

The Pile by Michael Bishop

The day after Roger and Renata Maharis—brother and sister, *not* a married couple—moved into a Fidelity Plaza townhouse that their father in Savannah had bought as a residence for them while she attended university and he raised money to return to classes, Roger carried some boxes out to the Dumpsters at the far end of the swimming pool and ran smack-dab into The Pile.

The Pile: that's how he *had* to think of it because that's what it *was*. It consisted of the discards of the Fidelity Plaza community: the castoffs and leavings of its residents, stuff too good to feed to the Dumpsters' maws, jettisoned junk with potential adaptability to other people's uses: *The Pile*.

Roger marveled at the items there: dilapidated homemade bookshelves, crippled rocking chairs, coffee tables made of converted telephone-line spools, chipped planters, moribund banana trees, elaborate metal floor lamps that (obviously) no longer worked, hideous plastic bric-a-brac, cheaply framed paintings of cats, clipper ships, or long-dead celebrities (not a few on black velvet), fast-food action figures from ancient film flops, scrap lumber, and a lonely plaid lounge chair that had declined from recliner to outright reject. Wow, thought Roger: A treasure trove for the budget-conscious—a category into which most Fidelity Plaza residents naturally fell.

After all, Renata was a doctoral candidate in marsh ecology, Roger worked part-time at the college in IT, and their immediate neighbors, Nigel and Lydia Vaughan, who had helped Daddy Maharis find this place, were bluegrass musicians who sold lapidary jewelry—or jewelry makers who often mangled bluegrass—to make ends meet. Other residents were retirees on Social Security, language tutors, rookie cops, or administrative assistants with live-ins who tended bar, stocked shelves, or schlepped out to the corner every morning to wait with the Hispanics, druggies, and dropouts for pickup day jobs. Despite the rundown elegance of its townhouses, then, Fidelity Plaza hardly qualified as upscale, and a murder at the swimming pool three years ago had earned it the mocking sobriquet *Fatality Plaza*. Ha-ha.

Roger half-coveted the plaid lounger, even though he and Renata had no place to put it. But if he could think of a place (maybe tossing out an old chair to make room), he should grab it *now*—before a downpour turned its cushions into waterlogged gunnysacks.

Whereupon a thirty-something woman and a really young teenager showed up at the Dumpsters to interrupt his musings.

“You interested in that thing?” the woman asked.

“Excuse me,” said Roger, startled.

“I mean, if you are, well, you can tote it off, because you got here first, but if you aren't, I'd like to haul it to our place for Brad.” She jerked her thumb toward the boy and introduced herself as Edie Hartsock.

Brad looked through Roger as if Roger's black-and-white Springsteen T-shirt bestowed on him total invisibility.

Roger smiled in spite of a sudden uneasiness. “It's yours. Haul away.”

“Could you give us a hand? I'm a woman and he's just a kid, you know?”

So, after handing the boy the fattest cushion and warning Mrs. Hartsock to watch her feet, Roger wrestled the Laz-E-Boy all the way from the Dumpsters to the Hartsocks' townhouse, dragging and rocking it like a lone stevedore struggling with a crated nuclear warhead. He even manhandled it up the steps and into their front hall, finishing there in a streaming sweat.

“Great!” Mrs. Hartsock said. “You’ll have to come sit in it some time. When you do, I’ll give you an Orange Crush.”

#

The Pile provided the ever-coming-and-going folks of Fidelity Plaza with a *resource*—Roger’s apt term—for losing what they no longer wanted or needed, and for acquiring what they hoped they could put to life-brightening use. It changed more often than the residents. Items appeared and disappeared every day, some rapidly and some with such vegetable slowness that it seemed they would take root beside the Dumpsters and grow up next to them like scrub trees or Velcro-suckered vines.

Roger and Renata settled in. They added to *The Pile* a burned-out portable TV set, a used wicker picnic hamper, and the plastic dishes, now scratched, that had come with it. Each of these items, Roger noted with satisfaction, vanished overnight. Somebody had found them worth taking, and that was good. Roger visited *The Pile* every other day or so, more out of curiosity than need, but usually hung back several yards to avoid seeming overeager to loot its ever-mutating mother lode.

After he returned one evening with a working steam iron—an iron that looked almost new—Renata started visiting *The Pile* herself. Occasionally she went with Roger to help him appraise its inventory, and together they salvaged a rustic coffee table that Renata assigned to the back porch as a “garden table.” Later, friends for whom Roger grilled burgers and vegetable kabobs on this makeshift patio told them that the table had first belonged to Graig and Irene Lyons, and then to Kathi Stole in Building F, and then to a sickly man in the nether corners of the complex, and finally to Roger and Renata. Renata, bless her, had refinished the table herself.

“The old guy’s son put it on *The Pile* the day after he passed,” Nigel said. “Don’t worry, though. I don’t think he croaked from anything catching.”

Lydia sipped her virgin Bloody Mary. “But we’re not saying it isn’t *haunted*.”

She could have, though: That table was about as haunted as a cumquat.

The iron proved more problematic. Using it, Renata burned iron-shaped prints in a new blouse, an old tablecloth, and a pair of Roger’s favorite chinos. Once, for no reason either of them could discern, it leapt off the shelf on which Renata had left it and gouged a hole in a linoleum countertop.

“Haunted,” Roger told her, joking.

“Defective,” she countered. “That’s why it wound up on *The Pile*.”

“I’ll put it back out there.”

“You will not. A decent soul would dump it where nobody else could get it.”

“Okay: I’ll dump it where nobody else can get it.”

“Yes you most certainly will,” Renata said. “Today.”

And because Big Brother did as Little Sis said, that was the end of that.

#

The Pile remained an attraction, though, and neither Roger nor Renata could resist going out there periodically to see what had manifested on, or departed from, it.

Roger, although good at his job, found his IT work only intermittently satisfying (“We’re all trapped in the tar pit of technology,” he once told his unamused boss); and so The Pile became for him not only a resource for items with which to furnish or decorate their place, but also a source of stuff that he could repair, remake, or put to good aesthetic use in imaginative artifacts of his own creation.

He converted a broken floor lamp into a bona fide light-giver that also served as a hat-tree. He painstakingly perforated a cymbal—*one* cymbal—to turn it into a colander-cum-projector with which a person could drain canned vegetables, *or* give an impromptu planetarium show (by shining a flashlight through its underside). He made a colorful banner for the front porch out of scraps of old material and pieces of balsa wood daubed with model-airplane paint. He used a discarded drum for the base of a revolving chess platform, whose board he assembled from coping-sawed squares of white pine and red cedar. When he couldn’t find what he needed on The Pile, he extracted from it items to barter with local merchants for stuff he *could* use.

Renata, working toward her doctorate, encouraged Roger in these activities; she even ceded to him the decoration of the living room and the upstairs bedrooms, areas that many women fight to control, and they prospered by this arrangement. If anybody razzed them or expressed surprise, they offered a united front.

Renata: “A major victory in the war for female emancipation.”

Roger: “An expansion of the territories suitable for male exploration.”

Of course, few of their friends expressed surprise. Any surprise, given the well-established theoretical bases of gender equality, centered on the fact that they actually put into practice what Renata preached—even if, after the iron episode, she might have said that she too often *wielded* that instrument while Roger *hung out* at The Pile talking with his scavenger pals and assessing its contents.

Roger added to his acquaintances by hanging out there, though. He saw an oddly slow-moving Brad Hartsock put some nested TV trays on The Pile. He met a college cop, Douglas-Kenneth Smith, who anted up the well-oiled derailleur of a road bike. (Roger grabbed this, wiped it dry, and hung it in a closet as a bartering chip.) He talked baseball with a grandmother, Loretta Crider, whose nephew unloaded a sewing machine, and he foraged out a set of yellowing place mats (with inset pen-and-ink sketches of Big Ben, Westminster Abbey, the Tower of London, etc.) that a high-school teacher, Ronald Curtis, had left on the Incredible Heap in a pretty aqua carton.

“You know why we call this place Fidelity Plaza?” Mr. Curtis asked Roger.

“Because the couples here only screw around with their own spice?”

Mr. Curtis scowled in consternation. “Their own what?”

“Their own *spice*—plural of *spouse*.”

“Ah, that’s very funny.” But Mr. Curtis declined to smile.

“Then why *is* this place called Fidelity Plaza?” Roger lifted a hand. “Does it have anything to do with insurance?” He lowered his hand. “Forget that. I don’t have a clue.”

“It’s because everyone who lives here—or nearly everyone—is as faithful as Fido to caring for and worshipping The Pile.”

“Well, I guess it beats watching *Wheel of Fortune*.”

“I don’t know.” Mr. Curtis at long last smiled. “I’ve always liked the pretty Letter Turner.”

“I prefer her sister Lana. Or did until Daddy said she made her last film the year I was born. And now poor Lana’s kaput.”

“I hope you and your sister enjoy the place mats.” And whistling the theme to *The Andy Griffith Show*, Mr. Curtis slipped his hands into his pockets and walked poker-faced back to Building G.

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One evening, after Roger had had another annoying tiff with his boss, he went out to The Pile to cool off. Renata was at the library, and he was grateful for the relative quiet near the pool and the Dumpsters.

Then Brad Hartsock sauntered over from Building M and stopped maybe twenty yards away. He held a furry doll wearing a red scarf around its neck and, under its hairy chin, an ebony breastplate like those worn by Roman legionaries in epic Biblical flicks—except, of course, for its size and color. Also, the kid holding this figure—a gorilla doll?—looked different this afternoon. On his and Roger’s first meeting at the plaid Laz-E-Boy, Brad had appeared no more than fourteen, with a morose face and eyes of such opaque iciness that Roger had been mildly freaked and entirely convinced that the teen had an IQ lower than the average Atlanta temperature in February. Today, though, he looked older and smarter—his eyes boasted a fiery spark—but, in his hipshot stance out by the Dumpsters, no less spooky.

“Hey, Brad, what you got?”

Brad studied the object in his hands as if his wit had fled. Then he swallowed and his smarts flooded back.

“A singing and dancing ape that doesn’t do either anymore,” he said. “Why? You *want* this piece of crap?”

“No thanks. I’m holding out for a piccolo-playing orangutan.”

“Smartass,” Brad snarled, like an adult gang-banger. His torso had some bulk, as if he’d been working out, and his jaw showed reddish-brown stubble. In starched denims and a striped pullover, though, he was dressed like a grade-school preppy.

An evil imp made Roger say, “You seem a tad mature to be toting around an ape doll, Bradley me lad.”

“And you seem pretty friggin’ *infantile* for a grownup.”

My God, thought Roger, the boy has panache. He raised his hands in appreciative surrender. “Touché, kid: touché.”

“Besides, this thing’s Mama’s. My bastard daddy gave it to her. Now it’s broken. All I want to do is chunk it on The Pile and go home. Okay?”

“Sure. It’s a free townhouse complex—even *freer* if you can get somebody else to put up your rent.” He backed away from The Pile.

Brad shook his head as if Roger undermined his dream of a crap-free world, but shuffled up in his expensive gym shoes and set the ape doll on an unpainted particleboard nightstand that would certainly blow apart in a light wind. Then he turned and sashayed straight toward Building M.

Again, Roger couldn’t help it: He approached The Pile, scrutinized the twenty-inch gorilla from a squat,

and at length snatched it off the nightstand. It was his, or his and Renata's, for Renata would love it. She loved animals and funny effigies of animals, and the red scarf around this ape's throat—along with the needlelike scarlet tongue in its rubbery mouth—would win her over faster than a loaf of fresh-baked Syrian bread.

And Renata did love it. She rocked it in her arms like an infant. She cuddled it to her neck on the sofa. She laid it beside her in her bed and took pains not to roll over on it during the night. "What a cutie," she said a dozen times a day.

Because of its skin color and quirky smile, she named it *Andruw*, after a favorite ballplayer, totally heedless of the fact that many people would think naming a gorilla doll after a black man racist. But she loved the ballplayer and thought his given name and its unusual spelling quite as endearing as his Mona Lisa smile.

Roger told her why she just couldn't call the toy Andruw, and Renata said she would shorten the name to *Andy*. Roger said this dodge wouldn't work because there'd once been a TV show, *Amos and Andy*, which many people now regarded as illustrative of racial attitudes best forgotten. Renata rolled her eyes, but, being an intelligent young woman, understood the strictures with which a monstrous past not of one's own making could tint the present, and so gave in.

"I'll call it *Q.T.*," she said. "Who can argue with that?" She added that it would be fabulous, though, if Roger could restore its ability to sing and dance. As cute as she found it, "bringing it to life again" would greatly heighten its adorability.

"If it gets any more adorable," Roger said, "I'll jump under a train."

Renata gave him an adorable up-yours grimace, and Roger got busy on the doll's adorable innards, to see what miracles he could perform.

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A day later, still working on the issue, he went out to the pool for some air and glimpsed Brad Hartsock perched on a patio chair with a poncho over his shoulders. (It had begun to get cool.) Brad gazed into the bland aqua ripples with such alarming world-weariness that he looked, well, *about thirty*, with a grown man's five-o'clock shadow and violet circles under his eyes.

Briefly, Roger thought the person must be Brad's older brother, on a visit from out of town. However, Mrs. Hartsock was nowhere near old enough to have given birth to this fellow, and maybe a trick of the autumn light had deceived Roger. Or maybe the guy was Mrs. Hartsock's younger brother or . . .

"Brad?" he said. "Brad, is that you?"

The figure in the chair turned a cold hard gaze on him. "Yeah, it's me. Who'd you think it was, President Bush?"

"Nearly," Roger said. "Sorry. I just thought you looked a little puny."

"Seasonal allergies." Brad flung back his poncho, disclosing a big aluminum can of malt liquor. "Plus this, I guess."

"Your mama lets you drink?"

"Why you think I'm out here?" The voice belonged to Brad, as did the features—but the galoot at the pool was a worn near-future avatar of the young teen Roger had met on his first visit to The Pile.

“Do *you* think that’s a good—?”

“Hey, I’m self-medicating, all right?”

“Whatever.” Roger didn’t want to leave. True adults didn’t let teens drink, even if they looked like flea-bitten thirty-year-olds. “By the way, I took your mama’s gorilla off The Pile—it just sort of spoke to me.”

Brad toasted him with the malt-liquor can. “May it bring you true happiness.” He chug-a-lugged for a good fifteen seconds, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and gazed back down into the water—dismissively, Roger thought.

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The gorilla, as Roger soon learned without even Googling “Gorilla Dolls” on his P.C., sang a novelty number called “The Macarena” to the tinny-sounding band in its back. It moved its rubbery lips, showed its pointed red tongue, and swayed its apish hips like a mutant hula dancer.

When Renata returned from the library that evening, Roger took the toy to her, set it on their kitchen table, and flipped its switch. Q.T. did his thing, loudly and repeatedly. Renata laughed aloud. She knew the gestures that went with the dance (even though Q.T. clearly didn’t) and performed them for Roger several times in a row.

“My God, what a cheesy routine,” Roger said, switching Q.T. off.

“Thank yew, thank yew.” Renata curtsied to him and to make-believe spectators elsewhere in the room. “What a terrific gift.” She tickled Roger’s chin and mockingly rubbed his upper arms.

“Thank Edie Hartsock, the gas-company secretary over in 13-M. The ape was hers before I rescued him from The Pile.”

“I certainly will.” Renata stopped rubbing her brother’s arms. “But what if she gets jealous? What if she wants it back, now that it works again?”

“Losers, weepers,” Roger said. “Finders, keepers.”

But then a series of events turned Renata’s appreciation of Q.T. into something like distaste. Roger hit the doll’s switch so often that soon even he had learned the hip movements and hand gestures that enlivened Q.T.’s ditty. A better than average dancer, he *kept* hitting the switch, triggering the tinny music, Q.T.’s pelvic swivels, and his own pseudo-Latin moves, which he busted in the kitchen, the dining room, and Renata’s room as she struggled to study.

“Stop it!” she shouted, covering her ears. “Have you gone bazooka?” This was a facetious Maharis family term for *berserk*.

“You bet—*totally* bazooka. Forgive me. It’s just so damned addictive.”

“For a while it was funny. Now it’s annoying. So, for God’s sake, stop.”

“I will. I promise. I’ll stop.”

But he couldn’t. He’d stop briefly, to watch a TV program or fix a meal, but then the contagiousness of Q.T.’s act would call to him, and he’d turn the toy on again and jig about the townhouse, upstairs and down, extending his arms, crossing them, clutching his head, and doing every other move dictated by the

song's choreographic protocols. Even when the music ran down and the ape ceased gyrating, Roger kept singing, kept doing his manic St. Vitus dance. He had become the Irksome Dervish of Building D.

"Stop it!" Renata cried. "Stop it! *Stop it! STOP IT!*"

"Yes. You're right. I'll stop."

He did stop, for a while, but then he started again. Renata screamed "*Arrrrrrrgh!*" (as he'd never heard her scream before), trotted downstairs with an old walking stick, and poked its tip into his bellybutton.

"Put Q.T. back on The Pile, Roger! Put him back out on The Pile!"

"A decent soul would dump him where nobody else could get him."

Renata twisted the stick. "Give it to me," she said. "*Now.*" Roger passed her the ape. "Good. Now we're going to give it back to Mrs. Hartsock. She might never have had Brad toss it on The Pile if it hadn't stopped working."

"Maybe he started doing what I've been doing."

"Only a baboon"—Renata started over—"Only a *buffoon* would do what you've been doing. Come on. We *will* take it back." They each grabbed sweaters and met at the door. "I'll carry it, bro'—I, myself, not you."

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"Come in," Edie Hartsock called out in a gravelly voice.

They entered the townhouse's smoky lower floor. Renata waved off offers of an orange soda and a mint-flavored cigarette and thrust the doll into Mrs. Hartsock's arms while explaining that Roger had repaired it and that it only seemed right to give it back to her now that it worked again.

"I don't want it," Mrs. Hartsock said.

"But—" Renata began.

"From almost the get-go it gave me the willies. I was glad when it wore out."

"But—"

"And I hate its stupid song. My ex gave it to me as a gag, if not as a torment."

Roger noticed that the plaid Laz-E-Boy had emerged into visibility (of a limited kind, anyway) from the drifting cigarette smoke. Brad lay in this chair, whose footrest he had extended and whose arms he clutched like an astronaut enduring a rocky launch. But what most disturbed Roger was the fact that several large manikins, marionettes, or dolls either stood about the room or hung from pieces of wire from the ceiling. He made out an evil-looking Howdy Doody, a lifelike Creature from the Black Lagoon, and a less adept facsimile of Godzilla. Other simulacra haunted the corners and the stairwell so that 13-M now seemed a bizarre conflation of a menagerie and Madame Tussaud's.

As for Brad, he dully ogled his visitors through eyeballs that appeared pollen-dusted. His bottom lip hung down, and strands of hair on his balding pate rose and fell in the updraft of a heating vent on the floor. Tonight, as opposed to Roger's last encounter with him at The Pile, he looked not only ill but also middle-aged—forty-five, at the very least. He'd lost weight and taken on wrinkles, and his skin had the sallow cast of a man long pent in a damp basement.

“Brad?” Roger said. “Brad, is that you?”

“Yeah,” Brad drawled mockingly. “Who’d you think I was, Beyoncé?”

“Those are powerful *allergies* you’re fighting,” Roger said. He wanted to point out that Mrs. Hartsock shouldn’t smoke around him, but how could he in her own outré place? Besides, she ought to know that.

“Allergies?” Mrs. Hartsock said. “Is that what he told you?”

“Yes ma’am, he did.”

“Oh, Bradley.” Then: “Oh, no. You see, he’s got this condition.”

“What condition?” Renata gazed about the townhouse in evident discomfort and perplexity. Roger could see that she thought Halloween much too far away to justify such freaky décor now.

Eddie Hartsock said in an annoyed-sounding stage whisper, “I really don’t like to talk about it in front of him.”

“Why?” Brad whined. “Because I’m fourteen and look forty? Or do I look even older tonight?”

“*Fourteen?*” Renata said. “How can this person be *fourteen?*”

“It’s really fast, his condition,” Mrs. Hartsock said.

“What condition?” Renata asked again, almost demanding.

“Progeria,” Brad said from the Laz-E-Boy. “I got progeria.”

Roger pondered this. The only case of progeria he’d ever heard about—in a book about bad shit happening to good people which his father had made him tackle when their mother died of breast cancer—occurred in a kid who’d begun looking like a little old man at three and who died at—well, at *fourteen*.

Brad’s progeria, if that’s what this was, had *started* at fourteen and was moving a lot faster than the disease of the kid in the book, as if to make up for lost time. It seemed impossible, but Roger had learned from his mama’s death that “impossible” crap could drop on you like a grand piano at any time and then resound smashing in your head and your kicked-asunder life forever.

“This is a pretty weird sort of progeria, isn’t it?” Roger asked Mrs. Hartsock. “I mean, if weirdness has degrees.” (The Hartsocks’ townhouse suggested that it had *many* degrees.)

“Yeah,” Brad said weakly. “My doctor calls it an allelomorphic progeria, a sort of one-gene-off kind.”

Renata stared at Brad Hartsock. “He’s a very smart fourteen.”

“But I look forty,” Brad said. “Or is it fifty? Mama, is it fifty? Or is it like”—his adult voice poignantly broke—“maybe even *six-tee?*”

“You look twenty-five, Brad: a handsome twenty-five.”

“Right,” Brad said, but he visibly relaxed.

“What can we do?” Renata asked. “To help, I mean.”

“Maybe a little entertainment,” Roger said. He took the ape doll from Renata and switched it on: “The

Macarena” blared into the room, and both he and the doll began hip-swiveling. Brad screamed. Mrs. Hartsock grabbed the doll away from Roger and fumbled to switch it off.

“Brad can’t abide it anymore,” she said, not unkindly. “I can’t either.”

“Nor can I,” Renata said, giving Roger a look. “I’m sorry—so sorry.”

“Well, you could put the obnoxious thing back on The Pile for me.”

“Yes, Mrs. Hartsock. We’ll do it tonight.”

“Edie,” Brad’s mother said. “Call me Edie.” They had bonded over their disgust with Roger’s asininity and their concern for Mrs. Hartsock’s dying son.

Mrs. Hartsock stepped onto the porch with them and unburdened herself as if they were paid confessors. “I divorced Bradley’s father seven years ago. He was never home much, and when he was, well, he was an abuser.”

“What sort?” Renata asked. “Physical?”

“That depended. He never hurt the boy, though. All that stuff in there—he makes models for movies, theaters, and Halloween festivals. When I told him by telephone that Bradley was—uh, terminally sick, he sent that hideous junk and had these guys who work for him come install it, just to cheer the boy up, and—” She began to cry.

Renata embraced her. “Does Bradley like it, all that stuff? *Does* it cheer him up?”

“I don’t know. He says so. But it may scare him. He’d rather his daddy come to see him, I think, but he won’t say that for fear of hurting my feelings. It wouldn’t—hurt my feelings, I mean—it would just scare me too.”

“Has he threatened you?” Renata asked. “I mean, since your divorce.”

“Not so I could ever convince anybody of it. But he’s always liked to hurt me, and I can’t help thinking that all this”—she waved one hand vaguely—“is all part of his plan to do that and to spread the hurt as far as possible.”

#

Renata carried Q.T. to The Pile and set the ape gently on the shelf of a flimsy, lopsided bookcase.

“Don’t fetch him back,” she told Roger. “Or I’ll kick you out and get daddy to back me a hundred percent.” This was at once a joke and not a joke. It gave Roger all the incentive he needed to obey, for his otherwise sweet sister ruthlessly carried out even her most extravagant threats.

“All that work,” Roger said looking at the gorilla doll.

“You replaced a battery,” Renata said, “maybe two. Don’t pretend it was this big deal. Now maybe somebody sane can enjoy it.”

“Until they’re *driven* bazooka,” Roger said.

“Just don’t bring it back.”

He didn’t. And Q.T.—under a wholly different name, if under any name at all— vanished from The Pile into

the townhouse of another resident.

In fact, Nigel Rabe appropriated it and set it up on a chest-of-drawers against the inner wall of Renata's office. Whenever he or Lydia played it, Renata ground her teeth in chagrin and frustration.

At length, she knocked on Nigel and Lydia's door and offered fifteen dollars for the doll. Its "Macarena" binges irritated her even more than did their weekend bluegrass jams, because the doll sounded off on nights when she studied. Faced with her complaint, Nigel declined Renata's money but returned the doll to The Pile himself. A friend indeed was Nigel. And, by returning it to The Pile, he sidestepped the punishments, deliberate or accidental, that possessing the thing often inflicted.

Thereafter the doll began making the rounds of those Fidelity Plaza residents who visited The Pile. Kathi Stole took the singing and swaying ape after Nigel and Lydia, but put it back on The Pile when her two kids began fighting over it like piranhas flensing a baby pig. The next time it appeared, however, several people expressed interest in it, and Mr. Curtis, who didn't care at all about the ape, became the comptroller of this item, the guy who decided who could have it. He inaugurated the ritual of handing a small piece of red string to whomever he deemed its next legitimate inheritor.

After Kathi Stole unloaded the gorilla, Mr. Curtis wandered into the crowd hanging out around The Pile like flea-market vultures and gave this red string to Creed Harvin, a political-science grad student. Creed took the toy home and promptly broke two knuckles thrusting them into a doorjamb while doing the hand motions that accompany "The Macarena." (It was dark, and Harvin was drunk.)

After Harvin, Bill Wilkes in Building J received the red string and of course the doll. The next morning, after he and his wife had hosted an intimate soirée at which the little ape did his repetitive stuff, a city trash truck rear-ended their Audi in the parking lot, and Bill Wilkes immediately returned the ape to The Pile.

Then D.-K. Smith, the campus cop, slipped Mr. Curtis (whom no one suspected of bribe-ability) a ten for the red string and put the doll in a window of his townhouse as a symbol of defiance against the rumor that the toy precipitated misfortune on its owners. But working security the next day, he got into an argument with a middle-aged man, who insisted on entering an athletic dormitory without proper ID, and wound up handcuffing the troublemaker. Later that afternoon, at the insistence of the offended man (an alumnus and a high-level donor), Smith was summarily fired, with no chance of appeal. With his rent paid through the month, Smith carried Bonzo—formerly Q.T.—out to The Pile and slung the ape into a discarded baby carriage.

Mr. Curtis was visiting relatives in Macon and so could neither pass the red string along to the doll's next hapless soul nor accept another bribe. And although Roger could not imagine too many residents vying for the doll now, he saw two other persons waiting for the ape when Smith jettisoned it, both bachelors, a bartender and a drywaller, and they reached for it simultaneously, knocking the pram over and rolling in the ambient litter to establish ownership. In fact, they grunted and grappled barbarously. Finally, one wrestler yanked the doll away from his rival, rolled through the detritus on the edge of The Pile, gained his feet, and took off along one fenced side of the swimming pool. The other man, slimmer and swifter, pursued with blood in his eyes.

Roger trotted down his own porch steps to keep both in view and marveled as first the larger man leapt the chain-link fence and then the slimmer gracefully took the same hurdle. It was late afternoon, and cool, but a small group of residents had gathered at the farther end of the pool beside the bathhouse; and, near the diving board in front of these people, the slimmer man caught the tail of his rival's shirt and spun him about so that he bounced off the board's butt end, flailed for balance without releasing his prize, and fell with a huge splash into the leaf-mottled water. The pursuer then jumped on the board and began pushing

down on the bigger man's head with one wet shoe, apparently doing all in his power to drown the guy.

"Hey!" Roger opened the gate to the pool and burst through to the diving board. Two people seated before the bathhouse—a burly man and a woman in a floral dress and a loose beige sweater—hurried to help Roger drag the assailant from the board. A siren on a light pole, a siren used for fire drills and tornado warnings, started to keen, and the man in the water sank beneath churning ripples as the doll went down with him.

Fully clothed, Roger plunged in after both. He had no coherent plan for saving either and so much fierce headache-inducing noise in his head that he despaired of ever hearing anything else again.

#

Renata knelt beside the supine, spread-eagled bartender with a nursing student from their building, a matter-of-fact young woman who said, "This poor dude is gone." D.-K. Smith, the sacked campus cop, held the elbow of the unresisting drywaller who had just shoe-dunked the drowned man to a depth impossible to rise from. Although the Fidelity Plaza siren had stopped wailing a short while ago, the sirens on, first, an ambulance and, then, two city squad cars had superseded it.

The ambulance left with the bartender; one of the squad cars, with the drywaller. Two policemen stayed to take statements from the on-site witnesses.

They began with Roger, who'd seen far more than he cared to admit, and moved on to D.-K. Smith, the student nurse, Renata, and the group at poolside. The woman who had helped Roger halt the drywaller's assault on the bartender (too late to prevent his death) turned out to be Edie Hartsock.

When this fact penetrated Roger's brain—as he stood on the slick concrete dripping like a spaniel in a cloudburst—he realized that the frail, wheelchair-bound figure at a round metal table in front of the bathhouse was Brad, drastically transfigured. Or was it? Could it possibly be?

Roger squelched over to this mysterious personage.

The man in the wheelchair squinted up at him out of a piggy grey eye in a deep-dug socket. He had a few thin wisps of hair across his skull and skin like wax-laminated tissue paper. He smelled of greasy menthol and stale pee.

"Are you Brad Hartsock?"

The codger blinked once and then blinked again. "Who'd you think I was?" he cackled faintly. "Methuselah?"

Roger found he was clutching the sodden simian doll over which the barkeep and the drywaller had fought. Despite Brad's screaming fit earlier in the week, he felt that he should give it to the "kid" as a wonky pool-party favor, a charm against early oblivion. Apparently, Renata telepathically parsed his intentions.

"Roger!" she shouted. "Roger, don't you do it!"

But Q.T., or Bonzo, or Little King Kong, fell from Roger's hands into Bradley's plaid-blanketed lap. Brad gawped at the doll.

Then he opened his mouth, which continued slack. No scream issued from it—no scream, no word, no whimper, no breath.

#

It was rumored that Edie Hartsock had a small closed-coffin family funeral for her son in her hometown. No one from Fidelity Plaza received an invitation to this event, and when Mrs. Hartsock returned a week or ten days later, she cloistered herself in her townhouse like a nun in a convent. Some residents speculated that she had had the gorilla doll buried with Brad, whereas others argued that she had weighted it with used flashlight batteries or old tractor lug nuts and spitefully committed it to an alligator hole in the swamp near her birthplace. These speculations were so outlandish, though, that Roger could not easily imagine what had prompted them.

A few evenings after Mrs. Hartsock's return, Renata saw a crowd gathered at The Pile in the twilight. She called Roger to her side on the porch. "There's something new out there. Do you want to see what it is?"

"I don't know." Despite their satisfaction with a couple of salvaged items (their garden table and an elegant little medicine cabinet), Roger had grown wary of The Pile.

"Come on," Renata said. "It might be worth it to look."

So they went to look. People parted for them—people gawking but not speaking, people stunned into a near-trancelike state.

The Maharis siblings moved gingerly through them to a point where each felt like a supplicant in the presence of some august, or richly uncanny, superluminary—for they beheld in the lee of one cardboard-filled Dumpster a plaid Laz-E-Boy in which sat a pale white figure reminiscent of Bradley Hartsock before the advent of his virulent variety of progeria. This effigy wore a powder-blue T-shirt, multi-pocketed grey shorts, and some of the prettiest Italian sandals Roger had ever seen. Had the figure had any nerve endings, it would have been cold—but, given Brad's death after fast-forward progeria, it existed only as a detailed manikin, not a living being, and Roger and his sister gaped at the real-looking humanoid artifact in bewilderment and awe.

D.-K. Smith handed Roger a lace-bearing sign.

The sign's legend read "TAKE ME HOME." Its obverse read "CHAIR AND ITS OCCUPANTS NOT TO BE SEPARATED."

"The Brad-thing was wearing this sign," D.-K. told the Maharises.

"Occupants'?" Renata said. "Why is that word plural?"

Loretta Crider stepped up and showed them the worrisome little "Macarena" ape. "This was in the Bradley-thing's lap," she said. "It freaked D.-K. out, so I just picked it up and held it."

"Right," D.-K. said. "Thanks. I'm leaving this spooky bullshit with you all. Take care, okay? I mean it: *Take care.*"

And he left them all standing there at The Pile.

Well, why not? There were laws against child abandonment, but none that Roger knew of against *effigy abandonment*.

After a while, Loretta Crider said, "Mrs. Hartsock's disappeared. Her townhouse is empty, flat-out empty. Who knows where she or all her stuff's gone? It's a mystery, is what it is."

She set the ape doll back in the lap of the Bradley-thing, and the remainder of the uneasy onlookers dispersed to their own places.

After a longer while, Roger said, “Renata, I could make something with this Laz-E-Boy and this creepy Bradley-thing.”

“What, for God’s sake?”

“I don’t know—a sort of found-art installation, maybe.”

Renata crossed her arms. Her face had grown lavender in the darkness.

No moon shone. The pool lights cut off. A wind rose.

Roger could feel the night, the month, and in fact the year itself all going deeply and dreadfully *bazooka*.

—for my son Jamie, on whose notes this story is based