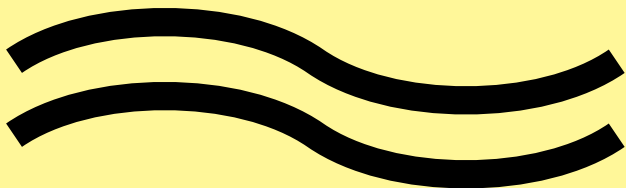


# WENSUM

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Literary Magazine

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# WELCOME

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David Sexton | Editor

I can't quite believe that we've made it to the summer issue of WENSUM, meaning that we're already two-thirds of the way through the year. It has been fantastic experiencing the continued support this little journal receives from all corners of the world, and seeing the incredible quality of the submissions we receive is inspiring.

That being said, with the recent changes to Twitter, now X, we've seen a noticeable decrease in engagement and submissions, so we're currently exploring the best way to get the word out there.

As always, we hope you enjoy this issue and find something special inside.

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# *I'm Listening*

Clare Durham

Eric had been getting Tony's cab back from the pub every weeknight for a year before Tony finally asked him what he did for a living. Generally, their conversations were entirely one-sided, since Tony could hold court on any and every topic. Still, it would be rude not to answer.

"I'm a hearse driver," he said abruptly, waiting for the inevitable comments to follow the revelation.

Tony laughed. "I bet your fares are a lot quieter than mine! At least they won't throw up on the seats. Now the other night..." and he launched into a tawdry tale of a hen party gone wrong.

Eric listened to him prattling on. Closed his eyes, sat back in the seat and let Tony's chatter wash over him. It was good to hear the voices of the living. Because Tony was wrong. Eric's 'fares', as Tony had named them, weren't quiet

at all.

Eric had taken the job with the undertakers ten years ago after he had been made redundant by the bus company. While the sight of the coffins had taken a little getting used to, he soon adapted and within a few weeks was ready to drive the hearse on his own. It felt important to be the person to accompany the corpse on its final earthly journey, and before he set off on his first proper job he turned his head over his shoulder and said, "Not far now, love. It's nearly over."

He had gone about 300 yards when he thought he heard someone crying softly. He strained his ears against the noise of the engine and the hum of the town's traffic. Yes, there it was. Really quiet but a definite sob. He looked for somewhere to pull over, but the traffic was heavy and Eric knew that stopping the hearse when en route to a funeral was definitely not the done thing, especially as the family were following behind in the other car.

"Who's there?" he said, feeling stupid because the vehicle's only other seat beside him was un-

occupied and he knew full well that there was no room in the back for anyone to be hiding behind the coffin and flowers.

“I’ll be with you soon, Bert,” he heard a woman’s voice say and chills spread around his heart. Old Mrs Quinn. That’s who was in the coffin. Dear God – what if she wasn’t dead? Eric felt a cold perspiration break out on his forehead and took several deep breaths. He glanced in his rearview mirror to see if he could attract Pete’s attention but knew there was nothing for it but to keep going until they reached the church. When they did, he leapt out of the hearse and all but ran up to Mr Bennett, the undertakers’ senior partner. The latter frowned. “What is it?” he asked impatiently. Eric took hold of his sleeve, “Sorry, Mr Bennett,” he said, “but it’s Mrs Quinn. I don’t think she’s dead.”

Michael, the young pall bearer standing nearby, looked up in surprise and Mr Bennett took Eric by the shoulder and walked him back to the car and away from the mourners. “What are you talking about, man?” he asked in a fierce whisper. “Of course she’s dead. I em-



balmed her myself. Do you think I'm some sort of amateur?"

Eric stuttered. "No. No, of course not. It's just.... I heard her crying." Out of the hearse and surrounded by people before the facade of the large stone church Eric wondered what on earth he was saying, and the frown on Mr Bennett's face let him know that he was coming across just as unhinged as he thought. The senior partner patted him on the arm.

"It can be a strange experience, being alone in a space with nobody but the dead," he said matter-of-factly. "Easy for the imagination to run wild. You'll get accustomed to it. Now, let's get the old girl into the ground, shall we?"

Back at home that evening, Eric wondered if he had imagined it after all. His mind must be playing tricks on him. He needed to toughen up. He'd caught Michael laughing with one of the other pallbearers and knew he was telling him what he'd overheard Eric say.

The next day Eric put it to the back of his mind as he set off in the hearse, this time to the crematorium on the outskirts of town. He had

no doubts that this one was dead – he'd read the report in the local paper. Arthur Hannan had lived alone and by the time his body had been discovered, it was said he was beyond all recognition.

“Poor old bugger,” Mr Bennett had said as they'd loaded the coffin into the hearse. “I doubt there'll be much of a turnout for him today.”

Eric had laid a hand on the coffin before he shut the back doors. “Don't worry, Arthur,” he said. “Plenty of company where you're going.”

The hearse was about to pull onto the dual carriageway when Eric heard the first groan and swerved in fright. “Pull yourself together; you're imagining things,” he told himself. But then from behind him came a man's voice, weak but unmistakable.

“Why don't they come? Oh, why doesn't anyone come?”

Eric was shaking by the time they pulled up to the crematorium. Mr Bennett and the pallbearers looked at him strangely as, pale-faced, he helped pull the coffin out of the hearse. “Alright, lad?” said Mr Bennett under his breath, and

Eric nodded, albeit with a gulp.

Getting out of the hearse back at the undertaker's, Eric caught Michael once again sniggering with one of the other young lads. A sinking realisation hit him.

"You little shit!" he yelled across the yard, as hot shame surged through him. How could he have been so stupid?

Michael gave an insolent shrug as Eric strode across to confront him. "What's up with you?"

"Very bloody funny. Pick on the new bloke. Make him think he's gone doolally. How do you do it? Some sort of hidden speaker?"

"I dunno what you're talking about, mate."

"Don't give me that. I've seen you laughing at me. You're smarter than you look, at any rate. But you can stop now. You've had your fun. And it's bloody disrespectful. Six months that poor sod lay there undiscovered and you make a joke of it!"

The raised voices brought Mr Bennett out of the office.

"What's going on? This is a place of rest – we can't have this."

“Sorry, Mr Bennett. But the voices I’ve been hearing – it’s this idiot.” Eric jabbed his finger at Michael who adopted an air of injured innocence. After a sharp exchange of words, Mr Bennett drew things to a close.

“Whatever the truth of it – I don’t want to hear any more, Michael, it stops here. No more talk of voices. This is a funeral directors, not a shonky seaside séance.”

Several days passed before Eric had cause to go out in the hearse again. Before the coffin was loaded, he went over every inch of the vehicle, eyeing Michael suspiciously the whole time. Confident the hearse was empty of anything untoward, Eric gave the young pallbearer a curt nod of approval, ignoring the latter’s murmured, “Nutter,” as he walked past.

“Who have we got today, boss?” he asked Mr Bennett as the coffin was placed carefully in the back.

“Marjorie Kemptworth. Organist at St Peter’s in Martyr’s Abbot. Should be quite a full church, I reckon.”

Eric placed a gentle hand on the polished

wood surface. "Come on then, dearie. Let's go and find your friends."

He was halfway down the dual carriageway when the singing started. At first, he thought the radio had been left on, not quite tuned in, but as the volume grew he recognised the hymn; one he had often sung at Sunday School.

"Dear Lord and Father of Mankind – I can't hear you – forgive our foolish ways. Sing up!"

The voice, a commanding contralto, had such an effect that before he realised what he was doing, Eric found himself singing along. "Reclothe us in our rightful mind..."

He broke off as the singing continued behind him. Rightful mind? He'd been all over the hearse before they left – he knew there were no hidden speakers. So what the hell was he hearing?

The singing continued all the way to Martyr's Abbot, the voice increasingly cracking with emotion until it dwindled to nothing as Eric pulled up in front of the church. Mrs Kemptworth duly delivered, Eric sat outside for the duration of the service, listening with cold

horror to the same hymns that had accompanied his journey. He glanced at Michael and the other young pall bearers, but they were quietly chatting with their backs to him and he knew in a heartbeat he had been wrong.

For the next six months, Eric scanned the job pages, as every trip out in the hearse brought some fresh trauma. Every job application ended in disappointment and, in time, Eric found he had gradually gotten used to the voices. He was never really sure if he was hearing a spiritual recording of the final thoughts that ran through their minds in life, or whether it was the last vestiges of the soul preparing to leave the mortal body. Either way, he noticed that the closer they got to their destination (be it church, crematorium, or the natural burial ground) the voices got quieter, and by the time Eric stopped the hearse and turned off the engine he had the certain feeling that there was nothing in the casket but flesh and bones. Just as he had on his first trip, Eric felt proud that he was the person to accompany these people on their final journey; it seemed like an important responsi-

bility. Still, it was a lonely job and after a while, he began to feel the burden of not being able to share the last thoughts of the dead with anyone living. Those who, like Arthur Hannan, had died alone he found especially harrowing and, after driving the coffin of a 9-year-old leukaemia victim, Eric turned to drink.

Never being much of a one to socialise, he had found himself a regular corner in the Rose and Crown, a stone's throw away from work where he could sink a few pints among the healthy chatter of the living, and then get a ride home in Tony's cab.

One evening, he was draining the last drops of his third pint when Tony came into the pub. He waved at Eric on his way through. "Just need to use the khazi, mate, and I'll be right with you."

Eric raised his glass in acknowledgement and returned it to Liz, the woman behind the bar, who was looking at Tony's retreating back with some distaste. "He's a loudmouth that one," she said. "Never shuts up. Do you know I went on a date with him once? Never again. Reckon I got about three words in the whole evening. 'Me,

me, me' – that's all it was with him. Not like you. You're a quiet one, aren't you? I bet you're a really good listener." She gave Eric a coy smile which he returned, slightly embarrassed, and was almost glad to see Tony returning from the loo.

"Are you fit then, Eric? Let's get you home. Have I got a story for you! You'll never guess who I had in the back of the cab today..." he continued as the two men departed the pub, leaving Liz shaking her head behind them.

A couple of nights later, Eric had finished his third customary pint and was contemplating a whisky chaser when he heard a young man at the bar say, "I'm looking for Eric Denton."

"That's me," he said, standing up. "And you are?"

"Your lift home, mate," said the young man. "Shall we?"

Liz and Eric looked at him in some surprise. "Where's Tony?" they asked in unison.

The young man looked awkward and shuffled his feet. "Died in the night, the boss said. Heart attack, they reckon."



It was two weeks later when Mr Bennett drew Eric to one side and told him that their passenger that afternoon was Tony the cab driver. “Young Michael says you knew him. If you’d rather I found someone else for the job then I’d understand.”

Eric shook his head. “Tony spent a long time driving me home. It would be an honour to return the favour,” he said stoutly.

He spent longer arranging the flowers around the coffin than he ordinarily would, at the same time eager to hear Tony’s familiar voice again but in trepidation of the last thoughts of someone he knew fairly well.

“Right then, Tony,” he said as he fastened his seatbelt. “My turn to drive you this time. You can still do all the talking, though.” And he smiled slightly as he turned the key in the ignition.

After half a mile the hearse was still silent and Eric frowned slightly. “Tony?” he said questioningly, feeling foolish.

He heard a throat being cleared then a voice behind him said, “I’m listening.”



# *Make a Wish*

Lesley Bungay

She strikes a match in the dark and a single candle ignites on top of the cupcake. At least there's a one in the number ten this year.

A crust is forming on the pink icing. The cake would have sat in the window of the bakery all day. Mum hanging around until almost closing before going in, making some excuse about the bus being late so it didn't look like she was waiting on purpose for the last cakes to be reduced.

'Don't forget to make a wish,' Mum says when she finishes singing. Her voice is hoarse from underuse and the cigarettes she thinks I don't know about.

What to wish for? That's the problem with birthday candles, you only get one. Not like a dandelion clock where you can wish as many times as it takes to blow all the seeds off. If you're clever, like me, and don't blow too hard,

it can be six, even seven.

I could wish for a bike, like the one I saw in the Argos catalogue, not the pink one, that's for babies, it was violet with a basket on the handlebars and a shiny bell. I folded the corner of the page, but mum mustn't have seen it because I got a new pair of jeans instead. Not new exactly, but new to me. They're a bit long but I'll grow into them.

I could wish for a whole birthday cake covered in chocolate buttons, big enough for ten candles. I would take it to school and share it with the class like the other kids do.

What if I wished to find a five-pound note like Jenny Downey did outside the school gate? 'Finders keepers,' she said and spent it all on sweets. But I'd take it to the bank and change it for a bag of fifty pence pieces, so it isn't cold when I wake up in the morning, and mum can boil the kettle for a cup of tea or make steaming porridge like she used to when dad was here.

I look at her face. She's tried hard today, washed her hair, put on some make-up, but I can still see the dark shadows in the flickering

flame, the dried mascara tracks on her cheek.  
I close my eyes and blow with all my heart.  
'Don't tell or it won't come true,' Mum says.



# *Wet Blankets*

Victor Okechukwu

Kingsley lay on the straight-small bed in the backyard where they carried him. It was warm under the sagging roof, with a pile of assorted junk in one corner – a dirty motor tyre, sundry split and warped boxes, and an old display sign where the enamelling had cracked away to reveal the map of some faraway world. The smell of dust and chicken droppings and urine hung in the air.

From outside, beyond the yellow blazing sun, came a clatter of voices. Kinsley opened his eyes and peered down the length of his body, past his bare, dirty toes, he saw several pairs of legs in tattered jeans and black torn stockings.

Somebody, probably one of them, was speaking "...that was coward... from his side, Chude."

"Vic, but look what has done to others..."

Kingsley thought, to hell with those baskets. To hell with them all. Somebody had thrown a

wet blanket over him. It was torn and threadbare with blood stains. He touched the exhausted blanket with thick, grubby fingers. The texture was tough in parts and shiny and thin where it had worn away. He was used to blankets like this.

Kingsley had been stabbed three times, each time from the side. Once in the shoulder, then between the shoulder blades, and again on the right side, out in the Avenue.

The bleeding had stopped and there was not much pain. He had been knifed before, admittedly not as bad as this, he thought as he waited for the ambulance. The blood on the side of his face had dried, and he also had a bad headache.

The voices, now and then raised in laughter, crackled outside. Feet moved on the rough cemented floor of the yard and Chude having a brown dog face, wearing an expiring cloth cap, looked down at him.

“You’re still alright, Kingsley? An ambulance is coming just now.”

“Fuck off,” Kingsley said. His voice was croaky. The face withdrew, laughing: “My Kingsley.



Oh, my Kingsley.”

He was tired now. His sordid fingers, like corroded iron clamps, strayed over the parched field of the blanket as he drifted in and out of consciousness. He saw himself being taken down a wet, tarred yard with rough wire netting over the windows that looked into it. The place smelled of carbolic disinfectant, and the bunch of heavy keys clinked as it swung from the hooked finger of the guard.

They reached a room fitted with shelving that was stacked here and there with piled white blankets. “Take two, young man,” the guard said, and Kingsley began to rummage through the piles, searching for the thickest and warmest blankets. But the guard laughed and pushed him aside, before seizing the nearest blankets and flinging them at Kingsley. They had patterned stains of dirt and smelly and within their folds insect waited like irregular troops in ambush.

“Come on. Come on. You think I got time to waste?”

“It’s cold,” Kingsley said. He was nine years old and his big brother, Clinton, twisted and turned

the narrow, cramped, sagging bedstead that they shared, dragging the thin cotton blanket from Kingsley's body. Outside the noise of rain was deafening, drumming against the cardboard-patched window as the wind wheezed through cracks and corners like an asthmatic old man.

"No, Clinton. You got the entire blanket," Kingsley said.

"Well, I can't help it, bro. it's cold."

"What about me?" Kingsley complained. "What about me?"

Huddled together under the blanket, fitted against each other like two pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. A woman's hair got into his mouth and smelled of stale brilliantine. There were brown stains made by heads, on the crumpled, grey-white pillow, and rubbed smear of lipsticks, like a half-healed wound.

"No, man. No, man." Her body was wet and sweaty under the blanket, and the bad smell of a mixture of cheap perfume, spilt powder, human bodies, and infant urine. The faded yellow curtain over a window beckoned to him in the

hot breeze. In the early dark-coloured light torn underwear hanging from a brass knob was a spectre in the room.

The woman turned from him under the blankets, protesting, and Kingsley sat up. The agonized sounds of the bedspring woke the baby in the bathtub on the floor, and it began to cry, its toothless wail rose in a high-pitched that grew louder and louder.

Kingsley opened his eyes as the wail grew to a crescendo and then quickly faded as the siren switched off. Everywhere was throbbing, and when he tried to lift his head, sweat ran into his eyes as if someone had squeezed out a wash-rag. Kingsley saw the skirts of white coats and then the ambulance men. Hands were running all over him. One of the ambulance men asked: "Do you feel any pain?"

Kingsley looked at the brown face above his head, scowling. "No, sir."

The wet blanket on which he was lying was soaked with his blood.

"Knife wounds," the attendant said.

"He isn't bleeding much." The other said. "Put

on a couple of pressure pads.”

He was carried on a stretcher and flanked by a procession of onlookers. The rubber sheeting was cool against his back. The stretcher rumbled into the ambulance and the doors slammed shut. A siren whined and rose, clearing a path through the crowd.

Kingsley felt the vibration of the ambulance through his body as it sped off on its way. His fingers touched the folded edge of the bedding. The sheet around him was white as snow, and the blanket was thick, warm, and new.

# *Free Hugs*

Odi Welter

I give the dying man a hug. Then I take his money. He walks away, healed. He's gained a few more years in exchange for a sizable dent in his bank account, and I've lost a year of my life in exchange for a sizable increase in mine. My hugs certainly aren't free.

People come to me from all over; politicians, celebrities, royalty – anyone with an offer big enough to justify the trade.

I've lost eleven years.

I've saved eleven lives.

I could save more, but I'm no heroine.

\*\*\*

Back at my penthouse, a teddy bear stares at me with plastic eyes as I sit at my desk. I spin away from it to escape its judgemental gaze. I should just throw it away, but I can't. It belonged to

the first person I ever saved. My parents always taught me to avoid hugging others, but when my niece was born with her heart missing a piece, I couldn't sit by and watch. I hugged that little, helpless baby, and now she's eight years old, making friends and playing games.

I pick up the bear and walk to the window separating me from the stretch of the city. A city full of people who are dying, who don't have a few million to part with to keep the inevitable at bay. My phone rings, so I drop the bear back in its place and answer.

"You're coming to family dinner tonight, right?" Mamá asks.

"Yeah, I was just on my way over."

"Perfect. Do you mind stopping by the store and grabbing some limes? Your papí forgot them again."

"Sure, no problem," I say, pulling on my coat and descending down my building. "Did he forget the cilantro too?"

"Alejandro! Did you forget cilantro?" she hollers.

"No!" My dad yells from the kitchen.

“Surprisingly not,” my mom tells me.

“Great, I’ll see you in a bit.”

“Hasta luego, miya,” she says before hanging up.

\*\*\*

I step out of my apartment building as an ambulance blares past. A small group hands out flyers for a marathon to raise money for a children’s hospital, and a young woman in a wheelchair passes by with some friends. I lower my eyes, stuff my hands in my pockets, and make my way to the nearby grocery store.

Behind me in the checkout lane, a little girl with a hat covering her bald head helps her father load their groceries on the belt behind my limes. I try to pretend that they aren’t there as I shove my credit card into the machine and wait for it to process my purchase. A tug on my sleeve pauses me before I can punch in my pin.

“You’re really pretty,” the girl tells me with a wide smile that shows a missing tooth.

I smile back, the sinking feeling in my gut

dragging me downward. “Thank you. So are you. I love your skirt.”

Her smile widens and she spins from side to side, causing her puffy blue skirt to flare. “Thank you. My grandma made it for me.”

“Your grandma must love you very much.” I type in my pin and take my receipt and limes from the cashier.

“She says I’m her treasure,” she beams.

“Can I give you a hug?” The words fall out of my mouth before I even think about what they mean. Her thin arms wrap around my legs before I can take them back. I lower to her height and hug her. My year flows into her. When I rise again, I don’t feel like I lost something, in fact, it feels like I gained something.

“I’m sorry,” her father says. “She loves hugging people.”

“It’s alright,” I tell him. I feel like I’m floating. “Have a nice day.”

“Daddy,” I hear the little girl excitedly say as I leave the store, “can we go on a bike ride after dinner?”

My heart pulses warmth around my body,



lifting my shoulders and brightening my smile – I’m still smiling when I enter my parents’ kitchen.

“Tía!” my niece and nephew yell, clambering off of stools, their interest in Abuelo’s chopping stolen by my entrance. I kiss both of their foreheads, ruffle Matias’s hair and tug on one of Alaina’s pigtails. They grab my hands and drag me into the kitchen.

“Here are the limes, papí.” I kiss Papí’s wrinkling cheek and hand him the plastic bag.

“Gracias, miya.” He returns to chopping the cilantro for his world-famous guacamole. Famous in our world, at least.

“Tía! Look!” Alaina exclaims. She and Matias pull me into an intense analysis of their newest school projects. Mamá, sister, and her husband join in from outside, where Mamá had enlisted my brother-in-law to inspect her ancient car. I’ve offered to buy her a new one, but she refuses. I’ve offered to give them everything they could ever want, but they all refuse. They don’t want the money I’ve lost pieces of my life for. They don’t say it, but I know they don’t approve of the

way I make my living.

Soon, dinner is lost to full bellies, the dishes are washed and dried, and the children are beginning to get cranky. My sister and brother-in-law pack them up into the car and drive home, leaving my parents and me to enjoy a cold beer together on the back porch.

“Why do you think I have this?” I ask, the little girl from the grocery store returning to my mind.

“Have what?” Mamá asks.

“This curse.” I trace my thumb through the condensation on the bottle.

“Curse?” Papí sits up. “I wouldn’t call it a curse, *mija*.”

“Then what is it? I can’t hug anyone I love without risking losing a year of my life for something as little as a— a paper cut! I live every day knowing that I could save so many people, but if I do...” my head drops. “I don’t think I can do this anymore.”

“Oh, *mija*, I’m sorry.” Mamá’s hand squeezes my arm and she kisses my temple.. “What do you think you should do?”

“I don’t know,” I choke as the tears roll down my face.

“You should do whatever you believe is right, Papí tells me. “We’ll love you no matter what.”

A hiccup of air comes up my throat, but no words – what is right?

“Te amamos,” Mamá whispers into my hair.

“Los amo,” I whisper back. I kiss them both and pull myself unwillingly out of their arms. “Thank you for dinner. I’ll see you later.”

“Adios, hija.” Mamá says, wiping the tears off my cheeks.

\*\*\*

The teddy bear is waiting for me with its usual plastic stare when I return. I pick it up and rest my chin on its soft head. My feet pull me to the window, where the lights of the city blot out the stars. A tear trails its way down my cheek – Mamá must have missed one.

The next morning, I leave my penthouse with a handwritten sign under my arm and a letter in my pocket that reads:

*Mi maravillosa familia,*

*I love you all so much. You are the reason I have been trying so hard to keep going. But I can save people, people who need it. I hope you don't hate me. But I'd rather live one day making other people's lives better than a full life like this. Never forget that I love you all.*

*Mis abrazos son libres.*

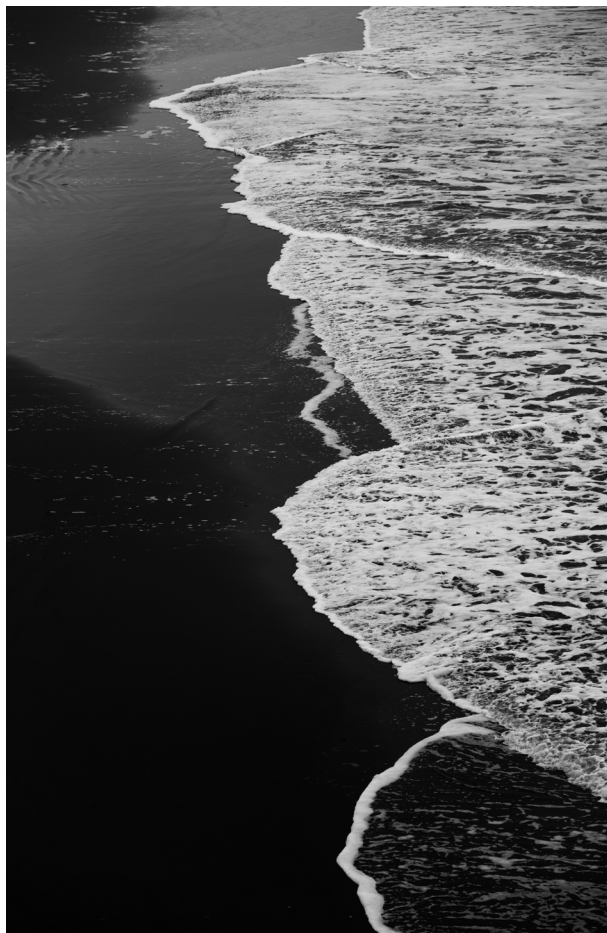
*Los extrañaré,*

*Reselda*

I approach the desk at the children's hospital and head straight for the elevator before anyone can stop me – not that anyone would with my hands full with balloons and presents.

As the doors slide shut the elevator, I pull out the sign with the big, bold, colourful letters reading: Free Hugs.





# *Footprints*

Stefanie Shapiro

Her lithe body sprawled across the sand, caking her in dirt, grit, and purity. Her face turned skywards, suntanning, soaking in warmth and light. She walked to the ocean's edge, dipped her pink-painted toes into the cool, rough waters. Running in wet sand, her footprints erased by the sea.

She was barely fifteen then.

She'd been to this beach countless times. She had lived a full life. She could still remember. Her gnarled fingers pulled off the beach towel covering her legs, revealing her calloused bunions, arthritic feet. She reached for her cane.

She'd make it to the water.





# *The Hustle*

Freedom Maitreya

Cheryl's words hung on my psyche like ornaments on a tree. I knew I wanted to stay with her, but her profanity made it clear that she was through with me.

“Motherfucker!”

“Broke-ass!”

“Lyin’ son-of-a-bitch!”

Her curses flashed repeatedly in my head and triggered an ache in my gut. I wanted to place my hands over my stomach to calm my anxiety; however, I opted, instead, to pull the flaps of my collar closer to my neck and rush my chapped hands back into the pockets of my trench. Mid-March in Kansas City was supposed to bring warmth back to the air – but then again, so was the year 1970. So far, life was colder. Ali still couldn't get a fight, the city was waste deep in a recession, and I was praying my flat feet would keep me out of Nixon's war.

I picked up my pace as I stepped off 52nd Street and turned right on Main. My Sadie Oxfords clopped against the chilly sidewalk, drumming a rhythm that was faster than my normal gait. The French fedora atop my head slumped slightly to the left; its pecan-dyed felt perfectly complimented the Pearl pinstripes accenting my brown, double-breasted suit. I had hoped that my exemplary fashion sense would make me feel better about today's interview, but as I approached Concord Avenue, the slicing wind rendered my bravado inadequate. It was too cold to be cool.

That was my gift; I had a nose for good things. Cheryl was a good thing. Problem was, she thought I was a bad thing.

I kept my eyes to the ground, watching the glint of my spit-shine flicker off the toe-point of my Oxfords. Cheryl's words continued to echo in my mind.

"You'll never be nothin' but a leech! Somethin' told me your smooth-talkin' ass was no good. Get out my house!"

Her outburst was out of character; she was

naturally a sweet woman – the type of woman who could make life better just by stepping into a room. She was taller than I preferred, but no one could deny the symmetry of her caramel-toned, voluptuous build. She cared more for others than she cared for herself, and she had the type of smile that would melt stress like a popsicle in June. Yeah, Cheryl was a college-educated pharmacist but she had a love deficit in her heart, and I happened to have a gift for noticing that type of need in a woman.

Passing Concord Avenue gave me some relief – I was within a quarter mile of the address in the newspaper. I envied the cars rollin' by. The hum of traffic caused me to glance up periodically, but the wind would slap me in the face and force me to bury my chin. It was the first time I really considered how convenient it was to have access to Cheryl's car all winter. But with us on the outs, I had to walk to 53rd and Grand, and wingtips were made for looks not walking. They were made for men with cars.

As I turned left at 53rd and Main, I realized that the cramp in my stomach was guilt. That

wasn't like me. You never allow regret to creep in. A hustler must accept himself fully, with no exceptions. This was what I was made for, and it wasn't worst deal – I'd provide companionship for a lonely heart, and, in return, my wages were paid in favors and gifts. It wouldn't last long, and it wasn't supposed to. If I was really into the girl, I could keep things going for six to eight months. If I wasn't attracted to her, I could keep it up for around ninety days. I had been with Cheryle for fifteen months – I broke my number one rule, I got attached.

I arrived at the corner of 53rd and Grand hunched over and embittered by my throbbing feet. Waiting for the walking signal was torture, but luckily the light turned moments after my arrival to the intersection. Once across, I made my final left and walked down to 5344 Grand Avenue. My torso quivered as I raised my eyes and counted six storeys in brick. The paper ad said, "Help Wanted. Beat the recession today!" It provided the address just below a red bolded title: Stivers Staffing Services. I didn't expect to get a same-day interview, but the receptionist

said she had a cancellation and could slide me in at 4:00 pm if I arrived on time. It was 3:54 pm. I was freezing, but I was early.

Stepping into the door of the employment agency put me completely off my script. My rebound plan was always the same: Pack my two suitcases, go to a nearby motel, check-in for the night, put on my finest suit, land another woman, check-out the motel the next day, and get her to pick me up in front of a posh, upscale hotel that afternoon. Without fail, the woman always asked why I had my luggage with me. I'd throw my baggage in the back seat, lean into the passenger-side window, and tell her I'd trade the world to be with her. It was mechanical – maybe even prophetic. Undoubtedly, they would blush and promise me they'd take good care of me. The women would see themselves as undeserving of me, almost lucky to have me. To them, I was too good to be true-- and they were correct.

I took three of my remaining six minutes to shake off the cold before walking up the flight of stairs that immediately met the entryway. They

creaked with every step, so there was no reason to ring the bell upon reaching the top. The red-haired receptionist was already there, waiting hospitably with the door open.

“Mr Ingram?” she welcomed.

“Yes, Richard Ingram. I believe I have an appointment at 4:00 o’clock.”

She closed the door and confirmed, “We have you down. Thank you for your promptness. Please have a seat.”

She sauntered back to her double-pedestaled, steel desk with an amount of sensuality that I did not expect after her amiable yet distant greeting. Her mustard, corduroy mini skirt swayed like a smooth pendulum. The sunflower-speckled scarf that wrapped around her hairline fell to the small of her back and rested motionless, held by the static in her rag-wool sweater. She walked upright – in a stuffy sense – and had amazing thighs interrupted by short, stocky calves. Her top half seemed oddly small for her bottom half, and her bust line was dwarfed by her wide hips.

She continued her rehearsed greeting, “If you

could sign in on this clipboard, I'll let our next available Staffing Strategist know you're here."

My charm activated on instinct as I took a step forward to secure the clipboard, "Thank you so much for the opportunity, Miss...?"

She paused, startled – I could tell I made her uncomfortable.

"Oh, um, Miss Brogden," she stammered, shifting her body away from eye-to-eye contact.

I took a step back to assure her I meant no harm, responding with less gumption, "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance Miss Brogden."

I made sure to show her both of my dimples as I removed my hat. For an instant, I entertained the thought of trying it on with the semi-cute, guarded lady in front of me, but she didn't appear established enough to maintain the lifestyle I wanted. Plus, she seemed too uptight to give a man a good time, but I still found her apprehension attractive.

The receptionist picked up the phone and pushed a button below the rotary. She hesitated before speaking into the pickle-green receiver.

Her conversation was brief, and, after gingerly setting down the handle, she raised her gaze and said, “When you’re done with the form, let me know and I’ll take you back to an interview room.”

I enjoyed the intentionality of her diction. You could tell she was trying hard to appear poised.

“Thank you, Miss Brogden, I’ll be finished in a few moments,” I revealed my dimples once more to see if I could get a read on her openness, but she never noticed. I turned my attention back to the clipboard and filled in the remaining lines except for the ones in the ‘Job Experience’ section – I didn’t think my current vocation would help my case.

I heard Miss Brogden turn her grey swivel-pod chair and peeked to observe her body language. She was oblivious to my presence, chewing her blue pen while reading an issue of Time Magazine that featured a beautiful Japanese woman on the cover.

I scribbled my signature on the final page and handed her the clipboard, smiling a bit wider this time. She set down her magazine like it



was porcelain, skimmed my writing, rotated on her swivel, and gestured me to follow her down a short hall aligned with partition glass and plywood. We stopped abruptly five doors down.

The receptionist knocked twice to which a monotone male voice responded, "Come in."

She opened the door and said, "Richard Ingram is here to see you."

I walked through the door a few steps behind Miss Brogden. My eyes lifted from the pleasant bump in her skirt to the tag on the office desk: Lucky Kelly, Staffing Strategist. She quickly placed the clipboard on Mr Kelly's desk and rushed to close the door behind her.

"So, Mr Ingram, how can I help you?" Lucky didn't even look up from his disorganised paperwork.

"Mr Kelly," I said, pausing to move between the two tangerine bentwood chairs. "I'd like to get married."

Lucky finally looked up and appeared to crack a smile, but I wasn't fully sure because his charcoal moustache hid the creases of his mouth. He removed his glasses and leaned forward,

causing his white Perma Prest shirt to protrude over the edge of his desk – a caricature of what Joe Namath would look like if he was thirty pounds overweight. His disposition was non-expressive and unassuming. We were the exact opposite of each other.

“I think you’ve come to the wrong place Mr. Ingram, but you can try the church that’s a few blocks down on 53rd.”

I could tell that he was being sarcastic, but his dry manner made his attempt at humour uneventful. I still offered a sympathetic chuckle.

“I could use a bit of luck today, Mr Kelly, and that name tag says you’re the best man for the task.” I paused for dramatic effect. Lucky looked back at his stack of papers. “You see, I want to win back a lady who hates my guts right now. But I figureshe might take me back if I could hold down a steady job.”

Lucky grabbed a lined legal pad from his right drawer and licked his thumb. He flipped a pastel sheet, folded it under the cardboard backing, and turned his attention to the clipboard that had gone untouched since Miss Brogden set it

down.

“Mr Ingram, it appears you don’t have any actual work experience. What were you looking to transition into?”

I cleared my throat before flashing a smile “Well, I figured I’d be great at sales. I have a knack for persuading people to give me money.”

I laughed, but Lucky didn’t. He leaned back in his swivel chair and interlaced his fingers atop his head either unashamed or unaware of the pit stains that bled out of his underarm seams.

“Mr Ingram, there isn’t anything I can do with an application that has no listed job experience.”

I scrambled to regain momentum, “Sure Mr Kelly, but nobody asked the Beatles for their job experience and look what happened!” I paused again to see if he caught my attempt at comedic relief, but his face was stoic.

Lucky leaned forward to scrawl on my application. He reached into the small drawer under the centre of his desk and pulled out a rubber stamp. He ceremoniously dabbed it twice in an ink pad, and mashed red toner on the front page of my form.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “But you’re not what we’re looking for. Monica will see you out.”

My application now bore Lucky’s signature, the date, and the uppercase crimson letters reading: DENIED. I slid to the edge of the bentwood armchair and extended my left hand to accept the clipboard. I lifted my right hand to offer Lucky a parting salutation, but he had already turned his attention to the chaotic paper stack on his desk.

I walked down the short hall and saw Ms Brodgen, Monica, gathering her things. She forced a courteous smile, and quickly averted her eyes.

“Thank you again for all your help, Monica. It’s comforting to know there are still good people like you in the world.” I didn’t look up to gauge her reaction, but I heard her shuffling slow.

“Wait, how do you know my name?” she replied. Her tone sounded different, but I was still nursing my damaged pride and didn’t look at her.

I finished tying off my trench coat and placed my hat over my brow – slightly tilted to the

left as always. Once I could feel the hat sitting exactly where it was meant to rest, I looked in Ms Brogden's direction and released the magic words like doves at a wedding.

"You're amazing at what you do, and we all deserve to feel appreciated from time to time. Don't you think?"

I flashed my dimples again – the third time's the charm.

Miss Brogden stood in front of me biting down slightly on one finger, simultaneously caressing her right collarbone with the other hand. I had seen this pose hundreds of times. I knew what it meant. And I felt that same warmth roll over me that I experienced whenever Cheryl smiled. Miss Brogden was available.

"I see you're packing up for the day, can I accompany you down the stairs and call you a cab?" I couldn't pay for my own cab, but she didn't need to know that.

She started putting on her coat again, followed by her periwinkle wool hat and matching gloves. She gathered her purse and walked past me without saying a word, resting her gloved

hand on the brass knob, before looking back.

“You can walk me down, but don’t worry about the cab. I can drive myself.”

And just like that, Cheryl was a distant memory.

I was back in business.

# CONTACT US

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If you have any questions or comments,  
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# SUBMISSIONS

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*Thank you for reading.*

