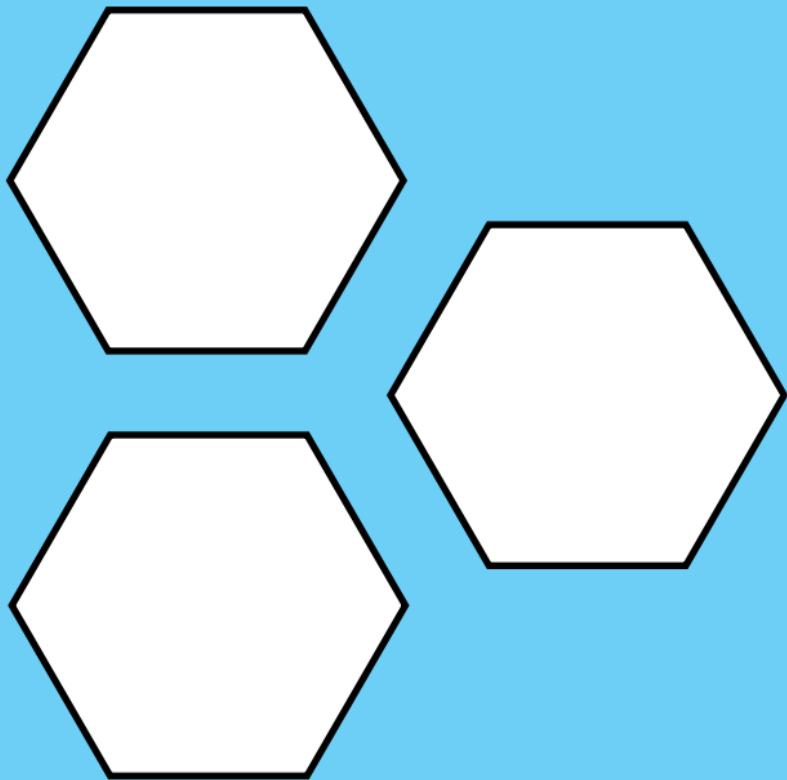


WENSUM

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WELCOME

David Sexton | Editor

As we embark on our third year, we are filled with immense pride for the incredible community that has grown around our magazine.

Over the past two years, WENSUM has become a place where voices from all walks of life can share their stories, and we have been privileged to showcase the works of emerging and unrepresented writers. As we step into this new year, we are excited to continue our mission of creating a platform for literary pieces that may not be commercially viable, and our commitment to providing a space for unique and thought-provoking work remains steadfast.

Thank you for reading, and here's to another year of literary exploration and discovery!

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Where

Glen Pourciau

Yesterday, I think it was, I had a setback. I don't have a sequence of events, before or after, but I sort of woke up midafternoon at the wheel of my car in a city forty miles west of our house. I didn't remember driving there and as far as I know, I had no reason to be there. I knew where I was because it's the city where I grew up and I saw a storefront with the city's name on it. I was disoriented, and didn't think I should try to drive back home by myself, and didn't know how I'd make it there if I did.

A few months ago, I unwittingly drove myself to a suburb thirty or forty miles east. I had no connection with the place, and I didn't know where I was. I called my wife, Sonya, and tried to explain. Sonya somehow worked it out and found me – I don't remember how – and she and Elena, our daughter, came to me. One of them must have driven my car home while I

was delivered back in the other, or something like that.

Not long after that mishap, I started doing a little better. I'd been able to drive myself around and do some things. Sonya tells me my car is now parked somewhere in the city where I found myself yesterday, but I don't know where it's parked or how it's going to get back here. Another possibility is Elena drove out with her yesterday and drove my car back, and they've hidden it someplace where I won't find it. But I don't want to accuse them when I don't know for sure what they're doing, and they're trying to help me. I got Sonya upset, thinking to herself what could have happened to me and how I could have run the car into someone when I was more or less unconscious. She's here in the house somewhere, I think, but I don't know where, and I don't want to look for her and ask her about my car again. She gives me a look that makes me feel how much she doesn't know what to do with me and makes me stare at how little I know about what to do with myself.

This morning, she went to the grocery store

and refused to let me go with her. I started to get up, and she put her hands on my shoulders and said I should rest. I asked her if I was resting so I could ponder being helpless, and she said it was to make me feel better. She said I seemed shaky. I couldn't argue with that one. Every time I'm on my feet, I'm dreading I'll wobble over and fall. A few days ago, I was walking down our front steps, and this strange floating sensation entered my head like water moving inside it. I somehow managed to fall over backwards and hit my head on a concrete step. I groaned and finally got myself sitting up, still stunned and catching my breath. I couldn't think where Sonya was and was embarrassed to shout. I pushed myself up and stood and then fell over backwards and hit my head again, maybe on the same step. I remember being on my side on the steps and waiting for something to happen. At some point, I was back in the house lying in bed, head aching and rolling around inside itself, though later on, I felt well enough to stand and walk slowly while holding the wall.

I've been thinking of calling Elena, to ask if

she knows where my car is. She might resist giving me a straight answer, but I don't think she'll lie to me. I can try to convince her to see things the way I see them. I can tell her that I'm trapped inside the house and my own head, and inside my head is not a good place to be. I'll say the idea of driving scares me too but at home, I'm limited to a few rooms. I'll tell her I can't do anything without my car.



Beguiled

Hilary Ayshford

We wanted to be gypsies, the raggle-taggle vagabonds of folksongs and fairy tales. We wanted to meander through the countryside in brightly painted wooden caravans on wheels, pulled by thickset ponies with shaggy coats and fringed feet, to sleep under the stars and cook food on an open fire, lit by lanterns glimmering in the dusk.

“Travellers,” our father snorted, picking up the phone to report them to the Council. Through a gap in the fence, we watched them set up camp on the playing field at the end of our garden, in shiny, modern trailers with lacy curtains at the windows, through which we could see clustered china ornaments, silver-framed mirrors, and brightly coloured silk flowers in vases. When night fell, their crystal chandeliers glittered and sparkled, sending shards of light into our bedroom, patterning the ceiling.

We wanted to run wild with the brown-eyed, brown-skinned children who shouted for joy and swore and threw stones, and nobody said "Keep the noise down," or "Mind your language," or "Be careful, you'll break something." Nobody made them go to school, or wear shoes, or brush their hair.

Most of all we wanted to be gypsies because of George. George, with his limbs like burnished mahogany, his topaz eyes, his silky black hair and his white, white grin. George, who widened the gap in the fence so we could squeeze through. George, whose soft, seductive accent held us in thrall. George, who showed us where wild garlic grew and how to pick nettles for soup without getting stung.

One day George would be King of the Gypsies, he claimed, like his grandfather. We invited George to come to our house for his tea, but he frowned. "I hate houses," he said. "They're too small and square and solid. I'd suffocate."

We wanted to canter bareback round the field like George on his sleek, coal-black horse, which rolled its eyes and flared its nostrils.

“Who wants a ride?” he asked. We looked at the ground and shook our heads. “If you’re scared, you’d better run along home,” he mocked. So two did, but one stayed, clasping George round the waist, resting her face against his back, breathing in his musk of sun-warmed skin and sun-crisped clothes. And after he helped her down, she trembled from the thrill of the gallop and the way he held her face in his hands and kissed her on the mouth.

In the bedroom, that evening we made a tent from sheets and bedspreads, hung Mum’s red silk scarf over the bedside lamp for a campfire, and by torchlight, we gossiped and gasped and giggled and pretended to read each other’s palms to see which one of us would sit behind George tomorrow.

But the travellers disappeared in the night, leaving an empty field rutted with tyre tracks and churned up by horses’ hooves. We never heard them go, never said goodbye to George. And deep in the detritus they left behind were the discarded, bruised hearts of three Gorja girls who wanted to be gypsies.

The Strange Man at the Door

Noel Lis

Somewhere in a quiet, forgotten corner of Edmonton, somebody or something rapped on the door of Mr Thomas, the sort of man in his mid-70s who had retired long ago but had never really ceased working. It was a knock with no voice: a flurry of light raps might betray a nervous insistence, while heavy thuds could indicate a calmer, more ominous inquiry. Instead, the two strikes came in short succession, even and measured with the exactness of a metronome.

Knock, knock.

A few years outdated, The Big Cats of Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo and Aquarium wall calendar read March 1993, an image of a Basking Shark perpetually gracing the small kitchen of No. 17 Janus Way. Above it, a dusty sunburst clock read 7:34 and had done so for a number of years. Bent over at the kitchen table, focused

on an intricate weave of nylon ropes, was the Scotsman responsible for this abeyance: Mr Randall Thomas. He froze, waiting for another knock. When none came, he carefully set his incomplete knot down on a stack of Popular Science magazines living on the stovetop. Wiping his hands on a stained tea towel, Mr Thomas carefully unlaced his heavy boots and crept over the faded rug and past the stacks of half-empty cardboard boxes to the front door. With the delicacy of a thief, he rotated the lock anti-clockwise as slowly as he could, hoping the thock of the deadbolt would go unnoticed by the visitor outside.

“Goodbye! Badbye!” he thought with glee. It was a little rule of his: Mr Thomas never spoke aloud to himself. Speaking made thoughts real, so he preferred to cling to illusions of certainty, as though making the sounds was a sentence that penned his dancing thoughts. Who was at the door was irrelevant; Mr Thomas did not answer the door on principle. He never did. Mr Thomas never had visitors, for he lived by himself and had no friends, family, or acquain-

tances that might disturb him. Most anybody he could tolerate had long passed on, save for his wife, who had been rotting her brain away in a home for nearly two decades. And anyone he might consider a friend was probably still in the Highlands, weathering the gales and sea-spray like the greying wood of the patio chair lost to the weeds of his backyard. And so, all suspects that could possibly remain were proselytisers, pranksters, or crooks.

Mr Thomas began the process of getting back into the proper mindset for his work. He slipped into the bathroom to see if he could urinate a little into the stained toilet, saving him the effort of getting up later. He never closed the door anymore, having no need for privacy. Only a few drips came. He read an article in *Nature* once about cancer. If a man should escape every other ailment and live to an old age, it said, statistically speaking, he would die of prostate cancer. Mr Thomas thought of this often. Did he piss too often or too little? Was the inevitable tumour already growing inside of him, or would something else get him first? It came to

his mind every time he went to the bathroom, but met it with indifference; after all, the only real difference was a trivial bit of time all things considered.

It was only after re-lacing his steel-toed boots, refilling his glass with water, pulling up the threadbare chair tightly to the table, and refocusing the lamp that Mr Thomas was able to determine where he left off. If dressed correctly, the coils of the Round Turn Interlocking Shroud knot would appear simple to the amateur eye but those twisting ropes never fully betrayed the difficulty of remembering the correct order each strand threaded over, under, and through itself.

Knock, knock.

Again. Undoubtedly encouraged by the lights inside, the person outside the door might only be deterred if Mr Thomas made it very clear that he did, in fact, hear them but did not care.

“Go away,” said Mr Thomas, in a soft voice. His rule was not broken, he thought, as he had not spoken to himself but instead to the visitor. Making good use of his boots, he

adopted a new approach and made extra effort to stomp his way to the tangle of blinds, which he turned quickly. His concentration shattered, Mr Thomas pushed in his chair, turned off the light, and returned his incomplete knot to its less complex natural state. After putting on a kettle for tea, he made his way to the dark living room and sank into his old armchair in the corner. A stranger might suggest that the sofa might be better positioned to see the television, but several lengths of blue-and-orange striped climbing rope Mr Thomas had found at a yard sale years ago now lay coiled on the seat. Moving the television never occurred to him, for this was the arrangement his wife preferred. As for the darkness, he did not bother changing the lightbulbs; the flickering light of the set usually illuminated enough to eat. Involuntarily, his leg began to bounce.

A letter sat on the coffee table, unopened. Two years ago, Mr Thomas received it from his sister in hospice. Every other letter he received met the curious flames of hearth, but this letter felt glued to the table. Just as he had forgotten about

it, the kettle began to murmur, threatening to scream.

“Alright, alright!” he said, raising his hands. Again, Mr Thomas quickly assured himself that his rule was not broken, for he spoke not to himself but instead to the kettle. With a cup of Earl Grey in hand (no sugar, a little milk, and paired with the type of sugared shortbread cookie found in round tins layered on little paper cups), Mr Thomas finally turned his attention to the television and the four fuzzy channels it received by coat hanger. With a click and a hum, the sound slowly came into focus. A moustached man, looking vaguely uncomfortable in an oversized suit appeared on the curved screen.

“-and these people, our uncivilised brothers and sisters, they still have no way to receive the good news. And all we’re trying to do is save them.”

The camera shifted to the interviewer, a balding fellow in a tweed suit. There was something pinned on his lapel, indistinguishable in the fuzz of the poor reception. An ethereal,

serious voice, then:

“The Sentinelese have never been contacted peacefully. Why do you believe that your attempts will go differently?”

“Well, we have God on our side,” the moustachioed man offered, and the rest of his sentence blurred into inarticulate half-sounds as Mr Thomas’ mind became occupied with a monolithic thought that wedged its way into his mind like a stone trapped deep in the tread of a tyre: Why go to such lengths just to tell someone that they were going to hell? His tea, already forgotten among its half-empty peers on the side table, had started to go cold.

Knock, knock.

One knock is normal enough, thought Mr Thomas, sinking back in his armchair. Two knocks were no more than a nuisance. But three knocks over the course of five minutes? A long moment of silence proceeded as Mr Thomas carefully thought through how he would rid himself of the interloper. Had he forgotten some rare appointment made months ago? No, it had to be someone else. Visions of wild possi-

bilities flitted about in his mind, each appearing more disturbing than the last. Could a lost child be looking to use the telephone? Maybe one of those serial killers the TV went on about stood there, just one two-inch door away. Worse still, it might be those damned Jehovah's Witness people. Flexing his jaw muscles, Mr Thomas assured himself with the unchangeable fact that nobody could be at the door if he didn't answer it.

Still, the thoughts persisted. And then, all of a sudden, he had it. The most simple answer if all was the very one he'd overlooked for so long: The very act of answering the door would materialise the knocker in the same way that the observation of Schrödinger's cat bound its state to a single outcome. Someone was simultaneously at the door and not at the door, and for Mr Thomas, that was good enough.

Knock, knock.

Startled from his reverie, Mr Thomas sat up, struggling against the recliner mechanism in his armchair. This visitor could not be ignored. Most would have given up by now. Only one

thing could be done, and it always ended in worse outcomes. He learned this lesson a long time ago. When Mr Thomas was little Randy Thomas, he was driven by curiosity to find out whether the light in the refrigerator went out when the door closed. To unravel this mystery, Randy waited until his mother took his sister Fran to her swimming lesson before he set to work carefully unpacking the contents of the fridge onto the floor and, with some effort, managed to remove the metal shelving. He climbed in, scrunched himself up against the wall, and pulled the door closed with a click. It was true, he had found out; the light inside a fridge does indeed turn off when the door is closed. What is also true, however, is that he did not escape the frigid confines of the refrigerator until his mother came home two hours later to the sight of fruits, vegetables, egg and milk cartons, and leftover ham on the linoleum, baking in the afternoon sun. Inside the fridge, she found a shivering Randy, too tired and distraught to cry whatsoever. Even now, Mr Thomas could still remember his father chuck-

ling behind his copy of the New York Times.

“Climbed in Pandora’s box, did we?”

Mr Thomas got up, grasped the fraying arm of his favourite armchair, and turned it to face the door.

Knock, knock.

In his heart of hearts, Mr Thomas knew what came next. Bathed in a cold sweat, he simply knew that another knock was imminent. Dread, like icy water, pooled into his boots and crept up his legs and around his stomach, which began to bubble with hot bile. It was the worst feeling he had ever experienced; this overwhelming knowledge that something waited for him outside the door—and no matter what he did, he could not escape it.

“Away, away!” he thought loudly. “Go away!” Simultaneously knowing and not knowing ate him from the inside like the fire ate his mail, tendrils of fear tickling his brain, threatening to warp and curl every surety he held, every truth he knew. And so it was with great bravery that Mr Thomas crept up to the door and placed his shaking palms against the peeling paint of the

door, waiting to feel the being on the other side through the vibrations.

Knock, knock.

In a small, triumphant act, Mr Thomas put his hand on the knob and broke his highest rule, the rule he had observed ritualistically for the last sixteen years: he turned the door handle of his front door and opened it, just a crack. Outside, a uniformed man stood under the porch light, holding a large rectangular bag at his side. A moth bumped against the lightbulb.

“Hello, pizza delivery.”

Mr Thomas slowly shook his head.

“It’s from your neighbours, across the street,” he gestured behind him. “All paid for.” Unzipping his bag, he produced a pizza box and held it forward, waiting.

“...Are you alright, sir?”

Mr Thomas nodded once.

“I’ll just leave this here, then,” said the lad, placing the box on the top stair and backing away. “Have a good night.”

The visitor, having completed another ordinary transaction, slipped back into the darkness

and was gone.

“Thank you,” said Mr Thomas, although there was nobody to hear him.

A Steady State Model

Mary Grimm

Our grandmother was the first dead person we knew, although we hadn't known her very well. She was old, and she often spoke in another language. The oldest cousin claimed that she understood her when she spoke in Slovak, but the rest of us didn't believe her, except for her sister because they always stuck together.

The two of them had spent time at their grandmother's house during her long illness. Their mother went over to help out, and the oldest cousin and her sister had to go there for lunch instead of home for a long while. They ate their sandwiches on TV trays in front of the lunchtime shows – Captain Penny, Pooch Parade, Who's the Funny Man? – while their grandmother lay on a bed in the dining room with her legs wrapped in bandages.

After the funeral, where we all had to kneel by the coffin and look at our dead grandmother's

face, pale as the white crayon, there was a party at the house with our uncles drinking shots in the kitchen. No one noticed if we went into the garage, which used to be forbidden. The boy cousin claimed he saw a rat, which made the youngest cousin scream. We crouched behind the rose arbour with the red rose petals raining down on us. This was the beginning of it all, the curly-haired cousin realised, the time when we started to live our own lives, but she didn't say it out loud for fear we'd all make fun of her.



Shared Values

Natalya Edwards

I chose to come back to myself on Thursdays because who the hell would choose to live their life only in the first half of the week? All that expectation, Monday morning dread, realising you've got a whole week ahead of you of zero lie-ins and a to-do list as long as your arm. I didn't think they'd be able to find anyone willing, let alone desiring, to live their life that way. But then they found the Other. For the Other, Mondays filled her with optimism; it was the weekend that filled the Other with dread.

Every Thursday Lunchtime we have our debrief. I slink down from the bedroom and curl myself up on the living room sofa. My skin is already beginning to harden. It's painless. I run my fingers across my arms and the sensation is like stroking a callus.

The Other is cooking lunch. Neither of us is a particularly great cook. She boils pasta, stirs

in some pesto, cheese and pasta water and sits down to eat. Halfway through eating, she hands the bowl to me. Every week I reach to take it thinking the bowl will slip out of my hands and smash onto the floor. Each week, I am surprised by its warmth and the sudden hunger that overcomes me. The hunger that comes with every other emotion. The painkiller of my half-existence wears away. I don't notice it immediately, but then I feel the weight of everything that was previously lifted. Before I was a straight line, observing and objective, dull and lifeless – now I am throbbing in all the ways I forgot I used to.

Did we start our period?

The Other nods. We're on Day 3.

She got the worst of it. Thank god.

The Other is fading now so she quickly briefs me in. Four deadlines by EOD Friday. You need to email several people. I've booked us in for a hair appointment at the end of the month. The bedsheets need changing, I've washed the spare ones. Your Dad called.

My Dad? My Dad never calls.

The Other doesn't say anything but she clearly

has something she needs to say.

Go on.

He asked for you to call him back. Not me. He was adamant.

I can hear him saying exactly what she said to her. We don't share memories, but I am familiar with my Dad's tone and viewpoint on most subjects.

I see. Thanks.

About a minute later, the Other eases into being. Well, mostly. If you walked into the room right now you wouldn't notice her, but if you knew, if you were looking for her, if you stared at the right spot on the sofa you would see the edges of her person and then two glassy eyes with dilated pupils staring back at you behind a translucent veil.

After about five minutes, when I've finished our lunch, she slinks off. We both go to bed once we are no longer occupying. She goes to rest until Monday morning when she'll be refreshed and able to occupy once again.

I have about twenty minutes left of my lunch-time. I take it slowly. It takes a while to get used

to having senses once again. The sensation of the hardwood floors against my feet, the white noise in the room. I do the dishes and let the tap run very lightly before I put it on full blast. Water makes such a harsh sound, but I begin to enjoy it after a while.

I think about when best to call my Dad for the rest of the day. Maybe later in the week would be best or in the evening, when he's probably feeling a bit looser after dinner and a beer. I was hesitant to even tell him when I was signing up for this lifestyle change but the doctors insisted. They felt it was important to let all your close family and friends know.

I decide to call him that evening after eight.

“I knew straight away it wasn’t you. She has a lisp.”

I roll my eyes. The Other doesn’t have a lisp. Well, I don’t think she does.

“How have you been?”

He tells me about how he’d been up and down

the vets with the cat. How he hates his job and can't wait to retire next year. He's booked a holiday to Mexico next month.

“Mexico? By yourself?”

“Yeah. Why not? I've never been abroad by myself that wasn't for work.”

Trying to move the conversation away from myself and the other only works for a few minutes – suddenly he's asking questions about us again.

“I just don't know how you do it. Let someone else fiddle about in your body.” He scoffs down the line. “What does she get up to that first half of the week? Surely there's some drug you could have taken instead.”

“I tried.” I did. I tried everything.

“Just a bit fucking weird if you ask me, letting someone else knock about in there.”

“I mean that's not exactly how it works...”

Dad continues. He's set himself off now. I put the phone on speaker, turn down the volume, and start to tidy my bedroom. There's always a pile of clothes that stack up against my chair. I fold them up and wait for him to finish. I've

heard everything he's said before. Not just from him. From everyone.

Eventually, the phone conversation ends without much solution. I've made my bed, and I've been sleeping in it half the week for the past six months without much issue. In fact, it's working really well. This time away from the creaks of my body and its constant throbbing has served me well. I'm more present when I am here – more productive. The Other is too. In giving away half my life I have gained half of it back. But Dad won't understand this. It's a decision he's never had to make.

I carry on tidying the room. It's not the most organised of bedrooms. I sit and untangle my jewellery, hanging them up nicely on each hook on my jewellery holder. I roll up all my trousers into neat little sausages and line them up inside my drawers.

Dad had some fair points about the Other. I don't know absolutely everything she gets to do during her side of our week. Both of us focus on the highlights, the stuff the Other needs to know in order to continue. When I think about it too

closely I begin to feel a little funny. This body has done things I cannot recall. I think about the Other going about her day. All the things she could have touched or interacted with.

I feel myself begin to panic and sit down on the bed. I close my eyes and breathe a little. I remember the positives of this lifestyle. I don't have to live my Mondays anymore, the Other took them on, she took them on for me, but I don't know what she does with them, and maybe that's fine, that's the price I paid for not living my Mondays. Maybe it would feel easier if I knew it wasn't my body she was living them through. My body has lived every Monday, and continues to, I just have no idea what happens to it.

Bit fucking weird if you ask me.

Bit fucking weird if you ask me.

Bit fucking weird if you ask-

I press my feet against the floor to ground myself but I hit a little too harshly and smash my heel against something wooden underneath the bed. My foot stings in pain. I pull it towards my stomach to comfort it, my hands stroking

and holding it carefully.

As the pain subsides I push myself onto the floor to work out what it was I hit. I pull out an intricately carved wooden box.

I got it from this vintage fair we went to. The price said £25 underneath but when I asked the seller said “for you £10” and how could I say no. I loved the strange little locks around it, the red velvet inside. They don’t make anything like that anymore, not for that price.

I don’t know how to open this thing, but my body does. Muscle memory. My hands pop the locks, they know to carefully ease the top by wiggling it slightly so the wood releases smoothly.

Inside are photographs, stuffed tightly, they don’t quite fit and each one has bent in the corners. I pull them out and see underneath is a notebook. I’m not sure why, but I open the notebook first.

The handwriting is mine and fills every page, corner to corner, with barely any space for the words to breathe. The only white space is the dash after the heading which details the date

and the day.

Monday – I don't know what to do with myself; it always feels like this at the beginning of a week. So much time and yet none at all.

Tuesday – Saw this really fucking sad film, like so sad. Just sad for sad's sake I think. It was like the director just wanted to make people cry and say: "ha! I've elicited an emotional reaction out of you because you cried!". Well, I did, congrats dude, mainly because I'm a human being and grief is sad not because you had anything really meaningful to say about it. Gave it three stars.

Thursday – Feeling aimless today. Sucks ass.

Wednesday – I feel like I shouldn't have agreed to this lifestyle. What is a Friday? I don't know, I never see it. Maybe I'd like it more in this body.

Thursday – Tired. Glad to go away soon. Sooooooo achy and tired.

I skip forward a few weeks and it is similar. Ebbs and flows of happiness and sadness, enjoying this life and not, she talks about it often, I skip on further.

Wednesday – God. The sex! It's so good. It's redicu-

I slam the notebook shut. I've gone too far. This is invasive, but also not really. This means my body has had sex recently. In a way, I've had sex recently. I was touched by another person, and I enjoyed it, my body enjoyed it and I had absolutely no idea.

I reach over to the photographs, they are face down, but I turn them over. They're taken on film, you can tell. Some are blurry, some off-centre, the imperfect nature of a temperamental cheap film camera. There are photos of trees, nature, and candids of people I don't recognise and I don't think the Other knows. It's like she went on a walk and just took these. I skim through. There is one of a man, taken indoors, sitting on a sofa looking sheepishly at the camera. I don't know him, but I do. Muscle memory.

I'm waiting on the doorstep for a tediously long time before he answers. When he opens he welcomes me in like he knows me because he does,

and immediately I feel at ease. I don't have to introduce him to myself in the way you would do on a first date. That effort has been done for me.

"I've made some soup if you'd like any?"

I nod. "Sure."

He tells me it's lasagne soup, and I look at him blankly before asking him to explain what that is. Apparently, it's essentially a bolognese sauce but with cracked pieces of thin lasagne sheets stirred in. He hasn't done the lasagne sheets yet and asks if I'd like to put in a few. I snap one and small shards of pasta go flying across the room. I apologise profusely and fall to the floor picking them all up, even the tiniest flakes.

The man laughs and falls to his knees a few moments later with a dustpan in hand. As he picks up the pieces he kisses my forehead and jokingly tells me I'm an idiot. I freeze and try my best not to give a strange reaction. For him, this is a normal interaction with the version of me he knows, an understood level of intimacy. Perhaps they're closer than I thought. Perhaps she's told him about me, about our lifestyle. But he hasn't mentioned any of it, he hasn't given

any indication that he knows I'm not her, or that I even exist. Then again, I've only been here about twenty minutes.

I met him online. He works for a tech company. Nice guy. He likes the girlfriend experience though. We meet a few times a month and hang out and it's as though we're in love, but we're not. He likes his alone time, goes climbing on the weekends, and has a few friends but I guess he misses the intimacy of knowing another person on that level. So, we pretend to have it for a bit, and it's fun; it works. To be honest, I really like him. We get along, he's attentive – when he wants to be — and the sex is so bloody good.

When we're in the middle of eating I realise this man is quite attractive. He's wedging his hunk of fresh bread slathered in butter into his soup. He gets a blob of the sauce on his chin and doesn't notice. He looks pretty stupid. That's when I see him as a person. I point out the mess he's made and he takes a look in the camera of my phone and laughs rather than hiding away in shame. I see his character flesh out around the corners from the Other's description. I un-

derstand why the Other spends time with him. This is fun. He is fun.

Afterwards, we watch a film. It is foreign. His Dad is Japanese so raised him on a lot of Japanese comedy. I tell him how I've only seen Takeshi's Castle and he explains to me how the attitude towards being on reality TV shows there is different. Over there you do things for the fun of it. Takeshi's Castle never needed to have a monetary prize. People go on just for the experience.

The film is a satire of Kung Fu and very heavy in slapstick. I enjoy it, surprisingly. I'm not really into absurd silly sort of humour, generally preferring dry, sarky comments but maybe that's just what I'm more used to seeing – I would never have picked it if he hadn't pointed it out.

It makes me realise how much of a bubble I've been in. My half of the week is very much just a fight to get through it. I sometimes see friends, if I can manage, but I am so tired and drained afterwards that I can never find myself mustering enough strength to organise the plans half of the time. This in comparison is exciting, and

new, and fresh. My pain is still there; it's always there, but this is distracting.

I find myself engaged, asking him lots of questions, smiling when he laughs. I can't tell what I am enjoying more, the film or watching him watch it.

At some point he begins holding my hand, and then at a later point, I lean my head against his shoulder. Me and the Other never discussed boundaries. I think both of us consciously decided to not bring it up. I don't believe she wouldn't have thought about it. Maybe I should have brought it up, I don't want to hurt her, but I'm also not convinced this will really hurt.

The man notices me looking at him and turns his head. We watch each other. I'm thinking about who he is, what they act like together, whether he can tell I am not quite her, are their conversations similar, do they talk in similar ways, about similar things, could he not tell us apart because we are so fundamentally alike or because we represent the same thing. Someone he can desire, introduce new concepts to, and showcase his knowledge and his care. Feel

meaningful. Good.

The man doesn't see any of this in my look. He just begins to lean in.

Sunday evening I make her favourite. Pie and Mash. With Parsley Sauce. I bought the packet specially and spent a lifetime stirring the milk in the pan until it thickened. I don't even begin eating, simply wait for her to reappear on the other side of the table and then pass it across.

She looks down at the untouched bowl and then winces. When her eyes look back at mine I immediately wish I could take it all back, but we both know it wouldn't change anything.

He didn't notice.

That we were different? I nod.

She shakes her head. Fuck. She stabs the knife into her pie, cuts herself a slice and stuffs it into her mouth. He knew as well, she says with her mouth full.

I don't know what to say, I let her carry on eating.

You didn't fuck him, did you?

My mouth twitches. Her mouth turns stern.

Don't pity me.

No. Not really.

We started, and I was enjoying it, really enjoying it. I hadn't been touched by someone else in so long – I wouldn't even know how to measure the time apart without consulting a calendar. But then it progressed and I couldn't get the Other off my mind. She was there. Doing this with him. Touching him where I was now, kissing his chest, perhaps in a lighter, more careful, more desirable way. That's when I had to pull away. He looked up at me confused as I quickly re-found my clothes that had been strewn across the room. He asked me if I was alright, to talk to him, telling me to come back. Over and over. He wouldn't stop saying words.

The Other is pissed. She rolls her eyes and looks down at the bowl, refusing to even make eyes with me. I don't care. It doesn't matter anyway.

When I asked the doctors how they matched us together the doctor waffled on about some

very long vetting process. Honestly, it sounded like a glorified matchmaking service. I was sent a twenty-six-page-long word document to fill in. The first half I had to give paragraph-long reasons for my reasons for opting for the process. Why was I making this choice? How did I believe it would benefit my life? Did I understand the risks, and how it would change the trajectory of my life forever? What were my future plans? Did I want a family? A long-term partner? I was told other stories where this life-style choice worked, where people successfully body doubled within a family unit.

Then they asked about my likes, my dislikes, my values, my taste in food, how often I showered, what clothes I wore, interests, hobbies, job, and career aspirations. So much of it so incredibly specific. I asked the doctor about this. I can't remember her response but it was something along the lines of: "We must ensure you and your double have shared values. A common ground that is invaluable when occupying the same body."

I take myself to bed, already beginning to fade.

I roll under the duvet, turn over, and the Other is there staring right back at me.

What did you answer when they asked if you would ever want to fall in love?

Her voice, almost a whisper.

I said yes but I couldn't see it for myself. Not with it working out long-term anyway.

Yeah, same.

She reaches her hand forwards and strokes my barely there cheek. I would have done it too.

But, I didn't.

I know. I would have been the same.

I ask her if she misses her old life. She shakes her head. I don't know much about it except that she wanted to leave. That's all I really needed to know.

You're so beautiful. If he could tell us apart I don't blame him for not saying.

We hold each other closely. I thought I didn't know this woman living through me. But I do. I know her more intimately than I've ever known anyone else in my life. In our time apart I only understand her better, and in our time together I feel the parts of her no one else will ever quite

get to touch.

When we wake, we realise we are not separate anymore. I pull her away from me for a moment, her eyes lock with mine and she smiles. She presses her forehead to mine, and it overlaps, her lips become my lips, her nose fades over mine, her fingers sink into my waist, and I think nobody, nobody in the world knows me better than her, who is me, and me who is her, not in this moment and every moment after. I will love her in the way she needs to be loved, and I understand her aches. I know what Monday means to her and what Monday means to me. I know waking up at 3 a.m. in a panic. I know the ache. I know the eternal tiredness that follows us wherever we go. I know how she is different, and I know the exact point where we become the same.

Going to a Show Tonight

Bruce Buchanan

The words once meant magic. But middle-age reality overwhelms 1993's exuberance. Parking costs too much, and the walk to the amphitheatre is too long. My knees already throb, and the opening act hasn't even started.

The first time I saw the headliner, I was younger than my kids are now. Our dorm rooms resonated with that jangle pop sound; Gen X anthems that we are loath to let go.

My college buddies, faces now framed by crow's feet and smile lines, amble to their seats and greet me with hugs. We brag about children, complain about work. But inevitably, the talk shifts to memories. Some funny, some painful. All indelible.

The stories mingle in the sticky, buggy evening air. Remember the guy who ate peanut butter with his fingers? And the girl who crank called us at 3 a.m.? She's a lawyer out west now – we

trade Facebook messages every so often.

Memories bridge the transition into night.
The lights fade with the ache in my knees. Practised fingers strum a Rickenbacker and sounds unused in years rumble from my throat. Spotlights spill colour over the stage.

And it is 1993 again.



Hillside

Zary Fekete

“Shall we walk up that way?” Roger said.

Cynthia looked up and saw the winding path he was pointing to. They were standing at the foot of a green hill, about 200 yards from where Roger had parked their car.

“Don’t you think it’s a bit steep?” she said.

“Not at all,” he said. “Here, take my arm.”

He took her right hand and began to walk toward the path. She followed carefully, placing her feet in the places where he put his. The sun was coming in and out of the passing clouds, and large shadows floated across the hill around them.

“There’s a fine lookout point from the top,” he said. “It’s worth the climb.”

She nodded without answering. She glanced back and saw they were already some distance from the parking lot. She heard the distant hum of the highway.

“I say, what’s that?” Roger said.

“What?”

He released her hand and gestured towards the edge of the path. There, a small wooden stake had been driven into the ground, with a delicate thread tied to it, a small envelope dangling in the breeze.

Cynthia looked at him. His eyes were on hers, but she couldn’t read his face. She stepped over to the envelope and held it in her hand for a moment before pulling it free. She recognized his handwriting on the card on the inside.

“You never know what you’ll find in these hills,” he said.

They continued up the hill. Roger didn’t hold her hand anymore. He walked slowly with firm steps. A moment later, he stopped and pointed to another piece of wood. Another small envelope was attached to it.

When they finally arrived at the top of the hill, Cynthia was a bit out of breath. She was holding seven envelopes in her hand. Roger ran his fingers through his hair and gestured toward an outlook point that faced off toward the moun-

tains in the distance. Cynthia looked farther up the hill and saw the beginning of many more foothills that climbed up toward the distant peaks. She looked back and saw Roger standing by the outlook alcove. Next to him was a small wooden pedestal with a small vase holding two red roses.

Cynthia walked to the pedestal and looked down at the hill they had climbed. The distant traffic was silent, and all she could hear was the soft breeze blowing past her skirt. When she turned back around, Roger was on one knee, holding a ring in his hand.

“Will you marry me?” he said.

A bird flew above them, crying out with a harsh squawk. The sound echoed in the valley below. It grew in Cynthia’s ears until she felt she couldn’t take it.

Who Wins the 109.361 Yard Race?

J. S. O'Keefe

The United States has only four percent of the planet's population but a full one-quarter of its economic output, which is wealth for all intents and purposes. Pundits and laymen have offered various explanations, both scholarly and emotional, divine intervention frequently mentioned among them.

Now after a brief yet deep analysis, I can also offer my two cents. The reason for our outsized affluence is that we are one of the very few remaining countries that haven't converted to the metric system. A pound of meat is what a healthy grown man eats for dinner on a holiday; a kilogram would be too much even for a wrestler. Forty-three feels cold in Fahrenheit; it is a high fever in Celsius. The length category does not fare any better: an inch is roughly a thumbprint, a foot is an average human step, but a centimetre measures nothing except itself.

The yard and the metre, however, are kissing cousins. I asked around the other day, what's the difference between the two? Some said the yard was a bit longer, others thought it a few inches shorter. Turns out, one metre is 1.09361 yards.

For the most part, I only follow team sports, except there is a track-and-field event that has always fascinated me: the hundred-metre running race (109.361 yards). Since 1984 all Olympic winners in the men's category have run it below ten seconds. That is one incredible tempo; I visualise a gazelle chasing Usain Bolt, the poor animal huffing and puffing and finally giving up with a hamstring.

Over the years I have developed the ability to predict the winner of the hundred-metre, and all it takes is a quick glance. I tell anybody who's willing to listen, hey, if you're a betting man put serious dough on that guy, he's a shoo-in. And I don't even have to size up the sprinters or know about their recent performance. Without any effort, I pick out the one who will cross the finish line first, leaving the rest to eat his dust. And let's up the ante here, say a helicopter takes

me half a mile above the runners, and from there they appear only like ants or dots, I can point out to the pilot, which ant or dot will win it hands down, so to speak.

So who's going to win the hundred-metre dash? Simple: the one who has a forty-metre head start.

I work for a magazine, we call it the Journal, although, in reality, it is a think tank. Our job titles vary, such as writer, associate, analyst, research fellow, but we all are paid for thinking. The outside world believes that ours is a super-high IQ organisation; they leave us alone and pay us very well. Once you are hired you have a fairly safe cushy job, so why would anybody ever quit? Still, a few do because, I suspect, they realise that they don't measure up, or they get bored trying to solve problems in which they have little or no interest. I am the low man on the totem pole, that is, the one who joined the Journal most recently. It's clear to me I'm not nearly as smart as most of my colleagues.

Last Friday, during the staff meeting, the

editor brought up an issue that's never on anybody's mind: What's the root of all evil? "The root of all evil is the love of money, at least according to Pablo," said one of the young writers who got his Ph.D. at Duke in Spanish Language and Literature. "I am familiar with the old tent maker's work," said the editor, "but as we well know, he was prone to exaggerating. Even if money were abolished and our system reverted to a barter economy, there would still be war, crime, hate, anxiety, etc., the list continues. Greed might contribute but it alone doesn't cause all societal ills. Is it the imperfect human mind or uncontrollable forces that occasionally cause us to turn into raging savages fully dedicated to hurting one another? What do you think, Chris?" The writer's name is not Chris, but when the big guy rejects your idea with such vehemence, it softens the blow that at least the son-of-a-bitch doesn't know who you are.

Over the weeks I've trained myself not to pay attention during these so-called brainstorming sessions. One of the old timers told me recently the meetings used to be held on

Wednesday but a year ago the editor decided to switch to Friday. He wants us to spend the entire weekend pondering the issues he throws out at the last minute. On this occasion, I was thinking about the metric system and who wins the hundred-metre sprint. He who has the forty-metre head start.

Then I noticed the editor kept turning in my direction, freaking me out. “This is a practical, not a philosophical question,” he said, “since the problem itself is real and shows no sign of going away. The root of all evil! Humanity has ignored it because we feel that either it cannot be solved or we will reform ourselves. The opposite is true: Every problem can be solved with enough effort, and evil can be tackled, too. Right, Mike?” Here, I could almost swear, he looked right into my eyes. My name is not Mike but nobody else’s name sitting near me was Mike either. Still, I held out hope that his focus was on another guy with whom I share the same first name to the extent that it’s not Mike. “When Nietzsche warned that every hero who fights monsters could become a monster

himself, the great thinker from Sachsen advised us to tackle evil collectively.” The editor suddenly stopped the harangue; now he was definitely staring at me. No way out, I felt an overwhelming urge to jump up and confess that yes, my name is Mike, and I am the root of all evil.

“By the way,” continued the editor, “I’ve done some intelligence work on salaries and, guess what, even the lowest-paid among you pockets a much bigger paycheck than your counterparts at Heritage, Cato, Brookings and Hoover.” This time he didn’t turn specifically toward me, but my mind went into overdrive again. Am I the lowest-paid analyst here, or is my salary considered excessively high?

Saturday was sunny with a light breeze; I drove to High Point NJ for a hike. It has several good trails, not particularly challenging but always a good workout, and the scenery is nice. A popular place, I often meet some of my colleagues here, including the editor who always comes with his wife. They must be early risers because whenever we bump into each other they are about to finish while I am barely on my first

mile. This Saturday it was different. After completing the Monument/Steeny Kill trail, I saw the editor in the Route 23 parking lot getting out of his car. "In the morning I noticed that the sole of my left boot had partially come off," he explained. "I tried crazy glue but it didn't do the trick. No big deal, I went to the Mall to pick up a new pair. My wife of course lost interest in hiking today; she is a firm believer that the day is gone by noon." He put on the boots and started adjusting his trekking poles. Suddenly he turned to me. "Greg, I noticed yesterday you were deep in thought concerning the root of all evil." My name is not Greg; the editor only knows the older employees and compensates by randomly assigning names to the rest of us. "Sir, to tell the truth, I was thinking about the metric system, and how to predict the winner of the one hundred metre running race. Interestingly, one metre is 1.09361 yards." The editor shook his head. "I always thought it was exactly 1.1. Anyway, the metric system becomes important only when we go abroad. And who cares about the hundred-metre race? It's like the Kentucky

Derby; even the experts can't predict it with any degree of certainty." He was walking up and down in the parking lot feeling his new boots. "Last weekend the trail was muddy but we haven't had much rain recently. How's it now?" I told him the trail was fairly dry. The editor was ready to get underway. As I put my car key in the ignition, he was back and waved to roll down the window. "So what's the big mystery about calling the hundred-metre dash?" I told him the sprinter with a forty-metre head start will always win. He chuckled, "You're a funny guy, Ted," and got on the trail.

Monday morning we were notified that the staff meeting had to be moved up from Friday to Tuesday because the editor was going away for the rest of the week to attend a meeting in D.C. Hopefully he has enough on his mind and forgets about the root of all evil, I thought. That's exactly what the sages call wishful thinking. Tuesday the editor started off by announcing that he had had a very productive conversation with Bob while hiking together at High Point last weekend. My name is not Bob but I

knew he meant me. “Stand up Fred, and tell us about who will win the hundred-metre sprint.” My name is not Fred either but I stood up and said the runner with a forty-metre head start will triumph. I scanned the room; a few faces showed confusion, the others were reflective, and nobody laughed. “My friends, that’s the answer to the root of all evil,” said the editor. “Having undeserved advantage leads to strife between individuals, between races and social classes, and between nations. The result is mistrust, hatred, and eventually violence and destruction.” I wanted to clarify that I never meant that an unfair edge is equal to the root of all evil and that there’s rarely a simple answer to complex problems, but payday was just around the corner and I didn’t want to jeopardise my big salary.



Corridor

Martina Collender

Look it, have you ever woken in the dead of night? It's so dark that for a second, just a split second, you think you've died. And you're so scared. And you lie there, and you feel so horrible and so... alone, and all that crap, you know? Yeah, well, with every step I took, it felt like I was walking to the place where all those horrible feelings were born.

It's funny, isn't it, the way the human mind works? Memories, there, faded shadows are all just faded shadows that we dwell in every so often. I mean, it was just a corridor, just a walk down a corridor, and yet it's that that sticks out. I remember the rest, obviously, of course I remember. But it's all a blur, you know? I almost... trained myself, I suppose, not to think about it... everything. And I don't, you know, I get on with my life, but it's walking down that Godforsaken Corridor; it sneaks up on me. And it's so

clear. Every step I took echoed, and I can still hear it echoing in my mind. Who the hell am I to complain; there are so many others going through so much worse than me.

Look, I don't want to talk about it ok, or, or need to.

I don't want to waste another day.

I don't want a hug.

I don't want a tissue.

I don't want to rent your shoulder to cry on.

I just, I just...

I just thought I'd tell you about the corridor, 'cause I think it's a bit mad, that it's the one thing that sticks out. Yeah, I freaked out ok? You don't get it. It was so messed up down there. It was like a forgotten place. It's stupid, but it felt like I couldn't smile down there because no one ever did or something. And with every step I took, I felt like once I got to the end I couldn't go back. I'd be stuck there. Which is stupid 'cause all I ever had to do was ask the nurse and make some bullshit small talk with her while she took forever to type out that code and let me out.

But sometimes, I'd think, if she can't get out,

then neither can I. Who decided she should stay and I should go? Stupid, so stupid, I know, she's in the best place...or so I've been told. But she can't decide when to go, you know? And even if she could, she's locked in her own mind, and I swear if I knew how to make her better... but I didn't. I don't know. And I'd give anything to make her better. And maybe if she got better, she wouldn't look so sad anymore.

You know, we were chatting once, she was in there a couple of months at this point, and we were just chatting, and she said: "You look wrecked, are you sleeping?" so I told her, cause' she asked, I told her about waking in the dead of night, and it being so dark and thinking I've died for a split second and being so scared... and she told me, she said to me, that when she gets that feeling when she wakes, and it's so dark that she thinks she's died... she's relieved.

Look I wasn't the first, and I certainly won't be the last, but when you see someone walking down that corridor... and I saw this one girl. And she was so small. And so young. And I would bet a diamond to a dollar that she didn't

know she was crying when she walked down that same corridor. And I wonder now, looking back, did I?



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