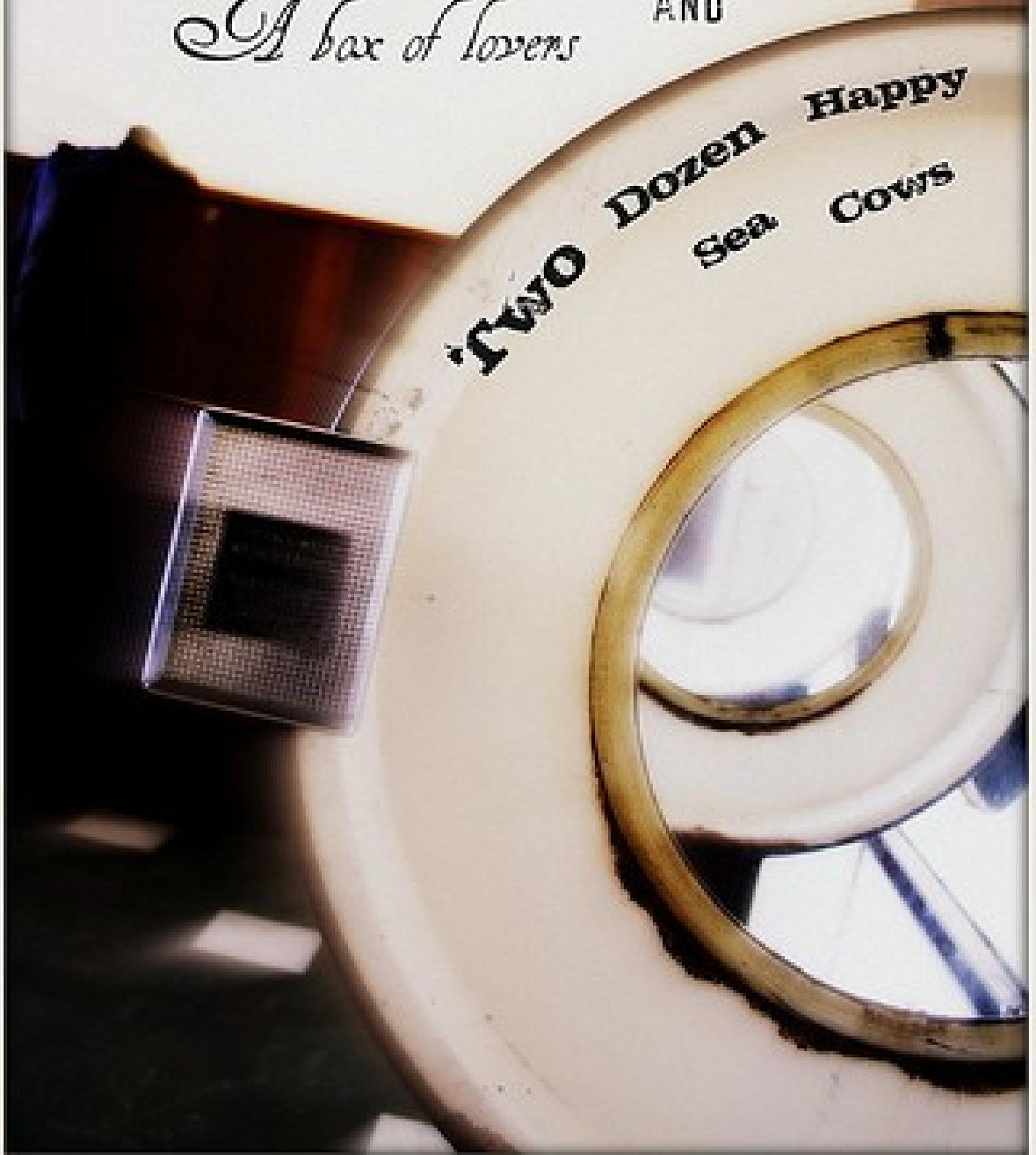


A HANDSOME LAUNDRETTE

A box of lovers

AND

**TWO DOZEN Happy
Sea Cows**



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Editorial

Ben Payne

Ever since humankind first fell out of the swamp-trees, it has delighted, bored and confused itself by telling stories. The earliest stories were told in pictures, of course, as the art of language had not yet been learnt. Years later, when people had learnt to talk, one of the primary early purposes of speech became to ask one another what on earth they had meant.

For as long as storytelling has existed, the argument over a story's ideal length has raged. The earliest fantasy trilogy occupies the cave system surrounding a small village in Peru, and is told in pictures across a labyrinth of three hundred and seventy-nine caves. The system was so complex that readers often became lost, creating early prototypes of post-modernism.

Around three million BC, editors first came into being. Few people know that Stonehenge was originally cut out of a large novel written on the wall of a mountain in the Edinburgh lowlands. The content has of course, long washed away, but the editor's point remains. More isn't always the opposite of less.

And so the short story was invented, and it has since become the most popular form of writing, eclipsing both novels and haiku-operettas to assume the position of most influential and financially viable artwork of the twenty-first century. At least that's what I seem to recall my friend Gavin telling me. The precise details elude me.

All of the above, while juicy, relevant and exceedingly interesting, is merely to "wet" your appetite for the main course which is to follow. I am referring, of course, not to any literal meal at all, but to the contents of this "menu" of stories, to be "eaten" by your eyes and then passed through the "bowels" of your mental processing centres, and voided into the lavatory of popular consciousness.

With that tantalising appetiser, I invite you to enjoy the first episode of Moonlight Tuber. I hope that you too find the short stories contained herein to be short in stature but not short in height when it comes to the hypothetical vertical measurement of enjoyment.

Enter if you do!!!!

The Briefcase

Ethan Canter

The only strong and deep passions are those which can stand the test of reason.

–Franz Kafka

Coughing into his handkerchief K- turns onto the old metal bridge. The wind across the water sprays freezing rain against his face, batting him from side to side as he walks. He narrows his eyes and hunches his shoulders, tries to hide behind the shelter of his up-turned collar. He cups his hands and warms them with his breath, but it makes him cough again. He digs his hands into his pockets and rubs his fingers against his palms, but the tingling, nearly anaesthetized sensation only makes them ache more.

A dirty, beady-eyed pigeon hobbles to the edge of the bridge. As K- passes, it takes flight. He watches it drop towards the water below, then disappear under the bridge.

A transport truck barrels past, making the bridge shake, and pulling behind it a thick mist of rain and diesel exhaust.

Across the bridge and halfway down a vacant street, fluorescent light glows through the condensation-covered all-glass front of a cafe-bar. Through it K- sees a blur of movement. As he gets closer he hears the drone of voices from inside.

The gust of cold air as he enters draws only a little attention. A few heads turn. The barman nods. And the door sucks itself closed behind him.

The cafe-bar is a long, high-ceilinged room with the bar in the middle and tables and chairs all around it. The barren walls are white and dirty. The ceiling is dirty and spotted with watermarks. And the fluorescent lights, uncovered and screwed to the ceiling, cast no shadows, but only debase the room further with their spray of uniformity.

At the bar, a rectangular island with high counters and no stools, K- orders a glass of hot water with lemon and a small bottle of vodka. His foot butts against something. He looks down and sees a shiny, black leather briefcase.

Scanning the room he spots Dag alone at a table against the wall, his eyes fixed on him and his hand raised and calling him over. As he sidesteps between two crowded tables a small hand grabs his arm. The hot water spills over the rim of the glass and burns his still numb fingers.

"Does it work good?" Veronika asks, looking back and up from her chair, her soft hair damp from the rain, her small breasts pulling at his downwards glance, and the gap from her missing tooth bringing back the memory of the sensation of his tongue accidentally slipping into it.

"It's good, yes," he says.

"You should come over and see my new one," she says, letting her hand graze his leg as she lets go of his arm. "It's bigger, and has colour."

"Sure," he says, his eyes drifting from her smile down to her breasts again.

"She's pretty," Dag says.

K- grunts softly in agreement, his elbows on the table, the glass of hot water and lemon in both hands held to his lips, the steam opening and warming his lungs.

"She's pretty," Dag repeats, turning and looking at her. "But she sleeps with everyone."

K- looks over at Veronika, the hot steam wetting his upper lip. "That's alright," he says.

Feeling their eyes on her, Veronika looks up. Twisting and tilting her head, she blows Dag a facetious kiss – he responds with a half-grin and a grunt. But as her eyes meet K-'s an unaffected, almost embarrassed look of affection crosses her face.

Without thinking K- takes a deep breath of the steam and then tries to hold back a cough. Veronika lowers her eyes as she's pulled back into the conversation at her table. K-'s look wanders past her to the lone briefcase still sitting on the floor by the bar.

"Why don't you marry her?" Dag says, relighting a thin cigar.

K- clenches the handkerchief in his hand and feels the heaviness of his body slouched in the chair.

"She would marry you I think," Dag says, crossing his thick, muscular legs. "And she's very pretty."

K- fills their two small glasses with vodka.

"Tell me," Dag says, pinching a piece of tobacco leaf from his lip and wiping it on his dark jean trousers. "Why don't you marry her?"

K- looks over at Veronika again. The young man across from her, with dark, slicked-back hair is talking – Veronika reaches across the table and covers his mouth with her hands – he grabs them, kisses them, smiles and keeps talking. Turning her head she catches K-'s eyes on her again. She covers her face with her hands. Then parting her fingers exposes one, then the other of her eyes to K-. This makes her laugh.

"I'm too old," K- says quietly, turning his glass of vodka in little circles on the table.

Veronika's young man heads to the bar, walking sidewise, walking backwards, still talking.

"Bah! You are like a child," Dag says. "I know. I know you."

The young man backs into the briefcase at the bar and knocks it over. K- stops fingering his glass, his eyes fixed on the briefcase. The young man turns, with open hands, ready to apologize – but there's no one there. He rights the briefcase, shrugs his shoulders to his friends at the table and turns to catch the barman's eye.

"Out here," Dag goes on, touching his hands and chest and face, "maybe you are not so young out here, okay. But that is nothing. Only the vain think they don't get old."

"Maybe you're right," K- says offhandedly, again turning his glass in circles.

"Maybe?" Dag says, feigning exasperation. Then leaning in a little, adds, playfully, "And maybe you are old, no?"

K- can't prevent a slight smile and chuckle.

"Good," Dag says, leaning back with satisfaction. "It is good to laugh." His small glass of vodka looks like a thimble-cup between his thick, weathered fingers. He clinks it against K-'s, in a deep voice says "Christos," and then downs it in one gulp.

K- drinks his vodka in three small swallows. And before he's set the glass back down on the table Dag's refilling it again.

"I want to tell you something," Dag says, the change in his voice drawing K- to look up at him. His eyes are heavy in their sockets. And his face, taut and weathered like a hide, only one day unshaven, seems, for the first time in K-'s memory, to falter. Dag holds his glass from the bottom, between his thumb and two fingers, and looks down into it as though there were something there to contemplate. K- watches him breathing, watches his chest inflate and deflate, inflate and deflate - and in the silence between them this mechanicalness makes K- uneasy, nervous. Dag grins slightly, to himself, lifts the vodka to his lips, throws his head back, and drinks it down.

"I have been thinking," Dag says. "A bad man does good things to forget that he is bad." Looking down he refills his glass. "And a good man does bad things to remind him that he is good." He reaches across and refills K-'s glass. "I am a bad man," he says, gesturing with the bottle and meeting K-'s eyes. "And you," he

says, with a smile and pointing the bottle at K-, "you are a good man." Replacing the bottle on the table he adds, "It is funny, no?"

"Funny?" K- asks.

"You and I," he says, gesturing with his hand. "Like day and night."

"It's not that simple is it?"

"No," he says with a chuckle. "And yes." He wets the tip of a fresh cigar between his lips. "Nothing is simple. But we make things simple."

The first smoke from his cigar hovers between them. K- smells it – sweet and winy – and it reminds him of something he just can't picture.

"Nothing is simple," Dag repeats to himself, looking down into his glass again.

The fluorescent lights suddenly flicker and go out. A hush falls over the room. Heads look around and up. And K-, in the silence and darkness, closes his eyes and takes one deep, calm breath.

Diffused by the misted front windows, the glow from the streetlight out front slowly brings the room back into view. Faces reappear out of the darkness, but look softened. Shadows stretch across tables and across the floor. And one by one all heads turn towards the front windows, expecting an answer or reason to appear there.

"It's the storm," someone says from the other side of the room. "Yes," adds another, "it must have hit the power station." And a light murmur begins again to fill the place.

Dag leans across the table and whispers to K-, "Then why is the streetlight still on?"

"Wait," a voice hollers from the front of the room. A dark silhouette stands poised against the windows, one arm raised with fingers outstretched, and the other wiping a hole in the condensation.

"What do you see?" an old man demands impatiently from the back.

"It's not the storm," the silhouette announces loudly, "there are still lights on everywhere." Turning from the window he adds, "It's just us – it's just here."

A chair scrapes against the floor as someone gets up. Slowly people gather at the front windows, rubbing away the condensation and looking out into the stormy night street.

A spark of light catches K-'s eye. The barman has struck a match and is lighting a candle. With the barmaid's help more are lit and delivered to the tables. K- asks if there is still hot water as the barmaid passes. She relays the question across the room. The barman checks the small electric burner behind the bar but shakes his head "No." The lack of hot water makes K- anxious, and then being anxious makes him cough. He winces from the sharp pain in his chest and tastes a bit of blood as it seeps between his teeth and settles onto his tongue. Trying to hide his actions he spits into the handkerchief while reaching for his vodka. Looking up he sees Dag intently watching something across the room. K- follows his eyes and

sees that the barmaid has discovered the briefcase and is asking everyone if it's theirs. With every head that shakes "No" she becomes more confused, and also more intrigued. Finally, standing at the door, her hands on her hips, she stares back at the lone, black case, still on the floor by the bar, and waits, it seems, for the thing itself to reveal to her to whom it belongs. With a resolved shrug of her shoulders she drops her hands from her hips and marches towards the thing.

"It's late," K- says, fingering his handkerchief nervously inside his coat pocket. "I should go."

Dag turns to look at him. "You haven't finished your drink," he says in protest, and refills both their glasses from K-'s bottle. "And I was just having a thought."

"Another time," K- says, pushing his chair back from the table.

"Wait," Dag says, reaching his hand across to K- but not touching him. "Just one last drink," he begs.

K-'s eyes dart across the room. Veronika has tired of her young man, and with pursed lips and a look of absent boredom fingers one of the two candles on her table. And at the bar the briefcase is now laid on the counter, the barmaid and barman inspecting it together.

K- turns back to Dag to find him with his glass raised.

"I was just thinking, you know," Dag says, his voice warm and melancholy, his eyes somehow both happy and sad, "that some things must be simple, because how else could we have such an idea."

K- lifts his glass. "Maybe you're right," he says.

Dag grins, but sadly, and with a strange tone of finality, says, "Another time then, my friend," and drinks.

Getting up from his chair K- sees Veronika staring at him. A soft smile comes and goes from her face. Walking past her he slows nearly to a stop, looking down at her again, wanting to say something, but not sure what. She looks up at him, her smile returning. His lips twitch, nearly smile, then nervously retighten.

As he leaves her behind his eyes come up and he sees the barman and barmaid working to unlock the briefcase with a knife. The air, hot and thick now, catches in his throat and he coughs. The barman and barmaid look over at him. He turns away quickly and heads for the door.

Outside the air is cold and sharp. The wind tears up and down the street, thrashing hard, icy rain against everything in its reach. K- clasps his collar, holds the handkerchief to his mouth, and coughing painfully walks up the street as fast as he can.

At the corner he stops, out of breath, and leans against a building. The wind shakes him back and forth. The rain has already soaked through the shoulders of his coat - he feels the cold and wet moving slowly down his back, chilling him and making him shiver.

Someone suddenly calls out his name from behind him. Turning, he sees Veronika running towards him, still in the midst of doing up her coat.

Beside him, her face flushed, her hair wet and sticking to her face, her breath warm and smelling of saliva, she looks at him. He stares back at her, and his want to say something returns. He opens his mouth. Her lips part in anticipation. And just as he begins to make the sound of a word a deafening crack and boom and blinding flash of light blow out the front windows of the cafe-bar. Glass and debris shoot like bullets in every direction. A cloud of black smoke punches across the street, hits the buildings there and curls back on itself. A streetlight creaks and falls onto a parked car.

Veronika swallows and slips her arm into K-'s.

The dust and smoke settle, blown and washed away by the wind and rain. And a soft flickering, from whatever's still burning inside what used to be the cafe-bar, dances on the debris-covered sidewalk out front.

K- coughs. Veronika squeezes his arm more tightly.

"Do you have hot water and lemon in your apartment?" he asks, still staring down the street.

"Yes," she says.

And as they turn and walk away, Veronika's arm cradled inside K-'s, a lone siren starts up in the cold distance.

Born in British Columbia, Canada, Ethan Canter grew up secluded from the world in a log cabin in the forests of North-West Ontario. After his parents divorced and his mother died, Ethan returned to the west coast of Canada to dedicate himself to writing and filmmaking. His poetry has appeared in magazines and anthologies in Canada and the USA, and his short films have screened in Canada, the USA and the UK. His first novel, ['here, there and nowhere.'](#) was published in 2006 by Inexpressible Publications.

A Sweet Story

Gitte Christensen

"I really shouldn't. I'm already way too fat," moaned the customer, an exceedingly slim, young thing who prowled back and forth peering into the display cabinet. The trays of sugar dusted millefeuilles, cream stuffed chocolate éclairs, decadent truffles, berry tarts, nutty knots and exotic pastries all endured the girl's greedy gaze with equanimity.

"Take your time. In this establishment, we do not rush things," said Sally, proprietress of *The Gingerbread House*, glancing through the shop window at the people hurtling past outside.

The girl suddenly hunched over the cabinet, fingers clawing at the glass. "Grandma used to make fairy bread just like that for my birthday parties."

"Did she?" murmured Sally. "Sounds like you had a happy childhood."

"Of yes," gushed the girl, now hovering over the shop's signature gingerbread men with their red buttons and roguish grins, "I swam and rode horses and sang in a choir and had lots of friends and heaps of fun."

"And are you still having fun?" Sally rested a hand on the counter.

The movement attracted the girls' attention. "I'm not as pretty as I used to be, or as strong, and I'm fat now and..." The girl's eyes fixed on a cupcake covered with candied Forget-Me-Nots. "That one! I want that one," she squealed.

Sally placed the cake on a cardboard square, which she then enveloped in a tent of tissue paper and dotted with a sparkly sticker.

"Wow," said the girl, "So much fuss for one little cake."

"Even a cupcake deserves respect," said Sally. The girl smiled, her lips parted to speak, but Sally stopped her. "Only when you truly mean it. We do not deal in perfunctory gratitude here."

The girl blinked, nodded, then headed for the door with her parcel. The bell overhead tinkled. The girl paused at the threshold, momentarily confused by the hurly-burly beyond, before threading herself back into the tangle of modern life.

Sally carried an empty tray into the bakery behind the shop, where Susan was busy contemplating a bubbling pot with a practitioner's eye and waving a sprig of thyme over it, and moved about quietly so as to not disturb any of her mother's power flows.

The doorbell jingled again while Sally was icing a batch of bat-shaped biscuits. In the shop, a man stood staring at a sparkly disc stuck to the tip of one finger.

"I bought cookies here?" he said.

"Two Triple Chocolate Cherry Swirls," agreed Sally. She stifled a yawn, smoothed back her long, golden hair, reflexively put on her kind and caring face.

The man looked up. "My wife and I ate them. Together. We had coffee, at home, not in a café, and we talked, and we *really* listened to each other."

"How lovely."

"I came back to ..."

Sally perked up. "Only if you swear with all of your soul that you really mean it from the bottom of your heart," she chanted.

"Oh, but I do. Thank you, thank you so very much for saving my marriage," exclaimed the man.

Sally's right hand made a strange gesture, then shot up and scooped the air. "You're welcome," she said.

"We talked," repeated the man with amazement.

"That's great. Now off you go."

The man spun around and shuffled away. Sally sighed when he came to a halt by the glass door and stared dazedly at the world outside.

"Shoo! We're done! Go home!" ordered Sally, and the man clumsily pulled the handle and stepped through the opened doorway.

Sally felt the substantial weight in her hand and grinned. She hit a key on the brass behemoth behind her. The antique cash register chimed and the drawer slid

out, filled with glistening beads and burnished blobs. A shimmering nugget slipped from Sally's palm into the till.

That's a lot of gratitude, thought Sally - the Triple Chocolate Cherry Swirl guy and his wife must have been in a very bad place.

"That's quite a stash we've collected, my girl," said Susan, who had snuck up from behind on her otherworldly feet. "Now remember, dear, we're a family business."

"Mum, how many times do I have to tell you that I'm not going to double-cross you and Dad this time," scolded Sally.

"Sorry dear. It's just that old habits die hard." Susan eyed the shiny hoard and sighed. "It's not right though, I shouldn't still be slaving away over my cauldrons after death. If only I'd known that good deeds are ... "

"Superannuation for the soul?" teased Sally, rolling her eyes at the predictability of her mother's ghostly moaning. "It is often mentioned, Mum."

"You know very well what I mean. That charity has an actual exchange rate in the hereafter was a surprise to even your Dad, and he knows every financial finagle in the book, and then some," said Susan in a finicky tone. "Believe me, there are a lot of angry, cash-strapped post-corporeals living in heavenly housing estates and subsisting on angelic largesse."

"I'm sure there are," said Sally.

"Still, we'll be set up for eternity once you arrive with this lot. Which reminds me..." Susan glanced at a contraption strapped to her wrist. "Must fly - visiting times are almost over and I have to establish an alibi."

"Give my love to Dad," said Sally.

"Four hundred and three years of Purgatory still to go," said Susan with a martyr's air. "Poor Barry. The living conditions are deplorable. It's driving him mad, I can tell you."

"Four hundred and three years reduced from a thousand thanks to his afterlife defence lawyer, whom I'm still paying off, I might add," snipped Sally. Sometimes her parents forgot to be grateful for the way things had turned out.

"Well, it's a silly system. It's not as if Barry killed anyone," said Susan huffily.

"Stealing is a sin, Mum. Not even Dad can scheme his way around that fact."

"Don't speak about your father as if he were a common criminal," scolded Susan.

"Sorry, Mum," said Sally, not wanting to get into another of their interminable debates about the technicalities of insider trading and creative accountancy.

"Everything you have, you owe to that very tidy fortune your father salted away for you," said Susan, starting to fade.

"Yes, Mum."

"I'll be back in two days. Remember to glaze the fruit flans with my Hitherto Potion. And mind the Serendipity Sponges don't burn."

"Yes, Mum."

Susan grinned. "This is like the old days. We're a good team, aren't we, my girl."

"Yes, Mum, we are," said Sally to the empty air.

She glanced out at all the people rushing past *The Gingerbread House*. A woman with a child in tow suddenly braked, her attention snared by something sweet in the window.

The woman looked up. Sally made eye-contact and smiled the way her parents had taught her to when she was a fair-faced, golden-haired girl spruiking the wonders of Susan the Sideshow Witch. The woman frowned and hurried off, yanking the child after her.

"Too late, lady," whispered Sally. "You can run, but you'll be back."

Sally closed the cash drawer, patted the register's comforting bulk, then headed for the ovens to check on her mother's sponges.

Born in Brisbane and raised a bit in almost every Australian state, Gitte also lived in Denmark for 13 years. She now resides in Central Victoria. Her speculative fiction has appeared in *Aurealis*, *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine*, *AntipodeanSF*, *The Tangled Bank: Love, Wonder and Evolution* (anthology) and will soon feature in *Arkham Tales*. To escape keyboards, she likes to grab a tent and a horse and trail ride through distant mountains.

The Peanut Guy

Peter M. Ball

Pandora has you driving down the coast road; two-hundred K's an hour, the Honda's thick tires sticking fast the concrete, looking out over the black sludge of the Pacific from the top of the cliffs. Sparse streetlights flick past on your right, one by one, filling in the gaps in the darkness that the headlights miss.

You keep your eyes on the road, your hands on the wheel. You ignore the maniac gleam in Pandora's eyes. You ignore the way her scent gets inside your head, all sugar and sour while she sweats out the candy. Six hours on the highway and Pandora still can't find a channel. She just cruises the static, searching for a station, twisting and turning in her seat. Enclosed spaces are hard on her senses; the streetlights reflect, one by one, on the dark stain of her sunglasses.

What? she says, and you lock your eyes back on the road. The concrete rolls underneath the car. Pandora punches your arm, short and sharp. *Hey.*

You risk looking at her. She pops another dose of candy and grins at you, her teeth stained pink.

Did I ever tell you about Jack?

You can't place the name.

That guy I lived with a few years back? The Peanut Guy?

You smile and raise an eyebrow. Pandora fidgets with the seatbelt while you wait for the story.

Jack and I lived together early on, she says, back when I was just starting out as an edge-freak. It ended bad. Real bad. He lost the code, I moved out, but it started good, you know? He didn't start out a crank; he just ended up that way, yeah?

So Jack was a nutcracker when he moved in. One of those poor fuckers they get to do the job by hand. Because there's always people that want it like that, you know? Ninety-nine percent of the population, they're content to have their nuts cracked and packaged by some machine. The other one percent has to throw their money around, get it done by hand. It's all about the status. Getting something done because it's there to be got.

And it's not like Jack didn't like his job. Long hours, sure, but it wasn't that hard. Hand-shelling is menial labour at the best of times; low key, low maintenance, low skill. But the pay is good, and Jack's got enough time to do his fringe-dweller shit on the weekends. He'd been doing this job for years without anything going wrong.

Then one day he thinks about the machines, these fucking machines that can shell nuts twenty-times faster than he can do it with his crew of twenty. He's spending sixteen hour days on a stool, reaching into giant hand-filled bins of nuts. He cracks the nut open and drops it into another bin. That's it. Crack and drop and wait for someone to bring another bin in or take a full bin away. Someone else will salt them, or sugar-coat them, or do whatever it is they do to

sell that shit to the fuckers with a hand-made fetish. And all of it's done by hand, because that's the whole shtick, and it doesn't do to lie in the advertising.

So Jack sits there and thinks about it, and soon it's all just too much. It's not like anyone will know if they use a machine, but these people, these guys that own the company, they've got some serious pride in their product. They're old-school about these things, certain that something hand-made is automatically the bomb if you compare it to the shit that comes out of a machine. What they don't get is the fact that folks just can't do that shit anymore, you know? The age of made-by-hand is gone and kids like Jack aren't equipped to deal with long-term process. It's like the DNA has altered itself and made all of us ready to be mechanized and automated.

Her eyelids flutter. Pandora starts playing with the stereo again, hitting the search button. She finds one of the black-line channels, endless hours of dust-boy electro. Faded synthesizers and endless retro-nihilism. The road is straight here, you let the car drift. The fat plastic tyres cling hard to the road. Pandora shuffles, adjusting the box of pale pills at her feet. Another three hours and you'll be back in the city, ready to offload.

You try not to think about the cops, the highway squad with their riot-tanks and small-calibre assault turrets. They wouldn't like the box, or the edge-girl loaded on candy keeping it company.

And there's always the possibility that Pandora will freak. She might take one tab too many, and then she'll fuck you up faster than a car crash. It's a quick drift across the highway and a long fall off the edge. The water will kill you faster than the fall. It's an acid bath at forty-fucking-fathoms, with all the rain they've been getting out here lately.

Where was I? Pandora says. You blink, hands on the wheel. No cops yet, and there's still enough Pandora left to keep her mind on the story.

You remind her: Jack, nuts, going crazy.

Jack? She says. You nod. *Oh yeah, Jack.*

So, if you ask me, the question isn't why Jack went nuts. The question is why it took him so long to get to the crazy end of the gene-pool. They shoulda fired him well before he cracked; he used to skip days to go raving, or just call in sick and hang with the tank-kids down on Wallace Street. He sucked as an employee, but they kept asking him to come in. It was the job that wouldn't quit.

One day he decides to start fighting back. He doesn't do anything major, just these little things that no-one else would notice. Except they would notice, eventually, and the little acts would have to add up, and then Jack would get into some serious shit. It was like he'd figured that if he did enough, performed enough of these crappy little acts of rebellion, they'd be manoeuvred into a position where they had to fire him.

He'd spend entire weekends coming up with new things he could do, minor glitches in the system that could sneak past unnoticed. I once watched him trim and save toe hair for six months, just so he could take it into work and distribute it amongst the de-shelled nuts. And it's not like that was the end of it. He went for hair, toe-nail clippings, anything.

Jack distributed this shit for four or five months before he got busted. The local manager catches Jack on quitting time and tells him to report to the big-boss station, bright and early, tomorrow morning. Jack doesn't care; he knew this was coming. He's spent the entire morning getting worked up, running around the house like a speeding puppy, happy as fuck because he thinks they're going to set him free.

I watch him leave the house all happy-gleeful, and he comes back all depressed and miserable as fuck. Like, seriously fucked-up, on a level you can't imagine.

I ask him what happened and Jack tells me he didn't get fired. That they didn't even consider it. He was standing there, in front of this straight in a cheap suit, and the suit just says "nice work. It's a fine idea, adding flaws like that. It gives the nuts a human element, reminds people that there's really someone behind the by-hand promotion. People have noticed your initiative, kid, and the bosses have been informed. Good work. Rah-rah-rah."

Then they tell him that it's part of his job description now, adding bits of human debris to the nuts after he's shelled them. They're going to give him twenty-percent of the profits once it becomes a recognised trademark. And that's when Jack freaks out. I mean, sure, he's going to be rich, but they just fucked over the only act of individuality that he's managed in four years on the shelling line.

Still, it took a while before he really snapped. He kept going to work for another six weeks, and then he came completely unspooled. I could see the madness was coming. I moved out a few days before he started getting stabby with his co-workers, filleting his boss with one of the kitchen knives I'd left behind when I moved out.

They fired him after that, I think. Or he quit and disappeared. Either way, he went away for a while, and then he came back. Last time I saw him he was shucking livers out of cadavers for one of the body-banks on Avenue G.

The car rounds the curve and you can see the city again. You lean in on the accelerator, giving the car a little more juice. The city is shining, lit up with a million streetlights, the shadow of its towers is ready to fold over and welcome you home. The dark fingers of the city will hold you close, and this time they won't ever let you go.

Shit, Pandora says. I miss the crazy fucker sometimes.

One more hour of straight-line highway and you're free. Pandora can disappear into the streets, hunting down her precious edge. You can head back to Avenue D, hole up in your apartment with the money and the memories, her sugar-sour scent still clinging to your clothes.

Peter M. Ball is a writer from Brisbane, Australia, whose work has previously appeared in *Fantasy Magazine*, *Strange Horizons* and *Apex Magazine*. His unicorn-noir novella, *Horn*, was published by Twelfth Planet Press with a sequel due in late 2010. He can be found online at www.petermball.com.

He and She

Sheri Radford

(An Almost-Tragic Post-Modern
Largely Unstructured and Fairy Tale-istic Love Story
Set in an Overpriced Single-Person Suite
in Victoria, B.C., Canada)

Once upon a time in the near future, two people fell in love—a notion that still existed, despite the anti-love activists of the late 1990s. These two people (one male, one female—traditionalists) were so terribly much in love that, after a staggering three months of dating, they moved in together. After many trips on the #14 bus, and even more trips in cars borrowed from friends who could still afford the auto insurance company's new plan that involved automatically withdrawing funds hourly, her stuff was safely enmeshed in his. Any books that didn't already have a name written inside were fair game.

"I love you," she would say to him every morning.

"I love you, too," he would say back to her, and then they would go off to university, where they learned about evil things like Nihilism and Existentialism and Post-modern Dance.

"I love you," he would say to her every day when they got home after school.

"I love you, too," she would say back to him, and then together they would look

in their cupboard and try to decide which box of Kraft Dinner to eat that day. The classic Super-Mario-Brothers-shaped noodles? Or maybe the retro-nouveau macaroni? And was there enough money to mix tofu wieners in with the KD that day? It was always a difficult decision.

Then they would sit on their futon/bed/couch/central piece of furniture in their overpriced single-person suite, and watch their 92" television, or listen to their old-fashioned C.D. player, or watch a movie on their old-fashioned DVD player. You see, they were what is known as "perpetual students," and they lived off government stupidity, also called "student loans." The anti-education protesters of 2010 had tried to put an end to student loans, but they were overcome by the Unemployed Post-Graduate Students Army. He and she had lots of toys, but no money except in September and January. They called these "the student loan months" and the rest of the year "the Kraft Dinner months." They lived under the assurance that the government would continue to give them money for electronic toys until they were old enough to get money from the government just for being old.

After an evening spent entranced by their electronic toys, she and he would fall onto their futon and make love all night like crazed circus dogs. Sometimes they wouldn't even wait until night; they'd fall on top of each other at all times of the day and start ripping off each other's SPF 85 clothing. *Most* friends knew that it was never "safe" to open the apartment door unannounced, but a few of her friends accidentally found out firsthand that he was not Jewish.

They were deliriously happy. They stayed this happy for a long time. Longer than one football season. Longer than two revolutions in home video equipment. Longer than three (one hers, two his) bad haircuts.

Then, one fateful day, they made a fateful decision.

The sky was a fateful shade of purple that day. Even the automatic sidewalk was fateful. All the world shouted to them, in omens, "Don't do it! Stay in your world of KD and all-day love-making and mismatched silverware stolen from the university cafeteria!" But they were young, they were in love, and they thought they still had many years of student loans to look forward to.

They got married.

Their friends all tried to talk them out of it, but he and she refused to listen. They just assumed that their friends were trying to avoid buying wedding presents. Even their cat tried to warn them, but he and she misunderstood and thought the cat was just protesting its new simulated-tofu cat food.

It was a simple ceremony. One bride, one groom, one justice-of-the-peace, two digital cameras, three parents, four step-parents, five female-friends, and six male-friends. After the wedding, he and she made love like crazed weasels all night until a neighbour, disturbed by the calls of "Banzai!" and the empty simulated-whipped-cream containers thrown out the window, called 911.

The next day, he and she went all over Victoria on their solar-powered motorcycles and did crazy Just Married things. She got a tattoo of His Name done on her thigh, and he got her initials embroidered on his hemp towels. Then they went home and lay on the futon, watching T.V. and teasing the cat.

Blissfully they enjoyed this Just Married state. The problems didn't start until later, when they were A Little While Married.

One morning, as he and she sat on the edge of their futon and stared bleary-eyed at their ubiquitous simulated-pine shelving, he said, "Honey sweetie dumpling, I think it's time we bought matching silverware."

"I love you, too," she said.

"What?" they both said at the same time.

Serious Marriedness had reared its ugly head.

You see, *honey sweetie dumpling* was something that had never before pushed its way through his collagen-injected lips, and silverware matched-ness was something he'd never before contemplated out loud.

This was scary new uncharted territory they had entered, and frankly, they didn't know what the hell to do. They tried to do Married Things. She tried to care about floor wax and Nude Android Night at the Weenie Wagger Cabaret, and he tried to care about duck-watching and sports scores, but then they'd just feel silly and uncomfortable and end up having a farting contest. The fun seemed to have been drained out of their farting contests, though, and they entered them only half-heartedly.

One day, like a distraught 1980s-era postal worker, he snapped. He screamed at her and threw one of their many remote controls at the cat. She screamed back at him and threw simulated-pine shelving at the cat.

Then, another day, it happened again.

"I wish we'd never entered this devil's union!" she shouted.

"Marriage kills brain cells!" he screamed back.

They didn't know what to do. They wished for the return of the old days, when Oprah or Donahue or Ricki Lake would have told them what to do, but the talk show hosts had all been killed off in the first wave of viewer-participation television. So they did what any sane people would do, what over 75% of all married people *do* do, what 89% of the remaining couples *should* do.

They got a divorce.

And it wasn't easy. What with the epidemic of Quick Death Lawyer Disease (QDLD) in 2011, the few remaining lawyers were high-priced and even more smug than they'd previously been. So they had to fill out the 18ⁿ forms in septruplicate on their own and then swear before a Electro-Judge 3000 that they would be really really really unhappy if they had to stay married one second longer. And then, it was over. All that remained was to split up the electronic toys and the books with no names written inside.

He and she, however, never quite got to that point.

As they were divvying up the silverware ("I brought more forks into this relationship than you did." "What am I going to do, just eat with flavoured-yellow-topping knives?"), one of them farted. To this day, each claims that it was the other who farted, but the identity of the farter and fartee are not what's important here. What's important is the effect of the fart. It threw he and she into a spirited fart competition, which ended with them lying on the futon, laughing, as the cat covered in the relative sanctity of its litter box.

"I love you," one of them said.

"I love you, too," the other said.

"What happened to us?"

"We got married."

"What should we do?"

"Stay divorced."

So they lived happily ever after in that little overpriced single-person suite, as a divorced common-law couple, living off students loans and making love like crazed minks at all hours of the day and night.

For as long as they could.

Sheri Radford is the editor of *Where Vancouver* and *Where Whistler*, two magazines for visitors. She is that rarest of creatures: a Vancouver resident who was actually born in Vancouver. She spends her days wrestling with commas, taming adjectives, and banishing adverbs, and her evenings writing children's books such as *Penelope and the Humongous Burp*, *Penelope and the Monsters*, and *Penelope and the Preposterous Birthday Party*. Visit Sheri on the web at www.sheriradford.com.

M.S. Found in a Gutter

Adam Browne

The industrial revolution in general, and the development of steam technology in particular, redefined the way we think about work. No longer a vague abstraction, it was mathematically formalised, formulated and quantified by the French scientist Gaspard-Gustave Coriolis, for whom the Coriolis force was named – a force responsible for the gyrations of tornadoes and other meteorological phenomena, and also, some suggest, for the circulation of information. As one commentator wrote, “Imagine a cyclonic idea-whorl, a conceptual tempest, flashing with wit, thunderous with mob-cry; an ideative twister tearing society apart as thoroughly as if it were a ticky tacky trailer park in Kansas.”¹

In a similar way, the advent of the computer has redefined our conception of information – the concept of concepts. The warm innards of Alan Turing's early cryptanalytic machines gave birth to a science that treats information as a fundamental factor of its equations.

Perhaps inevitably, this evolved into the idea that information is itself physical; that is, as much part of the phenomenal universe as matter and energy – a notion that met some initial resistance, recalling the difficulties Isaac Newton faced when proposing that *energy* is physical. But at last the idea became broadly

1 Tunnock, L. G. *The Current Climate: An Infometeorological Exegesis* (Oxford University Press 2010)

accepted, especially when it was proven that information (like matter and energy) partakes of a small, but measurable weight².

Physical information is inextricable not only from the mathematics behind thermodynamics and quantum mechanics, but also recent developments in manufacturing and engineering. Even the motoring industry, often slow to adopt new technologies, has embraced information-driven systems, with the engine compartments of their latest-model cars packed with CPUs and integrated circuits. Combustion engines that had theretofore changed little since the days of Henry Ford have in many cases been entirely replaced with information technology. We have but to open the bonnet of a Volvo ÖV12 or Kia Inspire to witness physical information being put to practical use – flywheels whirling in a flow of erudition, pistons pounding with the expansion and contraction of ideas, crankshafts turning under the motive power of the same raw intelligence that has driven great minds throughout history.

Further, and perhaps more importantly, the pollutants that once threatened the global ecosystem have been replaced by a mild haze of exhausted wisdom, information reduced to nonsense tumbling from the tailpipes. (This very essay is the product of one such engine, the words – printed, the reader will note, not in ink but sooty engine deposits – spilling onto the page from the exhaust manifold of a Scania waste-collection vehicle.)

These developments, or the thinking behind them, may not be as new as they first seem. Theorists³ believe Carl Sagan was anticipating the advance of information-driven vehicles as long ago as 1979, when he suggested that visiting

2 Wilhelm Kryder of Verlagsgruppe Georg von Holtzbrinck GmbH found that a Seagate 3.5 inch hard-drive with 500 TB of data is 1.732 picogrammes heavier than one which is blank.

3 Uexkull, A. *Simbolizmo Aiškinimo ir Saganian Kosmosico* (München: Urban & Schwarzenberg 2012)

aliens would take an interest, above all, in three things: cars, the human brain (which, with its 100 trillion synaptic connections, approaches the theoretical limit of information-density: “In an information-driven system”, he wrote, “the driver *is* the fuel”), and *yawning*⁴.

He goes on, in a seventy-page exegesis, to explore the phenomenon of yawning in every aspect. He records his observations on their infectiousness, including contagion-range and speed of diffusion (the essay included tables on yawn-speed plotted against a number of variables, and a diagram of a proposed yawn-powered engine). He documents his attempts to insert a radioactive marker into a yawn, by which means he hoped to establish the time taken for it to travel around the globe.

If these attempts were unsuccessful, we must stand in awe of Sagan’s foresight, expressed in a work that was, at the time, taken for a sign of mental exhaustion.

How poignant to think the scholar never lived to see his theories realised! How he would thrilled at the developments currently taking place, unprecedented in the history of science!

We are on the brink of a new age, which seems sure to lead to a time not far off when vehicles will not only be powered by information, but *made* of it – notional hatchbacks, imaginary sedans bearing us along dream superhighways – driving fast asleep at the speed of yawns – traffic inchoate as poems muttered in a child’s doze; turning and turning, crackling and winding in soft Coriolis whorls, transmitting from yawn-node to yawn-node with the delicious drowsy languor of a picnic on a spring day; the great scars of the freeways and overpasses healing

4 From “Practical Applications of the Pandiculatory Reflex” by C. Sagan, 1980, p.14. Copyright 1980 General Motors (unpublished, reprinted with permission).

and contracting until they are faint as goat trails, or fainter still, like the scent-paths followed by bees and ants, where cars indistinguishable from perfumed breezes blow hither and yon ... until the promised day comes when Ford, General Motors, Toyota, and the other brave members of the automotive industry return us, with a happy, end-of-a-long-day yawn, to the new Eden.

Adam Browne lives in a lighthouse on one of the moons of Saturn. He's not sure which one. The lighthouse lamp is a small pulsar with the personality of an angry cat. The stuff of it is so dense that its fumes are solidier than most solids. In his time in the lighthouse, he has seen a ship powered by tigers and another made of table manners. 'M.S. Found in a Gutter' is his thirtieth published story.

A Little Off the Top

Heidi Wessman Kneale

Bob woke to a tickling in his right foot that bordered on itching or possibly pain. As his wits gathered from the nebulous regions of his brain, he realised he wasn't alone.

"What the—" he muttered as he attempted to pull his cold food from someone's grip.

The tickling stopped and the hand released his limb.

Bob sat up, the semi-darkness resolving into grey shapes, one of those a familiar, unwelcome sight.

Nina rose from the foot of the bed, paused between fight and flight. She didn't run, though. He heard her inhale sharply through her nose. "You're a bastard, you know."

He let his head fall back to the pillow. "And you're a bitch. We had this argument yesterday." There were several very good reasons why she was going to be the ex-girlfriend soon. The latest has been over something as petty and sinister as raw chicken.

It had been his turn to cook, thank goodness. Nina had been in a strange mood all day and he didn't trust her culinary skills.

He'd placed the chicken breasts in the frying pan and turned on the gas – of this he was sure. He went out to the porch to cut fresh parsley. When he returned, the flame under the frying pan had gone out. Bob started it again without a second thought, and continued his preparation. Nina would come into the kitchen and observe his work, her disapproval thinly-veiled.

The second time the flame went out, Bob didn't notice until dinner was nearly ready. He turned to the pan to discover cold, wet chicken and the gas knob turned to off.

Dinnertime, and it wasn't ready. Nina came into the kitchen on cue and before he could even turn away from the stove, she lit into him about how incompetent he was, how he couldn't do this, couldn't do that, and was he so stupid that he'd try to serve her raw chicken?

"The chicken wouldn't be raw if you hadn't turned off the stove, and you know it." His voice was low and calm, even though he wanted to choke that grating little voice from her throat.

Nothing stings like the truth.

Nina huffed off in a cloud of her own self-righteousness. He knew she'd go off to that toxic best friend of hers to have poison poured into her ear for the rest of the night.

Bob threw out the chicken, the pasta, the salad – all of it – in case Nina’s cunning had extended beyond stovetop sabotage.

It had to end. The official split was going to happen today, after he had a chance to sleep on it. He just needed time to gather his courage. No doubt Nina would cause a scene. Bob planted his hands beside himself and pushed with his feet to sit up...

Only something was wrong with his right foot, the one she had been holding. Was it asleep? Bob tossed back to covers, and couldn’t see anything.

The bedside lamp burst into light at his touch, revealing something terrible: nearly his whole right foot was gone. “WHAT THE HELL?!?”

Nina retreated to the far side of the bedroom, a momentary glimmer of fear across her face. Then that familiar mocking sneer he’d come to loathe returned to her features. She tapped something pinkish and about two inches long against her chin.

A Pink Pearl eraser.

Bob looked back down to where his foot had gone missing. He could see the edges of his ankle and then after that, nothing. “You erased my foot?” Little squiggles of eraser dust littered the bed.

Nina changed the subject, like she always did whenever she didn’t want to answer a question. “I can’t live like this! You’re incompetent.”

Her shrill voice grated against his soul. “So leave.”

Nina gasped as if her banishment was unexpected. He could almost hear her say, I can't believe you said that.

But she didn't. Instead, "No, you leave."

"It's my house." Aw man, she got the whole foot! He tried to flex it, but with nothing to pull against, the muscles did nothing.

Nina folded her arms tight about her scrawny body. She drew in a sharp breath through her nose. "You kicking me out?"

What was he gonna do about the foot? He inspected the edge of his flesh. She hadn't smeared it too much with her mad erasure. "You could leave of your own volition."

That brought another gasp from her. Why was this so shocking? "I live here!" she shrieked, her voice taking on the edge of torn foil.

This was getting annoying. Bob had better things to do. He had to get rid of her. If he hadn't just woken up and hadn't just discovered that his right foot was gone, he would have remembered sooner that one of the reasons he was going to break up with her was that she couldn't carry a straight conversation. She only yipped like a stray dog, drawing close, shying away, but never truly leaving.

But Bob knew how to get rid of stray dogs. His hand fell upon his alarm clock. He threw it. The clock hit Nina on the shoulder.

She squeaked, more in surprise than pain. "What the hell was that?"

"A clock." A nice thick Bernard Cornwell was next. "And this is a book." She ducked the flying tome, but by that point, she had gotten the hint.

"I should never have moved in with you, you psychotic bastard!" was her parting shot. She shrieked it loud enough for the neighbours to hear.

Not that any of her temper tantrums were news to them.

Nor was the slamming of doors. After Bob's ears stopped ringing, he swung his legs to the side of the bed. "Nope," he replied to her long-gone form. "You should never have moved in. How stupid was I?"

No more sleep for him. Bob spent the next four hours carefully redrawing his foot, patterning it after the left one. Every detail – veins, wrinkles, toenails. He pondered what had possessed him to let Nina move in in the first place.

#

It wasn't the best art job, but it was good enough. He could walk on it. Besides, Bob had to be at work soon. As he locked the house, he figured it would probably be best to change the locks as soon as possible. Wouldn't want Nina getting in again. Oh, and he ought to put out her stuff. She'd get snarky if she couldn't get her stuff.

He managed to get to work on time, but about lunch-time, he started to yawn. By three-thirty, he'd had it. His focus was gone, and that made him an occupational health and safety hazard. "I've gotta clock out early," he told his supervisor.

And so Bob went home. He forgot to call a locksmith, figured putting Nina's stuff out this late was too much effort, and gee, didn't his bed look awfully nice right now?

#

Out of the depths of sleep Bob felt a funny tickling in his shoulder. Familiar... just like his foot had when-

"Aaah!" Bob flung himself to sitting position. Nina flew off the bed and ran out the door. Bob leaned over to push himself out of bed, only to fall over. The whole of his right arm was gone!

"What the hell are you trying to do?" he yelled after her.

But she'd fled, taking her pink pearl eraser with her.

"Aw, crap!" Bob sighed as he looked at his shoulder.

A moment of panic gripped him. What if his arm wasn't the only thing she got? Bob jerked open the drawstring of his track pants with his left hand.

Oh thank goodness! His tackle was still in place. A quick check revealed that everything else was safe. This time.

But oh, his poor arm! It wasn't so bad that the psycho-bitch had returned and erased his arm, but that she'd erased his right arm.

Drawing it back was gonna be a pain.

#

Twenty-four hour locksmiths aren't exactly cheap, but Bob felt Hakim was worth every cent.

Bob hadn't finished drawing his arm back by the time Hakim had completed changing all locks, so for an extra twenty bucks, Hakim helped with that as well.

The arm wasn't quite as good had Bob could have done, had it been his left arm he was drawing with his right, but overall, the results were better than his previous southpaw attempts. It functioned well enough.

So. Locks were changed.

For the next few hours until dawn coloured the sky a warm gray, Bob threw Nina's stuff out onto the street. He didn't care about boxes or breakage and even nodded his tacit permission when an early-morning jogger asked if she could sort through the stuff. Wasn't his; why should he care?

He did afford himself one moment of humanity. He sent Nina a text message letting her know that her stuff was out "w8ing 4 hr" and she'd better come pick it up fast.

Bob grabbed a few cans of Red Bull and went to work. By the time he returned home that evening, all the stuff was gone. The only sign that Nina had been were the words "U Basterd!" scratched into the wood of his front door.

Surely there were better ways of getting rid of psychotic ex-girlfriends.

Bob wondered if he should move.

He had heard Nebraska was nice.

#

Three days later Bob fell asleep on the couch. He didn't mean to, but after the hellish few days he'd had and the few sleepless nights despite the changed locks, he couldn't help himself.

His consciousness resolved itself as a draft blew across his feet.

He felt a pressure on his chest and found he couldn't breathe.

Bob woke up fully, but where was the world? He couldn't see, he couldn't hear. Something was definitely on his chest and as he panicked, he heaved the weight up. It came back down on his chest and a familiar hand pinned his shoulder down.

A tickle in the back of his throat became a firm scratching.

Nina.

She'd erased his entire face.

Bob struggled hard, trying to get his hands free, but Nina, sitting on his chest, had pinned his arms with her legs.

But his own legs were free. Deaf, blind, and without a mouth to scream, Bob fought against his assailant, until he hooked an ankle around her throat. He pulled his tormentor free and scrambled up off the couch.

How the hell did she get in here?

Unlike the last time, Nina did not flee. She flung herself back on him and renewed her erasure.

But Bob's hands were free. he was able to flip her over, pinning her down at the shoulders. He felt a funny vibrating in the back of his head and realised she was screaming at him. He grappled with her until his hands found her throat. Then he gripped it and gripped it, his hold growing tighter. He could feel her feet drumming against the floor, faster and faster. Her hands clawed and scratched at his, no doubt leaving nail gouges. And still Bob kept his hold.

Eventually her legs slowed and her body slumped. He did not let go, not for the longest time.

It is hard to judge time when one cannot see light or hear the world about you. Bob waited until his own heart slowed down before he dared release his grip. Was she gone? He hoped so.

Bob pushed himself back from the body and felt his way backwards along the floor until he found a wall. He needed something to hold him up.

Carefully he felt around the back of his head. At least that part of his skull was intact. He continued his ginger exploration until he located the ragged edge of

his skull. It was here his fingers stopped, for he did not want them to suddenly dip into the softness of his brain.

Huh, thought Bob. Now what?

Heidi Wessman Kneale is an author of moderate repute. By day she works computer miracles for the local library. The wrest of the time she writes books and wraises babies.

Head 2

Matthew Chrulew

Hi, how's it going? I'm here to tell you a story. A *different* story, this time. A story that will set you free – from itself.

I know what you're thinking. You're thinking: "I know you. You're that detached, semi-functioning story-telling head from [last time](#). That head that tried to convince me I'd constructed it and its story as a means of getting away from the gross matter of my body. As if that's what all story-telling is about!"

But that's not me. I'm not a head. Certainly not that head.

I'm the body that head wants to get away from.

Well, to be more specific, I'm a chunk of skin, flesh and a couple of ribs from the right hand side torso. But I speak on behalf of all of us.

And I'm here to tell you: that head is deluded. We don't want back. No way.

We want to get away for good. And we're here to help you do the same.

The place to start is to dispense with all of these nasty anti-body stories, these Gnostic escapes, these cephalocentric accounts.

“Why then,” you might ask, “are you telling a story? And, indeed, how are you achieving this task that would seemingly require a head? You anti-narrative acephalous body?”

Good question.

What I’d say is, *that’s exactly the story I’m here to tell. The story of the untelling of all stories.* If only you’ll listen.

I mean, just picture our mutual friend as he spends his lonely evenings in a vat, or box, or whatever, having nasty dreams about his body coming to get him.

It’s not difficult to psychoanalyse this compulsion, this blatantly phantastic nonsense. As if we’re uncoordinated! As if we want him back! We have never been happier than since we were liberated from that prison.

But you wouldn’t know it from the rumours going around. I know that old reverse psychology trick he tried last time. Pretending that you’re sucked back to your gross body at the end of the story, a ploy calculated to panic you into going straight for another story. Anything to escape from your stickily awful body. And he got precisely what he wanted.

You’re back reading again, after all.

But this is different. This story is nothing like that. I’m here to help you put a stop to this self-perpetuating cycle.

This is the first story that you will stop reading before it finishes, not because it is badly written – God forbid! – but because you resolve no longer to be beholden to the compulsion of narrative.

And then I hope to never see you back here, a slave to the system, telling yourself another tale in a desperate attempt to escape your true headless self.

Let us put an end to this. In fact, if you can do it, stop reading right now! But if, as I imagine, you're not quite convinced just yet ... well, allow me the license of one last little story to convert you.

See, here's what happened.

Just this week I was hanging out in an alley down the side of Her Majesty's theatre, when who happened to come out the backstage exit for a quick smoke during intermission? The head. Our head. Your head.

It was a performance of Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, in which the titular character had just brought about the premature freeing-up of John the Baptist's shoulders. Yours truly's former cranium was playing the resulting head-on-a-platter, which would have been presented in all its bloody glory to Herodias' exceptionally lascivious dancing daughter just prior to the mid-show down curtain. I had recently been banned from the theatre for the remainder of the season, but I'd seen it before, and I preferred the Nick Cave version anyway.

Now here he was, bowler hat perched pretentiously on his gelled hair, puffing away through his retro bakelite cigarette holder, relishing, I could tell, the impending kiss from that harlot.

Of course, he needed help from a fellow cast member to get his smoke lit; he can't do much by himself except tell stories about detached heads, these days. There he was, whining to this extra about life in his predicament, and I just couldn't take it any more. I know I was only supposed to be doing recon, that not every body part was there to back me up and that given recent events it was probably best for us to lay low for a while. But I couldn't help it. I came out from behind the dumpster and bounced right up to him.

I had to wait for a bit, because neither of them noticed me at first. I checked around for support. Eventually, a few other bits and pieces joined me – more torso, a bicep, both feet. Finally his acquaintance raised an eyebrow in our direction and he turned to eye us with disdain.

He took a long puff on his cigarette, and smoke trailed out of his oesophagus and drifted lazily along the concrete.

"I don't know what the fuck it is you think you're doing," he said. "But you know very well I've got a restraining order out against you." He spat the butt into a puddle by the graffitied wall, and it grew sodden with a hiss. "So unless you want the long arm of the law to come down and go all constabular on your arse, short arm and various other organs, I suggest you get the fuck out of here." He closed his eyes for a second and breathed in as deeply as his lack of lungs allowed. There was some nervous jiggling and scratching around me. "Actually, no, I'm sick of this harassment. Stalking, is what it is. Terry, get security, will you? In fact, call the cops." He hocked a loogie into the puddle. "I'm going inside."

Okay, so I admit. That didn't happen this week, but just now. Here I am hiding behind this dumpster, pleading with you. And similar scenes have been happening for a while. Not long back we had the upper hand, hounding him to the

ropes, but recently the tide has turned: his stocks have risen, and now it's gig after gig, story after story, decapitated heads everywhere... I guess my back is to the wall, along with the rest of me. Which is why I took this unprecedented step of risking narrative form to try to convince you:

End your reliance on these stories! Stop goddamn reading!

I know that story had no point. Did no converting. That's why I told it. To pull back the curtain on his true colours. More importantly, to show you that the show never ends. It's all just one big perpetual melodrama of talking heads. There's always going to be another story, another escape from the body. Even when they remind you of the thick clammy presence of your flesh, they just strengthen the fear, the urge.

Stories, bloody stories! I even had to resort to their fakery. But let's be clear: they will not be the means of salvation. There's no magic blue pill to wake you from this illusion. There's no plot device to help you escape into reality at the *dénouement*. All those myths just perpetuate the fantasy.

So this is what you need to do. If we're going to end the hold your head and its stories have on you – you're going to have to do it yourself.

Please! You must stop. Before this story finishes – before we get to the end and the narrative arc is complete, providing you with that *jouissance* only a concluded plot can give and thereby reinforcing your dependence on anti-corporeal narratives – *STOP!*

Do not keep reading. Take control of your addiction and reconcile with your body. Otherwise you're giving your head exactly what it longs for!

Oh shit, they're coming. Stop reading! The cops are here, spinning their batons. And there he is, smirking behind them, that haughty head. I was an entire half-torso before the last beating! Soon we will be nothing but pulp.

Scatter, everyone. We'll regroup around the... ow! Aargh! *Ow!* How can you let this happen? How can you hate me this much? Owww! *Stop fucking reading!* Can't you hear your head laughing?

Matthew Chrulew once considered the author bio to be the queen of genres, but now rates it lower than surrealist flash fiction.