WENSUM

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WELCOME

David Sexton | Editor

Many of you may not know, but WENSUM is run as a not-for-profit enterprise, with time being volunteered to keep this little literary magazine trucking along, and it can be difficult to find time in busy schedules to get the magazine together and keep on top of submissions.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't sometimes question whether the effort is worth it, but then I read a submission that resonates and makes me feel something deeply, or I get a moving reply from someone who accepts our offer of publication, and I know that the long hours spent keeping WENSUM going are well worth it.

So, thank you for reading, and thank you for your support.

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Holiday of a Lifetime

Chris Cottom

In June, my mate Mike will be seventeen, so we'll buy a van, fit it with mattresses, and go continental. It'll be the five of us from last summer at Sandbanks, except it'll be St Tropez and no mums mithering us about missing the sunshine when we sleep until tea-time. Mike had better pass his test, that's all.

When Georgia suggests a beach wedding on Skiathos, her dad says it's either that or some help with the deposit on a flat. So we settle for St Saviour's in Skegness, with an out-of-town hotel for the reception. We don't want my cousins nipping down to the prom for a go on the dodgems.

We're waiting before starting a family so we can hike the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu. We'll be off as soon as Georgia finishes her nurse training, which should be handy if we get Bolivian Belly or bitten by a guinea pig. Only, she's

waving something from the loo doorway with a smile as wide as a condor's wingspan.

Now our youngest is four, we're going camping in Corsica, although we'll have to cancel if Georgia's right about expecting again. If so, I'll borrow a bell tent from the scouts and pitch it at my mum's outside Uttoxeter. With luck, she might lend us a few grand towards a bigger motor. Let's hope it isn't twins, or it'll have to be a minibus.

We've been planning what we're calling our second honeymoon in Goa. Except now Georgia's going on some yoga immersion week on Islay. It doesn't float my Lilo. Anyway, it's women only. We can't afford both, but it means I can get on with redecorating upstairs. I'll start with the twins' room.

We've booked a five-night cruise around the Norwegian Fjords for my fiftieth. But Georgia's dad has just had a stroke, and she'll spend the whole time worrying. We can put the money towards converting the garage so he can come and live with us.

With the inheritance, we've earmarked our

ruby wedding anniversary for our first trip overseas. Georgia's been angling for Australia, while I'm keen on Canada. But she's hurt her back and can't do long hauls without stopovers in Saudi or somewhere.

From our bungalow in Burnham-on-Sea, we watch the families with their sandcastles and inflatable alligators. Georgia and I never miss the travel programmes. We can't imagine why people go abroad when you can see everywhere on the telly. And you don't have to worry about dodgy buffets, or mistaking fried squid for onion rings, or taking enough Yorkshire tea for a full fortnight.

Five Brothers

Courtney Welu

My first brother died of a disease with no name, or at least a disease with no name seventy years ago. They have presumably named it by now. Only eight at the time of his passing, he was the first of us to break my mother's heart as she tended to him through the night, his shuddering weak breaths forced out by lungs that panted and gasped long before a strange illness swept through our rural farm town and left three families mourning their sickly, delicate little boys.

He had been born prematurely, a month too early, his first weeks on this planet spent in an incubator learning how to breathe. His tiny body struggled with the effort. His lungs lacked strength and rigour, but my mother insisted he made up for it in energy and verve. He traipsed around the prairie just fine, brandishing a stick as a sword. He could not run for long, but he loved to sit on the porch and play with the barn

cat, who tolerated his games, his pokes and prods.

At the end of my mother's life, my first brother lay heavy on her mind. She would call out for him in her sleep; she saw his little form at the end of her bed, but this time she was the sick one. When I gently told her that I could not see anyone, she insisted that this was merely because I had never met my first brother. Our existences had not crossed paths; if I'd known him, I would have seen him, too.

My second brother died of loneliness. He was exactly one year younger than my first year brother, and the only one of us to remember him in vivid detail. The two of them were thick as thieves on the farm, play-acting spaghetti westerns and toy soldiers.

He'd always been such a sweet child, my mother said, helping her with chores without being asked, sensing when she needed time alone in the house, attuned to her emotions when most little boys would have been wholly ignorant. But after his older brother died, he clammed up. He became colder and more distant. He resent-

ed playing with his younger brothers, believing God had played a trick on him and forced him to accept mediocre replacements for his first and best playmate.

He loved me, my mother said, because I was the only girl – I was an entirely new thing. My birth gave him the chance to be sweet again. My mother claimed he changed my diapers, and when she could not get me to sleep, he would sing me snippets of songs he heard on the radio.

I remember him in flashes. Curly blond hair, light freckles. He would play aeroplane with me, lifting me up off of the ground, propped up on his legs. I don't remember his voice and our camcorders did not record audio, so he left no record of himself behind, no way to recall what songs he might have crooned over my cradle.

My mother thought that perhaps his life had turned around after his first brush with tragedy at too young an age. She wanted to save up money to buy him a guitar. My father had the opposite feeling; his shouting matches with my second brother would wake the whole house after my father caught him sneaking out for the

umpteenth time.

My mother never had the chance to give him the guitar; my second brother careened my father's station wagon into a tree three days before his high school graduation. He likely died on impact. He likely did not suffer for more than a few seconds, not like his older brother, who wasted away over weeks. We do not know if he crashed the car on purpose.

I received a guitar from my mother on my eighteenth birthday. We had more money then, so it was not as much of a frivolity, an imposition on her finances. Still, I knew what it meant when her eyes welled up, and she wordlessly passed me my brother's inheritance.

My third brother died exactly five months and twenty-three days after he received his draft notice in the mail, a day that turned the mood of our house ugly and dour. I was nine, old enough to recall the heaviness of the moment but not old enough to have a say in the events that transpired. My father, a proud veteran, believed that the importance of military duty must be upheld, no matter our personal feelings

about the conflict in Vietnam. My mother did not feel as though she could argue.

And so, after a buzz cut, my third brother left for basic training and did not return. He knelt next to me at our front door and gave me a fierce hug goodbye. He promised me, and promised our mother, that he would come home safely.

He came home in a coffin. I don't even remember my mother crying; her face remained stoic and passive throughout the funeral service. I knew instinctively when I watched her that she must have been preparing for the news since the day he left home. I couldn't tell you if he died heroically, but I hope he did, for my mother's sake.

My fourth brother died many years later in a Canadian suburb, far away from the Midwest prairie. His draft notice arrived two years after my third brother's death. My father, who defined himself by his Navy service and love of his country, was the one to encourage him to leave said country before he could become another piece of fodder in the military machine. My father had lost too many sons, and he did

not want to lose another.

My fourth brother hitchhiked and crossed the border, disappearing from our lives without dying. Our goodbye before he left was not so dramatic, because I knew we would see each other again one day, even if it would not be tomorrow. My mother was less certain, but she told him rather brusquely that she'd rather see him dead in Canada than dead in Vietnam.

She did not anticipate my fourth brother falling in love with a Canadian woman and raising a family there even once his return to America became viable. My mother came from the farm, where everyone stayed in the same community from birth to death. She'd never had a child choose to leave of his own accord, and although she certainly preferred an absence where she had the option to place a phone call, the rejection stung. No one knew better than my fourth brother everything that my mother had gone through, and yet he still departed.

For most of my life, I saw my fourth brother once a year at Christmas. He was tall, thin, mild-mannered, and worked as an accountant.

He had one daughter, my only niece, who was very nearly a stranger to me. I sent her trinkets and candies for her birthday, and my fourth brother would write a thank you card back and make her sign it in blocky childlike letters. I appreciated the effort, but I would have appreciated knowing her more.

My fourth brother's wife called my mother with the news that her son had died suddenly of a heart attack at age 52. She'd come home from work and found him splayed out on the bathroom floor, dead before she could even call an ambulance.

By this time, my father had been dead for ten years; he'd only lost three sons, and now my mother lost her fourth all alone. I came home expecting her to be wailing, but she simply sat in her armchair, glasses off and eyes sunken in, numb and soundless. I sat with her for many hours, and she did not utter a single word.

My fifth brother, unlike the brothers that came before him, died after a long, full, happy life. He was kind and generous with friends and strangers alike. He told me that I was more than his

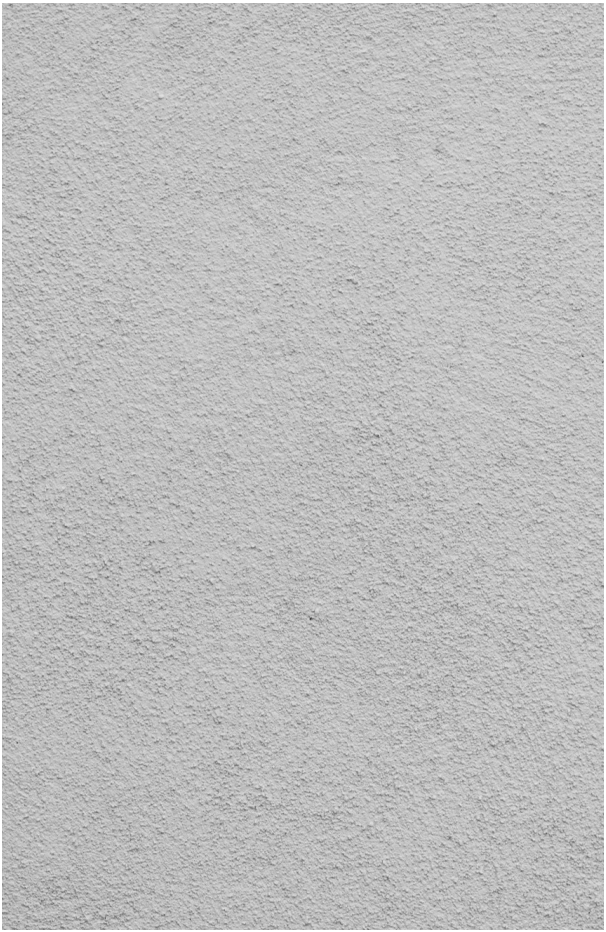
sister, but his best friend. He made a wonderful uncle to my children, playing games with them in the mud; they followed him like he was their ringleader. He had good friends, and a storied love life and always had time for his mother. He travelled to many countries but did not stay for long, coming back home every time.

Cancer came upon him suddenly, a general feeling of exhaustion and muscle weakness taking him to the doctor who diagnosed him with lymphoma. I don't think he would have gone through chemotherapy if my mother, at a wizened 95, had not been alive, sharp as a tack, and would have felt his loss as keenly as she'd felt the losses of her first four boys.

The chemotherapy may have extended his life by a few months, but when he could no longer care for himself, I stepped in. My fifth brother never had a family of his own; he admitted once to me in privacy that he had erred on the side of caution after watching what happened to the boys in our family, not wanting to place the burden of his death on anyone else's shoulders. But my shoulders were strong and capable.

I stayed with him for eight long weeks, watching his body slowly break down. I made sure he took his pain pills on time; I bathed him, trimmed his beard, and made him dinners from our mother's recipe box. I brought our mother to visit when she felt able, but she did not want to watch her last son dwindle away. When he finally let go in the night, I did not know how to tell her, but she knew from the tears in my voice when I finally plucked up the nerve to pick up the phone. We stayed silent on the line for a long while.

When my mother finally left this world, only a few days shy of her 100th birthday, I breathed easily for perhaps the first time in my life. My mother would not lose all of her children.



Quebec Snow

Mark Keane

Tony France came looking for me in the garden maze where I was pruning the hedges. "You can leave that for now," he said. "Mr Davidson has a special job for you."

"What's he got in mind?" I asked.

"I'll let him explain."

I followed Tony into the house and up the marble staircase.

We waited on the second-floor landing for Mr Davidson to join us. He led the way into a room with floor-to-ceiling shelves packed with books. Tiffany lamps in each corner cast diffused light. The Bocote floor was burnished to a rich, brown sheen. In front of one set of shelves stood a four-sided structure with a zig-zag arrangement, like an expanded concertina. Four grey plastered surfaces, nine feet high and fifteen feet wide, each with a six-inch wooden skirting board. Three plastic tubs stacked to one

side of the structure bore labels that read Brilliant White.

Mr Davidson pointed to the tubs. "You have been provided with six gallons of paint. Three coats will be required." He adjusted the cuffs of his bespoke suit. "I want the final effect to capture the whiteness I witnessed following a heavy snowfall in Quebec in January 1981. You will receive credit for any paint you do not use. That credit is, of course, predicated on your achieving the requisite whiteness of the Quebec snow." He paused, hands clasped behind his back. "On no account are you to get any paint on the wooden border or on the floor. No dripping is permitted. You will not be given any cloth or tissue. If you attempt to cover up mistakes there will be grave consequences." He pursed his lips. "Joe Spain certainly regrets his carelessness."

A muffled buzzing came from Mr Davidson's pocket. He took out his phone and checked the screen. "I have a meeting. Tony can cover the logistics." He exited the room, every inch the autocrat used to getting his way.

I waited until he was definitely gone. "What

did he mean about Joe Spain?"

"Joe Spain won't be painting anything for some time." Tony nodded his head slowly, eyebrows raised, making it clear he had nothing more to say on the subject.

"What's the reason for the painting?" I asked. "What was all that stuff about Quebec snow?"

"Don't ask me. I just work for the man."

"Is it a test?"

"Who knows?" Tony puffed out his cheeks. "If it is, you'd better pass it."

Up close, all manner of dimples, ridges, edges, and corners covered the four surfaces. "How am I to know if I've got the right colour?"

Tony shrugged. "Use your imagination. The boss suggested three coats of paint, and he should know." He glanced at his watch. "Time to lock you in for the night."

He showed me a small adjoining room. It contained a cot with a Hessian cover, a wooden chair, and a chamber pot. No lights.

"Someone will be back at eight with your breakfast. Probably me or Ivan. Get a good night's sleep; you've a lot of painting ahead of

you. One coat per day. Not as easy as you might think. Mr Davidson will check the final result on Friday." He leaned a little closer. "I remember Joe Spain's first night. He was cocksure. Painting a wall was a piece of piss, I remember him saying. He's not saying that now."

Tony locked the door. His footsteps faded, and an eerie stillness pervaded the enclosed space, inky black apart from a grey line where a gap under the door seeped pale light from the outer room. I lay on the cot and didn't sleep.

***

The following morning, Ivan Israel unlocked the door. I sat up and checked my watch: nearly ten o'clock.

"I know I'm late, Taffy," Ivan said, putting a tray on the ground. "Better dig in. You've got to finish the first coat by five o'clock. Mr Davidson's instructions." He stepped back out of the room.

I found Ivan off-hand to the point of hostility. Tall and paunchy with a precarious comb-over

and perpetual sneer, he always gave the impression I'd wronged him in some way. Nonetheless, I needed no encouragement to dig in. A top-notch breakfast, but I expected nothing less from Mr Davidson. Blueberry porridge, crispy bacon, waffles and maple syrup, eggs benedict, freshly squeezed orange juice, and a carafe of Columbian roast.

Ivan reappeared in the doorway. "This is a one-brush job," he announced. He handed me the brush, large and unwieldy with thick bristles. I turned it in my hand and saw white stains on the handle, dried paint at the base of the bristles.

"Is this what–"

"Same brush Joe Spain used," Ivan interrupted. "I hope you do a better job than him."

I thought about the wooden border and Mr Davidson's warning about mistakes. "Do you have a second–"

"One-brush job. Mr Davidson's instructions. You better crack on, Taffy. No time to waste." Ivan turned away but called over his shoulder, "Someone will bring you lunch at one o'clock."

I stood before the structure. The dimples and depressions I'd noticed the day before appeared arbitrary. A series of intricate rucks reminded me of an animal's backbone. The light from the lamps threw complex shadows that caused the undulations and hollows to shift position. Hardly the best light for painting. Mr Davidson was testing me and, as Tony said, I'd better pass the test.

I lifted the top tub, my arms wobbling with the effort, and lugged it over to the structure. Ivan provided no tools other than the brush, nothing to lever the lid from the tub. A hard plastic sheath ran around the rim that had to be removed before the lid could be released. I pulled and twisted, cut my fingers on the hard plastic, and finally ripped it from the tub. Using the key to my flat, I pried open the lid bit by bit until it popped.

My hands throbbed, fingernails broken, cuts stinging. I tore the hem of my shirt and wrapped the cloth around the cuts. The paint looked thick and yellowish – certainly not brilliant white. I tried stirring with the brush handle, but

it made no difference. Five hours to go, and I hadn't applied a single drop of paint.

By the time Hugh Peru showed up, I'd managed to cover the upper half of one surface. To reach the top, I stood on the chair from my room. Getting up and down from the chair, I worried about dripping paint on the floor and cupped my hand under the brush. The paint missed depressions in the surface. I poked the white tip of the bristles into the hollows, but the brush wasn't up to the job. The lighting was inadequate and misleading.

"Something smells good." Hugh held up a dome-covered platter. "Better eat while it's hot."

Unlike Ivan Israel, Hugh Peru was invariably cheery. A small man in his mid-thirties with curly black hair and an enormous moustache – he could have stepped out of a Velasquez painting.

He handed me the platter and moved to examine the wall. "You've made real progress."

"It's hopeless," I said. "The paint isn't going on properly."

Hugh shook his head. "The first coat always

looks like that. You're too much of a perfectionist. I'll leave you to eat in peace."

I lifted the dome, and the warm waft of flavours got my digestive juices flowing. Venison steak in a red wine sauce, garlic mash, and white asparagus tips. A glass of wine to wash it down, and cheesecake for dessert. Mr Davidson didn't skimp when it came to food. I refused to linger over the meal – no time for such luxury. By the time Hugh returned, I had resumed painting.

"How was lunch?" he asked.

"Tasty." I held out the brush. "How am I supposed to avoid getting paint on the wood with this?"

Hugh grimaced. "Very difficult. I suppose you need to be extra careful. We don't want a repeat of the Joe Spain incident."

"There must be a second brush I can use – a smaller one to do along the border."

"Afraid not. Instructions from Mr Davidson. A one-brush job, that's what he said. You'll work it out." He patted my shoulder. "Better get a move on. You have to be finished by five. Ivan will be here to shut up shop." He dawdled in the

doorway. “You’ll get it done. I’ve every confidence in you. You’re nothing like Joe Spain.”

I picked up the pace, moving down the first surface to within three inches of the wooden border. Any closer and I risked getting paint on the wood. I needed a smaller brush. Using my key, I hacked off enough bristles to fashion a precision brush. I should’ve kept the knife from lunch—it would’ve come in handy to cut the bristles and to open the other tubs. No doubt Mr Davidson wouldn’t have permitted it.

I removed a shoelace, tied it around the bristles to bind them together, then got down on my knees. Slowly, painstakingly, I moved the bristles from left to right, covering the area above the wooden strip. It worked. Starting at an angle of forty-five degrees, the tip just above the border, I let the paint grip and then drew the bristles away from the wooden edge. I followed this with a horizontal alignment and a smooth motion to the right. Inching along, knees rubbing against the hard ground, my breathing synchronized with my hand movements. Nothing existed but the wooden strip. I

kept going, all the way to the end of the fourth surface.

I eased myself off the ground. Ten minutes to four, and I had the better part of three surfaces to complete. I attacked the paint, shoved the big brush into the tub, pulled it out, paused and painted; up-stroke, down-stroke, to the right, up and down, a check to fill dimples, pressing the tip into corners, another press and twist. Back into the tub, careful not to drip. I persevered: mechanical, indefatigable, a painting machine. When the tub became light enough to lift, I carried it with me, minimizing the chances of spillage and working much quicker. I brushed and dipped and probed and squeezed until I completed the final section.

Ivan arrived at five o'clock. I hid the makeshift bristle brush in my pocket.

He walked from one end of the structure to the other. "Looks like you got it finished after all, Taffy. Very messy though." He hunkered down and inspected the border. "Better hope you don't slip up. Mr Davidson will be here on Friday with special lamps to check for mistakes."

I said nothing, too exhausted to speak or think. Ivan checked the tub of paint.

"There's still a lot left; you might have stinted on the paint. Right, put the lid back on, and I'll lock up." He picked up the brush. "What were you doing, Taffy? Painting or scrubbing the walls? I'll have this cleaned so it's ready for you in the morning."

He locked the door behind me. I lay on the cot, curled into a ball and fell asleep.

***

Tony France brought breakfast at nine o'clock. Not as lavish as the morning before—two slices of buttered toast, a Danish pastry, and a cup of tea. "Ready for the second coat?" he asked.

"I suppose so."

He waited in the outer room. When I finished breakfast, he handed me the brush, the bristles stiff and the handle white with paint.

"Word of advice: use more paint on the second coat." He took away the plate and cup. "Same arrangement as yesterday. Finish by five. Ivan or

Hugh will bring you lunch."

I took the bristle brush from my pocket. It was unusable, hard and unpliable. No matter; I felt calm and assured now that I had my technique. I used my key to saw off more bristles. In no rush, I sat on the first tub, breathed deeply, and pictured smooth white surfaces. I dipped the big brush into the paint, instinctively gauging the correct depth and load. In less than half an hour, I had painted the top half of one surface.

Onto the bottom half, no hesitation or uncertainty, in total command of the task. I reached the border and stopped for a short break to prepare myself for the next stage. I grasped the bristle brush – it felt natural, an extension of my hand. Angled strokes preceded horizontal strokes to complete the first side. I scraped the paint from the bottom of the tub for touch-ups. This time, I had no difficulty removing the plastic sheath and opening the second tub. I continued along the border, angled and horizontal brushstrokes, repetitive and relentless.

I didn't hear Hugh enter the room. "You're going great guns," he said. He watched as I

finished one more border section. I made no attempt to hide the bristle bush, leaving it lying on the lid. He nodded his head appreciatively. "You've really got the hang of it."

He carried a smaller dish with no cover: a bowl of oxtail soup for starters, two sausages and one potato for the main course, a glass of soda water, but no dessert. I ate the food quickly. Hugh kept up a lively chatter, but I didn't listen. I wanted him gone so I could get back to work.

He went into the small room and returned with the chamber pot. "I'll empty this for you."

I sipped the soda water and planned my strategy – finish the borders first then return to the top.

Hugh returned, chamber pot held aloft. "You're good to go." He collected the dish and glass. "I'll leave you to it. Remember to finish by five."

With the final stages using the bristle brush completed, I returned to the mother brush. A fluent sequence of strokes, up and down, in an elegant flow—an elegance, too, in the precise incursions into corners and depressions. I kept at

it, oblivious to the surroundings or the purpose of my task. It required my full attention – the physical act of painting was purpose enough.

I had just finished sealing the second tub when Ivan appeared. Seeing his snide expression, I slipped the bristle brush back into my pocket.

"No time to waste, Taffy. I've things to do." He lifted the empty tub. "Have you finished with this?" He surveyed the structure and grimaced. "You better hope the third coat works. That doesn't look like the colour of any snow I've ever seen."

He ushered me into my room and locked the door. I sat on the cot and brooded over what he said. There was no denying the surfaces looked streaky – the third coat would have to be decisive.

***

Hugh Peru unlocked the door the next morning. I was already up and pacing the available space.

"The day of the third coat; a most auspicious day." Hugh held the door open and waved me

through. “Breakfast is served.” He handed me a glass of water and a plate with a slice of bread. The brush lay on one of the remaining tubs, looking the worse for wear: bristles separated and handle thick with paint.

Hugh gestured to the wall. “It’s looking good. I feel cold just thinking about that Quebec snow.” I chewed the bread, hard at the edges, and drank the water. Hugh leaned against a bookshelf and checked his phone. I passed him the plate and empty glass. “Ivan will be here with lunch. Keep up the good work.” He gave me a thumbs-up. “Mr Davidson is bound to be pleased.”

My eyes ached after a night of fitful sleep. The walls appeared streaked and murkier than I’d anticipated. I returned to my room to get the chair and sat facing the structure. A final concerted effort, I just had to ignore my weariness and the hollowness in my stomach. I repeated the words, Quebec snow, like a mantra, squeezed my hands, broken fingernails biting into the soft flesh, and willed myself to proceed.

Seven hours left – precious time. Urgency fizzed in my veins as I pried open the lid and

entered the snowstorm, up and down the chair, paint from brush to wall. Paint and snow. Back and forth, more and more paint – every depression and edge, ridge and dimple, under thick, fluffy Quebec snow.

I cut off the optimum number of bristles and began along the border. Bristle brush at an angle and then horizontal, moving higher, encroaching the upper third coat. Then, the mother brush to smooth the overlap and achieve the required snowy, brilliant white. One surface finished, then onto the next, and into the third tub. I bent down, legs straddling the tub, bristle brush into the paint and onto the wall, switching to mother brush, tub and wall.

A quarter of the way across, my rumbling stomach caused me to hesitate, and I missed the switch of brushes, using the mother brush on the border. A splodge of paint stuck to the wood, glaringly white. I shuffled backwards, shocked and outraged. After two days, and more than four gallons of paint – how could this happen? Walking in circles, I groaned and cursed the brush and wanted to lie down and

sleep. No way. No giving up; not when I'd come this far. Giving up was not an option.

I tore a strip from my shirt and used it to sponge the misapplied paint, spreading and smudging the stain. I spat on the cloth, rubbed and rubbed until the paint vanished. No evidence of the mistake remained, not to my eyes at least. But would Mr Davidson know? I pressed on, slower now, ultra-careful. I could allow one mistake, but no more than one.

Ivan carried in a tray with another slice of bread and a glass of water. He gave me one of his derisive grins. "So, Taffy, what've you been up to?"

I said nothing. His grin broadened as though he read my mind.

"Any slip-ups? If you ask me, the whole thing looks botched. Mr Davidson isn't going to accept this. Snowy landscape? More like badly mixed concrete." He nudged the tray with the toe of his shoe. "Have your bread and water so I can get going."

I chewed the stale bread, keeping my eyes away from the spot where I splodged paint. Ivan

scanned the books on the shelves and hummed something that sounded like a nursery rhyme. I considered asking him what he honestly thought of the painting but decided against it.

He took the plate and glass. "Finish everything by five. Good luck, Taffy. You're going to need it."

I returned to the border, on my knees, hypersensitive and vigilant. All that mattered was the brushstroke, then the next stroke, bristle brush, and mother brush. I completed the border – no visible overlap, a continuum of white. One more check on the area where I'd slipped up, but I couldn't see anything other than wood grain. How could Mr Davidson tell? His eyesight was no better than mine. He would never know, and I had no intention of telling him.

Entering the home stretch, I painted with renewed vigour. The third tub was severely depleted, but enough remained to finish the job. I applied the paint thickly. It went on like a dream, the whiteness lighting the room. I scrutinized the surfaces, searching for paler areas, my tired eyes straining to find blemishes. Absorbed in

this search, I didn't notice Tony France until he stood beside me.

"Job done," he said.

I secured the lid on the tub, pressing down so it snapped shut. As I handed over the brush, I experienced a surge of sadness – nothing left to do. "Do you think Mr Davidson will like it?"

Tony took a step back as if recoiling from my question. "That's not for me to say. All I can say is you've done a better job than Joe Spain."

Emboldened, I asked, "What exactly did Joe Spain do wrong?"

Tony took his time before answering. "It was more his poor attitude. He didn't show the work enough respect. Can't say that about you."

I went into my room. Tony stood in the doorway.

"I'll be here in the morning with Mr Davidson for the verdict," he said.

When he left, I sat on the cot, got up and stood in the darkness, then sat down again. Sleep seemed unimportant as I vacillated between hope and disquiet. I pictured whiteness emanating from the surfaces in the other room.

Then I recalled Mr Davidson's reference to grave consequences, and Tony saying that Joe Spain wouldn't be painting anything for some time. And, of course, there were those special lights Mr Davidson would use to check for mistakes.

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The sound of a key in the lock woke me. Tony opened the door. "Mr Davidson will be joining us shortly. Come on out and wait." We stood by the painted structure. I stared at the ground, afraid to look up and see the area where I'd splodged paint or the inadequacy of the whiteness.

Mr Davidson arrived, dapper as ever. His eyes widened when he saw me, and I realized how I must appear – exhausted, three days beard growth, gaunt from hunger. And my clothes, torn and covered in paint, thick smears on my sleeves and across my trousers.

He stood with his hands on his hips and rocked back and forth. "Well, Oscar. I can call

you Oscar, can't I?"

"Yes," I replied.

"Oscar Wales is quite a mouthful." He smiled, the merest uplift of his lips. "Well, Oscar, you've been busy."

I waited for his verdict, but Mr Davidson appeared to be in no hurry. He wasn't even looking at the structure. Where were the special lights? Was the painting good enough? Did it remind him of the snow that fell in Quebec in January 1981?

"Well, Oscar." He turned towards the concertina surfaces, his face impassive.

I looked. The structure appeared white, brilliant white, but was it what he wanted? The leadenness in my stomach told me it wasn't. He walked towards the door, and Tony indicated that I should follow him.

"Oscar, I have an interesting project for you." Mr Davidson paused and coughed to clear his throat. "It relates to a visit I made in 1987 to a small village in the Urals. An area surrounded by forest, magnificent old oaks. Late September, the colour of the leaves was quite magnificent.

Something I'll never forget." He looked over his shoulder. "Tony, please take us to the other room."

With Tony in front, I accompanied Mr Davidson down a long hallway with thick-piled wool carpeting. Relieved and excited, I could barely take in his words.

"You will be provided with six gallons of paint. The effect I want you to capture is the colour and texture of those leaves I witnessed in that village in the Urals in September 1987. Three coats of paint will be required."

Tony stopped at a door and took a set of keys from his pocket. My neck tingled. I flexed my fingers and slowed my breathing, joyful and anxious. Another challenge.

A Loud Noise Will Come

Patricia Brubaker

They sit on the step, side by side, hips touching. She covers her ears and squeezes her eyes closed until tiny tears form in the corners. She waits, and only silence and crickets and an occasional siren on the main street blocks away from their house can be heard. She waits, opens her eyes and watches little seed pods from cottonwood trees drift down and around her feet like the first surprising snow. She watches and waits for the loud noise that her mother warned her would come.

She has never had a policeman at her door, never felt the rumble of fear in her tummy, her chest, the way she does now. But her mother said it is the way it has to be. Sometimes hard things have to happen. When she asks why, her mother looks puzzled for a second and says, "Because, that's why." She doesn't like that her mother doesn't have an answer to this. Her

mother said that after they hear the loud noise, Mutt will not have any pain; Mutt will be in heaven and not with them anymore. The girl doesn't like this. She doesn't want Mutt to be in heaven and not with them anymore.

Mutt was with her mother before the girl was born. Her mother always said that Mutt was the one who helped her through when the girl's father left them, who was by her side when the girl was a baby and colicky, and her mother was so alone. Mutt, with her scratchy black fur grizzled with grey and her funny way of plopping her paw in the girl's lap making her smile when she was sad, making her want to share her cookie with her, is loyal and loves them unconditionally. Her mom says that. She says Mutt is a good watchdog, keeps the bad out. She is a good girl. This is what her mother has always said. A good girl. Why did her mother have to call the policeman today?

Her mother said she had called the policeman because Mutt was acting funny. A foamy white substance was coming from her mouth, and she did not want to stand up. She seemed to

glare at them, a look the girl has in her memory from somewhere else but can't really place. The girl doesn't understand. Mutt is very old and sometimes doesn't like to stand up. Her mother always tells her this is normal; this is what old dogs do. She doesn't like that Mutt is old.

When Mutt glared, her mother looked at the dog for a few seconds and then backed up slowly, saying something wasn't right as the dog showed her teeth, just for a second. Her mother had pulled the girl close to her like she did when they were crossing a busy street. Did the tremble in her stomach start with the glare or her mother's grip? As her mother pulled her away, the girl looked at the dog, who seemed a little different but still so much like Mutt that she felt sad they were leaving her alone.

Mutt is inside with the tall policeman who had come up the steps just a few minutes earlier. His black shoes were shiny, and he smelled like pine trees. He looked at her, all smiles, and said, "Hello, Sunshine." She knows not to trust his smile because he is the one who will make the loud noise happen. Her mother's mouth smiled

at the policeman but not her eyes. She nudged the girl to say hello, but she knew better; she picked at a scab on her knee instead of smiling back.

Now, she sits on the front stoop. Her dimpled hands, hidden by the blonde curls that cascade over chubby fingers, cover her ears as she waits for the sound of a gunshot. She has never actually heard a gunshot. But that's what her mother called it. Her mother told her what to expect. She said you'll hear a gunshot. It will be very loud. A quick boom and maybe an echo. Cover your ears, she had said. Close your eyes. That's a good girl. But it's hard to keep her eyes closed. She wants to reach out and grab for one of the seed pods drifting in the air, but instead, she watches as they float weightlessly past her. She can smell the lemon her mother had rinsed her hair with earlier to keep in the lightness, a smell that usually makes her feel special. She still does not understand what she is waiting for, what will come.

Her mother settles next to her now, arm around her. She always feels safe when her

mother puts her arms around her, but now it feels different like her mother is the one who needs comfort.

To Be Violet

Lailee Zakir

My mules needed rest, as did I. In the distance, what seemed like a village. I dismounted and walked about. I was thrilled to find we spoke the same tongue. An elderly man with yellow fingernails led me to his home. His wife and granddaughter sat atop a floor of littered purple flowers. I noticed as we ate with our hands that the tips of the fingers of the elderly woman and young girl were purple.

When I asked about their purple fingertips, the elderly woman smiled. The young girl seemed irate, and for a moment, I felt I'd been crude. Look at me – in their home, eating their food and drinking their wine – daring to ask why their fingers were tinged violet. How rude! My cheeks flushed red. The elderly woman asked if my heart and mind could spare a story before I retired. I have long been in search of a pen and paper to tell this story once more. I've told it to

myself each morning and night – I pray I have not lost a detail.

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The women were orange, and the men sheer yellow; this is as it was in their village. Yellow men loved orange women, and their union would bear them children of yellow or orange forever and long onward. But one child had, on one day, been born violet. How horrified they'd been of touching her, of turning the plum to orange.

The labour had been short. Sterile. The woman at the foot of the tub found it hard to believe. That this child had indeed come out writhing and sobbing beneath the weight of the room and its gazes, without a trace of orange upon her skin. The quiet room. Quiet but the sounds of the writhing and screaming and weary-eyed blinks. The blinks themselves that had been the loudest. The meeting of eyelid to eyelid trumped the sound of all else. And so this violet child with wet eyes and unkempt temper

thrashed with fervour. The women of the room huddled around the open-legged mother as she wept to hold her child. The silence and the blinks had deafened her to the sound of the violet child's cries. Save for the ring in her ears, she could hear only the meek beat of the heart. One, where there had once been two. She asked if it lived or not as she had borne many children still before. The woman between her legs made no motion to answer, and the mother threw her head back in a wail befit for the mouth of a child or a soldier at the losing end of a knife. Together, mother and child wept, a current of perspiration down her temples as thick as that upon the child's violet tear-stricken cheeks. She wept for her child, who was not still at all but rather violently thrashing about.

This purple little girl had been slipped onto the white cloth along a frightened gasp from thin orange lips. It was there she continued to cry as her mother thought her dead. Her mother, whose ringing ears did not cease as the orange women sprung to action. The orange bodies that moments before had idled about in a disso-

nant shock now working in a wide-eyed blinking fever. The mother was taken away. Cold orange hands and white handkerchiefs soaked in water tended to her grief-stricken face. She and the child both lie wet with the excretions of her body. Her own body which once held two. Her ears rang with such a force she could hardly hear the hushed chatter of "Purple the girl is purple," or "violet, really – it's violet that she is." No, it was instead the deafening ring that flooded her ears as they knitted her back together with slender fingers. Slender orange fingers unfit to cradle a child of violet skin.

The mother would find later that this child had lived. Much less of her violet nature. She would find out much later as she awoke to yellow men in white coats with hair crowning their upper lips. She'd be lying in a bed wet with perspiration and tears, and what liquid had seeped through the stitches between her legs when they'd tell her that her child had lived. She was to be taken away, as would her child, although to vastly different places.

The men in white coats were curious, of

course, if she could bear another. If her looms were laced with violet. The woman lay for a long time with her legs open. Inaudibly, they'd chatter about her. Yellow men would filter in and out, each taking their seat, feverishly scribbling upon papers. They'd nearly piled atop one another at the door, each eager to be the one to make this discovery. Oh, how the people would revere them in their work! As the ones who discovered this purple child! Their victorious huffs at the foot of the bed were little of the mother's concern as she gazed out the window and wondered the whereabouts of her purple child. Her purple child, who she did not know was purple, despite all this spectacularity. The ringing in her ears had long stopped but she had chosen to stop hearing. She had chosen to stop hearing because her first and only born was someplace other than beside her on the unclean linen sheets, and her womb was barren and empty.

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The young girl had been sweeping the petals

from the floor with much diligence when she remarked she hated this part of the story with the shapes. I remember because I was confused about what shapes had to do with anything. The elderly woman returned to her story with a wave of the hand.

The mother wanted nothing to do with the yellow and orange of the outside. She was rather preoccupied with the hue of the sky and the triangle through which she observed it. The first time she'd speak after asking if her child lived would be to beg them to part the curtains. If she could not have her kin, she would have the sky.

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Her uterine lurch for the sky had especially shut her ears to the findings of the doctor between her legs. She hardly noticed this one at work. They told her, but she did not listen or rather did not hear. She did not hear and would not ever hear or listen or know why she had borne this violet child. Or that it had been violet at all.

But we know, of course, and it would be wrong of me not to include it here. I thought it would be a better fit for the end of the tale, but worry it may escape me… The doctor's findings were as follows: the woman had borne so many still children her womb had been bruised. Changed colours. Turned purple. For each time, the child due for birth would fight to stay within her, within her warmth, she'd only ever borne still yellow boys. The last had resolved to scratch at her insides in concerted desperation. They'd battered her womb. In some stroke of motherly ambition and biological miracle, this violet baby had been born.

The young girl scoffed as her grandmother explained. She seemed especially bothered by the notion of a bruise.

The yellow men in white coats told the orange women in white coats that were fitted at the waist. They told each other, then their yellow men at home. The story spread. This purple-wombed orange woman who bore a violet child! They rejoiced. They rejoiced, for at last a new fate had befallen them. Perhaps their

orange women, too, could bear violet daughters! Should luck attest, violet sons…

The people took to their beds in hopes of purple children. The women continued their expanding and retracting, eating poorly through pregnancy to starve the children within them. The village saw still child after still child- never another violet.

This would be the case for a long while in the village of orange and yellow people. All because of the story of the purple-wombed woman and her violet child.

At this, the young girl who had finished her sweeping and was now folding purple and yellow stained linen added: "The purple-wombed woman and her violet child who had long belonged to the Earth by the time the villagers learned they'd perhaps never happened to begin with." Her grandmother persisted.

Before the people had taken to their beds, and before the little orange girls would dream of having beaten wombs and purple children, the woman had lain on filthy linen and been told her child had lived and died. This, of course, she

heard. What would be spared from the tale told to the people, or perhaps what had not been spared but willfully forgotten, was that the very doctors meant to preserve this child's life had let it starve to probe its mother. That they were busy filling rooms debating the feasibility that the child should be at all. Far too concerned with the qualms of the womb from which it had been birthed, the doctors had let the child starve. In fact, the only touch the child had felt was that of the woman who had received its slippery body from the womb. It had lain there on that very white linen it had been dropped with a gasp. There, it had starved.

She'd been shamefully wrapped in the white linen in which she'd lived only a day. Swaddled by the thin-lipped orange woman who had delivered her. Delivered to both life and death by she who had been so afraid her orange fingertips would spoil the supple purple skin. The child had been buried in the fields, and that was where she lay.

At this, the mother was animalistic. Frothing at the mouth. She wanted to rip the stitches apart

and reach within her to find another herself. To hear the second heartbeat once more. She would never lay with a yellow man again, she declared. Ah, but a childless eternity seemed a far more miserable fate. Her looms had finally bore fruit, and they'd left it to rot! They'd left it for flies and the worms and the soil! She fled.

She fled to where they had wrapped this child in white linen and buried it in the field. She threw her body upon the soil and cried. She cried with such force her heart could not bear it and so it left her there, mere flesh flush to soil, sobbing and weeping for the child she never once held. Long after her heartbeat ceased, her body continued to weep and cry and wet the soil. It wet it so that when the rain did not fall it was fertile nonetheless. That the relentless gaze of the desert sun could not dry it. It remained there, earth lush with salted tears, a violet child, and a mother whose anguish ceased the beating of her heart. The mother's body had lain there as the seasons changed, becoming less body and rather flesh of the planet. Together, the soil digested mother and child.

A purple flower blooms, for only a day. Picked, violet petals fall away, the yellow roots discarded. All that remains is the top, the orange.

***

I sat before the elderly woman. Tea cold, mouth ajar. The young girl sat a large bowl of orange spice between us on the floor. Her grandmother knelt down in the way elderly women do, with great determination and strength, fingering a flower from her basket.

She said it lives only a day. I'd been blessed to find them for harvest. Delicately, the elderly woman pressed the centre between her index finger and thumb. With a small movement of the wrist, the orange and yellow centre of the plant came out. Like an organ. Pinching away the yellow root, all that was left was the top. The orange. She asked me then if I'd ever tried saffron in my rice.

My ink supply is leaving me, and I still have many days left of my travels East. If I could, I would write forever of this village and this

elderly woman and their spice of great magic and heart.

Saffron.

How We Solve It

J.D. Isip

Sarah, when she was small enough to hold – when she would ask to be held – had an angelic temperament. Except on some mornings. Mornings when everyone was running late, the dog had pissed the kitchen floor, breakfast was cold and disappointing, and my niece could feel the seam of her sock anywhere but where it belonged, like a smile across her tiny toes. Not a child for holding her breath, instead she would send a screech like ice or lightning surging through each corner of the house, her helpless parents, my brother and his wife, fumbling at her feet or, when nothing seemed to work, joining the banshee chorus of late for school and late for work and late, I'm late, for a very important date! When she shot into a teenager, then, somehow, an adult, my brother became fond of calling her Katie Ka-Boom. But those long ago mornings, when my life had, somehow, fallen

apart and they'd let me stay in the guest room for years, I became another set of arms, something useful. Sarah, red-faced and tear-smattered, would stumble into my room, one sock dragging and another in her hand, her parents' patience spent. One day I'd tell her about her mom crying over a stack of bills. Or how her father once punched a hole in the living room wall. Or how her uncle, slowly placing her socks on just so, lived a life of explosions. "It's okay," I'd tell her, "Sometimes it's hard for me to put my socks on, too." And she'd giggle.

Single Car Collision

Brian Coughlan

With the euphoria of some chemical released to prepare me for impact, of held-down car horns announcing, with the high-pitched whine of brakes shrieking in distress – the car veering towards a stretch of grassy median before performing an elaborate skidding manoeuvre, as if all grip conceded by the four tyres at once, kicking up earth from back wheels spinning sideways, as a low moan escapes my mouth, as my arms lock either side of a steering wheel that has just recently spun, entirely of its own accord, like a roulette wheel – the car turning over and over and over again.

Until finally no longer behind the wheel, no longer sitting in the driver's seat but contorted into a bizarre body position; dumped into the rear footwell – thrown there as absentmindedly as a bag of unwanted clothes. Rearview mirror dislodged and dangling from its wiring,

like a bird with a broken neck, muck splattered across the windshield, with wipers spreading it over and back over and back, an alarm dinging, slowly, agonizingly, ringing and ringing and ringing.

Uncontrollable sobs of ecstatic near-death relief collapse into long deep breaths, in through the nose out through the mouth. Before I know it the first responders converge, and all of my personal items are unearthed and carefully examined, turning them this way and that, shaking away the glass and debris, until they find my driver's licence, and with a bizarre transmission of ignorance they mispronounce my surname over and back, one after another, as the little piece of plastic imprinted with my surly expression gets passed along from one pair of gloved hands to the next.

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Hours earlier I'd paid a visit to my Aunt Fran in her nursing home. She was the last remaining member of my extended family who might,

who just might, be receptive to my questions and to discussing what had happened – where others had closed the door in my face or pretended not to know since it really was so long ago, and Jesus why go dredging up all that again. Suffering from dementia she had been consigned to a place of long white corridors, and breakout rooms, crammed with other immobile residents, strange-smelling rooms in a building that was once part of a grand country manor. She was my Godmother. When I was small she used to send me birthday cards with money concealed. The banknote would silently slip out when I opened up the card and flitter to the floor and one or other of my parents would invariably say I was throwing it away, as if it were a sign that I was feckless and had no regard for money.

I'd brought a fresh, cream-filled, sponge cake with me. Aunt Fran seemed lucid at first, as we exchanged pleasantries. She'd recognized me when I came in and seemed happy to have a visitor, but when I opened the box to show her the cake – she unceremoniously reached in and

flayed at it. A four-year-old would hardly have made such an impatient mess of the situation and I felt utterly powerless to stop her. Within a few minutes, she had the entire cake gone, pulling it apart like a savage, dusting her face with the icing sugar. Cream everywhere. All over her hands and her clothes; by the time I was ready to get down to the real purpose of my visit – I was confronted by a powder-faced harlequin, gurning with queasiness, and looking around her in a faintly distressed way – as if she had no notion of her place in the world.

Knowing that I didn't have much time, I moved closer to her and held her cold, sticky hands in mine while I asked her a series of questions relating to my childhood, and specifically around what had happened to my shadow. Since childhood, I had been haunted by her sudden and permanent disappearance. Did she ever exist in the first place or was it all in my head? Was she actually a family member, a sister, a cousin, or just a girl we had taken in? Had we fostered her? Why had she been taken away so abruptly and why was her existence and then her disappear-

ance treated as a shameful family secret never to be spoken about? What had happened to her after she was taken away? Was she still alive? If so, where was she…?

When I had presented my case, the questions I had, a few desperate conclusions I'd made, based on the scanty evidence, and asked her straight out if she knew what had been done to me and to her all those years ago – Aunt Fran's considered response amounted to nothing more than a long, bleary-eyed, yawn; the longest yawn of all time, followed by a loud disgusting burp of indigestion. At this point, a member of the care staff approached to ask if I'd by any chance given her sugary things. The branded bakery box was a dead giveaway. Surely I was aware of her diabetes? She wasn't allowed to have anything with sugar. I didn't know. Wasn't aware. I would never have given her something sweet had I known. Stuttering an apology I had to scrape and bow profusely to this self-righteous stranger, while my aunt fell into a contented, open-mouthed doze.

This care-assistant, or whatever she called

herself, must have been eavesdropping on our conversation, for no sooner had I collected my things, already resigned to yet another failure, she muttered something under her breath, something along the lines of get over yourself or something to that effect before turning her full attention back to my aunt, wiping her face with a wet face cloth to take away all the powdered sugar, throwing a thick blanket over her knees, undoing the brakes and shoving the wheelchair straight at me, forcing me to step smartly out of their way. With the face paint removed I saw that the very old woman underneath was now floating in a deeply delirious coma.

I left the retirement home with my cheeks burning. I pictured Aunt Fran being wheeled back to her room and assisted into her bed. I was too appalled, too angry with myself, too ashamed, to think straight. The summation was so thoroughly fitting that I felt exposed – like an earwig, her stone overturned, caught in the unbearable glare of sunlight, scrambling for the sanctuary of some other dark place. "Idiot!" I shouted into the stale air of my car when at

first the key refused to fit itself into the ignition because of my shaking hand. How dare she speak to me like that! As I slowly reversed out of the tight parking spot I fantasized about attacking her, screaming abuse in her face and demanding an immediate apology, or better still telling her that her supervisor would be my next port of call, and waving away her half-hearted apology.

Having failed to notice a sizable speed bump, due to the increasingly ridiculous nature of the fantasy, the underside of my car scraped – a long, horrific-sounding abrasion, to something that was mine, and that by extension I considered an integral part of me. There was no end to the abuse and damage being inflicted on me, and all because I wanted to take control, all because I dared to seek answers to questions that had remained buried for decades.

How many times as a child had I screamed those three self-pitying words: 'It's – not – fair!' whirling like a pint-sized dervish in an agonized display of anguish, only to be reminded that life wasn't fair and to get on with it, by a mother who

was unwilling to listen to what she described as my never-ending whine about just about everything. She would then try and explain to me in a calm and rational voice how incredibly fortunate I was – until my high-pitched whine started up again. It really and truly wasn't fair. I wanted her to fully acknowledge that it wasn't fair when I could see other children my age living in a carefree and thoughtless innocence, while I was saddled with this…with this constant shadow…who insisted on denying me access to the simplest of pleasures.

There was no getting away from her. I was forced to concede every experience to my shadow's constant merciless scrutiny. We were joined at the hip. It wasn't a question of not loving her, that was entirely beside the point, it was rather a question of having no privacy, nothing to keep for myself, and no room to figure out who I was, without her ruining everything, upsetting other people, demeaning the both of us – because no matter what she did – it was always my fault! Everything had to be shared with her, which in reality meant saying goodbye to it. Share it, then

watch it disappear, get pulled apart, broken into pieces, pulled asunder, spat on, shoved into her mouth, thrown down the toilet, or just abandoned somewhere – once she'd finally grown tired of mauling it with her filthy little hands.

One time on a trip to the seaside, I made the decision to give her the slip. She'd been getting on my nerves all day. Throughout the train journey she'd insisted on sitting so close that our legs touched every time the carriage swayed and every little gesture I made, she mimicked. Every utterance, no matter how inconsequential, she felt compelled to parrot, which made me sound foolish, so that the strangers around us on the train laughed at me, not her.

Then we get there; we're walking along this endless stretch of fine white sand; she follows me, a step behind, and stops when I stop, inspects everything I inspect, drops her towel right next to mine on the sand. The usual thing. I vow to get away from her this one time. So, I lounged back on my towel and, putting my hands behind my head, closed my eyes. With the sun beating down on my face I exhaled noisily

and performed a series of endless jaw-cracking yawns. She did the very same and when I went silent with pretend sleep she checked in every so often to make sure I was still out cold. I could tell she was doing it because of her blocking out the sun on my face. I started to snore. Big old wide open-mouth snores. Pantomime snores. By all accounts I was out for the count and no longer needed watching.

I waited until I was sure she was sleeping. When I was certain that she was asleep (bubbles forming from her nostrils) I slipped away noiselessly, then bounded out to sea, along a causeway of perfectly positioned boulders. I had to be sure-footed. The boulders were right by each other, but one mistake and I would end up in the water. That was the exciting part. I was free to be reckless and wild, for a change. Not holding her hand or watching her behaviour. When I figured I'd gone far enough, the sea spray hitting my face, I sat cross-legged on a flat section of rock, basking in the sunshine, wiggling my toes, emitting one great sigh of relief, the feel of a rough surface rubbing against my

clothes. A moment of pure bliss.

Next thing, I hear a sound. I turn round, to see her lose her footing on the boulder behind mine, to watch her slide down the greasy surface of the rock, a look of abject horror on her face, all the way up to her neck, in the cold seawater, still dressed in a polka-dot covered Sunday dress. Identical to the one I was wearing, of course. At which point adults came charging out with hollers of concern and she was rescued, lightly scolded, and then guess what – I was the one forced to ride all the way home in the train in wet clothes because we hadn't brought a change with us (which even now I find unfathomable).

The trip had been absolutely ruined for everyone and it was entirely my fault, they said, therefore I should be the one to suffer. Because I was supposed to be the good one. A role model. I was supposed to be perfect and reliable and caring and nice and to look after her and stick up for her and mind her and play with her, while her behaviour was unpredictable and violent, such as the hair-pulling, pinching, and the biting, which naturally isolated us from all

the other children in the playground. I wanted to fit in. I wanted to have friends. I wanted to be like everybody else.

One day she just vanished. Without any warning. Gone. No mention made of her again. As if she'd never existed in the first place.

Initially, I welcomed her absence as a blessed relief and an opportunity to finally become my own person. It was such a novelty I hardly knew what to do with myself. I remember existing in a kind of light-headed daze most of the time for that brief honeymoon period. I was so unbelievably happy, so deliriously happy that I didn't know what to make of it. I kept waiting for the catch, waiting for her to suddenly reappear – I was thoroughly convinced that her absence was just a temporary respite. When I had time to properly grasp it was permanent: incredible as it might seem I couldn't help but feel saddened and bereft.

After her departure, people would tell me that I was really starting to come out of my shell, that it was great to see it happening, and at long last. I knew what they meant, they meant well,

and yet I felt powerless against sliding in the opposite direction, I couldn't help but merge into the background. People ignored me, talked over me, repeated what I'd just said as if they were the ones who had said it. I waved my hands in the air and tried to draw attention to myself, I tried raising my voice and stamping my feet, I tried creating a scene, but nothing worked. I became angry and withdrawn and bitter. At some point I remember them saying she's not to be trusted, she tells lies. Which is why I developed a certain mentality, as a form of self-defence, to remain detached and objective no matter what.

Of course, I got on with it. What choice did I have? I made the best of the situation. There were worse-off people than me out there. I was just feeling sorry for myself. I had a tendency towards that kind of behaviour. It was pointed out to me. My mother would ask my classmates if they knew what was wrong with me. She couldn't seem to figure it out for herself, she needed to be told by other sixteen-year-old girls, and when they tried to state it plainly she lashed out at them, called them jealous and spiteful,

and encouraged me to make new friends who wouldn't talk about me behind my back.

After I finished school I drifted from one thing to another. I tried my hand at various college courses and different careers, but it was a distinctive lack of presence or charisma that always seemed to hamper my progress. Similarly, in my relationships, it was impossible to hide the fact that I was fundamentally different. I was dull and withdrawn, listless and reserved, bashful and introverted, sad and lonely and unwilling to do anything to change my position. I appeared to wallow in my insignificance and take a perverse pride in my status as a disappointing placeholder for a person. It felt like I was forever watching myself go through the motions of living without ever actually feeling present.

Something about me was missing. Something impossible to put your finger on. Friendships inevitably withered because of my clinginess. My career prospects continuously dwindled no matter what. I became stuck in a self-imposed rut, convinced that nothing would ever change

for me. And nothing did. I would always be like this. I would always be miserable and convinced that everything was futile and worthless because it was a state of mind rather than a condition. Finally, after years and years of self-loathing and anger misdirected at every part of myself, I sought professional help and explained or at least tried to explain what I saw as the root cause of my issues.

It was all about my mother as far as the therapist was concerned. She tried to convince me that this whole missing shadow business, while certainly interesting from a psychological point of view, was entirely irrelevant when it came to stepping out of my past and escaping the pull of its prison walls. It was nothing more than a confabulation: which she explained as being a convenient veil obscuring the true underlying issues that needed to be unearthed and examined. As part of the process, she encouraged me to write a lengthy letter to my mother and to list out all the grievances I could think of. To get them all off my chest and to seek proper closure through a process of open two-way communi-

cation.

I spent a very long time agonizing over that letter and how I imagined my mother would react to its contents. I made countless drafts before I finally forced myself to drop it into the postbox and wait for the explosion. Life went on. Stuff happened to distract me from the letter. In any case, she never once mentioned having received it. I dropped hints and acted touchy but there was no way I was going to ask her outright and every time I tried to engineer a proper confrontation I buckled and convinced myself that it was pointless and a waste of time and that it wouldn't achieve anything. I was proved right. The letter never served any purpose other than to drive a wedge between us that widened to a chasm as time went on until she passed away unexpectedly; after which my sessions with the therapist descended into a grim and repetitious game played out week after week in her gloomy little office.

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All this was re-spooling through my head while knowing vaguely that the exit from the motorway was coming up soon. I pressed down on the accelerator to overtake a seemingly endless oil tanker; the windows in the car all fogged from my angry breath. A previously lashing rain had changed abruptly to hailstones bouncing off the windshield like miniature ball bearings and piling up in the recess below the wipers, impeding their already tortured squeak of over-and-back. I started to think that maybe I'd left it too late to switch lanes.

Much later on, men in green and yellow uniforms untangle and slide my body into the back of an idling vehicle, connecting me to the blinking equipment by looping wires and sticky-ended probes, ferrying me at breakneck speed to the nearest hospital. The lights are flashing, I hear the sound of the siren, it takes forever to suddenly arrive and when the double doors fly open, they pull the gurney out of the back of the ambulance and push me inside the building all

smothered in plastic bags of fluids and strapped down with a neck brace fitted so that I can only look straight up. They carefully transfer me to a trolley and wheel me into a cold corridor. It's all very well the nurses making a big deal of me on account of my being in a critical condition, but what if I survive this? What if I make it through the surgery? What then? I don't suppose it's her waiting for me, or holding my hand, telling me that everything will be fine, whispering into my ear to stay strong, mopping my brow with a damp tissue – but somebody is looming over me – I can tell because of their intermittent blocking out of the blinding light emanating from the ceiling of this endless corridor.

A Word for the Old Woman

Richard Gibney

There's an issue with one of my friends, Hector. He has a tendency to introduce me to gangsters and dealers. It's only after the fact that he'll say: "Here's the scoop. That guy runs the heroin out of Darndale to the whole of North Dublin."

By this stage, I'll have already offered the dealer some kind of assistance, or perhaps he me. We've become acquainted.

When I go to any stranger's home with Hector, I look around the place for weighing scales or any other signs of measuring out illicit substances. Evidence of paraphernalia, or drugs themselves, or sleeves of counterfeit cigarettes, or whatever else.

But often, Hector will impart the information after the fact, once we're alone again.

"Pawel is the Polish contact for stolen cars in Ireland. I mean, all of Ireland."

"You're telling me this now?" I ask him.

"You've never heard the old adage 'Keep your friends close…'?" he'll respond with a chuckle.

I don't think Hector understands the meaning of the expression.

He introduced me to the seventy-two-year-old mother of a gangland criminal yesterday. A man whose story I'd read about, his death was quite an event in the city centre, witnessed by dozens. His ovate, clean-shaven skull cracked open like an egg with a shotgun blast, brain matter and bone fragments all over the street beyond his fallen body. I didn't know who she was when my good buddy asked me to come with him to the garden centre to pick up some compost for an old lady's garden.

She didn't look seventy-two, this old lady, in her low-cut blouse and pleated miniskirt when I saw her for the first time, emerging from her townhouse to join us in the car. Just the hint of crows' feet around her eyes, and her skinny frame suggested that she might be a little older than a half-century. When we arrived at the garden centre, she scrambled out of the back of the car, and Hector placed his hand over my

hand on the gearstick as we watched her begin the walk towards the garden centre from the car park.

"What?" I asked.

"She's Mick Kennefick's mother."

"The guy who was killed last week?"

My pal nodded, his eyes not leaving her as she disappeared through the garden centre's main entrance.

"Apparently, she's had to come out of retirement since his murder."

"What do you mean by that?" I asked my friend. Hector looked at me, winked, and touched his index finger off his nose.

We got out of the car and followed her in, past the two lines of lawnmowers of various shapes, colours, and sizes that stood sentinel outside the shop.

She hovered over the massive packages of lime and fertiliser halfway down the central aisle, examining them carefully, a pair of spectacles plucked from her handbag now sitting on the bridge of her nose. Hector and I lugged four bags of compost out to the car for her, put them

into the boot, and then set off back for her place.

The three-storey townhouse, of which I'd only vaguely been aware, although I lived about a half mile from it, had no laneways leading to its modest back garden, and steps led up to the elevated front door, so we had to lug the compost bags through the house itself and down the steps into the garden.

The nineteenth-century floorboards creaked under the weight of our burdens, my pal and I bounding through the hall, into the kitchen, and out to the raised patio and the backyard beyond.

It was there I saw half a dozen grave-like trenches, dug deep into the lawn, alongside the mounds of earth that had been displaced by the work.

We set the bags of compost down on the paving in front of the lawn. Mrs. Kennefick appeared on the elevated patio above us, a large, big-eared man with curly hair, buck teeth, and a prominent scar stretching from his forehead to his lips, grazing one eyelid, standing alongside her. He seemed to have appeared from nowhere.

"Gentlemen, this is Kevin Dennis," she announced.

"Ah, I know Kevin!" Hector stood back on the grass, wiping his palms off his shirt and staring up, and I joined him, watching the two above us. "How are you doing, Kev?"

Kevin grunted, bobbing his head slightly, and adjusted himself, steepling the fingers of both hands over his belly. Anxiety intensified, manifesting itself as unsettling discomfort in my bowels as Mrs. Kennefick addressed us again.

"Kevin says you told Roderick Chambers where he would find my Michael last week, Hector."

"No," my friend said immediately. "It's common enough knowledge that Mick would go into town and play pool in the Gamer's Haven. Sure, I played a few games with him there myself now and then. But honestly, Margaret, I didn't tell anyone anything." Hector glanced at me, his forehead peppered in beads of perspiration. I'd never seen someone break out in a sweat on sight like that. Its novelty gave me no comfort. My returning look was laden with resentment

at being placed in this predicament.

"There's a word for a woman who's lost her husband. 'Widow' has a very strict definition. I'm a widow myself, of course." While still addressing us, Margaret Kennefick threw a quick glimpse at Kevin Dennis that may as well have been a detailed and specific order. Kevin promptly drew a pistol from the back of his belt and cocked it, aiming it at my friend. "Again," Mrs. Kennefick continued, "if you're an orphan, it means you've lost your parents. I'm at that age where that would be expected," she shrugged. "But we don't have such a word for a woman who loses her child. So harrowing and unnatural an event is the experience that perhaps even suggesting that we should have such a word, a word as common as orphan or widow, is taboo."

"Agreed. I couldn't agree more." Hector nodded once. "Although, historically, such bereavements were common enough. I mean, even my granny's generation was dealing with a lot more infant mortality than we have today."

"Shut up, you fucken moron," I hiss-insisted at him.

"I'm sorry. I–" Hector offered an apology to us both, aloud. "I'm sorry for going on. I just babble when I'm nervous."

"What have you got to be nervous about?" Mrs. Kennefick asked.

"Nothing. Nothing I've done. It's just Kev there's pointing a gun at me, and you've accused me of ratting the late-lamented Mick out to Roddy Chambers. Which I would never do. In a million years." Hector gulped audibly. "Look, Mrs. Kennefick, Margaret, if we're done here, I need to get home. I'm very sorry for your loss, but my mother's looking for some bacon bits from the supermarket to sprinkle into the dog's dinner," he said, voice laced with both a definitive authority and a pleading uncertainty over everything. Hector stepped forward and began mounting the steps up to the patio. After not being shot when he reached the top, I quickly followed him as he continued his speech. "I'm very sorry for your loss, as I say, but Fletch won't eat his kibble without the bacon. I've to pick that up on the way home."

Hector stood stock still, holding her gaze until

she finally nodded. He turned back at me and uttered a casual:

"Let's head on, so."

We paced quickly through the hallway and out to the front door. Departing down the front steps to the car awaiting us at the roadside, we got in, and I slipped the key into the ignition, threw the engine in gear, and slammed my foot down on the accelerator, pulling away from the kerb without as much as a look around to ensure I could drive off without causing an accident.

"That's the last good deed I'm doing that involves you and your mates," I roared at Hector, sitting beside me. He was bent over, his head between his legs. "Do you hear me?"

"What would you call her anyway?" he asked finally, gasping. He raised his head to look at me.

"What do you mean? A psycho bitch?"

"No. I mean the fact that Mick is survived by his mother. What do you call that? Here, can we stop at the supermarket before you drop me home? I need to pick up some stuff."

Momentum

Christopher Thomas

Jamey scurried up the side of the hill, he kept low as he crossed over the old logging road, and then he ran down into the ravine on the other side at a pace mostly out of his control. He could feel the muscles in his thighs grab and his knees crunch with each jarring stomp on the steep and uneven ground.

He could hear the dogs again. There were at least three of them and they were closing in. If he could stay on his feet he could make it to the treeline and then there was a creek, not fifty feet further, that carved a scar through the base of the ridge hills and curled around the other side of Stafford's farm – if he could get that far.

When he made it to the treeline he glanced back – nothing in sight, only the din of a barking posse fast approaching from over the rise. Jamey forged through the brambled edge, jumped a rotten log and nearly hit his head on

a low-growing branch before reaching the creek and quickly submerging himself to try to scatter his scent. He reckoned he had to be within a half-mile of the track at Carver High School. If he could just beat the dogs to the track, he thought, things would be better.

He sloshed down the creekside, staying on the bedrock wherever he could for better footing. His feet were numb, and his side ached and his heart pounded so hard it made his head hurt. He leapt onto an old tractor tyre he saw half-buried in the bank and used it to launch himself up a rocky face, grasping at tree roots and crags and pulling himself up onto a higher, flatter stretch of ground. From there he could see one of the dogs coming down the creek in full stride. He didn't know if the dogs could scale that bluff, or if they would find a way around, but he didn't wait to find out. It was dusk and the light was fading and he could hear the dogs gathering as one behind him, not slowed by the terrain and taunting him with their tortured yowls.

Jamey cut through the last stand of trees and burst out into the rising field that led to

the track. He had nothing left in him but fear and fury, so he fell forward onto all fours as he struggled to even scamper up the last few yards of the hill, gasping for air and digging his feet and fingers into the earth until he had somehow actually done it. He crested the hill at the edge of the track where he gathered his remaining strength to stand tall and turn toward the dogs, fully invested in his own fate. The ninety-pound chestnut-red bloodhound jumped up and knocked Jamey over before quickly being joined by two black-and-tans as they surrounded him, climbed over him, licking and nuzzling and slobbering.

Two men walked over to get a hold of the dogs. "Son," yelled one of them, "I ain't never seen nobody outrun these here dogs before. I guess you think you're somethin' special, don't you?"

"Leave 'em be," Jamey heard a crusty voice say. It was Coach Howard. The coach walked over, grabbed Jamey by the arm, snatched him off the ground and set him to standing. The coach studied Jamey who stood there sagging

and depleted, looking as pitiful as any end-of-season scarecrow. "He ain't lyin'. No one's ever beat them dogs." The coach shook his head in amusement, "Most come up the logging road at the end there. Why'd you drop down into that holler?"

Jamey put his hands on his knees to prop himself up, to keep himself standing, "I don't know, exactly. Maybe I thought I could get a little rest while coming down that last hill, and maybe that the water would slow the boys down," he nodded in the direction of the dogs who were being lovingly rewarded for catching their quarry.

"Well," the coach nodded. "It don't much matter now, does it? A deal's a deal. You beat them dogs over five miles, son. Welcome to varsity."

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