



Vagabond City
January 2014

Introduction: This issue features an incredible diversity. Everything from the comical to the mystical, the cynical to the earnest is represented in this issue. In the interest of expanding our literary palette even further, *Vagabond City* has brought together a collection of poems and stories from disparate corners of this odd world.

- Joe Marchia

Anthropomorphism

Changming Yuan

the sea smiling widely
with every wrinkle open
towards the morning sun, the trees balletting
in the storm of summer, the birds
chatting aloud, indeed, all is well
as God is taking a nap, dreaming
about becoming a human
both in form and in mind, where
nature imposes itself as a wild urchin
and the whole cosmos is expanding
from a past concept into its present body

that's how we approach the world in our own terms
first, and last

Changming Yuan, 7-time Pushcart nominee and author of *Chansons of a Chinaman* (2009) and *Landscaping* (2013), grew up in rural China, holds a PhD in English, and currently tutors in Vancouver, where he co-publishes *Poetry Pacific* with Allen Qing Yuan and operates PP Press. Most recently interviewed by [PANK], Yuan has poetry appearing in nearly 800 literary publications across 28 countries, which include *Asia Literary Review*, *Best Canadian Poetry*, *BestNewPoemsOnline*, *Istanbul Review*, *London Magazine*, *Paris/Atlantic*, *Poetry Kanto*, *Poetry Salzburg*, *SAND*, *Threepenny Review* and *Two Thirds North*.

Apartment #112

William Jackson

Set the beer down on the counter where the roaches play,
stir the food.

It's night outside and in your heart and in your mind.
A police helicopter circles circles above your head
a halo w/ search-lights and you've become so holy
you no longer notice.

The bag briefcase dynamite you left the house w/
today is no longer with you but you know where you
forgot it.

And there's a woman on the other side of town who
wants your penis in her mouth and blood-stream but
you've decided you've been w/ older women long
enough and transmuted it into a lunch and sunny
conversation.

Turn the heat off the meal and sip your beer.
It's not late enough at night but most of your neighbor's
lights have been extinguished and those that remain
on are(nt) suspects in infamy.

Your manager steps outside w/ her 16-year old
daughter's baby making baby noises to make her
presence known, talking shit about you in her head
her heart lead not by intuition but emotion,
eyeing your lights on out the corner of her eye,
wondering where your attendance has been.

You sense this from previous observation and go on
drinking eating living shitting fucking debating
meditating and masturbating; being all-pervasive;
being all-deluded; victorious; indignant comprehensive
luminosity.

That halo lurks 'round and 'round for murderers and
criminals and prostitutes but the only ones that
got bagged were the Buddhas.

Fingerprints of the Night

William Jackson

Figures plotting murder in the shadows
of the front yard of your apt. building.
Meth, Craq, Spice smoke rising from
cracks in the concrete of your parking-lot
& drive-way & sidewalk transforming into
clawed lizards that scale the walls of your
being as it dissipates.

Gunshots split the noise and your cranium.
Your neighbor's daughter drunkenly strolls
into your bedroom and disrobes,
bringing her naked body to bed w/ you,
her boyfriend passed out and inebriated at
her mother's house.

Light forms fell short of brightness and
reached out for distractions.

Transvestite cliques get their door kicked in
by cops w/ dicks who point rifles scream whips,
then bag all the drug-money, ice-cream, and tricks.
The nights scream w/ rage as transformations fail.
Look at all of us.

Gaze on these faces where not a scar untouched.
Look deep into each individual's telescope and
see what universe their story might bring.
The children sleep and the parents rest.
The sky falls while the ocean rises and celibates sing.
Your adopted father passed away some time ago
and left behind a leviathan.
You awaken the next morning to the sunrise &
sirens w/ that woman still next to you,
her belly full of infants crawling through beer
bottles and shot-glasses, and letting her sleep
step over her naked body to piss out the rest of
the kids that didn't make it into recycling.

William Jackson was born and raised in Los Angeles, CA. He's given readings around L.A. at places like The Goethe Institute, Chung King Road in Chinatown, and Lawrence Asher Gallery. He's been published in The Evergreen Review, Gambling the Aisle,

Papercuts, Tenement Block Review (U.K.), RipRap, and Ginyu Magazine (Japan). Will enjoys cold sake and long walks on the fire.

Destinations

Diane Payne

Standing in the long line,
burdened by suspicious border patrol agents
and a heavy backpack,
I see Bob's blue truck.

It looks the same as it did the day
he left Michigan for Oregon,
a place he believed to be hipper,
more appreciative of guitar builders.

Bob's old truck idled in the vehicle lane,
packed way too high, belongings tied below a tarp.
One strong wind could lift the tarp
and the guitars would soar like helicopters.

I run to Bob's truck and the agents follow,
breaking up our embrace by demanding Bob empty his truck, and me my pack, all our belongings strewn
on the ground
as if we're putting on an impromtu yard sale.

Bob believed this chance meeting was a sign from God:
we miracously meet at Canadian border after months
of no communication. Instead of hitchhiking wild and reckless, I'm to sit in his old blue truck,

and we'll return to Michigan, the land of stability,
proof of God's plans, and Bob will build guitars
and drive a bus, and I'll teach crazy people,
and he'll quit smoking, and I'll settle down.

I grab my pack, return to the line, and slowly walk across the border, while his old truck drives down the
highway,
and somehow I know my life will always be like this-
strange crossings at borders, second chances,

backpacks searched for items that will never
be found, maps that will be circled but never
followed, destinations reached, but never attained.

Diane is the MFA Director at University of Arkansas-Monticello. She is the author of *Burning Tulips*, *Freedom's Just Another Word*, and *A New Kind of Music*. She has been published in hundreds of literary journals.

Dantescan Voices

Gerard Sarnat

“...My house is a decayed house,
And the jew squats on the window sill, the owner...”

— T.S. Eliot, “Gerontion”

Bukowski spit: “Most publishers
thought that anything boring had something
to do with things profound.

I carried *The Cantos*
in and out and Ezra helped me strengthen
my arms if not my brain...”

A purer poet than Ezra,
T.S. placed second
in the pound-of-flesh grammar school.

To reckon with Fascist “Eliot” concerns,
parsing my newborn grandson’s name,
I insisted on an extra L.

Now working out Spanglish sounds
big Eliot would judge mongrel,
little Elliot may never know.

Gerard Sarnat is the author of two critically acclaimed poetry collections, 2010’s “HOMELESS CHRONICLES from Abraham to Burning Man” and 2012’s “Disputes.” He has been published or is forthcoming in over 70 journals and anthologies. Harvard and Stanford educated, Gerry’s been a physician who’s set up and staffed clinics for the disenfranchised, a CEO of health care organizations, and a Stanford professor. For “The Huffington Post” review of his work and more; visit GerardSarnat.com.

I Said I'd Make You Breakfast

Natalie Strickland

I knew you were hiding behind the shelf
silent and bare-ass naked
but I had important things to do

like say I'd make you breakfast,
but I forgot, because I saw the paint on the counter
asking to spread itself on blank pages
that I opened and shut, and opened and shut,
til it looked like I shit in a journal
and gave it to you.

So you said, "You shouldn't try so hard."
All those books I made bled onto the floor,
puddles of blood and pus you slipped through
on your way to the next town.

And I was the black yolk in a stale boiled egg,
I was the crust you rubbed from your eyes at 7am,
the window you closed, that was me.

Natalie Strickland is a 23-year-old fox living the modern life in Harrisonburg, VA. She produced the music 'zine *A\$\$*, and the DIY collective arts journal *Nonsense*, *Nonsense*. Her poetry is published in *Nonsense*, *Nonsense* and *Gardy Loo*. Natalie is collaborating with friend and fellow writer Jesse Burke on a limited run, handmade chapbook. She currently writes and distributes *2COUNT*, a serial one-page music 'zine. Natalie's time is spent breaking hearts, traveling, forming sloppy bands, doing college, beating dead horses, and freaking out on the internet.

Overdose

Erin Kelly

He twisted slowly as if he'd been smacked in the face, and his eyes rolled into his head. Then he fell flat and hard, like a thousand-year-old pine in the forest, crunching on the forest floor. He was motionless and awkwardly positioned, like a hit and run victim, and soon his face turned white then a little blue.

Abigail screamed. She and Tammy watched as Damien fell. In the dimly lit room the girls looked at each other. They were best friends, and the absolute, unrivalled, biggest fans in the world of Damian and his band The March. In fact, they were fans before the band had a name, when they were playing covers at unpaid gigs as the Elastic Band. Now Damien was on the ground and to Abigail and Tammy, it seemed as though he wasn't getting back up.

'Is everything okay?' Mr Richards strode into the room and flicked the switch on the ceiling light, his eyes darting around the room for an explanation of the scream. He stood above Damien like a school teacher standing above a troublesome pupil and said, 'Why can't we throw a fucking album release party without one of these fucking louts getting too smashed to bother talking with the press or the fans.'

'Is he okay?' asked Tammy, who was now clutching Abigail's arm. 'He fell down hard.'

'He's just had too much to drink is all,' replied Mr Richards, who was now tapping Damien's body with the side of his foot. When Damien didn't move, he kneeled down beside his client and stared at his lifeless face. 'Jesus, I don't think he's breathing.' He then checked for a pulse.

'Are you a doctor or something,' said Abigail.

'No, but it doesn't take a doctor to know this he's in serious trouble. Quick, lock that door; we don't need any of the press seeing this.'

When Mr Richards said this Tammy gasped and Abigail whispered, 'O...M...G.' 'I said one of you lock that fucking door.'

But before either of them could follow the order, the door swung open again and in walked a man that looked as though he would have fit in seamlessly on stage with The March.

'Here he is,' he said with a wonky smile, revealing a blackened tooth. The man closed the door and locked it. 'My friend here thinks he is a god. One EP and then a record deal and he thinks he's fucking immortal.'

'I'm sorry, who might you be?' asks Mr Richards.

'I'm Laz. And this *rockstar* here owes me money.'

'Don't talk about him like that,' said Abigail.

'This is obviously not a good time. You need to leave,' Mr Richards said to Laz.

'This fucker bought a fifty worth of heroin off me but said he only had twenty on him and that his manager would fix me up later. I came to the party so I could cook it up and get high with him, but the lousy bastard couldn't wait. He's gone and snorted it all.'

'Jesus. Are you saying he's overdosed on heroin?' said Mr Richards, eyes wide with panic.

'Yeah. That's right. Now, where's his wallet,' Laz said approaching the body.

‘Listen you little shit, you’re not gonna touch Damien or his wallet.’ Mr Richards stood face to face with Laz, who considered his words, smiled, took one step back, reached into the pocket of his jacket and pulled out a small knife.

‘No, you listen, you old fuck. I need my money. I got a kid you know, he’s as annoying as fuck but he still needs to eat. And I’m trying to run a business. Now you either get outta my way so I can take the wallet, or point me in the direction of his manager who owes me thirty bucks.’

‘I’m the band’s manager. And I don’t owe you shit, rat.’

‘Why are you arguing about money?’ Tammy said, ‘Someone call an ambulance.’

‘It’s too late,’ said Laz, relaxing the knife, ‘our friend here is walking the tightrope. Any minute now he’ll err a little further to one side and slip away.’ He said this with a grimace; it wouldn’t be the first time he’d seen it happen.

Mr Richards held his phone to his ear and thought to himself that this was no way for a band’s breakthrough album promotion to begin. Or was it? And that’s when the light bulb clicked. He stared into space for a moment and ignored the voice on the receiver asking him if he needed the police, an ambulance or the fire brigade. He hung the phone up.

‘What are you doing,’ cried Abigail.

‘All of you just shut the fuck up for a moment.’ He stood there scratching at his jawline, then, and as if winning an argument in his own head, he smiled and began to nod. ‘Nobody leaves this room until the paramedics take Damien out in a body bag.’

The two girls and Laz just stood dumbstruck.

‘This album will have the sort of media attention that no promotional budget can buy. With both hands Mr Richards frames a headline in mid-air, ‘Dead Rocker’s Final Masterpiece.’

‘You’re out of your mind, old man,’ laughed Laz.

‘And think of the money we’d make,’ said Mr Richards, frantic, with the genius idea reaching fruition in his head. ‘Yes, yes, that’s it. We can each sell our story to any of the papers and magazines.’

‘I could make more than thirty bucks, right?’ asked Laz.

‘Ten times more.’ Mr Richards assured him. ‘And you girls, you ever wanted to be part of rock and roll history?’

‘It would be kinda cool to say you were there when the guy from *The March* died,’ Abigail said.

‘And I can say he wrote the song ‘Infinity’s Daughter’, off the new album, about me,’ said Tammy.

So, the four of them reached an agreement: nobody was to enter or leave the room until they were all certain he was dead.

‘But, we need a consistent story,’ began Mr Richards, ‘So this is how it will go. I was sitting in the room discussing what Damien thought to be The March’s key influences, when –’

‘But we were in the room with him,’ Abigail interrupted, ‘and he was about to tell me he loved me.’

‘No he wasn’t, he likes me so much more,’ said Tammy.

‘Just listen, we need to decide on a realistic –’

‘Oh, I’m fucked, then,’ Laz interjected, ‘I can’t say I was here to collect money for the drugs that killed the motherfucker.’

‘Then don’t, you moron. You can say you’re a friend who was just hanging out. Maybe you were in here talking with the girls over in that corner.’

‘Gross. Didn’t you just say realistic? We would never talk to someone like that.’

‘Well, I wouldn’t talk to you bitches either,’

‘Oh, sure.’

‘Listen we just need to...’

And amidst the arguing there was a single cough, which seemed to reverberate around the room like a giant church bell. The four of them became silent, which made the second cough more pronounced. It was Damien; he had rolled to his side, vomited and was now coughing the residue and acidic taste out of his mouth.

‘I need some water,’ he muttered.

Mr Richards’s sighed and Laz cursed. The four of them looked down at Damien who was now spitting on the carpet, then sternly at each other.

Mr Richards pulled a twenty and a ten from his wallet and Laz disappeared, like a cockroach when the light turns on. The girls shuffled out of the room and went back to the party looking for the cute bass player, and Mr Richards knelt down and said, ‘I’m here for you buddy, you’ll be all right.’

Erin is a wannabe retiree who enjoys napping and waiting for the kids to call. Her interests include shopping, talking over the fence with Jenny Hilton, and writing. Erin’s work can be found in print and on the screen (Word Riot, Out of the Gutter, Hypallage and Regime Magazine).

That Was Vermont

Sarah E. Caouette

Altruism brought on my mother's cancer—worried so much about others, we couldn't have an address or phone number listed in the city directory. For me, as a teenage girl, this was an embarrassing thing to be UNLISTED. My mother lost three students that year to gangs—mostly drive-bys and muggings. One found at home, where no one had noticed him dying. Bled out on a shag carpet floor.

My stepfather, Byron, became the replacement for another instructor who'd been beaten into a coma in the basement of the school. When he was late for dinner, mother paced. Tense and wrinkled across the forehead, twisting a terrycloth dish rag between her big hands like a washing maid.

We lived in the suburbs, had a two car garage, and I went to Catholic school because it kept me out of trouble. There shouldn't have been anything to worry about, but still my mother looked over her shoulder every time she left the grounds of the school.

On windy nights, the branches of the wild cherry tree thrashed violently against our kitchen windows, and mother walked the hallways on edge. Helping disadvantaged youth hadn't turned out the way she'd envisioned it—wanting to save the world, one poor child at a time.

And so, when the school year finally came to a close, we packed up and left. And moved to Vermont, where there was nothing like that we'd ever have to worry about.



The house on Hospital Hill had been once a group home for the mentally ill. The foundation had sunk a good few feet into the ground from the weight of all that history, and for four years the house sat morbidly empty with no one cutting the grass. It smelled of cat urine, and finger prints of feces smeared the pastel colored walls. Animal or human? No one could tell. The water had been shut off for so long, the well needed to be pumped and refilled. And even when it got flowing again, the smell of sulfur and iron was prominent on the skin like burnt broccoli—all our hair eventually turning tinted rusted auburn.

Large conic ant hills protruded from the two acre plot like sand dunes, or land mines. And no one dared to go up the path to the front entrance, afraid of making any false steps. No one came around to welcome us to the neighborhood, by the time we'd settled in—after the movers had long gone. So, my mother went to them. Making the rounds. Introducing herself, her husband, and their brooding adolescent daughter. Our new neighbors turned out to be a pedophile, a doctor, and a handful of other teachers, elated that a *normal* family just moved in. Had mother never stopped by to announce us, they wouldn't have known. The residents of The Hill gossiped and speculated, but none of them would have ever just dropped in.

I spent most of my summer scraping paint off the side of the house, wearing the skimpiest of clothing I could scheme up. My scissors working their way to shorter hem and wider necklines.

This is...this is child labor, I complained to mother, as the flaking chips left a sharp stannic taste of lead behind my pouting lips.

Scrape! mother demanded with gusto, as she too whittled away another decade on a nearby banister.

In the evenings, when asked to take out the garbage, I would catch a possum or two eating the leftover pieces of scraped paint that had blown into the yard below. I suspected it was because the paint was sweet on the tongue. But then again, poisonous things were often deceptive like that.

There was no getting around the fact I was pissed at my parents for uprooting me again. I was sixteen, and knew nothing else but to be pissed. So, I did things to spite them, like wearing barely-there jean shorts and pushup tops, too much caked-on makeup and sometimes no bra. This drew attention from the men in town—the toothless ones with prominent chins, who stood outside Laundromats and bars with no signage, smoking unfiltered Camels and gawking at the young able ones who passed by.

What I didn't want was any of that Vermont *wholesomeness* rubbing off on me, and whined every day that there was no shopping mall or skate park to spend my time. That the only other kids I saw in all my summer scraping, were a couple homely boys riding around on second-hand bicycles, trying to catch a glimpse of me bent over the porch railing like some jailed egret getting ready to lead a flying-V.



The first time I took LSD, I met a straight guy who danced for a gay men's review. My friend's hair went the color of purple *Grape Crush* right before my eyes. And a couple of townies convinced me to climb up on top of a mill building in the middle of a corn field, because they said the echo effects were: *Out of sight*.

And there standing on the cement flat with faded blue helicopter markings, from where I could hear every stem sway in the granular ocean, I developed a deep hatred for Vermont. For its smoke stack that puffed steam from processed paper. The conifer tree line. And the scent of manure ripening in my nose. For my parent's choices, and what I wished to disown. And for what I didn't know would become of me, in this backcountry I refused to call home.

The second time I did acid, me and my accomplices were banned from the movie theatre for tripping out during a military festival. Where someone announced in a room full of vets that, *The sergeant has tits!* And then proceeded to crawl across the soda pop-

covered floor on forearms, as his legs trailed behind him, pretending to be wounded while under attack.

After we were asked to leave, I picked popcorn from the boy's hair in the alleyway, and let him stick his brackish cow tongue inside my mouth. I was sure then that's when I saw angels spying on me from the brick rooftops above us—round eyes and orbits. But this didn't stop me from being anything but shameless and high.

The third time I transcended time and space, I was in an AP Bio class learning the lifecycle of larvae. The foil beneath my desk, fingering sticky jelly reds. The gurgle of the water bubbler, and the swimming yellow Sicklets behind slimy glass. And at home during dinner, the oranges my mother had sliced dandily spinning like pinwheels, reduced to a deep growl then laugh.

I'm worried about Macie. My mother's voice was low, but fully audible through our shared wall at bedtime. Me, listening on the other side, staring down into alien streets, attempting to calm my mad pulse and heartbeat.

And within this thread of forced silence, there emerged from the gutters, two macabre figures with waving clipped hands. Sinister, as they danced like wind sockets, flailing spastically with full wicked heads.

◆

It was a girl from class, who disappeared one weekend after partying in the woods. We'd all been on mushrooms, and had run strings of dyed ribbon through the pine and boscage to be certain that no one would get lost. Lots of Hansel's and Gretel's to account for, and this system had worked in the past.

Flashlights darting past tree trunks like a nature slide show transitioning in slots. The girl's name unknown. *Who'd she come with?* All unknown.

And though, I had noticed that she was pretty, reserved, and moved like a fawn on new legs. *Hello?!* was all I could think to holler into the dense woods.

Monday came, and the girl was said to be missing. Tuesday, her parents called the school. The authorities wanted to know the details that no one bothered to observe.

We'd all been out of their heads.

Hadn't they (our parents) ever had a night like that?

Of course not. Stupid kids. Things like this don't ever happen in Vermont.

◆

My mother's cancer went into remission in year five. Perhaps due to the clean mountain air, perhaps she had nothing more to worry about. Still, I remained resentful of the move, and bought a one-way ticket back to the city the first chance I got.

When I heard about the pickle jar found buried by a Vermont woodsman, I was preparing to give birth to my first daughter.

I always hated that place, I told my husband. *It gave me the creeps.*

What was it in particular?

Well, it was how the day could be nothing and everything at once. Mean nothing and everything. Then you'd find yourself lost. It would be dark, and you'd be all alone. That was Vermont—where you couldn't trust the fog.

Then it's a good thing you got out when you did.

I did. By the skin of my teeth, by the skin of my teeth.

Sarah E. Caouette holds an MFA in Creative Fiction from Southern New Hampshire University. Her work has recently appeared with The Citron Review, The Good Men Project, Cigale Literary, and has been recently selected for the literary event Word! Portland. For the time being, she currently resides in Maine, believing there's something about the air.

Banana-Fana Fo-Fana

Bruce H. Hinrichs

“The name of a man is a numbing blow from which he never recovers.”

– Marshall McLuhan

No one knew the city better than taxi driver Nicaragua Mars. Because of his multi-syllabic name, his friends just called him Nic. However, for purposes of this story we will call him Nicaragua, because it's a much cooler name. A bit geopolitical, though. A bit like being named Kazakhstan or Mozambique, I suppose. In fact, I did know a guy named Mozambique Byrd who ran a rent-a-pet shop. Whatever.

Anyway, no one knew the city better than Nicaragua Mars. Wait, come to think of it, calling him Nicaragua would take up too much ink and would take too long to read, so we'll just call him Nic, as do his friends. But, as you've probably guessed, that's not even his real name, Nicaragua Mars – no way! Sounds made up. Which it is.

Before he officially changed it, Nicaragua Mars's real name, believe it or not, was Real Name. It was pronounced: *Real Name*. Weird, huh? You see, his parents were jerks. Having the last name, “Name,” they thought it would be cute to give each of their children first names that made meaningful phrases when paired with their peculiar last name. You know, like when people with the last name Christmas name their little girl Mary. Or when the Falactic parents name their daughter Anna. Or when a couple with the name Cadabra call their daughter Abra. Or when a child is named Deep by a mom and dad whose last name is Doodoo. Or, when the Gulch parents call their daughter Dry. Or when couples named Head name one of their children Crack. Or when a family with the name Attitude calls their cute little girl Insufferable. And so on. You get the picture. The “Name” parents were jerks.

Naturally, everyone in Nic's family later officially changed their stupid given name to something more suitable. For instance, Nic's younger brother, Fake Name, wanted to change his name to Fats Domino, but the judge said that that was a well-known name and therefore he could not allow it. Fats Domino was a 1950s piano player named Antoine who had many hits including “Ain't That a Shame,” and I guess it was. His biggest hit was called Blueberry Hill, which coincidentally was the name of Fake Name's first grade teacher.

Being denied the name Fats Domino, Fake Name then asked the court to change his name to Chubby Checker. The judge disallowed that name on the same grounds. Chubby Checker was the fake name of the 1960s rock 'n roll singer, Ernest Evans, who popularized the dance known as the Twist. “C'mon baby, let's do the twist.” The song revolutionized dancing since it was the first time couples danced without touching each other. Not such a good idea. Chubby Checker got the idea for his fake name from the wife of TV personality Dick Clark. Dick Clark's real name was Dick Wagstaff. You can understand why he changed it. Dick Clark became famous for hosting the TV show *American Bandstand* (on which both Fats Domino and Chubby Checker performed) and for announcing the lowering of the ball in Times Square on New Year's Eve each year.

Anyway, Fake Name finally settled on changing his name to Obese Backgammon, which he reasoned was close enough to Fats Domino and Chubby Checker. The judge said that was fine.

Everyone now called Fake, Obese. He wasn't, it was just his name. He was a bit overweight though, you might even say pudgy. In fact, Obese had considered adopting the name Fudgy Pudgy, but he thought it unappealing because it was so rhymey, and also because it is the name of a Japanese cartoon character. No, Fake Name wasn't fat enough to warrant his chosen moniker; he just liked the sound of it – Obese Backgammon.

Unlike his brother Obese, Nicaragua (I mean Nic) was a bit on the thin side. Skinny, in fact. Real Name, that is, Nic, liked to stay thin because he thought it was an advantage for a taxi driver to be lithe. By the way, Nic did not like to be called a "cab" driver. It reminded him of Cab Calloway, a famous 1930s scat singer who wore natty clothes and whose orchestra played at the Cotton Club working with musicians such as Dizzy Gillespie. Calloway's most famous song was "Minnie the Moocher," which reminded Nic of Minnie Mouse, and of fares who ran off without paying. Being called a "cab driver" made Nic feel dizzy (but not gillespie). Nic liked "taxi driver." You see, Nic believed that the term "taxi" meant a person who paid taxes. In his mind there was the "taxer" and the "taxi." The taxer charged the taxes, and the taxi paid the taxes.

Nic's brother Fake – I mean Obese – scoffed at this idea and told Nic that the term taxi actually was a plural of the word tax. You could say taxes or taxi. "I paid my taxes," or, "I paid my taxi." Except it was pronounced tax-eye. I paid my tax-eye. That's what Obese thought. But Nic's sister, Maya Name, who had changed her name to Plain Jane, told Nic that the word "taxi" was a derivation of the verb, "to tax," meaning to strain. So, the term "taxi" actually meant to strain, or to put pressure on something or someone. Maya – I mean Plain – figured that was what taxi driving was all about: taxing people. Straining them very hard. That's what the driver did – he taxed, or strained, the people in his cab. Have you ever taken a ride in a taxi? Taxing, wasn't it?

But Real – sorry, Nic – did not buy these interpretations. Nic was proud to pay taxes, and hence he liked to be called a taxi driver. He figured a taxi driver meant a driver who paid taxes. There was the taxer driver, and there was the taxi driver. Nic was a taxi driver. He didn't charge taxes, he paid them. Nic was proud of paying taxes because a couple years ago his sister Plain had a fire at her apartment and the local fire fighters put it out without charge. Nic tried to pay them, but the fire fighters insisted that he keep his money since the fire fighters were paid by taxes. Ever since that epiphany, Nic bragged about paying taxes. For example, each time he read or heard about a local fire that was put out by fire fighters, Nic bragged about it for days. "I paid for that," he'd say. He was the "taxi."

Meanwhile, down at the taxi station, Nic's boss was a tall, lanky Chinese man named Brake Fluid. Everyone who worked there remarked that it was terribly odd that the boss's name corresponded so well with the aura of the taxi garage. They marveled at how often this seemed to happen – that a person's name fit with his or her occupation. You know, like a paleontologist named Stegasaurus, or a car mechanic named Wrench, or a doctor named Langerhans, or a chiropractor named Quack, an electrician named Shock, a sociologist named Group, a psychologist named Nutz, a potato farmer named Spud, a fire fighter named Hose, a teacher named Chalk, a plumber named Flush, or a lawyer named Attache or Sleazeball. Weird coincidences, for sure. But Maya – sorry again, I mean Plain – understood all this because she had experienced such characters in her past. For example, she had an eighth grade teacher named Miss Taken, a dentist named Incisor

Gap, an accountant named Decimal Avogadro, a piano teacher named Tuner D. Keyes, and a pet mouse named Squeak. Ironic, no?

Anyway, as I was saying, no one knew the city better than Real Name, err, I mean Nicaragua Mars. That is, Nic. Although, truth be told, Nic was not an especially good driver. In fact, he was a terrible driver. Absolutely awful. Even dangerous. It was a miracle that he had a driver's license. In fact, he didn't have a driver's license. Well, not a real one. He had a fake driver's license that he bought from a guy in an alley. Although it was drawn with a crayon on a wrinkled brown paper bag, it was good enough to get him a job as a taxi driver. But actually, the line drawing of Nic was a pretty good likeness.

Nic was a horrific driver who could barely keep his taxi from going sideways. In fact, he did drive sideways. Still, Nic was the top driver in the taxi garage (It's funny how that goes – the worst drivers are professional drivers). What Nic was best at, though, was knowing his way around the city. No one knew the city better. Well, no one except a few people who had lived in the city for a long time. Oh, and some city officials. Oh yeah, and a few of the construction workers who worked in different places throughout the city. Oh wait, and an old lady who sat on the city commission for several years until they finally said "uncle" and she got up. Oh, yeah, I just remembered, and an idiot savant who happened to live in the same city as Nic. He was amazing, this savant, a young man named Orangutan Marshmallow who could tell you any address in the city if you just told him the color and weight of the house. He could also tell you the circumference of every bald man's head in the city. Orangutan could play the piano with his nose without a piano. He could calculate the square roots of small electric appliances. He was able to remove his toes and still play *This Little Piggy*. He was amazing. He was one of only one idiot savant in the city. Orangutan knew the city better than Nic, but nearly no one else did. And, how was that, you ask, that Nic knew the city so well? I'm so glad you asked! It's like this....

Nic's other brother, not Fake Name (I mean, Obese Backgammon) but Nic's other brother, his *older* brother, was named Alias Name, but officially changed his name to Contemporary Man. He wanted to change his name to Modern Man, but another person had already taken that name. Anyway, Contemporary was driving Nic to the airport one day when they were involved in a serious car accident (bad driving ran in the family). Nic suffered a severe head injury, but the weird thing was that his brain injury caused him to become a memory genius in visual-spatial perception. He now had a detailed map of the whole city in his head. The surgeons tried to remove it, but it was stuck between Nic's medulla oblongata (which, coincidentally was the name of the chief surgeon) and his ventromedial hippocampus (amazingly, the name of the nurse, though she was usually just called Vennie), so they had to leave it in. Talking fast caused it to flap, which gave Nic a headache. The surgeons also found that the map was simply impossible to re-fold correctly no matter how they tried. One of the surgeons, Dr. Piers Yorskin from Neither, Norway fainted after a valiant attempt to re-fold the map. The map apparently was jammed between Nic's gray matter and his white matter in a region of the brain called the "doesn't matter." So, with a map of the city stuck firmly in his brain, Nic knew the city better than anyone. Well, except for those listed above. Well, okay, and a few others, too, I suppose. Whatever.

Nic's life changed drastically when one day he picked up a fare at the airport, a Mr. Pickled Cucumber, a lawyer from Frozentoe, Saskatchewan, who wanted a ride to a mysterious hotel called the Pleaze Putit Inn. Pickled Cucumber had the weird habit of playing a didgeridoo, a primitive wind instrument that requires the player to vibrate his lips while blowing into a beeswax mouthpiece at the end of a long wooden pipe made by termites while simultaneously breathing in through his nose. By breathing in and blowing out simultaneously some didgeridoo players can play a steady note for half an hour or more. This, by the way, had a mysteriously relaxing effect on the termites.

Pickled got his didgeridoo while he was studying languages in Australia and discovered that the two languages, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara, could be grouped together under the name Nyangatjatjara. You see, psycholinguistics was a hobby of Pickled's. He purchased his didgeridoo from a Pitjantjatjara shaman who worshipped the Urulu rock formation. Out of respect, Pickled named his daughter Urulu Cucumber. Her middle name was SacredRock. Unfortunately, Pickled's daughter had been stolen by kangaroos and was badly injured riding in a marsupial pocket. Urulu Cucumber was now in a vegetative state. By the way, the term kangaroo derives from a Guugu Yimidhirr word "ganguruu," which, contrary to popular belief, does not mean "I don't understand you." Incidentally, the didgeridoo is known as a "yirdaki" among the Yolngu aboriginal people of Arnhem Land in Northern Australia, as a "paampu" among the Pintupi tribe of Central Australia, and is named "ngarriralkpwina" on the island of Groote Eylandt in the Gulf of Carpentaria. But, to simplify things we'll just call this weird musical device a "didgeridoo."

Pickled Cucumber played the didgeridoo because it was prescribed by his sleep therapist, Dr. Needle Gozinya, to treat a severe case of sleep apnea. You see, Pickled could not sleep and breathe at the same time. Well, that is, unless he played the didgeridoo. He found it more convenient and interesting than wearing a C-PAP.

In the taxi, Pickled Cucumber and Nicaragua Mars started chatting, particularly about the low humming sound that was coming from the back seat. It turned out that it wasn't snoring, as Nic had assumed. No, it was Pickled Cucumber vibrating his lips and exhaling on the beeswax mouthpiece of his didgeridoo while breathing in through his nose. Pickled loved music. He told Nic about his favorite musician, Frank Zappa, who was an eccentric genius who named his four children Moon Unit, Dweezil, Ahmet Emuukha Rodan, and Diva Thin Muffin Pigeen, and for whom many scientific discoveries had been named including the 3834 *Zappafrank* asteroid, the *Phialella zappa* jellyfish, and the *Zappa Confluentus* bacterium.

As a child, Frank Zappa had sinus problems which his doctor treated by inserting a pellet of radium into each of little Frank's nostrils. As a result, Zappa's lyrics and album covers often contain nasal images, Pickled explained, and he told Nic that Zappa was close friends with musician Van Vliet who had changed his name to Captain Beefheart, and who with the Magic Band, whose members included Drumbo and Zoot Horn Rollo, released a popular album called *Trout Mask Replica*. It is said that Van Vliet got his name from his uncle who referred to his penis as a big, fine beef heart whilst peeing in front of Van Vliet's girlfriend Laurie. However, Van Vliet said on TV that his name derived from the fact that he had, "A beef in my heart against this society."

Captain Beefheart and Frank Zappa met at Antelope Valley High School, and while neither appeared on Dick Clark's *American Bandstand*, Zappa was on the *Steve*

Allen Show where, inexplicably he did not play guitar, but instead played the bicycle. By the way, comedian and talk-show host Steve Allen's middle name was Valentine, which means strong and healthy, and also was the pen name of British author Archibald Thomas Pechey who wrote many songs, as did Steve Allen.

And, wouldn't you know, wouldn't you just guess, the two of them hit it off right away. I'm referring now to Nic and Pickled. They hit it off right away. Two peas in a pod. There was chemistry between them. Mostly carbon dioxide, I think. Perhaps a hint of salicylic acid methyl ester, also known as wintergreen, although that is quite superfluous to this story, I suppose. Interesting, though, that wintergreen would be developing between them, don't you think?

Anyway, the two of them were getting along so well that Pickled Cucumber invited Nic to dinner that evening. Since Nic was free absolutely every night without exception, he readily and happily accepted. They went to a nice restaurant called Cannibal's. The host said they had to wait for a table and asked for a name. Pickled immediately said "Pajama." In the restaurant's bar, Pickled explained.

It turns out that some years ago Pickled Cucumber grew tired of restaurant hosts asking him how to spell his name. It really annoyed him. Every time he had to wait for a table the restaurant host asked Pickled how to spell his name. He thought, "Why are they asking me how to spell my name? Are they going to send me a letter when the table is ready?" Pickled tried asking the hosts to write his name phonetically since they were going to be speaking it later, but the hosts did not know what the word "phonetically" meant. They just stared at him blankly, and then later whispered about him with their peers. So, Pickled decided to make up a name that would be easy to spell. He tried many different names, but to no avail. Each time he went to a restaurant, no matter what name he gave – even Smith, Johnson, Homer Simpson, Banana, Nose, The, Spaghetti, Choo-choo, Furniture, Boogeyman, Pinwheel, Spittoon, Crackerjack, Icepick, Whiplash, Doodle, or Smell – the host asked him how to spell it.

But wait, Pickled Cucumber excitedly told Nic, in fact there was one category of names he had stumbled upon that hosts did not ask him how to spell. Pickled had discovered that hosts will not ask you to spell your name if your name is a word that is embarrassing. Pickled discovered this by accident one day when he coincidentally found that his pants were on fire at the precise moment when a host asked for his name. "Shit," he had yelled. The host wrote it down without asking for the spelling. After this serendipitous discovery, Pickled tried many similar names such as Wartface, Bigsucker, Sexkitten, Fart, Crotch Itch, Burping-Goat, Dingleberry, Vulva, and Nixon. They worked! Hosts were too embarrassed to ask how to spell them.

However, there was a weird side-effect that Pickled soon uncovered. On one occasion he had given the name Frankenstein – embarrassing enough to avoid the how to spell it question – and then later while waiting in the bar he heard over the loud speaker: "Frankenstein party of two, your table is ready." Pickled Cucumber found that this caused a great deal of attention from other people waiting in the bar. They all stared wide-eyed and open-mouthed as the "Frankenstein" couple, drinks in hand, went to get their table. At that moment, Pickled quickly decided to walk with very stiff legs to give them something to tell the kids later. By the way, Pickled explained to Nic, if you want to try the Frankenstein name at a restaurant, I suggest that when the host is writing it down you meekly add "Doctor." It's a nice touch. Also, Pickled continued, be sure to keep a

straight face. After you say that your name is Frankenstein the host will glance at you for a moment, not too long, but for a second will turn his or her eyes up to look at you – it's at this moment that if you are smiling, the deal will be off. But if you have a serious face, then after just a quick look, the host will begin writing the name Frankenstein without asking how to spell it. It is at this moment that you should lean forward and quietly, but seriously, without smiling of course, add, "Doctor."

Then, Pickled Cucumber said to Nic as he finally got to the crux of his explaining, after I discovered that they will announce "Shitz party of four, your table is ready," or something like that, I decided to use names that went with the word "party." Like Republican, for example; and as a bonus I found that the word Republican is embarrassing enough to avoid the how to spell question, too. So, Pickled continued, that is why I gave the name Pajama tonight.

Just then, as the two of them were sitting there chatting and sipping their drinks in the restaurant's bar, they heard over the loud speaker: "Pajama party for two... Pajama party for two..." So, Pickled and Nic went in to eat. Naturally, the other people in the bar stared at them. Pickled walked with a joyous and happy stride, and made a big yawn for everyone to see.

At their table, the waitress told them they could choose "All you can eat," but Nic said no thanks, he couldn't eat all that he could eat. So, Nic just ordered coconut jumbo shrimp and mashed turnips. Pickled had a peanut butter and jelly sandwich with coleslaw and pineapple pie. They chatted as they ate.

When Pickled learned of Nic's great skill – knowing the city better than anyone (well, better than a lot of people, anyway) – he became very interested. As a lawyer, Pickled was always looking for easy ways to make money. If it was legal, that was a bonus. If not, well, loopholes abounded. If loopholes didn't abound, then some whatnot could be finagled. If a whatnot could not be finagled, then perhaps a thingamajig could be boonswaggled. Or maybe a whatchamajigger could be insinuated. Or a doohickey could be fillydallied. You see, Pickled didn't care about ethics at all. He simply didn't think about that.

Hmm, Pickled thought, how can I use Nic's skill, and make a lot of money, and give Nic only about ten percent or less? Okay, he said to Nic, why don't we start a service that will tell people how to get from one place to another in the city? There are lots of people who can't read maps. Most people don't own a GPS, either. Whaddya think?

Nic was all for it. He had a map in his brain, after all, so he may as well sell it to others. A brain map should be shared. So, Pickled and Real Name, I mean Nic, went into business. They called their venture, *Navibrain*. They advertised in newspapers, restaurants, Laundromats, on telephone poles, kiosks, bulletin boards, and on the backs of homeless people and the fronts of prostitutes, sometimes with a sandwich board. They discovered that lots of people couldn't read a map or use a GPS and needed to find their way around the city. They were doing great.

Then, one momentous day they got a call from a woman named Flapps Her-Arms. She had been born "Flappsinna Her," but married a man named Missing Arms and then shortened her first name and hyphenated her last. Her brother, Broth Her, changed his name to Phantom Limb and took a job selling mirror boxes. Miss Flapps Her-Arms had called *Navibrain* because she wanted to know how to get from Point A to Point B. Nic

knew about Point A (it was near the zoo, about a mile from Sinus Cavity at the intersection of Della Street and I've Done Her, Avenue?), but he had never heard of Point B. It wasn't on his map. Pickled Cucumber told Nic to just make up something to tell Miss Flapps Her-Arms. So, he did. That is when Nic and Pickled discovered an amazing fact: it didn't matter what they said to people. Sure, some people got mad and complained when they were given wrong directions, but *Navibrain* already had their credit card numbers. The few people who took time to ask for their money refunded were cheerfully told that it would be credited to their accounts right away. Several months later, the money was credited. Pickled and Nic kept the interest they had earned on the money.

That is when they stumbled upon the capitalist's dream: they could make money by doing nothing. Pickled and Nic started a slew of other companies that claimed to do many different services, such as rust proof cars, clean furniture, change the oil on snowmobiles, fix roofs, run errands, water plants, water children, deliver sushi, eat sushi, wash airplanes, and so forth. But, in fact, they did nothing. They had no overhead whatsoever. They just collected the payments, put them in the bank to collect interest, and then gave the money back to customers who complained. They kept the interest. They found the best services to offer were those that customers had to wait a long time to find out if they worked, like rust-proofing cars.

Pickled and Nic made a lot of money. Sure, they made money on the interest they earned, but mostly they got rich off the apathetic customers who never asked to have their money refunded. People were forgetful, after all. Pickled Cucumber kept ninety percent and he gave Nicaragua Mars ten percent. They were making plenty.

It all came to an end one hot summer day. Nic's younger brother, Obese, had discovered what was going on and wanted in on the deal. So, Obese started his own company – a dating service called *Meet Your Soul Mate or Someone Vaguely Similar*. Obese's intention was to do nothing, just to collect money. He was able to obtain a free website called MYSMOSVS.com where people could pay by credit card. Obese found that a huge number of people were willing to sign up to meet their soul mates or someone vaguely similar. The business was a success. But then he met *her* – I mean Lullaby U. Dreamscape. And, the most wonderful thing happened. Not to Obese, but to Nic. They fell in love.

Lullaby and Nic were a perfect couple. That is, if by perfect you mean pretty good. They fell in love right away. Well, if by right away you mean fairly fast. Soon they got married and Lullaby changed her name to Venezuela Mars. However, unfortunately for Nic and Pickled Cucumber, Lullaby, I mean Venezuela, did not like the unethical nature of their businesses. Venezuela insisted that Nic give up doing nothing for a living. That's what Venezuela Mars wanted, so that's what Venezuela Mars got. You see, Nicaragua Mars, I mean Nic, was a good and obedient husband.

Well, the idea of starting an ethical business was so foreign and unsettling to Pickled Cucumber that he left town immediately and headed for the big city with his didgeridoo. When he got there he immediately landed a job engineering dirty tricks and spreading lies for a political party, which was quite fitting since schadenfreude and stealing money for the rich seemed to be Pickled's main preoccupations; it was precisely what he was good at.

On the other hand, Nicaragua Mars thought that starting an ethical business seemed an excellent idea. Since Nic had encountered so many unusual names, he thought

it would be a good idea to start a business that helped companies create names for their products. So, he did. He called his business *The Really Good Name Company*. As you would expect, he was excellent at it since he had a lot of experience with names.

Now, wouldn't you just know it, Nic's new business giving names to products was a big success. He was very good at creating names. Very good, indeed. His first job had been for a mattress company called *Drowsy Knights* that was putting out a new line of pillowtops. Nic named the company's number one elite mattress after his wife's original maiden name – the Lullaby Dreamscape. The officials at *Drowsy Knights* loved it, and Nic was a success, an ethical success.

By the way, a year after they met, Nicaragua and Venezuela Mars had a beautiful baby girl. She was adorable. She was the light of their lives. They found her not the least bit taxing. Fortunately, she had the looks of her mother and the brains of her father. Well, that is, without the map, of course. And, what do you suppose they named their precious little dear? Well, I'm certainly not going to give that away here. You will just have to imagine. But, I'll tell you this, her name is a real doozy!

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MARY and BOB and PIE

Gilmore Tamny

Mary's very funny. Bob's very regulated. They eat this kind of pie no one's ever heard of. Once, they served it at brunch, and I walked in on them in the kitchen and Bob had his hand down the front of Mary's jeans, just like that, casually rummaging around. I never knew what to make of it and it made me feel a bit forlorn, partly because at that moment, there was no one rummaging around the front of my pants, but, also I got the feeling she was tolerating with—no that's too strong—indulging the rummaging for his sake rather than her own pleasure, and that seemed rather a lonely business for Bob. I wondered if her pants often as a touchstone of sorts. Is that how married people are? It's hard to say from my vantage point. I've had affairs and lovers, sure, but haven't had a person there, solid, immobile, in my life, like a boiler or a golem or Stonehenge dolomite thingy, as is possible. Bob stands holding a beer from another country, looking bland, handsome, un-unhappy, blazered, distinguished. The other guests are going into peals of laughter over something Mary said, as they often are. He seems unmoved, but perhaps he's just inured. I want to ask him what it's like to live with such a charming person, but perhaps I already know: you want to put your hand down their pants at odd moments, in the stillness of a late morning's brunch or as you lean back in a closet as you find your coats after a party. I thought I witnessed this anyway, at Cheryl and Tim's. You think I'm strange for noticing? I say you are far, far stranger for not.

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Sat Watching

F. X. James

William Harris was sitting on his front porch, drinking coffee, watching the traffic go by. He did this every day around the same time, five in the evening or close to it, even on weekends, and he had done it now for several years. William, Bill to anyone who knew him, was nearing his third year of unemployment. He was once a carpenter making twenty-two dollars an hour with excellent benefits and a retirement plan to be envied. Now he was entirely dependent on state disability and food stamps, for he could not find a way to successfully manage the pain that constantly ran from the base of his neck to just above his coccyx.

Bill slipped from working scaffolding surrounding the city's new library one chilly November morning and fell twenty feet to a pile of frost covered bricks below. A witness to the fall said Bill dropped without making a sound, which made it all the easier for Bill to hear his back snap like kindling when he landed. There was talk that he would never walk again, but it was only talk, and a year after the fall Bill was moving unaided from his living room to the front porch in a little under five agonizing minutes.

By today he'd cut that time way down, and anyone looking at Bill as he moved about his small world might be hard pressed to see him as a man in tremendous pain, though some, the more perceptive types who were astute enough to catch the twitching of his cheek muscles or the flexing of his jaw or gleam of sweat across his brow, might recognize any one of these as signs of a proud man suffering his lot in silence.

Bill owned a Harley-Davidson motorcycle, a 1997 Super Glide with matte black tank and fenders, leather saddle bags, and eighteen thousand miles on the clock. Before the fall Bill never thought of himself as an avid motorcyclist, like some. Back then he was purely a fair weather rider, making local journeys of less than fifty miles or so, and mostly making these only on sunny weekends. But he was proud to own an American-built machine just the same, even though he no longer used it. The bike's domestic pedigree nicely offset his foul weather ride: a 1988 wine red Toyota 4Runner with a hundred and ninety-seven thousand miles on the clock and a hairline crack in the engine block. It too sat in the drive, leaking almost a quart of oil about once every month or so, but Bill liked the wretched thing nonetheless.

His sister Annie came by once a week with loaves of homemade bread and a small stockpile of Bill's basic grocery needs. She shopped with his food stamp debit card and insisted on showing him the receipt that displayed at the bottom how much was left in his account. Bill would nod and smile and thank his sister for her efforts. They had a good relationship, and Bill really liked her husband, Jonah, and their two young children, Hillary and Sam. Once a month they all descended on Bill's place for Sunday brunch, an event Bill looked forward to.

Bill rotated his back ever so gently from side to side and winced at the pain. Shortly he would make the trip back inside to begin his daily regime of exercises as prescribed by his physical therapist, Helen, a comfortably large black woman with huge breasts Bill secretly longed to fondle and kiss.

There were birds in the trees to the left of the porch and during a sudden pause in the parade of traffic, Bill could hear them singing. He didn't know what sort of birds they

were, nor did he know the names of the trees in which they sat, but such ignorance never suppressed the joy he felt at hearing their song. He was just getting to the point of telling the tunes of three specific birds apart (or so he thought), when a garbage truck rumbled by, leaving only the guttural roar of a diesel engine to be heard. This was quickly followed by a slew of rushing cars, the tinny buzz of a Japanese motorcycle, and a speeding delivery van trailing a thick plume of blue exhaust, all working in cahoots to silence the few natural sounds to be briefly enjoyed on another late afternoon in town. The traffic was back again to its near constant rhythm.

Bill sipped his coffee and drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair. Now and then he waved to car drivers or motorcycle riders passing by. The puzzled looks of the drivers always made him smile. Riders often waved back or gave quick nods in his direction. Bill believed this was because his own bike was parked in the drive beside the Toyota and clearly visible from the road. There was a camaraderie among motorcycle riders, Bill knew this firsthand from his weekend days of pleasure riding when almost every rider he met on the sunny roads waved as Bill went by. Bill always waved back, of course, even grinning a little with pride behind the tinted Perspex of his visor.

Bill took a deep breath and struggled to stand, exhaling a controlled stream of air through his mouth as he slowly ascended. There was pain, of course, flashing bursts of it twisting up and down his spine and across his shoulders. But he could move at least, and thank god for that much. During his month long stay in the hospital he'd seen plenty of other less fortunate souls. Men and women both who would see out the rest of their days propped up in a mobile chair. One other patient in particular broke Bill's heart. A teenage girl, Carol, dropped from the back of her boyfriend's motorcycle when he pulled a sudden wheelie while speeding down the highway. Carol, unprepared for the stunt, went straight off the small pillion seat and right under the wheels of a UPS van. The medical staff said she was lucky to be wearing a helmet at the time, but it never felt like luck to Carol, she told Bill, now that she was ruined from the neck down. Bill had to agree with her on this, nodding sagely whenever she talked about it, which was often. If it had happened to him, he knew damn well he'd want death as well. Save all the worthless guff and platitudes for her family. Total immobility was no life at all and he and Carol knew it.

Bill decided he would get himself another cup of coffee and bring it back out to the porch before he began his daily exercises. He was a disciplined man, but not one to punish himself for taking a little leeway here and there. He'd get to the exercises like he always did, just like he promised the buxom Helen he always would.

Back inside he poured a fresh cup and took another three painkillers with the first hot swallow. He thought about dinner while he was there. He hadn't been hungry for most of the day, just snacking here and there on cashews and small pieces of dried fruit. Before resuming his early evening post out on the porch he'd spent most of his time inside, reading, and watching movies in his room. He stood at the sink and rubbed his hand along the cool metal rim, then drew the back of a forefinger across his wet brow. Carol, he thought. Whatever happened to Carol? He took another sip of coffee and shambled over to the drawer beneath the microwave oven. He opened it and dug beneath the towels and rarely used kitchen utensils until his fingers touched their quest, a folded sheet of printed paper listing contact numbers of the hospital. At the bottom of the page, scribbled faintly in pencil in Bill's own hand, was Carol's home phone number, as

dictated to him by her nearly three years ago. The area code was not there, but he knew that was because she lived locally or did so when they first met. He drew his thumb lightly across the numbers. He felt his heart jump, but knew it was not a romantic zap of any kind. Carol was a fraction of his age. She was a tragically broken girl made to live under a rule fashioned from a twisted sense of concern. But it was not a rule she had made for herself. Was she still alive today? Bill wondered. Had she found some desire of her own to keep going? Was she living now because *she* wanted to?

Bill folded the sheet of paper again and clutched it between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand. He then moved at his own pace toward the telephone mounted on the wall by the kitchen door, the fingers of his right hand lightly brushing the surfaces they passed: table, counter, stovetop, sink. He had the phone in one hand and the paper in the other when he heard the explosion outside, or that's what it sounded like to him at the time, like the shattering rip of glass and metal beneath the awning of a terrific boom.

A few minutes from this moment, during what became the last few seconds of his life, Bill would wonder why such a thing as a motorcycle crash right outside his door should sound like an explosion in the first place. Bill dropped the phone and paper both and spun around too fast. He yelped at the pain and clutched the base of his spine, kneading the thick column of bone vigorously with his knuckles as he shuffled to the front door, the phone left hanging from its twisty coil of black wire.

On the porch he could see what had happened. A motorcycle rider had hit a car pulling out of the driveway of an old man Bill had spoken to once or twice before. He couldn't recall the old man's name, but did remember the old man sharing the story of his wife's death with him sometime last year. She had fallen down the stairs, the old man had said, fallen down alone while the old man was visiting a friend. When he returned she was there at the foot of the stairs, a large pool of blood drifting out like spilled paint from beneath her head, the old man told Bill. He knew she was dead, knew it without even having to touch her, he said. Bill could only shake his head at this and make soft commiserating sounds with his mouth. He wanted the old man to stop talking, wanted him to just turn around and go back home, to keep his tragedies to himself, keep them private like you would a sexual proclivity that went beyond the realm of normalcy and toward some dark and ugly place. But the old man kept talking, his gnarly hand occasionally squeezing Bill's arm as he shared his sad and morbid tale.

Bill thought that perhaps the old man had pulled out of his drive without looking. He could tell from the twisted front of the bike that it had been a hard collision, indicating the bike had been moving fast, much too fast for this particular road and time of day. The forks were mangled and the wheel was completely bent, the tire there shredded and hanging from the metal rim in dark strips, looking to Bill like leaves of dried tobacco. Other things came to Bill's mind in the sixty seconds or so it took for him to move quickly and painfully from his porch to the dead rider's side (and clearly he was dead, for Bill could see a bright pool of blood spreading from beneath the rider's unprotected head. Such near-comical irony he thought, as he shambled along, sweating and wincing more than he had in years). The first of these was the lack of any other traffic around, as if the road had been closed several hundred yards in either direction just prior to the accident, leaving the rider and old man to their volatile fate. The crisp clarity of birdsong then suddenly came unhindered to Bill's ear. No other cars and the birds are singing again, he thought, or perhaps they never actually stop.

The motorcycle had plowed into the driver's door of the old man's car. Bill could see the old man slumped in his seat, his head still bobbing gently. The windshield and driver's window were both opaque and completely webbed with tiny little cracks, like veins in a leaf. Bill made it to the car, clutching the base of his spine, sweat in his eyes and across his chest, his breath coming in short, difficult bursts, pain gripping the length of his vertebrae. He looked in through the passenger window and saw blood down the front of the old man's shirt. He couldn't see where it was coming from, but it was a lot. Bill tried opening the door but it was locked. He tapped on the window to get the old man's attention. The old man turned slowly to him, blinked his gray eyes once and fell like a stone into the passenger seat. I won't have to touch you either, old man, to know that you're dead, thought Bill. He stood back from the car and remembered the rider. Huge clouds hid the late afternoon sun. I shouldn't be here, thought Bill. He looked up and down the road, and still there was nothing, not so much as a single vehicle. His mind struggled with this, he had never known it so quiet at this time of day. Part of him thought it was a sick joke, some elaborate prank, like the sort he'd seen played on celebrities on late night television shows. I shouldn't be here, he thought again. I haven't called Carol yet, he thought. He could see the legs and feet of the motorcycle rider. One foot glistened with fluid and Bill knew it was blood. The poor dead soul was still halfway in the road. If Bill could just get him out of there, pull him back up into the old man's drive, then he could go back home and call for help.

Bill moved around the car, dragging fingers lightly across the cool surface of glass and metal. The pain in his back was excruciating. He knew he was getting low on painkillers. He'd need Annie to make a trip to the pharmacy for him soon, maybe as early as tomorrow morning. He felt bad having her do so much for him though. She had her own life to live. A husband to care for, kids to clean and feed. A house to keep in order.

The clouds moved on and a soft gold light fell upon the tableau. Bill could see the rider was a young man, dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt. The motorcycle had fallen and trapped his left leg, pinning him to the ground. Bill noticed the bright yellow tank and fenders of the bike, a Honda. He could smell the mix of oil and gasoline and blood. He felt dizzy and weak and there were sounds now building inside his head, low mechanical rumblings, slowly gaining volume. The traffic! The traffic had finally come back. Someone could help him now. Someone could lift this machine off this poor dead boy (for Bill knew such a feat of strength was far beyond his ability alone, knew if he even tried the pain would knock him out cold, if not kill him too). There was a truck now, he could hear it. Another motorcycle even. Cars galore now. Bill didn't look for them, he didn't need to see who would stop first to help, he just knew someone would. There was just too much blood, too much destruction to be avoided. He kept moving around the car, closer to the face of the dead rider. Suddenly he wanted to share this awful event with Carol, perhaps death witnessed by him firsthand would give her a newfound strength to live, should she need it. Yes, he thought, I'll call her and she'll remember me and be so happy to know that I never forgot her, then I'll tell her all about this amazingly sad and final event; the old gray eyes fading to lightless orbs, the young man cut down in his prime, two deaths in only a handful of seconds. Bill was thinking all these things in a rapid fire jumble of incomplete words and flashes of imagery. Whatever speed (and lack of protection) caused the young rider's death was nothing compared to the immeasurable speed of the human mind.

When the bloodied rider's hand then reached out and gripped Bill's left ankle, that immeasurably fast mind of Bill's simply went blank. For a few seconds it could process nothing of use to him at all. No more sounds or imagery. No more names or faces of familiar loved ones or previous acquaintances who can no longer move from the neck down. No feeling of warmth upon his neck from the sinking late afternoon sun. In that one unacceptable moment as the hand closed upon him (for the hand of a "dead man" cannot possibly move and therefore has to be unacceptable), Bill lacked the awareness of every infinitesimal thing that had come together to make him who and what he was on this day, Mr. William Harris, Bill to anyone who knew him, ex-carpenter, and for the last three painful years, state dependant.

The grip from the young man (who was of course, not yet dead), was strong, incredibly strong, and beyond Bill's involuntary ability to keep the basic functions of his body continuing, this strong grip was the *only* clear thing that came back to Bill's mind. He gave out a loud shriek and shook himself free from the bloody fingers (spider legs, Bill's brain offered up, now it was getting itself back on track. Massive, hairless, goddamn fucking spider legs.). He staggered back, back into the road, with his arms spread wide, as if welcoming the embrace of a dear friend (Carol? Oh, even more irony there) or family member (Annie? Annie who does so much to help, too much), he looked and saw the fallen rider's blood again, flowing from beneath the young man's broken head like a cut of beautiful silk. The sounds, he thought, the sounds that were gone and now are back, the roaring, thrumming sounds of all that weight and speed and help.

Bill did not close his eyes when he fell, but the driver of the truck did.

F. X. James: I've had words published in Icon, Illuminations, Yawp, The Binnacle, Into the teeth of the wind, Art Times, The laughing dog, and others.

A Dress On A Mannequin

Travis Coover

Ingrid passed through the revolving door and into the lobby of the *Harrison's* department store. A man with a maroon blazer and matching dress slacks greeted her upon her entrance, a thin moustache outlining his upper lip. He looked to be in his mid-50's, with dark hair that he parted to one side, and a brass ring on his right ring finger that she noticed as she returned a polite, "hello" to him. Ingrid felt at ease by the man in the maroon jacket. In the past, she wasn't fond of being greeted by store employees. In her younger years she had worked the matinee hours at a movie theatre, cleaning up popcorn, and sticky candy off of the floor of the foyer. Her manager, a portly man who could best be described as, sweaty, used to make her greet everyone who came through the door with a prepared welcome:

"Hello, welcome to the Canyon Creek Movie Theatre. My name is Ingrid, and if you need anything at all, just give me a holler."

She projected her resentment from that job onto store greeters, and felt she was being patronized. In this instance though, the greeting felt genuine, caring almost.

As she passed through the lobby, running, her fingers over the top of the salmon colored customary "bored husband" couch, Ingrid realized she was in one of *those* moments. That peculiar instance in which a person walks into a room, having no recollection as to why they entered in the first place. Certainly it made sense why she was in the lobby, she had just entered the store. However, Ingrid could not recall why she had come to the store at all. In fact, the entire day up to that point seemed quite cloudy. It wasn't that she couldn't remember anything about the day, but rather, that those events seemed distant, floating, and non-linear.

Ingrid passed through the lobby and into the women's clothing department on the first floor. It was a weekday afternoon and the place was practically empty, aside from a few shoppers sprinkled here and there. One of these shoppers, a middle-aged woman, was thumbing through an assortment of summer dresses, as her teenage son followed behind her, bored out of his mind. Ingrid noticed something peculiar about the boy. He was wearing a green sweater, with a big capital P on the upper left side. It was the type of school jacket kids used to wear in the 50's and 60's, the predecessor to the big and puffy letterman jackets. On his left sleeve, was a patch in the shape of a baseball, and the number 11 stitched on the inside.

"Excuse me, I don't mean to bother you," Ingrid said.

"I was just wondering where you got that sweater from? I can't remember the last time I saw one of those."

"You can get them at our school bookstore. If you play a sport, they'll give you a patch to put on the side," the boy said.

"Some guys in my class will even play a sport just for the patch. They think girls like it; maybe they're right, who knows?"

The three laughed.

"That'd be neat if all of the schools still made those vintage school sweaters, I bet they'd sell a lot of them."

"What's vintage?" the boy said.

"You know, like retro, or old-fashioned."

“Old-fashioned? I’ve never seen any old folks wearing anything like this. And besides, all of the other schools have letterman sweaters just like ours, in their own school colors, of course. Doesn’t your school have the same type of sweaters?”

“My school?” Ingrid said, amused.

“I’m not in high school, haven’t been in a long time.”

“Huh, you look like you’re still in high school. I would’ve guessed you were a sophomore, or a junior at the most.”

“Well, that’s very sweet of you to say.”

The boy’s mother chimed in,

“Certainly you must have seen other teenagers around town wearing the same thing?”

“No, I can’t say that I have.”

There was a silent pause, as the three realized they had reached an *en passé* on clearing the confusion.

“Well, you two have a wonderful rest of the day.”

The mother and son nodded politely, as Ingrid walked back to the main walkway that divided the first floor of *Harrison’s* in half.

Ingrid dismissed the conversation with the boy and his mother as just some type of misunderstanding. She began perusing the different outfits that were for sale, partly for leisure, and partly to spark some type of memory as to why she had gone shopping in the first place. As Ingrid neared the cosmetics counter, she caught a mannequin display in her periphery. The mannequin was dressed in a fluffy sea-foam green dress, which looked as though it would only leave that store in the hands of an over eager junior for her prom, or by a vindictive bride who wanted to make sure her bridesmaids didn’t look as good as her at her calypso themed wedding. Just then, the strangest feeling overwhelmed Ingrid. She had seen that dress before. She wasn’t sure where, only that she had seen it. There was something else too. Though the dress was objectively unattractive, Ingrid felt a strong fondness for it.

“I remember how beautiful you looked in that dress.”

Ingrid turned to the woman behind the cosmetics counter,

“Excuse me?” Ingrid said.

“When you came in that day, you were so excited when you saw yourself wearing it in the mirror. You looked beautiful.”

Like the man at the entrance, the woman behind the cosmetics counter was wearing maroon. She had on a maroon pencil skirt, with a matching coat, with a white blouse underneath. On her left lapel was a gold hummingbird pin. Also like the store greeter, she looked to be in her 50’s. She had blonde hair that came down to her chin, parted down the middle.

“I think you have me mistaken for someone else,” Ingrid said. “I don’t have a dress like that, and I’m quite certain we’ve never met before.”

The woman kept her eyes on the dress, and continued talking to Ingrid as though Ingrid had said nothing.

“You were shopping here for hours, looking for the perfect dress for that night. You kept saying that everything had to be perfect, just perfect. Finally, you saw that dress on the mannequin, and I saw your eyes light up. I saw how much you loved it, instantly. I bet that night was the fairytale you wanted it to be, wasn’t it?”

The eyes of the woman behind the counter were now welled up with tears.

“I’m sorry miss, but you’re thinking of someone else. It must’ve been another woman who looked a lot like me, but it certainly wasn’t me. I don’t own a dress like that, and frankly, if I was looking for a dress for this ‘fairytale’ night, then it certainly wouldn’t be that one.”

“I remember *my* high school prom,” the woman behind the counter said. “It was one of the greatest nights of my life.”

Ingrid stared at her for a moment, waiting for some type of response that related to what Ingrid had said to her. The woman’s gaze though, remained on the dress.

“Maybe *you* should buy it,” Ingrid said.

“It seems like you really like it, and I bet you get some sort of employee discount.” Nothing.

Ingrid slowly turned away from the cosmetics counter, and began walking toward the lobby. She wasn’t sure why she had come to *Harrison’s*, and frankly, she didn’t care anymore. Something strange was happening. The interactions she had had were bizarre enough, and she wasn’t sure if it was the store, or if something had shaken loose in her mind, but she needed to get out of there.

As a mental exercise, Ingrid would often retrace the events of the day before, and continue until she could no longer remember, often going back as far as a week. She would recall things like, meals she had eaten, friends she had run into, and television programs she had watched. Today, Ingrid would not have fared so well. She couldn’t remember what she had for breakfast, or lunch, or if she had even eaten those meals at all. As she struggled with this, Ingrid again encountered the man in the maroon suit near the *Harrison’s* exit.

“Hello again miss, was there something I can help you with?”

“I don’t think so. I think... I think I should really be leaving.”

“Well miss, I’m sorry to hear that, may I ask, if you had trouble finding what you were looking for today?”

“I guess you could say that.”

“Miss, I can’t help but notice that you look a little flustered, is everything alright?”

“Well, to be honest, I can’t recall why I came to *Harrison’s*, and now everything seems a little confusing. I’d like to just go to my car, and go home.”

“Certainly miss. Would you like a glass of water before you leave? Perhaps you’d like to rest on our lobby couches, until you feel better?” Ingrid didn’t want to rest on one of those ugly couches; she wanted to leave. She turned from the man in the maroon suit and walked out of *Harrison’s*, and into the parking lot. Her hands shook, as she rummaged through her purse for her keys. Finally hearing that sound of metal jangling together that brings everyone a sigh of relief, Ingrid pulled out the keys to her car. The relief turned to panic instantly when she looked up. The *Harrison’s* parking lot was completely full, not one empty spot that she could see. More troubling, much more troubling, was that every car in that parking lot was a 1968 royal blue Volvo 122, the same type of car that she drove.

This is it. This is what it feels like when you lose your mind, she thought. Slowly, Ingrid passed over the crosswalk, and approached the first car in the lot. Hanging in the rear view mirror was a small tiki-head, about the size of a liter, carved out of beech wood.

The bright green yarn that tied it to the mirror was twisted, and the back of the tiki faced the windshield. On the inside, "Hawaii 1984" had been carved into it. *Breakthrough*. Ingrid recognized the ornament immediately as her own. *This is my car*. She slid her key into the driver's side door, and turned. At least, she tried to turn it. She wiggled the key back and forth for a few seconds, to no avail. Ingrid pulled it out to make sure it was her car key, and that she hadn't absent-mindedly tried to open her car with her house key. No, it was the right one. Again, she tried to open the car, and again the lock didn't budge. A tear slid down her cheek, and landed on her hand, which was now flushed white.

Ingrid walked around the front of the car, and looked down the long row of *Volvo 122's*. In each rearview mirror was a tiki-head, dangling on a bright green string of yarn. She wasn't worried about her memory anymore, now she was just scared.

When her hands hit the glass on the revolving doors of *Harrison's*, she thought they were going to smash completely through. Ingrid was again in the lobby, leaning over with her hands on her knees, the revolving door spinning voraciously behind her.

"Hello Miss, welcome to *Harrison's*, how is your day going so far?"

Ingrid looked up and saw the man in the maroon suit, his hand outstretched toward the first floor women's clothing department, the brass ring still on his ring finger.

"What's...what's happening?"

"I'm not sure I understand, Miss, is there something in particular you're looking for? I can point you in the right direction."

"Is this some type of sick joke? Who are you people?"

"Why Miss, we are *Harrison's*, the best department store in the state, if you ask me. Miss, I can't help but notice that you look a little flustered, is everything all right? Would you like a glass of water? Perhaps you'd like to rest on our lobby couches, until you feel better?"

"You literally asked me the exact same thing five minutes ago. No, I don't want any water, and I sure as hell don't want to lie down on one of those hideous couches."

"My apologies, Miss."

Ingrid was not a rude person. Normally, she would never talk to someone that way, but it seemed like maybe he was holding something from her.

The women's clothing department was out of the question. The problem though, was that there was no question. Passing the lobby, she made a left and took the escalator to the second floor. It may as well have been another universe. The aesthetics of this floor were completely different to the first. There were bright pink and blue neon lights that zigzagged along the walls. There were mural paintings as well. Not of happy customers, or scenic places in the city, but random geometric shapes, and floating Greek busts with sunglasses on. The carpet had a space theme, with planets and constellations spreading across the entire floor. After taking everything in, Ingrid realized that this floor was electronics.

In one area, there were *Zenith* and *Quasar* big screen televisions, accompanied by those antennas with the giant rabbit ears. *I didn't even know they made analog televisions anymore*. On the wall to the right of the televisions, were rows and rows of VCR's. *I wonder if this place buys used stuff?* Ingrid continued walking around the second floor, not realizing she was the only customer. After the VCR's, were glass cases of record players, *Walkmen*, and bundled blank cassette tapes. The back of the store was geared

towards kids. RC cars and remote control speedboats sat on their respective boxes, leading up to the back counter.

“Your kid must’ve gotten a really good report card for you to be looking at getting him one,” the kid behind the counter said. He looked to be twenty at the most. He had on a maroon polo, with a name tag, “Clark: Electronics.”

“I’m sorry?” Ingrid said.

“Your kid, they must’ve gotten some really good grades for you to think about buying them a *Nintendo*.” In the glass case were boxes and boxes of the old *Nintendo* systems. Behind Clark, were the game cartridges: *Mario Bros 2*, *Gunsmoke*, *Tetris*, *The Legend Of Zelda*, and countless others.

“I can’t believe you guys still sell these. How long have *Nintendo*’s been around, twenty-five years?”

“Miss, *Nintendo*’s have only been out for a couple of years. They’re our most popular piece of merchandise in all of *Harrison*’s. You might be thinking of *Atari*, but even those aren’t that old.”

Ingrid looked down for a moment, pinching her bottom lip between her thumb and index finger.

“This may seem silly,” she said. “But, what year is it?”

“What year is it, Miss?”

“Yes, humor me, what year is it?”

“It’s 1989.”

But that’s...impossible. Ingrid had an idea.

She took the escalator back down to the first floor. Avoiding the woman behind the cosmetics counter, Ingrid saw that the mother and her son were still shopping.

“Hello, I’m sorry to bother you two again, but I have to ask you another question. Can you tell me what year it is?”

The mother looked at Ingrid for a second, “it’s 1959.”

“1959, okay.” She looked at the boy. “Earlier, you said that you thought that I was in high school, right? So how old do I look to you?”

“I don’t know, sixteen, or seventeen.” She turned from them, without responding, and walked up the escalator to the second floor, and to the back where the “brand new” *Nintendo*’s were.

“How old do I look to you?”

“Excuse me, miss?”

“How old do I look to you? You said earlier that you thought I was buying one of these for my kids. That would mean that I’m at least old enough to have a kid that would play video games. So, don’t b. s. me, how old do you think I am?”

“Jeez, miss I don’t know, mid- forties, maybe forty five?”

“Great, mid-forties, forty-five, thank you.”

It was now becoming clear that there were more than just stairs that separated these two floors. It only seemed fitting for Ingrid to take the escalator up to the next floor.

As she reached the third, and top level of *Harrison*’s, Ingrid could see that the overhead track lighting was flickering above her. This floor was hollow. No employees, no one. In the back corner was a gift-wrapping station, with several wrapping paper square samples laminated behind a giant piece of Plexiglas, which was hung to the left of the service window. At one time this floor may have been the home to kitchenware, or

maybe outdoor equipment, like hedge-clippers and lawnmowers, but now nothing. There were a few miscellaneous boxes here and there, as well as undressed mannequins missing a limb, or their head, but that's all.

Ingrid decided that this floor would be no use to her, and made her way to the escalator. Before reaching the first step, she caught her reflection in a discarded dressing room mirror propped up against the wall. *Would you look at that*, she thought. In the mirror, Ingrid saw an old woman, with gray hair that ran to about her shoulders. She was close enough now to the mirror that her breath fogged up on the glass. She slowly began to run her fingertips over the wrinkles of her face, starting from her crows-feet, and making her way down to her neck.

Oh, I see. She began to laugh, hard. Again there were tears in her eyes, but not tears of sadness or confusion.

Bypassing the second floor, she returned to the women's department. When she stepped off of the escalator, Ingrid noticed the small bridal area to the right. Just as she was drawn to the ugly sea foam green dress earlier, she was now approaching one of the wedding dresses.

That's...that's my wedding dress. Immediately, she remembered walking down the aisle in the dress, all those years back. Reynold was waiting for her at the altar, both of them trying not to laugh from the embarrassment of everyone staring at them. Afterwards at the reception in the Elk Lodge, their parents argued over who was going to pay for the cake when it ended up having more than the agreed upon tiers. Reynold's best man, Eddie, who'd been drunk since well before the wedding started, sang "Only You," while crying into the crackling P.A. system. Ingrid walked back to the cosmetics counter, and stared at the sea foam green dress on the mannequin. *Walt Sherman, THE Walt Sherman. He was so nervous when he asked me to go to Senior Prom. I interrupted with a "yes" before he got his whole little prepared speech out, just to save him from bumbling through the rest of it.*

"You looked so beautiful in that dress." The woman behind the cosmetics counter said, this time looking directly at Ingrid.

"I knew I just had to have it. The prom theme was 'Under The Sea,' after all. I never said thank you. That's something I realized later in life. I never thanked you, Mom, for buying that dress for me."

Ingrid's Mom walked around the counter, and hugged her, which may have been the only thing that kept Ingrid from collapsing.

"You still have that hummingbird pin I got you for your birthday."

"I wear this everyday, it's how you see me in your memory."

"I don't understand where I am," Ingrid said.

"I know sweetie, you must be overwhelmed. Just know that there are a lot of people who care about you, and are trying to help you. Reynold has been there for you all of these years, and Clark is the best grandson I could have ever hoped for. They want to bring you back from the static. It's because of how much they love you, and how hard they've worked that I'll always be here for you, standing behind this little cosmetics counter, here for whenever you need me."

Ingrid pulled her mom in closer, and kissed her on the forehead.

"It's okay to go outside now," her mom whispered.

She turned from the cosmetics counter, looking back, both of them smiling at one another.

Leaving the women's department, Ingrid again ran her fingers over the couches in the lobby. The man in the maroon jacket, turned to her,

"I hope you found everything okay, Miss."

She wrapped her arms around that him, rubbing his back,

"I did Dad, thank you."

Ingrid walked to the revolving doors, and began to pass through. As the glass doors rotated, the endless rows of *Volvos* dissipated, replaced by a warm, fluorescent glow.

After a few moments, the encompassing glow calmed, and Ingrid realized she was lying in a bed. She turned her head to the right and saw a table, with many items sprawled across. Her sea foam green prom gown, her wedding dress, the small tiki-head with green yarn tied through that she got in Hawaii, her Dad's class ring, and her Mom's gold hummingbird pin, were all placed neatly. When she looked up, she saw an observation area covered with glass panels. Men in lab coats with clipboards were staring down at her anxiously, clearly anticipating *something*. The door to this strange room burst open, and Reynold and Clark ran to her bedside.

Reynold leaned over her, his arms shaking uncontrollably as he gripped the metal handles on the side of the bed,

"Ingrid, honey, do you know where you are? Do you know who we are?"

Clark felt like he was going to burst out of his skin,

"Mom?"

Ingrid sat up quickly, eliciting gasps from the observation room.

"Reynold! Clark!" She pulled them both in, hugging them so hard that she lost the circulation in her arms.

"Oh my God," Reynold said. "It worked...it worked!"

Travis Coover is a writer from Riverside, California. He is writing a collection of short stories that will eventually manifest into a book. He is self-publishing a children's book, which is currently in print.