, and they are still on his trail.

Finally, a thicket ahead. He can make it.

He hopes.

He legs are fatigued and his heart feels as if it will explode.

Just as he smells their breath, like rotting meat and death, he spots a small hole in the thicket. The low, dense bushes have large thorns. They scrape him on the way in, but they are also his savior.

The wolves yip and yelp as they stick their noses into the thicket and the thorns cut and draw blood.

They finally give up and look for easier prey.

He is safe. For now.

After more searching, hunger engulfs him. Desperation takes over. He can't go on much longer.

Finally, he sees food. A small patch of grass, replete with wildflowers.

As he begins to devour his meal, he catches a glimpse of movement. He is immediately still.

Slowly, a red fox emerges from the shadows.

He is motionless. Maybe the fox won't see him.

No such luck.

"Hello little rabbit," the fox says.

"Who me?"

"Yes, I'm deciding if I should eat you tonight."

He looks closely at the fox, devious and clever, and notices the eyes. A deep brown, like when his mom roasts pecans before folding them into Thanksgiving pie.

He recognizes the eyes. They are familiar.

Just like that Native guy. John.

A new fear creeps inside of him, snaking its way to his heart.

The fox appears to grin, showing his teeth and offering a knowing look.

"You will understand soon enough."

Then the teeth crunch down onto his neck.

Trevor's own screaming wakes him up.

As he gets ready for work that next morning, his hands are still trembling from the dream.

At work, Trevor's normal confidence is shaken.

He rushes to his desk without the usual "hellos" and winks he offers to his coworkers.

His normally quaffed hair has collapsed in the front—bangs falling carelessly on his forehead.

Charles walks by his cubicle and notices: "You okay, Trevor?"

"Oh um, yes I'm fine. Let's just say I might have had too much fun last night." He tries to offer a big laugh, but it comes out as a chuckle.

Later, when the deliver guy approaches (the one the girls in the office go crazy for), he looks different to Trevor.

Is his uniform tighter than normal? Maybe he's working out because his muscles make the fabric around his arms stretch and bulge.

Trevor shakes his head and wonders why he is thinking this. How strange.

All day he is off. Like a headache that won't subside.

After work, he smiles as he remembers that on the weekend he will visit his family at their lake house. It would be his opportunity to unwind, and recenter himself.

On Saturday morning his sister, Monica, makes pancakes, and his mother makes chilaquiles, his favorite.

He feels like himself again for those few moments at breakfast. He smiles and remembers that he is up for a big promotion and his future is a corner office and large bank account.

Later his sister wants to go to "the beach". At a lake, the beach is a relative term, but there is sand and there is water, so who needs waves and salt?

The summer sun allows Trevor to take off his shirt and display his chiseled chest, something he's worked hard for.

He relaxes in his folding chair and watches people frolic in the water. He usually has an eagle-eye for hot women in bikinis. But today he feels content to chat with his sister.

He realizes that he rarely just talks with her or asks her how she's doing.

After several minutes, Monica stops and stares at him with narrowed eyes.

"What?" he asks.

"I can't remember the last time we talked like this. Maybe when we were kids."

He grins but says nothing in return.

After their talk, Trevor heads to the bathroom.

While he's washing his hands, he sees a well-built man with no shirt behind him. In the mirror he notices the man checking him out.

Trevor turns around to see the man's eyes move up from his feet, linger on his crotch and then move slowly upward to his face.

Their meet eyes.

Trevor should feel disgusted. He should want to yell or hit the man.

But a strange yearning snakes its way within him.

A heat that begins as a flicker radiates out to his skin and he reddens.

The man steps close to Trevor and offers a toothy grin.

"How are you today?"

Trevor falters and mutters, "Ok."

They are alone in the bathroom, and the man's hand slides up to rest on Trevor's cheek.

"You are very handsome." Words Trevor usually loves to hear, but in this moment, he is torn.

He wants to shout: "I not fucking gay!"

But the longing. That snake that has worked its way from deep within to his groin.

His heart is racing.

Trevor pushes the man's hand away and utters, "I need to go."

Then he rushes out the door.

Panic.

He wanders alone and ignores the phone when the texts from his sister make the beeping sound he usually likes to hear. And later when his parents call, he puts the phone on silent.

Trevor is aimless, maneuvering through the large trees and bushes without a path. Obstacle after obstacle blocking his way.

What the hell just happened? I'm not attracted to dudes.

He yells, "I'm not!"

Only the trees and a few squirrels hear him. They offer high-pitched chitters in response.

* * *

During the next week, Trevor is determined to return to the status quo. He will hang out with Rick and talk about girls. He will continue to impress his boss. He will get that promotion.

While he is driving to work one day, he has to stop abruptly at a red light, and his phone slips and falls under his car seat.

Once parked, he rummages under the seat and finds it. But then he sees something else.

A small bag with a tied end. Almost like the ones his mother puts fancy jewelry in, but this one is leather and has an insignia. An eagle appears on one side. It reminds Trevor of the Native American jewelry he saw a kid. The eagle's wings are spread, and its head is turned slightly to the right.

He examines the bag carefully and then slowly opens it.

His eyes widen as he pulls out a rabbit's foot. But not the kind you get as kids that are supposed to bring good luck.

No, this is a literal severed rabbit's foot.

What the hell is this?

Dried blood coats the side that has been severed, and one drop has stained the white fur on the foot.

Disturbed by the unwanted gift, he throws it in the trash outside the building of his work.

But the foot is branded in his mind. He can't stop seeing it.

All day he is distracted. The foot, severed, with blood. That's all he can think about.

He searches online for an answer. There it is. Not the same bag, but similar, and also with strange items inside. The one he finds online has teeth in it.

A hex bag.

What the fuck is going on?

On the way home, he remembers his dream. The one where he is a rabbit.

He never believed in omens or curses before. But now...

That night he sets out for a strip club. He will control his own life. He will watch women undress and dance in front of him, and he will get hard thinking about what he wants to do to them.

He will prove that he is a virile, heterosexual man.

An erection has eluded him since that night, that altercation in the parking lot.

He is determined to end his dry spell.

The club is busy on a Friday night. The "regulars" ogle and shout, waving their dollars from the front row.

He sits a few rows behind them and watches as a girl clad in a nurse's outfit slowly unbuttons her blouse. Then she flings the top and begins to whip her head around until the white nurse's hat flies off as well.

Finally, she is in a bra and panties, and Trevor knows it is coming. The erection he has been waiting for.

But even when her pink breasts dance up and down and her hand is rubbing herself, he feels nothing.

No erection. No fantasy of kissing her, licking her, fucking her.

"Shit!" he bellows, but the thumping music drowns out his curse.

He runs out the door, and into the cool night air.

He wanders again. This time in the forest of downtown streets and drunk singles.

As if by instinct, he finds himself outside the Rainbow Lounge. This time with fearful curiosity.

He looks around to make sure no one is watching him, and then he slips inside.

The thumping beat is much more boisterous than the strip club. Joyous even.

He approaches the bar cautiously and waits. A shirtless bartender smiles at him and asks, "Whatcha havin cutie?"

He has never heard these words from a man, but he's flattered.

"Can I get a beer?"

Trevor settles near the dancefloor and watches men, many shirtless, dance freely with one another. Some close their eyes and he wonders what they are thinking, feeling in that moment.

Some men press crotches together and stare at each other with desire. Others are kissing each other.

He feels an urge. A longing. A rush of blood.

"Are you here alone?"

The voice startles Trevor and he whips his head around to see a tall, handsome man smiling at him. The man's crooked smile is alluring to Trevor.

He hears himself say, "Um, yes."

"Do you mind if I sit?"

Then, as if his mouth conspires against him, Trevor says, "No, go ahead."

They begin to talk over the loud music. He is lost in the honey-colored eyes of this man. His name is Kyle, and he visits the club often. Kyle's tousled, wavy hair keeps falling into his face, and his strong hand slides through his bangs to push it back.

After what feels like seconds to Trevor, but must have been at least 30 minutes, Kyle asks if he wants to leave.

Trevor hesitates, looks around, and then finally nods.

They stroll the street, walking too close together for straight men.

"This is me," Kyle says once they reach a black pick-up truck.

"Nice," is all Trevor says.

Then Kyle looks longingly at Trevor, places his palm on Trevor's chest and pushes him back against the truck.

Kyle's lips meet Trevor's, and they kiss. At first it is soft, but then passion—heat—surface and the kiss is harder, wetter.

Finally, after his failed attempts, Trevor feels the blood rush into his cock. It grows hard with desire.

He gives over to the heat, the craving as their bodies press together while lips and tongues coalesce in a passionate tango.

After a few minutes, he hears yelling.

"Look at those faggots making out. That's fuckin disgusting!"

Kyle turns to face them, but Trevor is embarrassed, so he hides behind Kyle.

"Come on, guys, just be on your way," Kyle pleads.

"Oh, the little homo wants to get back to sucking dick! Why don't you get the fuck outta here. We don't want to see your kind kissing in public."

Kyle clenches his fists and stares them down.

"Faggots should be killed off anyway," one of them finally says.

After hearing this, Trevor steps forward and shouts, "Just leave us the fuck alone!"

The heavy-set one who said they should be killed steps forward, pushes Kyle out of the way and hits Trevor in the face. His meaty fist meets Trevor's jaw.

He stumbles back into the truck and massages his jaw.

I'll beat the shit out of you, fucker! Trevor tells himself.

But then a horrifying recognition.

Trevor sees his best friend, Rick, staring, eyes wide in shock a few feet behind the man who just hit him.

"What the fuck?" is all Rick could say.

Trevor is motionless. His feet refuse to move.

"Trevor? What are you doing?" Rick words tumble out slowly to inhabit the cold air between them.

"Um, I..." Trevor's voice wouldn't cooperate either. It is conspiring with his feet.

Kyle finally breaks the silence: "Do you know these guys?"

His downturned eyebrows and furrowed brow feel like judgment to Trevor.

More silence.

Finally, Trevor says, "Can we leave now?"

Kyle nods and they hop into the truck. As they speed out of the parking lot, he looks back to see Rick, still standing, mouth agape.

"Goddammit!" Trevor finally roars in the truck.

"Who were those guys?"

"One of them is my best friend. And he doesn't know..." Trevor's words lose themselves within his throat.

"Oh," is all Kyle says. He remembers the darkness, the fear of living in the closet.

* * *

The morning light nudges Trevor to consciousness.

He squints his eyes and tries to rub them awake.

The bed, the furniture, the drapes. They are all foreign to him.

A rustling down the hall rouses him from bed. He stretches, and then the events of the night before come flooding back.

The gay club, Kyle, seeing Rick.

Then memories of the night in bed with Kyle.

Kissing. Groping.

Then the sweat and moans of two men reaching a climactic crescendo.

Trevor is still in shock that he slept with a man. That he enjoyed it.

He eats breakfast with Kyle, but is in a haze. Like he's watching his life through a greasy lens. Who is this man who smiles at Kyle? Who stares at his lips longingly. Whose eyes trace the curves of his biceps and ass.

Finally, the reality of what happened begins to descend up on Trevor, like dense fog on a mountain peak.

Who would Rick tell? Trevor's family?

What if his boss finds out?

The questions and fears swirl within him.

They overwhelm him, and he must go. He offers Kyle a weak excuse about "needing to get work done" and leaves.

He's not sure he will see Kyle again. But the longing, the desire lingers.

The next morning, Trevor showers, eats breakfast, and decides that he is going to recover his "normal" life. He is determined to be himself again. The night before was just a one-off, a mistake.

But that feeling, that snake that slithered through his insides has now settled within him. It has become part of him.

He tugs at his collar, and he wipes sweat from his forehead.

During the next week at work, he tries to focus on his future. Despite what happened, he can still have a normal life.

On an important morning before work, he looks into the mirror and smiles, but he knows the gesture is fake. A hollow expression to make him feel...what? Hopeful? Confident?

So he stares at himself and declares out loud: "I will get this fucking promotion!"

The important day has finally arrived. His boss will make the announcement sometime that day.

All morning, he has clammy hands and checks his inbox incessantly. Just before lunch, he notices an email notification with the subject line: New Manager Announcement.

His hands shake with anticipation. Trevor clicks on the email and reads:

"It is with great pleasure that we welcome Scott Lombardi as the new Public Relations Manager. His start date is..." Trevor stops reading.

How could they choose Scott over him? Charles doesn't even like Scott. At least that's what he said.

Trevor rushes to Charles' office and confronts him.

"What the hell is going on? Scott? Really?"

Charles is startled and then extends his hand toward to the chair in front of his desk. Trevor slumps in the chair.

"We went in a different direction. I'm sorry."

"That's it? You told me I was in. That you would back me. What changed?"

Charles looks down at the floor, as if he's trying to find the right words.

"We need someone who fits our management culture. And Scott is the right fit."

"The right fit! He's an idiot. Be honest, Charles. What changed?"

"Fine, you really want to know? Trevor, you wouldn't be a good match for our team. You know, with your personal...preferences."

"Preferences?" Then it struck Trevor.

He stammers, "How...did...you...find out?"

"Look, you are a valuable employee. But you're just not what we are looking for in terms of management. I'm sorry."

The rest of the day drifts by in a haze for Trevor. He can barely do work, and as he watches his coworkers walk down the hall or chat in the break room, he is an outsider. As if he's watching them on a screen in slow motion.

He is detached from his own life.

That night Trevor calls his mother, a place of comfort and support for him.

"Hello son," her voice is tense, strained.

"Hey mom. I need to talk. I've had a horrible day."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

The distance in her voice alarms Trevor.

"I didn't get the promotion at work."

"Oh, that's too bad."

She has never been this short with him. Usually she has lots to say and adds her opinion and support in every situation.

Finally, a silence settles between them.

Then she asks, "Trevor, is there something you want to tell me?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we heard some...shocking news from your sister. Who said she heard it from Rick."

Trevor clenches his fists. "What shocking news?" But he knew, of course.

"You know, that you're a..."

She couldn't say the word. It was just like her. His mom would avoid "indicate topics," as she would say. And being from a Midwest, Christian family, speaking about someone's sexuality is avoided.

"Mom, I'm figuring some things out."

"Well, this threw us for quite a loop, son."

"I imagine, but like I said, I'm still figuring things out." Trevor pauses and then asks, "Can I speak to Dad?"

"Oh, um, your father is still dealing with this news. He needs some time, honey."

"Some time? You mean he won't talk to me?"

Seconds of silence feel like pinpricks.

"Just give him some time," she finally offers.

The conversation wanes after that, and Trevor abruptly hangs up. He crumples onto the bed and cradles his face with his hands. Tears force their way to the surface, and he weeps for the first time as an adult.

The next morning Trevor is accosted by the morning sun beating down on him from the open curtains. He is still in his clothes from yesterday.

He wanders into the bathroom and stands above the toilet to pee. In his morning grogginess, his pee splatters on the seat and onto the floor. He groans and tears a few pieces of toilet paper to wipe up.

The yellow liquid even made its way behind the toilet. As Trevor wipes, his hand feels something taped to the back, just out of sight.

He rips it off and holds it close to his face.

"Fuck," is all utters.

It is the same leather bag with the eagle insignia. He knows what's inside, but he opens it nonetheless.

He tosses the severed rabbit's foot in the trash can.

I'm gonna find that fuckin Indian and make him pay for ruining my life.

It takes some time for Trevor to remember his full name, but he does eventually.

Enapay is a unique last name, so he's easy to find.

Once the address is in his phone, he sets off to confront the man who has cursed him.

He parks out front of an ageing home in an older neighborhood. The steps creak as he approaches the front door. He forms a fist and then knocks. But when he does, the door swings partially open.

"Hello?" Trevor calls out.

Silence.

He pushes the door fully open and creeps in.

"Hello? Is anyone here?"

Finally a voice: "I've been waiting for you."

Trevor follows the voice to the kitchen, where he sees John sitting patiently.

"What the fuck did you do to me?"

"I see you haven't learned manners yet." He stares at Trevor. Then he finally adds, "Why don't you sit down." John's arm motions toward the chair opposite him, and that's when Trevor sees it. A tattoo on the inside of his forearm. An eagle. The same one on those bags he found.

Trevor sits down and stares at John's tattoo. John notices him staring and asks, "Do you like my tattoo? My grandfather told me that eagles are spirit guides, and when they soar high in the sky, they are closer to the Creator."

Trevor squints his eyes and leans forward, closer to John.

"Who are you? And how did you do this? I woke up one day...changed. Now I'm..." Trevor's voice catches, and he feels the sting of tears again but chokes them back.

John's expression softens and he points at Trevor's chest: "So there is a heart in there after all."

A smile beams across John's face.

"Please, tell me what you did. And how to undo it," Trevor pleads.

John takes a deep breath and offers Trevor some tea. At first Trevor shakes his head, but John places it in front of him anyway.

He takes a sip, despite himself.

"Let me tell you a story that my grandfather used to tell me. It's called 'The Plight of the Rabbit'."

Trevor scrunches his forehead and wants to protest. He doesn't want to hear a story right now. But despite himself, he is silent and simply listens.

"The rabbit is a sacred animal. One that is a survivor. He must overcome many obstacles to reach his food. He travels from his burrow, which he so diligently carves out of the earth for safety, all the way to the farmer's land. The journey is wrought with dangers. He must watch the skies for the eagle, ready to swoop down and make a meal of him. He must scan the hard earth around him for many dangers. Wolves in their packs looking for a quick meal. And that is just the natural world. Then when he approaches the fence that surrounds the farmer's land, an unnatural barrier, he must be on the lookout for traps set by the farmer to rid of him of the "vermin" who steal his vegetables. He must be wary of the dogs who patrol the farmer's land, ready to bark, announcing his presence, and then try to kill him and place him at the feet of the farmer, who will look down with pride at the dogs. But if he survives all these obstacles, these dangers, then he will reach the prize. The carrot or the lettuce. He will fill his belly and be happy. You might ask why the rabbit goes through such a gauntlet for a few bites of a carrot. Like all things, it is his nature. He cannot be what he is not. So he awakens in his burrow each day to make the same journey."

"Then my grandfather paused, looked at me and finally said, 'You are two-spirit—male and female together—and like the rabbit, it is your nature. You will pursue the carrot and endure more dangers, more pain, than any predator. So be cautious, but do not despair. The rabbit is a survivor. And the dangers he faces means he savors the carrot all the more.'"

John takes long, slow drink from his teacup and then stares directly at Trevor.

"Now you know what it is like for the rabbit. For me. For those like us."

Trevor stares at John, and then finally nods.

"You have only just begun to be hurt, to lose things you hold dear. And all for something you can't control. And shouldn't have to."

Trevor finally says, "So what now? Can I get my life back?"

"That depends on you." John smiles after he says this.

Trevor begins to feel drowsy, sleepy. His eyes flutter and the world falls into shadow.

Suddenly he's in a parking lot. He blinks several times. John is in front of him. The anger on his face is palpable. His dark eyes, his wrinkled brow and sneer, showing teeth, like a wild animal.

Then John yells out, "Why, you jealous? You want some?"

It suddenly comes back to him. Trevor knows that he is back in that moment. John and that pale guy he was making out are in front of him. Rick is behind him. He is about to hit John in the face.

His fist is already clenched, and he wants to hit John. This time it is not for being gay or kissing, but for all the hell he went through. Yet, if he is truly back in that moment, before it all happened, then he can have his old life back.

He looks back at Rick, and then finally back at John and says, "I never want to see you again." Then his fist unclenches, and he steps back.

John grins—a knowing grin—just like the fox from Trevor's dream. Then he utters, "I hope you have truly changed. That you have learned empathy."

John begins to walk toward his car, then pauses. Turns toward Trevor and finally says, "I will be watching."

Then John looks back at the pale, frightened man and says, "Let's go."

After John leaves, he turns to Rick, who says, "We should go. And you shouldn't drive. I'll take you home."

Trevor nods and gets into Rick's car.

On the way home, Trevor feels a sense of relief wash over him. He can have life back. He can get that promotion. He can marry some girl of his dreams. A genuine smile stretches across his face.

But then a strange feeling. A chill runs up his spine.

Trevor glances into the small mirror mounted on the sun visor in front of him. His olive skin, his hazel eyes—they look different to him. His reflection has changed. He looks away.

Then as Rick continues to talk, Trevor feels something.

A rush of blood.

A longing.