

ROGUE WORLDS

#10



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SOMETHING FAMILIAR ABOUT THE FARM

by Forrest Aguirre

Forrest Aguirre's fiction has appeared in Twilight Showcase, Flesh & Blood, Rogue Worlds, Indigenous Fiction, The Earwig Flesh Factory, Redsine, The Journal of Experimental Fiction, , and 3rd Bed among others. He has work forthcoming in Exquisite Corpse, Fresh Blood, and Lingering Dementia. The Butterfly Artist, a collection of his short fiction, is available from Flesh & Blood press. He is managing editor for Ministry of Whimsy press.

Locus Magazine calls Forrest "... an interesting writer, worth watching, whom I think could benefit from disciplining the wilder flights of his imagination a bit." Forrest spurns such disciplinary measures.

Such a lonely place. Johnny Milkpodseed needed adult conversation. His squeeze doll was no longer entertaining. The silence had oppressed his flappy ears ever since Old Wise Stoat had left him for the garden plot out back to push up daisies. Not that Johnny disliked the daisies. Their chromatic spray delighted him, tickled his beak, pollinated his overcrowded maw. They carved a yellow scar across the smudged gray fields, a smiling soiree amidst the decadent saw-toothed entities that Johnny called flowers. But even their sun-shiny countenances could not un-bury him from the funk that engulfed his inner being.

So he went out to resurrect Stoat, a determined lip-purse pinching over his rickety denticles. The cascade of ratty black hair draping his shoulders pulsed in syncopation with his scrawny legs as he approached the dilapidated tool shed. Clatter clack clicked the padlock and the door swung open, a dusty puffball aerosol spewing forth from the shack, tools clanking to the dirt: Ice pick, ball peen, flame thrower, dozuki, elephant goad and, there, the spade. Spiders scattered; he reached out and shouldered his instruments.

Pop went the daisies and they dwizzened dry and withered as the corpse beneath. Squeaks and snaps erupted from the Old Stoat bone bag as Johnny tugged the corpse from beneath the heavy loam. The cadaver did not want to come up whole. "In whole or in part, you must never depart. I need some talkin' to," Johnny spit sweaty words to the stringy ears of the already departed. But, failing to free the corpulent corpses legs, the sickly rurilocist brandished the dozuki with finesse, liberating the top half of the man from the lower fraction.

Across the table from Johnny's favorite hickory stool, Old Wise Stoat sat, planted waist-first in a dirt-filled half barrel of clamber skull hooch. Johnny stared at his old friend for a long, long time till he decided what to do.

He mulched the torso and doused the thin hair with brackish hog trough water. And he waited. The purple sun rose and dipped twelve times before Johnny, still staring, saw the first tremblings of life in the lower lip. A twitch and a wink of empty eyesockets later, Sir Johnny detected a whispered exhalation coming from the windbag, a faint gassy moan like that made by the specters of un-baptized infants as they wove through the nearby trees bemoaning their fates. Smelling salts shocked Stoat to verbalize:

"Harumph! Wot? Wot?" the rotting philosopher stammered his surprise. "M-mine eyes! Mine eyes have seen the glory and now they've gone all black. Obfuscation! Obfuscation! Oh, what precipitated this terrible turn?"

"Stoat! You're back. How are you old . . . er . . . friend?" It had been awhile since Johnny had killed the old scaumer – he hoped that Stoat had forgotten.

"Johnny? Is it you? I see – or perhaps not – that you have passed on to the other side to be with me."

"You see nothing, you raw-gabbit. You've come back to the land of the living – sans eyes and locomotion, but you're back. You'll make a lovely conversation piece."

"But I don't want people conversing about me."

"Silly Old Stoat, people won't be talking about you, no gossiping, that is. You will be talking to people. You will start now by reciting your descent into the underworld. Do tell. Begin now."

Wise Old Stoat, being wise, knew that Johnny must have his way. It wasn't as if the professor could walk away – drag away, perhaps, but without his sight he might drag himself right into the pond. And drowning scared him more than anything, worse than death. Besides, how far could he pull before his fingers wore down to nubbins? How would he scratch, remove fleas, assume a posture of pontification?

He assumed such a posture, finger to lip, thumb to chin, elbow in hand, and squinted as if in deep thought.

"Harumph! Well, I don't rightly recall how I got there, but there I was, a buzzing in my mazzard as if worms had eaten their way into the sensorium – that place in the brain where the nerves from all of the organs terminate, near the medula oblongota, said worms having flung my spirit from it's soul-case into the void of The Extramundane, that infinite empty place, beyond the bounds of the universe, in which nothing exists, or so the philosophers say."

Johnny was now remembered why he had killed him.

Stoat continued: "But what know the living of the dead, wot? You see, old fellow, the scrutineers are all wrong. All those men whose work I so studiously inhaled from my ivory tower, wrong: Altmann's notion of a separation betwixt those who deserved to die and those that did

not; Wegg's model of afterlife consciousness as a cloaca infused sewage system; Darktree's mathematically perfect gear-work treadmills upon which the dead live and relive past states of existence – all of it ratt-rime, doggerel, a tirade of nonsense.”

Johnny began to snore lightly. Stoa “Harumph!”-ed and spoke louder. The audience of one wolke with a start, all mawmsey from lack of rest.

“As I was stating, I have debunked the scholars with my discovery, Johnny Milkpodseed, that the place beyond the pale is, in many respects, much like our own world.”

The farmer picked the sleep from his eyes, clearing his throat as if to acknowledge his attention to the story.

“Yes, the land of the shades might be the land of the living, for as my eyes opened in death I entered a large filed, ashen, as if burned, with thorny black stems thrusting up from the soil. Flowers grew there, malignant creatures reeking of stale pollen, the sweet green scent of chlorophyll supplanted by decay.”

Johnny tipped his stool back, looking out the window, through the rain, at his fields. The vegetation writhed and thrashed, waiting to be fed their chum.

“This I believed to be a place where the dead are prepared for judgement.”

A squinting nod from the farmer: “Mmm.”

“And beyond that a forest. Horrible faceless creatures guard the wood and within the dead are judged – ‘by their fruits ye shall know them’.”

A slight turn of the head and the listener spotted his herd by the orchard, featureless swine with nary an orb or orifice, cavorting at tree's edge. A collective moan pulsed forth from the trees, a million shriveled fruit-heads full of complaint, some so rotten they fell off the stem from effort only to be churned to linctus by the pig's hooves.

“Those deemed worthy of a better life must make way through one last trial before receiving their just reward. After walking through the trees and passing judgement, I stood on the brink of a fetid pool, an aqueous oculus whose filmy membrane seemed to me the very barrier between heaven and hell. I had difficulty finding the courage to cast myself in...”

Johnny watched through another tiny window as the rain carved circles on the pond.

“... but from out of a nearby building came a creature so hideous in aspect and vile of form that I was able to take the last plunge to the beauty and bliss that awaited on the underside of that brackish little lake. For the paradise beneath, dear Johnny, is worth all the pain in the world, love and light mingled with good mirth and friendly company, where all needs and wants are attended to and happiness, justice and good fortune permeate the fibers of the soul.” The torso heaved with laughter. “In retrospect I had no need to fear, wot? Yet so great was my terror of drowning that only the batterfanged mug of that farm yard demon could drive me to the bellitude of that higher plane. As I stood at the water's edge looking back over the farm-guised hell a man – or was it a demon? – crambled toward me on stilt-like legs, his keaked spine barely able to keep balance over a pair of gargantuan feet. His jet locks flowed like medusas behind

that scrawny face, a shepherd's crook of a nose and gubbertushed pie hole catching wind, slowing him down long enough for me to make up my mind and dive into the proverbial drink."

The hawk-nosed xanthodontic Johnny craned his bent back to stare at his reflection in the window. Something echoed off the inner walls of his skull.

"In fact, the whole episode, the flora, the fields, the smells and sounds, even the man reminds me of . . ." Stoats voice trailed off as his cavernous eye sockets seemed to search the surroundings, head turning towards landmarks of memory.

Wise Old Stoat had found the door jamb, dragging the whiskey barrel behind him, before Johnny had fully made the connections. The plump old mummy clawed frantic to the pool, smelling his way to the water. Johnny screamed "No! Don't go! I am so alone!" as the revived dead man beat the newly-enlightened farmer from his planting-pot bottom before rolling into the syrupy depths of the pond. A smile opened across the philosopher's face as he exhaled his last breath in a cloud of bubbles and sank towards bottom. He disappeared from view two fathoms down, travelling faster and faster into the darkness. Johnny thought he saw a glimmer of light somewhere in the water, deep down in.

"All alone all over again," Johnny moped.

Next Spring a fresh clump of daisies sprouted out above Wise Old Stoat's half-upturned grave.

And Johnny Milkpodseed wondered: Is there really a hell or not?

THE END

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FOR THE MUSIC

by Edwin McRae

Edwin McRae is a Kiwi Science Fiction scribbler from the forgotten frontier of civilization - New Zealand. Currently working on his second novel.

Her fingers stumbled along the keys like drunken butterflies. The intense grimace of concentration on her pretty face would have been comical if the sounds she hammered out of the hapless keyboard had not sounded like an ancient steam train in its final rattling death throes. Victor shuddered inwardly, feeling nothing but pity for his poor tortured piano and his equally punished ears.

“Yes...yes, that is fine for now.” He cut her off before she could begin another hideous exercise. “You are coming along well, Jacinda. Perhaps though you should play a little softer when you practice this piece, and focus on your rhythm.” And perhaps you should go play in the traffic you talentless little Barbie-doll!

He forced a smile onto his face. After all, her parents were paying him a handsome sum to give this vacant flower piano lessons. The rich, as when he was young, still liked to cultivate a veneer of artistic appreciation and culture. More so than ever in fact. Ironic considering the possibilities in digital music: virtual Pop bands, music written by AIs, commercial musak that monitored a customer’s emotional state, matched it with a digitally selected tune and projected it directly into the shopper’s ear-drum. Despite all of this, people still flocked to live performances, drooled over rampaging rock stars and convulsing soul-tech artists, basked in the glories of live opera, and best of all as far as Victor was concerned, sat in awed silence as a virtuoso pianist stormed his way through Rachmaninov’s Concerto No.2.

He sighed, the memories of his own career fluttering in a nostalgic mental breeze, tattered like the banner of a defeated general. He looked at his student as she smiled at him, all beautiful and banal. What a striking picture she would make on the stage, her blond locks glittering in the spotlights, a sparkling dress hugging her slim elfish form. Pity she had the musical ability of a pile of dog turd.

“See you next week then, Mr. Kovacs.” She flashed a parting smile at him, as white and even as the keys of his piano. He nodded as she bustled out of his studio, and then once the coast was clear, made a break for his drinks cabinet. He was onto his second vodka, lime and lemonade when the vid-phone beeped. He groaned and so did his antique armchair as he hauled himself out of it.

“Yes?”

“Mr. Kovacs! I have something you have to come see!” Daniel’s young face flickered onto the cheap plastic screen, a student of his for the last two years, from the university. Quite talented.

“A piano, Victor. A very old and amazing piano! I have it at my flat.” Victor frowned. Daniel never called him by his first name, he was normally shy and fastidiously polite. And he did not look well; pale, drawn, dark bands beneath his eyes.

“Are you all right, Daniel? You look tired.”

“Yes, fine. You have to come over! I have to show someone who will understand. Hurry!” The screen went black. Victor ran a mottled hand through his thick grey hair. Then he shrugged. Might as well see what the boy has. Probably just a Japanese replica Bechstein mistaken for the real thing. The copies were so good these days.

Victor’s aged Jaguar halted with a rusty screech outside Daniel’s crumbling old flat. The whole street reeked of age: grey crumbling buildings sitting in decaying rows, like ancient grandfathers and grandmothers slouched in their rest home armchairs awaiting the inevitable wrecking ball of nature. The corporate towers of the Melbourne business district loomed coldly overhead. Their blank mirrored windows stared soullessly, hungrily anticipating the time when they would trample the once stately homes into history with giant feet of reinforced concrete.

Victor scowled up at the glowing giants and rang the antique doorbell. A tarnished brass speaker crackled a reply as the door unbolted itself. He stepped inside and creaked his way to the stairs. Daniel’s rooms were on the top floor. He had inherited the place from some aged uncle. The rest of the place was hauntingly empty.

“Down here, Mr. Kovacs!” The voice came from further down the decaying hallway, from a dimly glowing doorway. Victor made his way cautiously to the light and discovered a flight of precarious looking stairs leading into the basement. He felt his skin prickle as if brushed by a chilling draft, even through his thick, old-fashioned suit.

“Daniel?”

“Down here. In the basement.”

Victor tested the stairs. Despite their rickety appearance they seemed stable enough. He made his way down and found Daniel, his face pallid and his eyes glittering with excitement, seated next to the oldest piano the piano tutor had ever seen. The lines, the intricate scrollwork, the richly grained wood spoke of antiquity, perhaps 19th century. He moved in for a closer look. It was in perfect condition, as if direct from a factory in Osaka. But something else, a feeling, a niggling at the back of his skull told him that this was no copy. He leaned past Daniel to get a closer look at the name inscribed above its ivory keyboard.

‘Sebastien Erard, 1823’.

Something else caught his eye, a tiny brass plaque tucked in beside the music stand, inscribed in French. Victor translated under his breath.

'To Ferencz. Become the greatest of them all. With admiration, Sebastion Erard, 1823.'

"Ferencz," mumbled Victor to himself. A memory scuttled furtively across the back of his mind. Ferencz, it sounded familiar...like... He sucked dank air between his yellowed teeth and the dry dust of the basement caught in his throat. A fit of coughing brought Daniel to his side.

"Mr. Kovacs, are you okay?"

Victor nodded quickly and waved Daniel away. Daniel gazed at him for a few concerned moments, and then seeing that his old tutor was all right, his face broke into a grin, wide and tight across his pale, gaunt face.

"And now for the really amazing part. Listen." The young pianist turned to the keys and began to play Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata.

The notes rang clear, resonating through the musty air, crystal vials of pure music. Daniel had a fine touch on the keyboard, but this was something else. Victor could feel his heart-strings being plucked like a harp, sorrow, serenity, love and loss, he experienced these as if he were a youth again, a teenage music student, roaming the cold streets of Budapest, driven with idealism and wracked by a storm of adolescent yearning. Then he began to see things, the moon glittering like liquid magic across a still, night-clad lake. A nymph dancing on the surface, naked and perfect, spinning and leaping, the water rippling out from the light touches of her milk-white toes. He shuddered in yearning, awash with the beauty.

Then Daniel, without pause for rest, launched into his own favorite, Grieg's Piano Concerto in A minor, a cascade of thunder, the rain falling, the soaring of a hawk. Victor felt the thunder rumble in his chest, the icy water against his skin, the stately freedom of the hawk as it swept over mountains and fjords. It was as if he were there, and as if Liszt himself sat at that piano, coaxing his mind and his heart into a passion of imagination.

Victor was left panting with spent emotion. Daniel collapsed. Victor rushed to catch him, bracing him up with a hand on his shoulder. At the touch Daniel's eyes fluttered open. A weak smile stretched his thin lips.

"It takes a lot out of me." He placed his hands on the piano and steadied himself. "Not bad though?"

Victor nodded, his eyes wide. "Beautiful, Daniel. As I imagined Liszt himself..." His voice trailed away as realization grew in the dimness of his memory. Of course! You old fool! 'To Ferencz.' Ferencz, Franz Liszt's christening name, the Hungarian virtuoso pianist of the Romantic era, the King of the keyboard, 'the greatest of them all!' The story rushed back to him, of a twelve year old Liszt in Paris, rejected by the Paris Conservatoire. A piano had been his compensation, a gift, from the esteemed piano maker, Sebastion Erard. If it was real, then this was it, the very piano that had helped launch the young virtuoso to international renown by the age of sixteen.

"M...my God, Daniel! The inscription...Ferencz...this piano once belonged to Franz Liszt!"

Daniel's eyes narrowed, his fair features becoming suddenly dark with suspicion. "I know, Victor. You won't tell anyone will you? This piano, it belonged to my uncle, in this house. It's mine now and I want nothing to happen to it."

Victor felt a twinge in his stomach, the barest scratch of fear. Daniel, normally so reserved, had never spoken to him like this before. “No, of course not, Daniel. But this...” He waved his hand at the piano, lost for words.

Daniel’s smile returned. “I know. I’ve never played like this before. It’s like...like my talent has been locked up. But now the gates are wide open, and the music...it’s amazing.” His eyes glowed brightly in the gloomy basement. A fire burned within him, fanned by a gale of inspiration. “I have to play! People must hear this!”

Victor nodded, despite himself. Daniel was behaving oddly, and he looked weak, exhausted, but the boy’s intensity was contagious, reviving an excitement within Victor that he thought was long since dead. The possibilities beckoned, the intoxication of the tour, the silent adulation of audiences, intent on every run, every cadence, every long tantalizing note. He could be part of that again.

And so they talked, the one reveling in the Spring of his abilities, the other in a Winter of reminiscence, about a concert.

The first concerts were small affairs, the usual politely attentive audiences of wealthy, jewel-encrusted peacocks and their accompanying penguins. But when Daniel began to play Liszt’s piano, the effect was that of a storm bursting over a plain after a long drought. People cried, laughed, growled, and roared. They envisaged the landscape of the music with all its glory, a collective hallucination of raw emotion and imagination.

“Forget VR!” they said to all that would listen. “This is it! The real experience.”

The audiences grew and grew, until Daniel played before thousands, oceans of humanity that frothed and peaked in the gales of his music. Rolling Stone Magazine called it, “the ultimate mind shag!”

And so, while Daniel basked in glory, Victor sat back and basked in music that to him was the light of God. Through Daniel he lived the life of the virtuoso, witnessed the adoration, swam in the music...and the money. He had everything he wanted but the touch of the keys themselves. And though his fingers itched and yearned, he curled them away and listened to Daniel play. Oh, how the boy could play!

At other times he kept busy with his duties, organizing the concerts, fending off the media, and more unusually, feeding Daniel’s increasingly insatiable appetites. The once quiet, polite Daniel had learned to revel in his abilities. And there was never any shortage of young, pretty admirers to fulfill the latter need of the maestro, but many did whisper about his peculiarities, that he would spend more than an hour away his beloved piano. That he was so very pale.

And as Victor looked on, his virtuoso student grew paler and paler, till one day, he collapsed. As the final curtain fell in New York over the ringing final chord of Rachmaninov’s Piano Concerto No.2, so did the maestro, his head striking dissonance from the stark white keys. Victor rushed to his side. The medevac came soon after, but the boy, weak and barely conscious,

would not let them take him. Finally, the doctors came instead. They tested, probed, mumbled, and frowned. They found only one thing, anemia, a drastic lowering of the red blood cell count. They could find no bleeding, no cause. Some suggested gene therapy. Daniel said no, and Victor, torn between his concern for the boy, and his love of the music, agreed. But from that day on he grew suspicious, and he watched Daniel more closely.

The maestro recovered. The tour continued. But the collapses became more frequent, and Daniel became more gaunt, his eyes sunken, his cheeks sallow. The young admirers stopped coming. Daniel began to spend even less time away from the piano, taking his meals there, never sleeping, only playing. He began to talk, to mutter to himself as he hunched over the piano, as if in some dark conversation that no-one could hear. Victor became increasingly anxious. His head ached with worry. The boy was obsessed, dangerously so. Should he stop him? But that would mean an end to the music, and try as he might, Victor could not do that. He could not stop it.

And then one day, the music stopped by itself.

It was in London, a grand finale of a concert to finish a whirlwind tour. The last notes of Liszt's Etude No.3 died away in the air, and Daniel's limp body slumped to the stage. The concert hall fell as silent as a morgue. The stagehands reached Daniel first. He dangled from their arms like a broken scarecrow as they carried him from the stage. Victor came to his side and knelt there, a mist of tears on his old eyes. Daniel's face was a thinly clad skull, his skin snow-white, his lips blue. His mouth moved, and Victor brought his face close to catch the words.

"Rach...Rachmaninov...finale...must play."

Victor shook his head, the tears now streaming down his wrinkled cheeks. "You cannot, Daniel. You must rest."

The breath rasped up through Daniel's thin throat. "Not me...you." Daniel's skeletal thin hand clutched at Victor's jacket. "He needs it..."

Victor gazed into Daniel's eyes, shaking his head in despair, and as he watched he saw their feverish light flicker and then fade away.

He needs it... He looked up, his vision warped with loss, and his gaze fell on the piano. Without a word he stood, his fists unclenched, and before anyone could move to stop him, he stepped out onto the stage. A thousand voices, awakened from shock, suddenly stilled, as Victor crossed to centre-stage, and with his heart fluttering like a stricken moth, like that first day in Daniel's basement, sat down at the piano. His fingers itched as he placed them on the keys and stiffened with shock as images poured through his grieving mind. Liszt, young, his dark hair flying, his fingers a blur, playing in a shower of flowers and feminine sighs - an ocean of talent in one man. Great enough for the task.

Then came others, maestros, virtuosos - a long and winding river of talent. A young man stood out from the rest, playing like a demon in lace and frock coat, his face fashionably white, a shock blue wig askew on his head. Wolfgang...Amadeus... another of a long line of candles that burned out so brightly, so early, for their one passion. Great, but weak.

Victor's eyes regained their sight. He saw his old fingers against the warm keyboard, ready, eager. In his mind he saw himself among the others, a brief shard of twilight.

"You will never survive this, old man." He said it to the still concert air. And then he played, and shone, like a star beneath the burning spotlights. He played until his final notes rang off into the night. He played until his fingers bled.

Jacinda waited with ill-concealed glee as her present was wheeled in through the doors. Her Daddy spared her a flashing grin as he signed the check and handed it to the old man. And paid far too much as far as he was concerned. He shrugged. Anything for his little girl. He kissed her on the forehead.

"Happy Birthday, Jacinda." He closed the doors after him, leaving them alone, the old teacher, the girl, and the piano.

She walked around it at first, admiring the workmanship, the age.

"It's beautiful!" She said. "And it really belonged to Daniel Beaumont?" She sighed, and placed her delicate hand on her chest as if her heart were all a flutter. "He was so wonderful. Daddy bought me tickets to see him in Sydney."

The old man nodded. He was paler now. He'd been away, on tour she thought he had said. And now he looked older, drained of some life. He walked stooped, with a cane, when once he had been straight.

She smiled at him and sat down before the piano, savoring her fantasies, of burning spotlights, and sighing fans. She placed her delicate fingers on the bone-white keys. Her back was to Victor, or she would have seen him return her smile with his own. It held no humor, only hunger. He too had his fantasies, his passion. His dream had not died that night in London. He was strong. Stronger than he had thought. But he missed the boy.

He closed his eyes as the music began, as Jacinda played as never before, as never she could have in her life. Victor listened and loved, feeling the passion in his thin blood, the longing itch in his fingers, and the guilt in the shadow of his heart. But the piano washed his guilt away, cleansing him with its voice.

Music, it said, like any religion, had to have its martyrs. There could be no other way.

THE END

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MY BABY'S BACK YARD

by Jonathan Dunne

Jonathan's been published in various anthologies and magazines in Ireland, England and the United States. He's currently working his way through a degree in English Literature. Some of his work is currently up at the horror showcase at Alternate Realities.

What would the back yard have been without the crazy pavement and the four conifer trees – one for each of the children, thought Jacob, shuffling his false teeth over gummy-worn gums. His whole face was living in the smile, contorted and bent into shape like the iron-cast smile of a mentally retarded old man who hasn't, unlike his teeth, been tainted by what life has thrown him. Grasping a trembling crusty food-caked butter knife in one hand and a Café Crème Plain cigar in the other, he knew he was being watched. He didn't have to look over his shoulder to know that.

He glanced down at the weather-beaten deck chair he was laying in as if he'd just realized it was there then gazed at the piece of gnawed pale plastic which had once been the color of a clown's nose sticking up from between the broken cracks of the crazy pavement.

“Go on! Go away an' leave my life in *peace!*” screamed his quivering lips then taking a deep drag on his Café Crème Plain, making sure not to take his frail eighty-year old guilt-ridden eyes off the crazy pavement because *his* face was peering out at him from behind the fourth conifer tree trunk like a sour after-taste. No doubt, the one thing the back yard would never have been the same without was Jacob's youngest son, Jonny.

“I knew this was going to cause us problems, Cyril. I don't know what planet we were on when we decided to take this place on?”

“Well, we *knew* what we were thinking, Milly. Tony said this farm had potential ... and I happen to agree with the lad. It just needs time ... We all need time.”

“I'm not disputing that fact, but how much time are we talking about here? Good God but it's been years since the disappearance. You'd think the air should've cleared by now.”

Not very far away, Cyril and Mildred Doody, in their mid-eighties, were trying to make a call on the land phone perched against their kitchen wall. She's half blind while he suffers from Parkinson's disease and between them both they tend to struggle. The number they are about to dial is a number which their son Tony had kept on the back of an old envelope in one of his back-pockets but in the last few months the number had graduated up to weighty leagues

on the small notice board alongside Ambulance; Police; and Doctor Moore. Tony's gone into the city to take a look at a few second-hand parts for the old John Deere. They figure they can deal with the problem, probably, but they feel they're intruding and who's to judge in matters of the main cardiovascular muscle?

"Still easy to make out Jonny's dummy."

The sucking end had since gone chewy; brittle in the frozen winter; and eroded by the time summer had come around again – and how many summers has it been now?

"You remember the day I did that? Hmm, Jonny?" Jacob whispered, taking another drag on the cigar, holding it in ... *innn* and *ooout*. After everything had happened all those years ago Jacob said that the crazy pavement was a lot like him – an entirety but with every bone broken in his body and a few cardiovascular muscles thrown in, like the heart for example. At least that's what it has felt like since the disappearance.

The knife glinted up at him from his brittle hand as he took another drag on his cigar, which had gone out, but which hadn't been lit in the first place—he thought he had, just like he had a lot of thoughts these days.

Cyril Doodly hung up the receiver with a shaky liver-warted hand while Hilda stood at the kitchen window, squinted eyes, as the raindrops raced each other down the pane. "Well, Cyril, c'mon, shake a leg or are you going to shake your head like that all day?"

The rain's coming down heavy now and Jacob knows he could've made a success of the farm, but things just went from good to middling to everlasting nightmare, bless us oh God, Amen. He lay back in the deckchair, keeping his rheumy eyes open to the heavens as long as he could before the heavy rain begun pitter-pattering his sunken cheeks while an electrical bolt of hair-raising and hysterical joy was going off in his toes, jolting up along his spinal chord and stemming off at his rib tips, even making its way through his aluminium hips which he had gotten installed a couple of years back. In a couple of thousand years the anthropologists will be able to class me by my bones and metal parts – Pre-Android era. 'God, Doris but you laughed at that one,' he snorted out. The white face, three feet above the ground, still stared out at him from behind the end and weakest conifer by the hedge along the New Line road.

It was never going to be just any crazy pavement, no sir; this was going to be an outright *loony pavement!* And Doris – Lord have mercy on her good soul – nearly dropped little Jonny when she came out to the back yard that day seeing Jacob had done. 'A dedication to the little man. Look, immortalised forever in the crazy pavement,' Jacob declared all those years ago as he inaugurated Jonny's dummy in the wet cement of his newly constructed crazy pavement. Little Jonny was two years old by then and going on three and the last of four children.

Jacob dropped to the cracked pavement. Now, after more than forty years of silent remorse, it's time to tell the story.

He can see those little bastards and their black eyes now as he begins chipping away at the cement around Jonny's dummy like an architect with a toothbrush, beginning to work up a little sweat on his forehead. The scurrying in the back of the fuel shed. He had let them go on and on multiplying and wallowing in their own faeces.

And what about that peculiar stench? That was the worst thing. "Jesus, it lingered on in your playpen for I don't know how long," he muttered, the rain soaking into his humped back. "Crazy pavement! Just how crazy I didn't know, like. It's ... It's ..." His dour expression looking down on the haphazard path below him—the same one which had taken him far away from where his life should've been. Anyone passing now would've taken Jacob Deere as one seriously repenting old man.

Rats. Over dust-wood-cobwebs-burnt oil-old rubber-more dust Jacob could smell the rat's piss, acidic ammonia urea piercing the soft palate of his inner nostrils, but more than that, poison in open veins. 'I remember I ...I was ploughing the ten-acre,' drops are falling from his forehead onto the crazy pavement now—some are sweat, more are tears. 'Doris was in the chicken house collecting a couple of eggs. She didn't notice when you rambled off, Jonny. Jesus, you just don't wander off like that! That was the day she started to die, y'know that, don't you?'

"Anyways, I called it quits for the evening 'cos the sun had fallen behind Sugar Hill and my eyes used to get strained from trying to keep the Massey Ferguson in a straight line. We didn't have power steering in them days. Anyway, you wondered around to the back yard here and spotted your dummy in the crazy pavement. You cut your hand trying to rip it out of the cement, remember? That's where Doris found you, sitting right here trying to have a suck on it. T-T was my own f-fault"

"Mr. Deere?"

He tried looking towards the conifer but whipped his stare back to the crazy pavement. "*Don't! Don't stare at me like that!!* Can't you see that I'm trying to get this thing off my chest." Frantically, he ground at the cement but the butter knife kept scraping along the rock.

"Doris took you in and washed your hand in the kitchen sink, remember? But you tottered out again to where the four winds took you, which was the, well, the fuel shed. It was dark, remember? And smelt bad? I would've tanned your backside for you if I'd seen you within an inch of the place. You were no sooner inside when I'm supposin' that you decided you didn't like the place so you turned and ran." Jacob sighed, resting his pins and needled arms down by his sides. "God but you could've run for the next eighty years, Jonny, because them bits and pieces you put your paws on in the fuel shed were already eating into you—and not only that but probably the other hundred and ten things you touched in the thirty seconds you spent in there before Doris found you."

"Jacob?"

He didn't notice the two standing tall on the crazy pavement next to him as he began to bawl. "A week later you had a fever and you looked a lighter shade of green and..."

“Shouldn’t we do something?” whispered Mildred Doodly from under the hood of her anorak. “Look at the poor man, he’s still wearing his slippers.”

“C’mon, leave him. He’s just trying to get the lad out of his system,” Cyril mumbled back from the side of his mouth. “We know it broke his heart when Jonny went missing. We’d be in the same rut if it had been our Tony.”

“The worst thing is not knowing, isn’t it? It would’ve been half the battle if they’d found the child but ...” she tapered away. “And what kind of security, will you tell me, do they have over in that old people’s Home? Hmm? You can’t just let an old man out like that to wander the streets ... or the countryside. He’ll freeze. And you’ve seen how fast them cars race up and down the New Line road.” She stopped, then pursed her arthritis-knobbled hands tight below her bosom. “It was a mistake buying this place. And what about our spare room? I always get a bad feeling in there—and you. This – “

Below them, Jacob stopped blubbering ... but began again.

“ ... is the third time this month, Cyril. We can’t have that. And where in the heavens did he get that knife?”

“Probably whipped off the canteen table in front thirty other old fogies,” Cyril answered, with hands and head jittering with Parkinson’s, felt he was going to burst with laughter like he did at church when he still wore short pants. Mildred squinted back at him, knowing then how lucky they really were. Oh they had their complaints all right, but they were alive and kicking in their own house, which had, up until a year ago, been Jacob Deere’s.

“It was a mistake buying this place after we knew about its past.”

“Shush now, we don’t want to get into that business again ... You don’t mean it anyway.”

“To hell I don’t mean it! ... Ahem, curbing her voice. ‘That man’s never gotten over what happened. Anyone with half a brain can see that. Oh, tis weird, Cyril. *Weird!*”

A white pick-up truck with Guadiana Golf Course in dark green leaf across its side raced into the back yard and skidded to a stop next to the Doodlys who both took a step backwards.

Jacob didn’t acknowledge.

A man in his late thirties swung open the door. “What’s going on?”

“We rang you as soon as we could, Brian,” Mildred answered. “We gave the old people’s home a bell as well in case they might actually be worried about him. The poor man shouldn’t be walking the roads on his own.”

Brian Deere stepped out of the pick-up, sighed and ran his green callused hands through his hair and walked around the back yard with his face to the sky then came back to where his father was crouched. “How long as he been here?”

“We were standing at the kitchen window for a good fifteen minutes before we buzzed you at the golf course,” Cyril answered.

“With all respect to you and yours,” Mildred started, “we can’t have your father just turning up here in our back yard whenever he feels like it. It’s not that we don’t want him here you understand—we do. We know that, well,” she glanced at Cyril for support, “we know he’s never been right since your brother went missing. Sure, why do you think our Tony left the conifers there and that ... whatever ‘tis that you call it.”

“Crazy pavement.”

“Am I right, Cyril? Our Tony could’ve had all that bulldozed down when we moved in.”

Cyril hesitated. “Well, I –”

“I knew this was going to cause problems eventually,” Brian suddenly blurted out. “We all swore I don’t know how many years ago that we’d keep our mouths shut about this but it’s got to stop ... dad, it’s got to stop.”

The Doodys looked at each other, wishing Tony was there.

“You were a darker shade of green,” Jacob went on, “a-a-and there was a horrible s-smell coming from your playpen in the bedroom even while you were still supping milk from your bottle, dear Jesus ...”

“It’s time to leave this behind us, dad. We all promised to keep our mouths shut about it but what do you expect us to do when you keep turning up like this in the Doodys’ back yard and mouthing off –”

“This is our back yard, Brian. *Ours!*” spat Jacob.

“We sold it, remember? So we could live the rest of our lives in peace? It wasn’t healthy being around here. It was ... morbid, for want of a better word.”

The Doodys frowned, looking from each other to father and son and back again.

“Give me that knife, dad. C’mon.”

“*Nooo*,” Jacob pleaded, still not looking up at his son.

“Look, I won’t have this on my conscience any more, and neither will you. We’ve been living this nightmare too long.”

Brian turned to Cyril and Mildred. “My father – or should I say we have to come clean about something which happened the best of forty years ago.”

“No, no, no ...” Jacob had his face on the pavement now, the exposed side of the dummy wrapped in his fist.

“To be honest with ye,” Brian went on with a dry mouth, “I don’t think I would’ve said anything but ...”

“*Briannnnnn!*” Jacob cried.

“Sweet Jesus will you come on with it!” Mildred pleaded.

“You see those four conifers there?”

“Uh-huh,” Cyril answered. Mildred squeezed her eyes shut to focus.

“Each one of them represents each of us four kids. That one, the tallest one, is mine and so on down along the – ”

‘We know all that,’ Cyril piped up. ‘We left them there out of respect for your father there, and the same for the, ah, ...’

“Crazy pavement.”

“That’s the one, with the child’s dummy and all that business. It seemed a bit ...sacrilegious.” Mildred squinted up at him.

“Well, you see that last conifer there, the weakest one?”

They both looked at it and nodded.

“Jonny’s buried underneath it.”

Cyril blinked. Mildred’s mouth opened down like a drawbridge.

“Dad could never face the fact that it was blood poisoning Jonny caught in the fuel shed over there ... was over there. There was a rat infestation and Jonny, my brother, got infected with rat’s piss when it went in through a cut he got on his hand when he tried to get his dummy out of the crazy footpath here.” Brian was trembling. “We didn’t need a doctor to tell us what was happening, we could see the infection spreading out from the cut and up along his hand. He died a week later in his playpen. Dad could never forgive himself, so we all agreed that Jonny had gone missing to protect him.”

“The stench, that was the worst thing,” Jacob murmured from the crazy floor. “It hung around in the bedroom for I don’t know how long afterwards.”

“We all just wanted to feel closer to Jonny, but it was dad’s way of torturing himself as well – with the thought of Jonny with us forever. I suppose he killed two birds with the one stone.”

Cyril nodded for both of them, though the Parkinson’s was taking grip and he was due his pill.

“C’mon dad, I’ll get you back.”

Brian hauled his father from the crazy pavement and got him into the pick-up and drove off, leaving the Doody’s standing in their wake, looking from the fourth conifer and back to the tail-end of the pick-up as it left their back yard and turned onto the New Line road.

Cyril and Mildred were back in their house – the cluttered up spare room adjacent to their bedroom to be more exact – next to an ancient radiator and stale furniture. The only sound was Mildred’s wheezy chest as they stared at the damp stained walls inside the peeling wallpaper.

“That explains everything,” Cyril whispered. “How many times have we tried to heat this place?” He rubbed his goose-fleshed arms.

“Always cold ... and damp.”

“How long ago is it since Tony ripped this place open, remember? We thought it was a leaking pipe leading off the toilet. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, this was his room, wasn't it.”

Mildred didn't answer. She was scanning the room with dull eyes, trying to picture in which corner little Jonny's playpen had been all those years ago.

But more than that, they were both wondering why Brian had lied to them.

THE END

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RUNNING THE GENDER GUANTLET

by Fredrick Obermeyer

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“What do you think you’re doing bringing gender into the workplace?” Jan 79 said.

Jan 79 Systems Analyst had just caught Roberten’s 42 Tech Assistant with its—or rather his—pants down in the androgynous executive bathroom when it walked in suddenly. And Jan found that he still had his penis and testicles while at work.

Jan found the very idea that someone would try and sneak their gender into the office detestable. It was the kind of outdated and illegal behavior that promoted sexual harassment and decreased workers efficiency by over seventy-five percent.

“Keep your voice down,” Roberten said, and shushed Jan.

Jan heard some noise coming from one of the stalls on the other end. It started towards the other end and snapped, “Who is that in there with you?”

“Nobody.” Roberten stepped in front of Jan and blocked its way. Jan tried to push Roberten out of the way, but he shoved it against the wall, stepped back and spread its hands out.

“Easy now, Jan,” Roberten said, and put his hands up. “We aren’t hurting anybody now. We just came in here for a quickie, that’s all. You didn’t see anything.”

“The hell I didn’t. You are in direct violation of the Gender Equity Employment Act and I’m going to have to report you to our supervisor.”

“No wait,” a voice from the stall cried. “Please don’t.”

A woman emerged from the stall, pinning up her small breasts with a suppressor bra. Jan recognized the woman from her clothing. It was Vic 31, Systems Operations Manager. It--or she--was of the workers that stood on the high rungs of the corporate ladder.

Vic's face grew tight with panic and she rushed over to Roberten's side, held him tight. Seeing them there, holding each other made Jan tremble with anger.

"I'm turning you both in," Jan said.

"No," Vic said. "Don't—we're not hurting anybody."

Jan strode to the door and reached for the open button, but Roberten and Vic slipped in front of it and blocked the exit.

"Stop, please," Vic said. "I don't want the supervisor to know."

"I don't care what you want," Jan said. "You have broken the law and tarnished the reputation of our firm, and you need to be removed."

"Is it money, is that what you want?" Roberten said. He reached in and pulled out his credit slip. "We'll pay you to keep quiet."

"Nonsense." Jan knocked the slip out of his hand, then reached for the door button. But before it could press the button, Vic grabbed Jan's hand, squeezed it and said, "You are not going to report us to anyone, do you understand? My father is a big time player in this corporation and if you try to pin anything on us, we'll have you proven wrong and you'll be out of a job."

Jan shoved them aside and hit the button. The door slid open and Jan ran out before the pair could grab it again. Once past them, it went to the nearest floor comline and said, "Jan 79 reporting to gender control office. Unauthorized presence of gender and sexual activity committed in workplace by workers Roberten 42 and Vic 31. Please detain them immediately. Out."

It leaned against the wall and frowned.

Jan didn't like having to rat on fellow employees, but it was necessary for the good of the firm. And besides, it feared that if it let their behavior slip now, they could hold that against Jan later and it might possibly lose its job if they were caught.

Jan returned to its cubicle, sat in front of its com booth and proceeded to work on hyperdynamic micro-energy systems.

Ten minutes later, a message came over Jan's office comlink. It clicked the device on and said, "Yes?"

Martine 175, Supervisor 2nd Class appeared on the holoscreen. Like all other employees of the firm, it had a bald head and bland, asexual features. The skin was neutrally tanned, as employees of all races were required to have during work. No black, white, copper or any other form of colored skin was tolerated under the Racial Workplace Equalization Act.

"Jan 79, report to my office at once," Martine said. Its face had flushed red with anger.

"Of course, supervisor."

Jan clicked off the comline, then stood and hurried up to the office.

When Jan arrived at the supervisor's soundproof office, Roberten 42 and Vic 31 stood in front of the supervisor's desk, glaring at Jan. Right then Jan knew it was in trouble. Martine folded its arms, a disappointed look plastered across its face.

"You wanted to see me, supervisor," Jan said.

"These two employees have just received a visit from this building's gender control office," Martine said.

"Yes, I had them detained after I discovered they were illegally bringing gender and sexuality into the workplace."

"That's funny, because when the GCO bots did a full scan on their bodies, they detected no presence of gender or sexuality upon their persons."

"But, supervisor, I saw them. I know I did! They tried to bribe me and then they tried to threaten me by going to the CEO of this firm."

"You must have seen something wrong, then."

"Really?" Jan folded its arms and sighed. "Then did the bots do a complete examination on their person, with their clothing off?"

"I don't see why. If they had—"

"Before you go questioning my accusation, I demand that they show their bodies—"

"This is hardly appropriate—"

"Well, it's like they used to say, the proof is in the pudding."

Roberten flashed Jan a smug smile and said in a gender-neutral voice, "If this will convince it that we are telling the truth, then fine." He dropped his pants. No sexual organs or body hair stood there. He also raised his shirt and revealed a hairless body with no nipples. Vic sighed, then lifted her shirt. She had no breasts or suppressor bra and when she pulled down her pants, she had no labia or clitoris or vagina, no pubic hair, and no other feminine sexual features.

Just the same gender neutral features as its counterpart.

Jan's smile dropped down to its feet and it gawked. How could that be? It just saw them a few minutes ago. Jan turned on the supervisor and said, "That's not what I saw. They had genitals. I'm not making this up."

"Jan 79, I do not appreciate you making malicious and false accusations against innocent company employees," Martine said. "There is no place for it in this firm."

"But I'm not lying, supervisor," Jan said. "I saw them. They violated the law and—"

"That's enough. You will be placed on suspension for three days pending a review of your conduct and of this incident. Furthermore you will receive a reprimand on your official record. I also expect you to formally apologize to them during that time."

“Absolutely not,” Jan said. “I know what I saw.” It shook its head.

Martine’s brow furrowed.

“If you do not deliver a formal apology and confess to your malicious and erroneous accusations, I will fire you.”

“You can’t do this to me.” Jan’s voice quivered and it was on the edge of tears. “You can’t...I need this job!”

“Then you will apologize to them.”

I’d rather die, Jan thought.

Jan looked at the smiles on Roberten and Vic’s faces and right then it refused to give up. They broke the law and they needed to be punished. But it knew that it could not afford to lose its job, especially with the way the economy was going nowadays. Yet it was torn between fighting and giving in.

What should I do? Jan asked itself.

“That is all for now,” Martine said. “I will expect that apology transmitted to my deskcom by Friday along with a verbal apology right here in my office. Otherwise I’ll be Emailing you your pink slip.”

Enraged, Jan strode out of the office. On the way out, it barely managed to hide its tears.

* * *

On the first floor lobby of International Energy Systems Inc., Jan passed through the public genderization/degenderization energy field and emerged as her female, offwork counterpart, Julie Ansareni.

Outside of work, Julie’s hair was long and auburn and she had small breasts, long legs and an elegant cafe au lait complexion. Yet despite the change in her physical appearance and gender, the same anger and sadness and resentment smoldered deep inside her and all her thoughts codified into one goal: getting back at Roberten 42 and Vic 31 for humiliating her like that.

But right now she had no idea how she could do it.

She left the building, hopped the first glideline and rode it back to her apartment on the outskirts of downtown Albany, New York.

After she entered her apartment, she sealed the door, then activated her holocat Pepper. Pepper meowed, licked her hand and then disappeared through the nearest wall.

“Stupid cat,” Julie said. She would have to reprogram it later on.

She went to check her E-mail when the doorbell rang and she said, “Open” to the doorcom. It beeped and slid open.

Elizabeth Morard walked in.

“Hello, Julie,” Elizabeth said.

She was a tall, white woman, five years older than Julie, but who still looked young thanks to a home-based robot plastic surgeon. Perhaps too artificial with the cheekbones and thick lips, but she still looked nice.

“Just sit down and make yourself a drink, I’ll be right back,” Julie said.

“O.K.,” Elizabeth said.

Julie went into the bedroom and stepped under the daily Sexual Orientation Selector pod next to the closet. It had five settings: homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, transsexual and asexual. But her mind was so preoccupied that she didn’t know which one to pick.

She really enjoyed Elizabeth in bed, but tonight she thought she could find a guy at the club to take her mind off her troubles, so she thought she might choose hetero for the night. But every time she thought about hetero, her mind kept flashing back to the quickie that Roberten and Vic were having in the bathroom. Disgusted, she pressed the homosexual button. The SOS pod flashed a beam across her forehead and changed her sexuality from asexual to homosexual.

She emerged from the SOS pod as a lesbian.

Back in the living room, Elizabeth had already made herself at home on the couch, with a whiskey and soda on the rocks. She lay back against the couch and sipped her drink, then frowned as she saw the sour look on Julie’s face.

Elizabeth leaned up, put the drink on the black glass table next to the couch and said, “What’s wrong, kid? You look like you had a bad day. Want to talk about it?” She patted the cushion next to her.

“No, it’s just...” she sighed, went over and sat down. She started to cry on Elizabeth’s shoulder. “I had a really shitty day.”

“What’s wrong? Tell me about it.”

She sighed again, looked up at Elizabeth and then told her everything that had happened at work today. When Julie finished, Elizabeth rubbed her shoulder and said, “So they screwed you over, is that it?”

“Yeah, they did,” Julie said. “Now I have to apologize and I didn’t even do anything wrong! They’re the wrong ones, not me. And you know what, I don’t even know how in the world they managed to switch their gender so fast. I called up my supervisor as soon as I got back to my cubicle and that wasn’t more than three or four minutes tops.”

“That’s plenty of time,” Elizabeth said. “Have you heard about those new portable gender switching fields?”

“No.”

“They can allow you to switch genders and even androgynize yourself in seconds. One of my department heads bought one, though they’re extremely expensive and not usually sold to

the public. But if they had the right connections, then I don't see why they couldn't have gotten a hold of one of them and used it when you weren't around."

"I still don't understand why they had to bring gender into the workplace at all. Couldn't they have just waited until after work?"

"Maybe. Or then again maybe not. Some people still cling to the old days, I suppose, and I guess some people just like the thrill of breaking the rules, even when they know that they can get caught."

"It gets me so mad," Julie said. She poured herself a scotch and soda and sipped it. "To be punished for what they did and to know they got away with it. I want to get back at them, Liz. I want to expose them and humiliate them like they did to me. But most of all, I want to see Martine apologize to me personally for denying my accusation." She sighed and ran a hand through her hair, took another sip of her drink. "The only problem is that I have no idea how to get back at them. And I have to deliver that stupid apology to them in three days or else I'm fired."

"Yeah, that sounds like a problem."

"Honestly I don't know what to do."

For a few minutes, Julie sat drinking in silence, thinking about her options.

Then Elizabeth said, "Wait, I have an idea."

"What?" Julie said, putting her third drink down on the table.

"Three days is plenty of time to set them up."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean if I can get a hold of a power suppressor, do you think you might figure out a way to lead them into a compromising position?"

"Maybe. But when? And how? Why do you need a power suppressor?"

"You said you have that meeting in three days, right?" Elizabeth said.

"Yeah," Julie said.

"Then it's perfect. The only thing is we have to make sure that they can't use their own field and androgynize themselves before the meeting."

"So how do we know for sure that they are going to regender themselves after they've passed through the building's field?"

"Once they enter the building, if I know where the meeting place is, I can give you the power suppressor and you can plant it at the meeting place. If they are in male or female form, then they won't be able to use the field to change and you can call in your building's GCO to round them up."

"But how do I expose them once I get to the meeting?"

"Pull their pants down," Elizabeth said, as if it was obvious.

"I'm serious!" Julie said.

"So I am. If you want to expose them, you have to, well, expose them. Literally."

"And if I'm wrong or if something doesn't come through?"

"Then you've lost your job anyway and they win. In any case, you have to take the risk if you want to win this thing. There's no way around it. Or, you could go back there with your head down and admit defeat."

"Never," Julie said. "I'd rather be fired. Even if I have to go on workfare. Nobody makes a fool out of me."

"That's the spirit. Now come on, let's get to work on this project of ours."

Elizabeth stood and Julie followed her into the dining room.

* * *

Three days later, Julie returned to International Energy Systems Inc. with Elizabeth. Julie had a verbal and written apology prepared and Elizabeth had her power suppressor.

Elizabeth signed into the building as a visitor rather than an employee, which allowed her to retain her gender while in the building. After a thorough security scan, the androgynous security officers allowed her to enter the building through a portal that stood next to the gate.

A moment later, Julie passed through the field and became Jan 79 once again.

Jan and Elizabeth hopped the nearest glideline up to the 42nd floor. Along the way, Elizabeth slipped the power suppressor to Jan and it stuck the device in its pocket.

On the 42nd floor, they went to Martine's office. It knocked on the door and Martine said, "Come in." The supervisor's voice was low and sharp.

As they entered, the supervisor slipped something into its desk drawer, cleared its throat and said, "You're early."

"I wanted to make sure that I got here on time," Jan said.

"Who is this person?" Martine nodded towards Elizabeth.

"I am Elizabeth Stewart, Jan 79's legal representative. I am here to insure that my client is fairly represented in these matters."

"Why should Jan need a lawyer here? This is an informal meeting."

"I didn't say I was a lawyer. I said I was a legal representative."

"She is here to apologize to two of my employees, Ms. Stewart. If anyone should be fairly represented, it's them."

"You are not going to take advantage of my client, though, I can assure you."

"I wouldn't dream of it."

While Martine and Elizabeth went on talking, Jan reached into its pocket, slipped out the power suppressor disk, stuck it on the wall behind it and activated it. A slight hum came from the device. Barely noticeable. But Martine looked quite annoyed at their presence here.

"...then I should remind you that your client gave false accusations against two of my employees."

"My client is no longer denying that, supervisor. I just want to make sure that you don't take advantage of it, that's all."

A moment later the door slid open. Roberten 42 and Vic 31 came into the room, glared at Jan as they stood next to the supervisor's desk. The door sealed after them and Martine stood.

"Ms. Stewart, these are our employees, Roberten 42 and Vic 31," Martine said. "Employees, this is Ms. Stewart, here to apparently protect Jan's interests in this matter, whatever that means. Apparently she thinks we are out to exploit her client."

They said nothing and just glared at the pair.

"But I assured her that we are only here to see the best interests of all parties in this matter. If you wish, we can wait for your own lawyers to arrive—"

"No, let's get this over with," Vic said. "I want to get back to work."

The pair looked nervously at each other, then at Elizabeth.

She flashed them a bright smile.

"Very well," Jan said. It stepped up to them and said, "I formally apologize for the improper and false accusations I made against you three days prior."

"Yes, we accept your apology," Roberten said. "Fine, good. May we go now?"

"Why, what's wrong? Don't you want to hear me give a full apology?"

"No, that's fine."

"It's all right then, you may go now," Martine said.

"No," Jan said. "I want you to hear me say how sorry I am."

"We believe you," Vic said.

They headed for the door. But Elizabeth stepped in their way.

"What's your hurry?" Elizabeth said.

"Jan and Ms. Stewart!" Martine said, its voice cracking. "This is highly improper behavior. You will let them leave this office at once or else—"

"Or what?" Jan said. "You'll fire me? In front of a witness?"

"Yes."

"Then you may as well fire them too."

Martine's face trembled with fury and he started to cry "What—" When Elizabeth said, "Now."

Jan and Elizabeth rushed over and pulled both Roberten and Vic's pants down.

They didn't have any genitals on them, though.

"Oh shit," Jan said, and stumbled back in shock.

The couple's faces turned red and Jan's heart dropped down to its feet. It turned. Martine's face was livid with fury.

"That's it!" Its voice cracked. "You. Are. Fired!"

Suddenly Jan realized what was going on.

"Fine," Jan said. "But before you let me go, might we at least check your pants as well?"

"No, leave immediately, before I call security!"

"And while you're calling them, why don't you call the GCO in here also?" Elizabeth said. They closed in on Martine.

"Help me," Martine shouted at Roberten and Vic.

But before they could stop them, Elizabeth and Jan ran up to Martine pulled its pants down and revealed his penis and testicles, then shoved him down to the floor. He lay there, trembling.

"Excuse us," Vic said.

"You take one step out that door and I'll tell them exactly where you keep your gender fields," Martine said. "Plus I'll show the GCO holocordings of some of your more intimate work sessions in the boardroom."

That stopped the pair from leaving. They turned on Jan and Elizabeth. Martine jerked his pants back up hastily, stood and stepped back towards his fellow gender conspirators.

"Grab them and hold them."

Before Elizabeth and Jan could fight back, Roberten and Vic grabbed them and held them down.

"What are you going to do?" Jan said.

Martine took the genderization field module out of his desk drawer, put it on top of Jan and pressed the button on the side.

But the device didn't work.

"What the hell?" Martine cried, his masculine voice straining.

"What's wrong?" Vic said.

"The field's not working. I can't change Jan back to its original gender."

"Let me see that thing," Roberten said.

It rushed over to the field module, checked the underside of the device and then pressed the button.

“It doesn’t have any power,” Roberten said.

“But I put in a fresh power cell just the other day,” Martine said.

“Forget it, it won’t work,” Elizabeth said.

Roberten’s face grew red with anger and he grabbed Elizabeth and said, “What did you do to this module?”

“Nothing.”

It raised his hand up to slap her, but Martine grabbed the hand and said, “No, don’t.”

“Wait a minute, we can go get the other fields and bring them back here,” Vic said. “They should work.”

“Good idea,” Roberten said.

It started towards the door with Vic, but Martine grabbed it and said, “Uh-uh, Roberten, you’re staying right here with me. I’m not going to be left alone in this room with these two.”

“All right,” Roberten said, and angrily shrugged Martine’s hand off its shoulder. “I’ll stay here. Vic, you get the modules and come back here quick.”

“Right.”

Roberten and Martine held the women down and clamped their mouths shut as Vic slipped out of the office. Once Vic was gone, Martine re-locked the office and said, “Look, I’m willing to level with you two here. If you keep quiet about this and let me get rid of my gender, I’ll take your reprimand off the record, give you a promotion and a formal apology, plus a pay raise to show you that there’s no hard feelings.”

“That’s not fair,” Roberten said.

“Shut up. Look, Jan, can you deal with me on this?”

“No,” Jan said. “I don’t care what you offer me. I’m not going along with this scheme. I’m turning you in. All of you.”

“Oh, come on, more than half the people in this place sneak their gender in and have quickies all the time.”

“And they’re all just as wrong as you are. I don’t care if you don’t like the law. That doesn’t matter. You either obey it or you get fired. And that’s it.”

“No, the law’s wrong. People should be able to bring their gender into the workplace—and besides, what’s wrong with a little consensual sex in the workplace?”

“Nothing’s wrong with it. As long as it’s kept outside of the workplace.”

“You listen to me,” Martine said, “if you don’t keep your mouth shut and look the other way on this, I’m going to fire you right now and have security throw you and this so-called legal

representative of yours out on your asses. And I can do it to, because I have the power here. So what's it going to be? Are you going to stand with me, or are you going to stand with all the other poor saps on the unemployment line?"

Martine's arrogance enraged Jan. It shoved him back against the opposite wall and kicked Roberten in the shin. Roberten howled and collapsed. Elizabeth shoved Roberten down to the floor with her foot, then said, "Jan, get on the line quick."

Jan scrambled over to the nearest comline and dialed up the building's GCO while Elizabeth picked up a chair in front of the desk, held it in front of her and said, "Just try it" to Roberten and Martine.

The comline flashed on.

Martine screamed, "Don't!"

Martine rushed at Jan but he met Elizabeth's chair. He grabbed it and struggled to tear it away from each other.

While they fought, Roberten ran past them and tackled Jan to the floor. Jan shoved Roberten off, scrambled over to the comline and screamed, "Martine—gender violation—" before Roberten yanked Jan back down and killed the line.

"Asshole!" Roberten cried.

It slapped Jan, then yanked it up from the floor by its neck. Next to them, Martine tore the chair out of Elizabeth's hands and flung it away, then came at her. Suddenly the door opened and everyone froze in mid-struggle.

Vic raced in with the fields, shut the door behind it and said, "I got them."

"Quick, before they get here," Martine said.

Vic tossed Martine the two fields and he grabbed them, tried the first one.

But it didn't work.

"This isn't working!" Martine said.

"What?" Vic said. "They're both charged. They should work."

"You two, get rid of them or else we're going to get—"

"Caught?" Jan said.

Before Vic could say anything, somebody buzzed the office.

"GCO, open up right now," a voice said through the doorcom. "Open up!"

Smiling, Jan ran over to the door and opened it. A pair of GCO officers entered the room and the trio frowned as they held the evidence right in their own hands. The GCO officers stepped into the room and sealed the door behind them.

"What seems to be the trouble here?" one of them said.

“It’s them,” Jan said. “They have genderization fields and my supervisor Martine was trying to switch his gender before you showed up.”

“Oh really,” the other officer said.

They turned to him and said, “And what do you have to say to that?”

“Guilty as charged,” Martine said, and smiled.

He held up the field.

Jan’s chin dropped and it said, “No.”

But the officers put all doubt to rest when they turned to Jan and pulled their pants down. One was a man and the other was a woman.

“Good thing you showed up and not the other officers, otherwise we might have had some problems on our end.”

“Yeah,” the male officer said. “In the meantime, you had better give me those for safe keeping.”

Martine handed them the field modules and the officers slipped them into their pockets. Jan and Elizabeth gawked at them.

It wanted to ask how could they, but then it recalled what Martine had said about more than half the employees in the building sneaking their gender in.

“So, Jan,” what do you have to say about this little set up—before I fire you, that is,” Martine said.

“I quit.”

THE END

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CHASING THE UNICORN

by Sandy DeLuca

Sandy DeLuca's fiction and poetry has appeared in such places as Space and Time, The Edge, The Urbanite, Thorns of Nature anthology (SpecFicWorld.com), Divas of Darkness anthology. Her poetry chapbook Burial Plot in Sagittarius was nominated for a Bram Stoker award for the year 2000. And recently she's completed a short novel called Settling in Nazareth, and she's presently at work on two other novels. In addition her cover art and interior illustrations have appeared in various places across the small press and her paintings have been exhibited in local galleries.

Web site: <http://sandydeluca.ameranet.com/>.

October rain confronts summer ghosts,
a reminder that Ra has moved away
and the graveyard flowers won't survive the night;
groaning heat pipes tell tales,
and the wind howls in time with their lament

Pumpkins stare into headlights with
gapping mouths;
tabby scratches at the window
shaking crystal drops from her whiskers;
I hold her close,
touch her mystical heart and
feel the sandpaper tongue on my face

She's been through the veil again,
emerald grass in her teeth,
fairy flowers round her tail

Into my lap she leaps,
head nudging my chin,
mischief eyes shine with stories
and into my palm she drops a silky strand

She's seen him again,
been allowed to touch his gemstone horn

and lick electric hoofs

I was in love with him long before
the felines came to live here;
painted his image on quilted blankets
and awed at his gifts like a child
before a magic woman's bowl of life

I pursued him once when the city's
lights gave way to the land of lure,
my innocence lost before sunrise;
enchantment spent on dope and silver
ornaments from Manhattan windows;
spells were no longer potent
and I grew old,
never cherished by the mythical horse

I wish I could leap through the gate
without scraping my knees

All this life I've tried,
but the bandages and blood pans
are still beside my bed
and I exist in life's illusion,
listening to cat purrs
and to Autumn's tears

ABSOLUTION

by Lon Prater

Lon Prater has had work printed in Borderlands 5 and published online at SDO Detective. In addition, he edits the bi-monthly webzine Neverary at <http://www.neverary.com>.

Lilith speaks to Corinne
shivering and nude
Words choke out her passion,
while thunder chokes her mood.
“Decades swollen, pockets full,
Why ever did you care?
the final night,
we are each one,
left alone and bare.”

Corinne can't see Lilith,
feels no martyr's flames.
Would not change a tragic day,
Relive it all the same.

In focus, clear:
the earth she'll leave,
her life,
the things held dear.

“After the end,
I cannot care
The things that
happened here.”

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BONSAI

by Lida Broadhurst

Lida's work has appeared in over 100 magazines, including "EOTU", "This Way Up", and "Nemonymous #1".

Plant from roots fashions dreams
of limbs rambling skyward,
until eye above superior smile
takes aim at different dream,
unzipping leaves, forcing metallic
snakes to strangle branches.

Plant twists, obedient to insane
pattern. While nourishing hopes of its
tormentor writhing from wood:
crucified.

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GLASSEYES

by James R. Cain

James R. Cain lives in Australia, and has appeared in over 50 publications and soon in the Cloaked in Shadow, Cold Flesh, and Dark Lurkers anthologies. He's a graduate of the inaugural Clarion South in 2004, and his novel 'Sisters in Evil' with Tim Curran is due for publication from Hellbound books (USA - April 2005). He's editor of Dark Animus.

Visit him online at <http://www.darkanimus.com/cain.html>.

Glass eyes
staring through the window at the rain,
wondering about the mud -
thirty-three years of bombing had extinguished all green.
Sleeping plants and flowers;
now, imprisoned with memories of a long-wilted youth.

In the rancid heat, she felt the crawling sweat.

Acidic tendrils arose through the moldered floorboards.
"You've come," she rasped, "finally."
and with these words, accepted her fate.

The roots tasted air... converged,
formed a contorting mass of roots and amorphous vegetable matter -
towered over her.
Eyes returned to the window.
She was shaking now; crying.
She watched that ash wash away in decadent streams.
Smelt the perfume of forest loam. Fungal air.
Remembered,
an excited child, leading her parents through the National Park.
"We'd been hiking," she said smiling, "and I was safe."

Her back was embraced by the sentient goo.

Thoughts petrified on that steaming, dirty landscape -
filmed with mist now; water vaporizing as it scoured the blasted earth.

Her mind turned to leaves, sticks, growing things, life.

With blood congealing, she sort of understood.

Ten billion raindrops
crystal eyes watching,
raced to cleanse the Earth.

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SKULL SINK

by Teresa Tunaley

Originating from the UK but now residing in the Canary Islands, freelance artist Teresa Tunaley finds more time to devote to her work. For more than 30 years she has been doodling traditionally with pencils and dabbling with watercolors. More recently she uses a more modern technique using software such as Photoshop and Paint Shop Pro to produce her creations.

Along with published stories and poetry, she can be credited with award winning cover art and illustrations for author stories. Her work can be seen online and in print across the UK, US, Canada and Denmark.

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RECOMMENDED READS

by Jason Brannon

Jason Brannon is the author of over 100 published short stories, four short story collections, two novels, and two chapbooks. His writing has appeared in such diverse publications as Dark Realms, The Edge, Wicked Hollow, Black Petals and Dark Karma.

Web site: <http://www.jbrannon.net>

The Rising

by Brian Keene

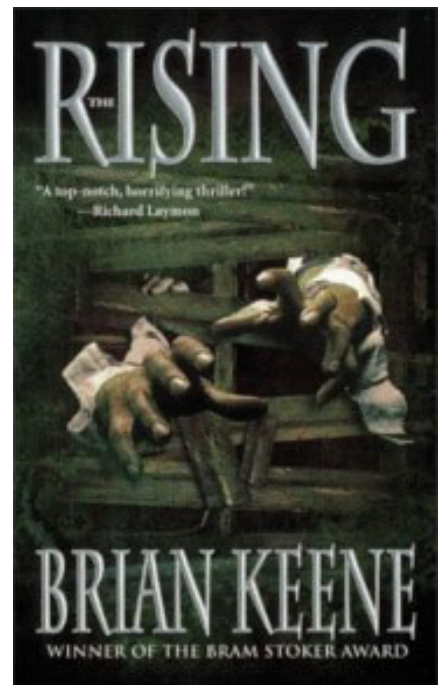
Delirium Books

ISBN: 1-929653-41-7

Although Brian Keene's *The Rising* is full of zombies of every shape, form, and variety, the novel has a very human heart. When the dead start to rise and take over the world, Jim is worried about only one thing: his son, Danny. After staying holed up in a Y2K bunker that he'd built and stocked himself, Jim decides to venture out into the world when Danny makes a last-ditch call to his cell phone, telling him that his mother is sick and his stepfather has already turned into one of the undead. Despite the miles and obstacles between them, that's all

it takes to convince Jim to head to the surface in search of his son. Thus begins a journey of single-minded determination that will put Jim in contact with an old preacher, cannibals, mountain men, rogue soldiers, a government scientist, a junkie, and, of course, zombies.

This could have easily been a novel that lapsed into cliché. Yet there are several new and inventive ideas here that invigorate the old standbys. Zombie animals, for instance. Keene has explored this idea a couple of times in previous stories and really uses it to good effect here. The zombies are sentient too rather than the mindless lumbering morons we've all come to expect from the movies. This makes the zombies more of a threat to Jim and to those few remaining survivors in the world of *The Rising*. These are zombies that can plot and strategize and operate cars.



Without giving away too much of the story, suffice it to say that Jim encounters more than enough obstacles and dilemmas on his way to find his son to make this book a page-turner. One thing that Keene fans should particularly enjoy about this book is the return of Frankie, the junkie, who first makes her appearance in *Wild Kingdom*.

Like any good storyteller, Keene explains just enough about the specifics of *The Rising* to clarify and intrigue. Of course, as the narrative progresses, the story isn't even about the 'how' or the 'why.' It's simply a nail-biting trip into the life of a man who loves his son dearly and wants to do everything in his power to reach him before the zombies do. At one in the morning, I was unable to put the book down because I needed to know what happened.

So what did I think once I reached the end and read the outcome? Shocked, yes. Disappointed, no. Although much has already been said about the ending, I think it held up well, dovetailing nicely with the rest of the novel. I've even heard a few grumblings that the ending was too dark. In my opinion, darkness goes with the territory in a novel like this. Given that Keene is quickly becoming regarded as one of the new masters of the genre, it would seem that he knows best. I agree.

If you miss out on the beautiful limited edition that Delirium has released, there is still hope. Leisure is going to release this one as a mass-market paperback as well. That said, there simply won't be any excuse for missing out on one of the best books of the year.

Highly recommended.