

# EAR RAT MAGAZINE

Volume Seven | January 11th, 2024

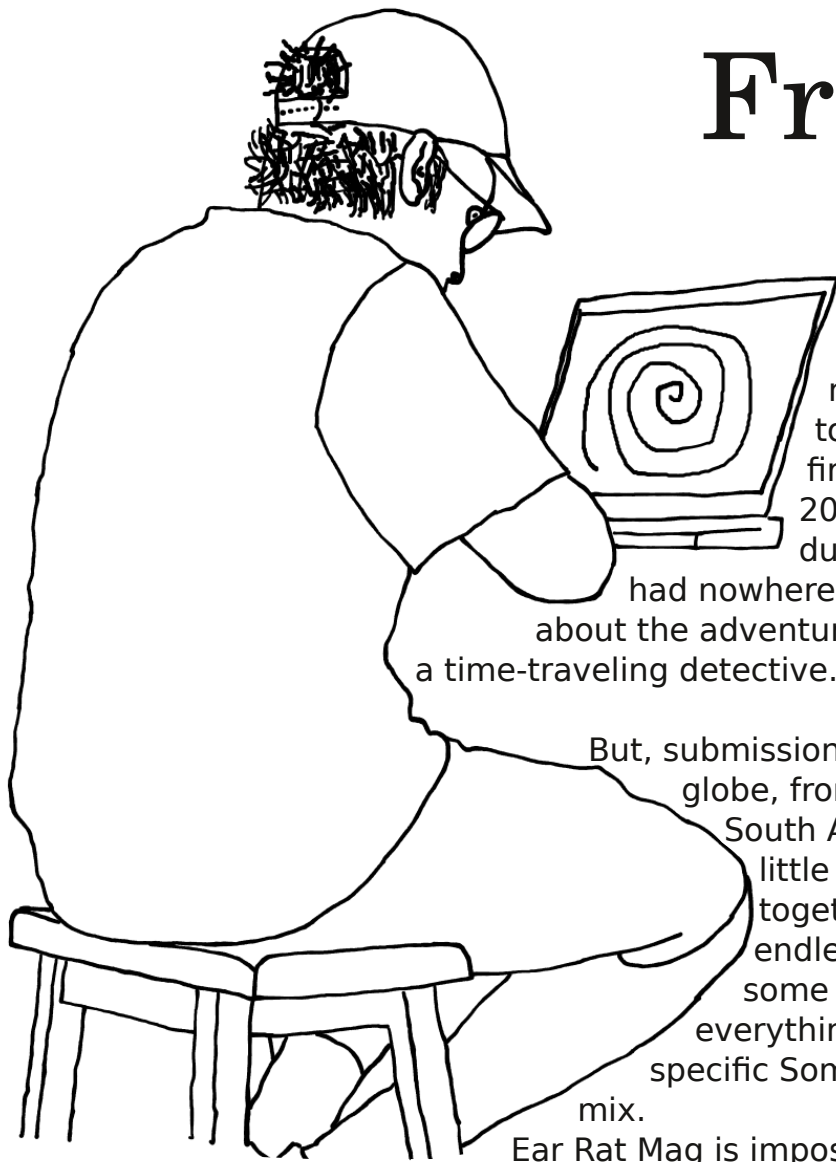
LOVE AND  
CONNECTION IN  
STRANGE AND  
CURSED PLACES!



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# From the Desk of the Editor



We've been crackin' on at this thing for nearly four years now. When I threw together a call for submissions during the first moments of the pandemic back in 2020, I figured maybe I'd get a content dump from a random Neocitizen or two that had nowhere else to send their obscure 36-part series about the adventures of an anthropomorphic bear who is also a time-traveling detective.

But, submissions came rolling in. Work from all across the globe, from Europe and Asia and Australia and South America, we all threw together these weird little stories and comics and works of art together in a time where everything felt endlessly bleak. Some of us lost loved ones, some of us lost jobs, some of us lost damn near everything. Even the ones who didn't lose a specific Something, they still lost something in the mix.

Ear Rat Mag is impossibly on its seventh issue, but for the first time it's not clear if issue eight is on the horizon, however near or far that view may be. There's no dramatic admission of some long-standing illness or some other life changing event that's weighing down the decision making process; sometimes our hearts just change and all we can do is listen.

Regardless if this is the last issue or not, I wanted to give a few shout outs to the real all-stars of the project.

bikerbuddy (always lowercase, must be lowercase) for showing up for every. single. issue. bb runs the reading project, which for my money is the **best** book review site on the web, and I'm not only saying that because I snuck a few reviews on the site myself. A fully independent, non-tech-bro-created, weird and quirky and local book review site is the perfect antidote to the social media burnout that seems to pervade every single website imaginable. I've said it once and I'll say it forever, you aren't a true Neocitizen until you submit a review for the reading project.

Automatic Llama, for signing up to be the Art Director for issue two and then basically running the entire mag himself for the next four issues. You might think of issues two through five as "the good ones" and you would be absolutely correct in thinking that. Llama put together some of the raddest fucking magazines I've ever seen and basically

singlehandedly created art to accompany every submission that ran. Llama is a hell of a dude and I hope he gets rich by making like some really clever t-shirt design that gets picked up on Woot! or whatever. Whatever he wants to do in life, I hope he is successful in like a fun and carefree way and he cruises on his bike in slow-mo with a soda and the sun shines perfectly and it looks dope.

Preternaturalty, for not only submitting the second most amount of written works, but for all of those works to be little wonderful genre pieces that could stand entirely alone on some weird forum website where people write those forever-ongoing stories that are like 700 chapters long, and yet Pret sent them over to the Ear Rat. I think Pret is writing like, three, or four? books at once on their site, and (even though I'm woefully behind on all the series) they are all so very, very good. Go and read them, you will be better for it and it's also just like, cool good free stories to add to your brain soup inside your skull.

And there's tons of others, everyone really. I might've "founded" this zine, but the contributors are the ones who actually made it something. Dann, Sage, Pike, LUS, Furnace, Ausra, Hannibal, Cameron Z, Hannah F, Nyahoo, biko, Bluef00t, Mark C, Josh J, Snufkin, incessant, Violet, Roger B, Melted, Dani, you all submitted great pieces that I was proud to run in these odd little PDFs.

I'd be lying if I said it was always fun to make this thing, but it is really fun to see what all y'all cook up for each issue, and if another ERM never comes, then hey we at least got seven great issues to look back on.

Ear Rat Magazine No. Seven: *Love and Connection In Strange and Cursed Places* begins now.

- Mike V.



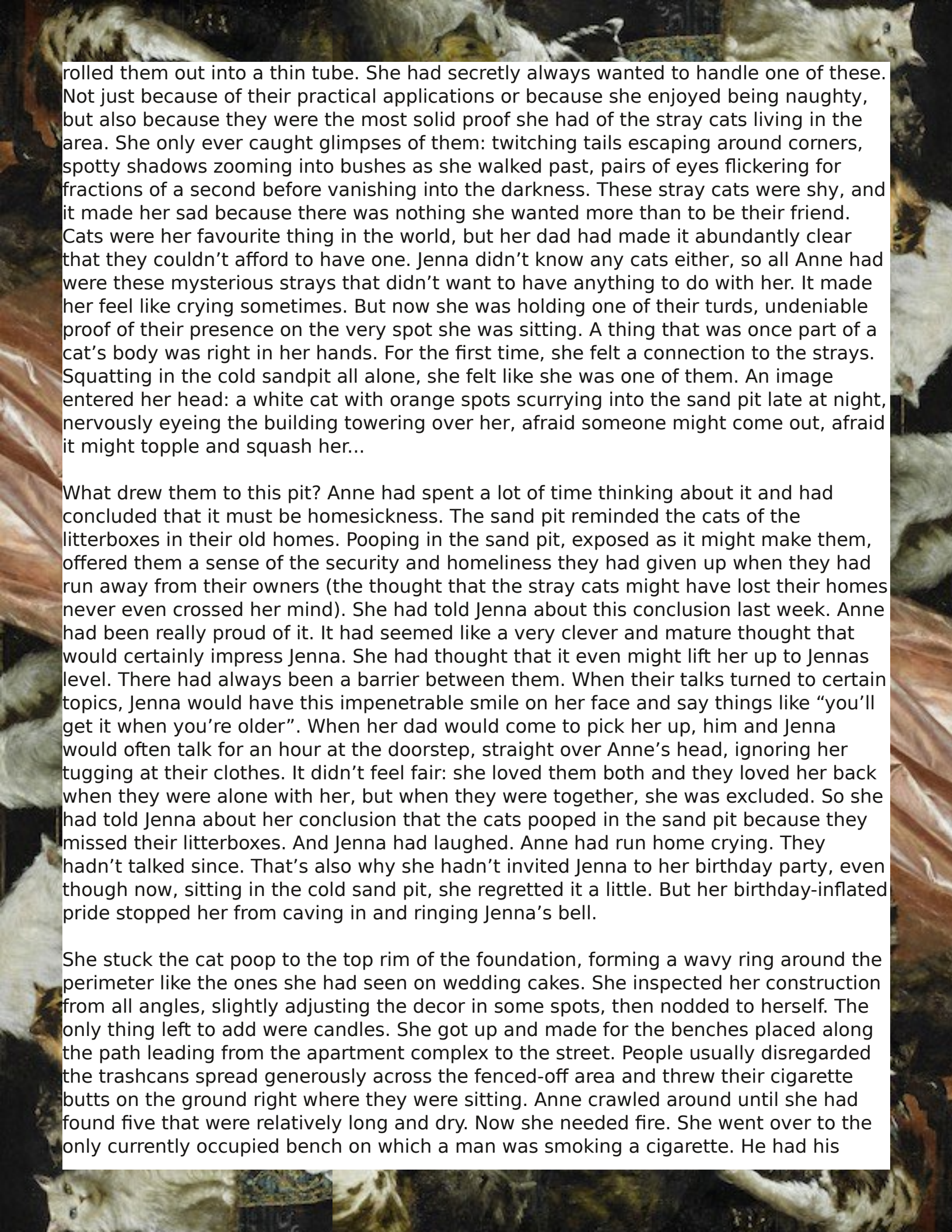
# S TRAY P PRINCESS

by **Brenholz**

Anne spent her fifth birthday in a sand pit, baking a cake in pouty defiance. Her pink polyester princess dress pooled around her feet and got in the way as she shovelled load after load of sand into her bucket. The thin patches of grass surrounding the pit were still covered in the night's rime. Really, this was not the time or place for this dress. The only reason she was sitting here was because the Birthday Rules had been broken: She was supposed to have been woken up by her dad singing songs at the foot of her bed, then she should have run into the kitchen and blown out the candles on the cake, finally unwrapping a heap of presents containing every dream her over-boiling anticipation had conjured up over the course of the year. But it hadn't worked out that way. She had woken up on her own. She had laid in bed for half an hour with the sheet pulled over her face, afraid of somehow jinxing things by breaking with the prescribed order of the proceedings. Finally, she had jumped out of bed and run into her dad's bedroom, finding him fast asleep. She had climbed onto the bed, started jumping on his belly, screamed into his ear- to no avail. He just wouldn't wake up. Had he forgotten her Birthday? A date so important that it would have to be marked in the calendars of every person on the planet? She couldn't wrap her head around it. It was all wrong, but the reality of her situation was this: a father that won't wake up, a couple of presents she found under the dinner table (chief among them the dress) and no cake. She wouldn't stand for that last point, so she had decided to take matters into her own hands.



She turned the bucket upside down and patted its top with her shovel, then she twisted it around a few times. Jenna from two stories down had taught her that this would keep the sand from sticking to the bucket. It had rained the night before and no one ever bothered to put a tarp over the pit when it wasn't in use, so the sand was wet and quite sticky. Anne didn't mind. The moisture gave the sand a clay-like texture which made her constructions much more durable. When she lifted the bucket, her cake's foundation revealed itself as one solid beautiful mass with an almost convincingly cake-like brownish hue. Anne was satisfied. Time for decorations. She dug around the pit until her hands touched what felt like a wad of Play-Doh. Another consequence of the residents' negligence: Local stray cats relieved themselves in the sand pit. Their faeces were buried deep like pirate booty. Her father had forbidden her from touching them, but he had also decided to forget her birthday, so Anne didn't care about his opinions right now. And the sand-covered turds were much more mouldable than regular sand while still looking the part: Perfect for the finer details of her cake. Anne couldn't help grinning deviously as she stuck the individual droppings together and



rolled them out into a thin tube. She had secretly always wanted to handle one of these. Not just because of their practical applications or because she enjoyed being naughty, but also because they were the most solid proof she had of the stray cats living in the area. She only ever caught glimpses of them: twitching tails escaping around corners, spotty shadows zooming into bushes as she walked past, pairs of eyes flickering for fractions of a second before vanishing into the darkness. These stray cats were shy, and it made her sad because there was nothing she wanted more than to be their friend. Cats were her favourite thing in the world, but her dad had made it abundantly clear that they couldn't afford to have one. Jenna didn't know any cats either, so all Anne had were these mysterious strays that didn't want to have anything to do with her. It made her feel like crying sometimes. But now she was holding one of their turds, undeniable proof of their presence on the very spot she was sitting. A thing that was once part of a cat's body was right in her hands. For the first time, she felt a connection to the strays. Squatting in the cold sandpit all alone, she felt like she was one of them. An image entered her head: a white cat with orange spots scurrying into the sand pit late at night, nervously eyeing the building towering over her, afraid someone might come out, afraid it might topple and squash her...

What drew them to this pit? Anne had spent a lot of time thinking about it and had concluded that it must be homesickness. The sand pit reminded the cats of the litterboxes in their old homes. Pooping in the sand pit, exposed as it might make them, offered them a sense of the security and homeliness they had given up when they had run away from their owners (the thought that the stray cats might have lost their homes never even crossed her mind). She had told Jenna about this conclusion last week. Anne had been really proud of it. It had seemed like a very clever and mature thought that would certainly impress Jenna. She had thought that it even might lift her up to Jenna's level. There had always been a barrier between them. When their talks turned to certain topics, Jenna would have this impenetrable smile on her face and say things like "you'll get it when you're older". When her dad would come to pick her up, him and Jenna would often talk for an hour at the doorstep, straight over Anne's head, ignoring her tugging at their clothes. It didn't feel fair: she loved them both and they loved her back when they were alone with her, but when they were together, she was excluded. So she had told Jenna about her conclusion that the cats pooped in the sand pit because they missed their litterboxes. And Jenna had laughed. Anne had run home crying. They hadn't talked since. That's also why she hadn't invited Jenna to her birthday party, even though now, sitting in the cold sand pit, she regretted it a little. But her birthday-inflated pride stopped her from caving in and ringing Jenna's bell.

She stuck the cat poop to the top rim of the foundation, forming a wavy ring around the perimeter like the ones she had seen on wedding cakes. She inspected her construction from all angles, slightly adjusting the decor in some spots, then nodded to herself. The only thing left to add were candles. She got up and made for the benches placed along the path leading from the apartment complex to the street. People usually disregarded the trashcans spread generously across the fenced-off area and threw their cigarette butts on the ground right where they were sitting. Anne crawled around until she had found five that were relatively long and dry. Now she needed fire. She went over to the only currently occupied bench on which a man was smoking a cigarette. He had his

hands buried deep in the pockets of a black leather jacket and a brimless cap dragged down over his eyes. The smoke he inhaled seemed to flow directly into his crinkled grey skin. He hadn't acknowledged Anne on her way over and continued to ignore her when she stood right next to him. After she had stared at him for a good minute or two, he hissed: "The hell do you want?" Anne replied unfazed: "Do you have a lighter?" The man turned his head up so he could get a good a look at her. His eyes were narrowed. "Yeah, I got a lighter. What, you wanna borrow it?" Anne nodded and opened the palm of her hand, revealing the butts she had collected. "It's my birthday." The man laughed. "So? That's no reason to help you start smoking. I'm not that irresponsible. Now get lost. Little girls shouldn't be playing with fire." Anne was getting angry. "You're just like dad and her! Stop treating me like a kid already! I'm all grown up, see?!" She did a little twirl with her princess dress, then she broke down crying. The man looked down at her, helpless and uncomfortable. Finally, he muttered to himself: "Well, my pops never let me do anything, and look how I turned out... Never had a chance to learn until it was too late..." He contemplated the matter for a while, then he loudly announced his verdict. "Alright! Here, take the lighter. Go ahead and smoke those butts. We'll see if you still feel like playing "grown up" afterwards." Anne immediately stopped crying, jumped up and grabbed the lighter. She thanked the man and ran off.

The cake was finished, the candles were lit. Anne was proud of herself. She had really managed to turn this birthday around, without any help from those stupid adults who didn't even trust her to leave the house on her own. She felt worthy of her dress and of the strays to which she now belonged. She imagined a giant mirror floating in the air in front of her, an elegant mirror with a decorated solid gold rim, the kind of mirror in which Rapunzel could marvel at the full volume of her hair. She blew out the candles, then she gave her reflection a beaming smile. "Happy Birthday!", she shouted. And dug in.



: ~~XXXX~~

yo-yo. dreamy boy  
you're on your own  
now——

a live radio show  
like, that one time  
with an audience,  
with an audience.

we play with music  
playlist talk  
in total silence  
leaned

we say good-bye in a hurry  
——suddenly

the spies work  
the street outside  
around

around me, lurk  
to a safe-space

far away

by Comet Pustójj



# CENTER STREET

by *Wes*

is that a new couch?  
wow that thing is ugly  
it was three or four of us  
or maybe just three of us  
we were sitting out  
on a balcony  
or patio type thing  
i swear to god  
there was cat hair  
it was two of us  
and we were walking  
through that neighborhood  
we hardly slept at all in our 20's  
are they still doing that?  
anyway  
it was two of us  
we weren't smoking a joint  
but we probably would have  
this isn't the one with the tequila  
and the orange juice is it?  
are they still doing that?  
there were stacks of VHS tapes  
but we only ever watched  
the Jeff Goldblum ones



# MY FRIEND

## JUNIE

by *bikerbuddy*

### 1. A phone call

My friend Junie was arrested last night as she grappled with a shop mannequin in the window of a local apartment store. The police called me after they had tried to process her at the station, and this is what they told me: after her arrest Junie wouldn't call anyone; Junie wouldn't speak or respond.

Junie and I hadn't really talked for a while but it is possible that mine was the only number on her phone. Junie is a 'loner', a word of my mother's. She was fond of using it against me when I was twenty-two because I hadn't yet dated a boy. But when she met Junie she stopped saying it. Junie was turned like a wilting flower against the sun. My mother's questions, dancing around the very thing she wanted most to know but dare not ask – if Junie was a lover or a friend (the horror of a lesbian daughter! where will the grandchildren come from?!?! ) – were enough to send Junie deep into herself.

So, yeah. Junie. Arrested. With a mannequin. A dummy. I'm not going to judge that, I thought, as the cop explained what had happened through the phone.

When I arrived at the station I was greeted by a uniformed police officer, well-groomed and handsome. He was tall, so it wasn't any effort for him to lean over the counter and place his mouth near my ear as though he had some intimacy he wished to share. He told me that Junie hadn't spoken to anyone all night. She had no identification. They hadn't known her name until they spoke with me on the phone. 'Junie' I told them. Her

name was Junie. But that was all I could remember. How soon people slip from our minds! They'd put her in a holding cell to start with, with another woman brought in on some misdemeanour, but they'd taken her out not long after.

"We placed her in the sergeant's office back there," the officer said, indicating with a motion of his head an open door behind him. I could see Junie at a desk in the office, unmoving.

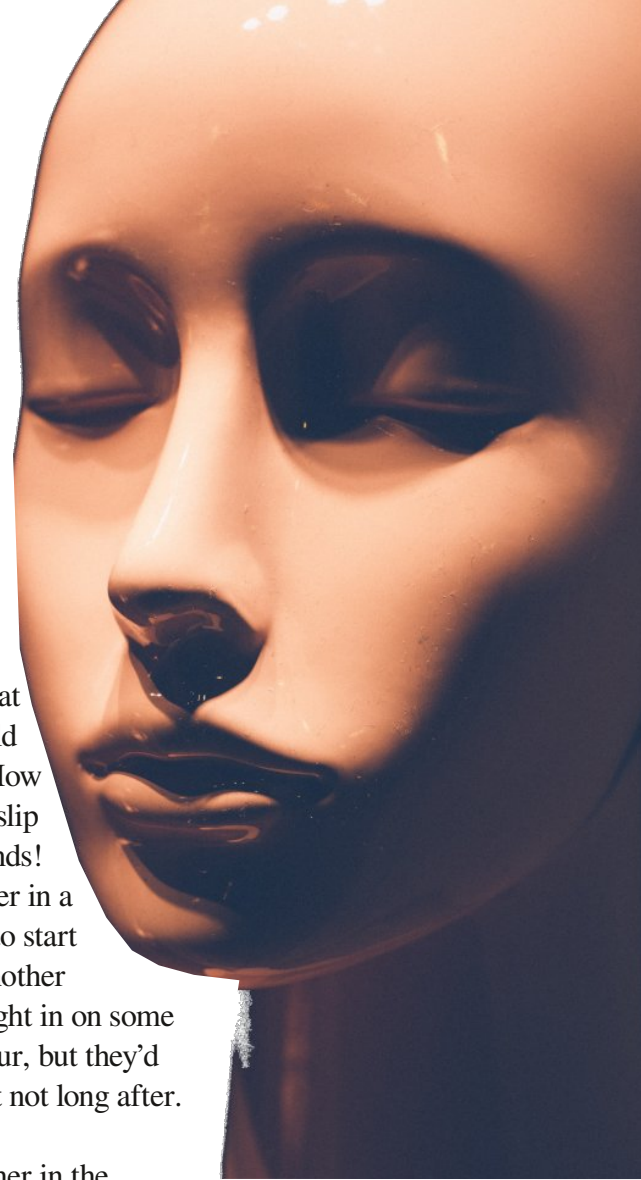
"Did she ask for me specifically?" I asked, trying to catch Junie's eye through the doorway.

"No," the cop said. "She's said nothing. Hasn't asked for anyone. We read her her rights but she didn't respond. We suggested she call someone but she showed no interest. We did a search and found her phone. It didn't even have a password."

The officer paused to gauge my reaction, but I was merely a little confused.

"We're concerned about Junie," he said.

A friend from school had introduced us. Junie seemed okay at first, if just a little too withdrawn. But I hadn't



seen Junie for so long – six months? – and I had assumed that she'd faded from my life.

"It felt like she was imploding," the officer told me; a rather mannered expression, I thought, for a cop. There must have been something in my expression that prompted him to explain: that he'd watched a documentary about the universe and singularities – black holes – and that's how he described the feeling of looking at Junie. That she sat in the cell, non-verbal (that sounded more like cop speak to me), and he swore that he never saw her blink at all; began to wonder if she was breathing.

Even now, Junie seemed to draw everything inward: the light in the room dimmed, the warmth in the air faded and the regular sounds of traffic dulled, as though the station had been slowly immersed in a deep tank of water.

"The Senior Detective suggested I speak to you first," he explained. "She wasn't sure what to make of the whole situation." I briefly considered the young Constable. Good looking. Possibly university educated. He seemed out of his element, but his possible appeal was obvious. No doubt he was considered a better candidate to speak to a young woman coming in late on a Friday night. But something seemed weird. The whole station was too quiet, as though the sound had been eaten from the room. Maybe it was that the few staff working around the office were really poor actors in a pantomime awaiting their cue.

My last evening with Junie was eerily quiet, too. She'd gone to the toilet and she'd been there so long that I started nosing through her bookshelf, bored. I opened the book before I realised it was her diary. When she returned, that's what she saw. She changed, as though something had gone off quietly inside her, like a switch or by the sound of a clap. The light blinked from her eyes and the warm room froze between us.

\* \* \*

my name is junie but no one needs to know that.  
learn your name and people think they know you.  
knowing is what everyone wants to do. to know. to

fix you. i mean place you. put you somewhere. a fixture. sometimes they say pigeonhole but I say fix. because when they think theyve got you measured and holed they can forget you. youre in their mental space. a place. a place where part of you is imprisoned.

an address is a fixture. a phone number is a fixture. be somewhere three times in a row and its a habit and now a small part of you is trapped there

proust: "our social personality is a creation of the minds of others"

but whitman: "i contain multitudes"

i am five feet three inches in the old scale. 160 centimetres. i am taller than any person i know. i will travel farther. i will see more. i will know more

like caesar i could conquer worlds. caesar bestrode the world like a colossus. cassius says this of him to brutus in shakespeare. or shakespeare made him say it. outlived by his own creations

caesar: like talos in jason and the argonauts. two colossuses. one man one metal. caesar from an old patrician family long declining before he returned to rome to bestride. talos presumably the work of man or gods. a made thing brought to life. also bestriding

transubstantiate. bread that becomes flesh

like reify. the abstract becomes real

all art is real. everything fake is true

i can make myself anything

the colossus of rhodes could not in reality have bestrode the harbour entrance in greece. the engineering was impossible for the time. it stood beside its harbour. but now there is talk. how to recreate it. how to recreate something that never

was. as it is imagined. now

reify. i read this word and wondered what it meant.  
to learn it is to reify language into meaning.  
unlearned words are letters only.

can you remake what was never made. can a  
fantasy be made real. like caesar, can a life  
become legend. like talos, can a thing obtain  
purpose

swift made gulliver bestride the lilliputians. with the  
trick of a map. a reimagined world. gulliver was so  
large he could fend off Blefuscus whole fleet. then  
he sailed to brobdingnag. suddenly he was small.  
smaller than everyone. small gulliver bestridden.  
So small he could look up into a cankerous breast.  
so small he could have crawled into the cavity  
made by the cancer. in brobdingnag he is a thing  
of curiosity only. in brobdingnag he is the creation  
of others

large or small. we can be either. we can choose  
what we are no matter what others say

john donne. the century before gulliver. large  
things become small. small things made large.  
donne's mistress lays naked before him. a  
continent and new world to be explored. america  
his new-found-land. america reduced. a conquest  
reified within a single body

i remember constance in my bedroom. then she  
was not. when she was here she filled the space  
on my mat. she lay there waiting. when she was  
not there – gone – the idea of her was large and so  
she is larger. too large to be contained in this  
space. only in my mind can she stretch her legs.  
only here is she comfortable

## 2. Held in a room

“We thought we could keep a better eye on her there,”  
the Constable said, gesturing towards the sergeant's  
office. “We were afraid she might hurt herself.”

The Constable's tone was ingratiating, but I think we

both felt the awkwardness of its paternalism. If I'd had  
my thoughts together I might have said something. But I  
felt vulnerable and concerned, and this young cop  
seemed like a decent enough guy. Well meaning.  
Perhaps even genuinely compassionate.

The office where Junie sat was a small box with a door  
set aside from the common work area. It had a small  
window at chest height – not too useful for peering  
through, I thought – but its door remained wide open.  
She still hadn't moved even though she must have heard  
my voice. I figured she must have been here for hours  
and she probably needed to pee. But she wouldn't ask.  
She was a closed shop. Apart from that last night when  
she seemed to take forever, I don't remember her ever  
going to the bathroom.

“And there's this other thing,” the cop was saying as I  
stood wondering how long Junie could hold on: how  
contained she really was.

“Yes?”

“Can I show you? It's in here? The detective wanted me  
to ask if you knew anything about it. It's really why we  
asked you here. We were hoping you could explain.”

“Sure,” I replied. He asked me to wait for a moment  
and left me at the counter while he disappeared through  
a door at the back of the station. He returned with a  
woman in plain clothes, possibly in her fifties, whom he  
introduced as Senior Detective Smith. The young cop  
lifted the counter to allow me through. Detective Smith  
offered me her hand and I shook it.

“And the name's Constable Jones, by the way,” the  
young cop interjected. It made him seem clumsy and  
inexperienced. “Should have introduced myself before.  
Sorry.” He offered his hand, awkwardly, and I shook it  
limply, a little embarrassed now and uncertain.

“Thanks for coming,” Detective Smith said. She  
ushered me towards another door and the three of us  
passed into a room at the back of the station. There was  
no-one there. The Constable turned on the light. The  
room was dominated by a large conference table. Worn  
chairs. An old tube television was suspended by a

bracket. An overhead projector sat dejectedly on a trolley, its knotted cord trailing somewhere behind a cabinet. Near the ceiling in the corner of the room was a surveillance camera, its red light on. The detective gestured to the table where a bulky wad of paper, possibly two feet wide, had been folded unevenly: large sheets of butcher's paper, it seemed, held together by masking tape, forming a network of untidy trails across its under-surface, holding it together. It had a vaguely triangular shape, with one side peaked, pointing off the table like a compass.

Detective Smith nodded at the bulk of paper. "Your friend had this with her when she was arrested." She paused and thought for a moment. "Actually, the report says it wasn't with her when she was arrested. Hard to carry, I guess."

"It was the only time she said anything the whole night," Constable Jones explained. "When she realised we were taking her she got real anxious and told us to look for it near the outer door where she'd left it. She wouldn't settle until we showed her we had it. After that she just seemed to . . . to turn off. Hasn't said a word since."

I nodded. I stared at the lump of paper, left there like laundry. It was large but it still felt intimate. Junie's hands touching it. Pressing down that tape against each of the large sheets. Smoothing it down like clothing. Like a dress. Stroking it like a dress and finding unexpectedness there. A taught nub of uncertainty beneath that dress.

\* \* \*

Reified. the abstract becomes concrete and real. an idea made flesh.

caesar was the opposite. a little bald man. no one would notice him now if he walked down the street. he was flesh. now disintegrating each year somewhere in the earth just like shakespeare said. and each year more books. more films. you do not need to know history to know caesar. each story he told. each story told about him. elevating him to an idea beyond imperious clay. a

transubstantiation

in the 18th century xavier de maistre travelled through his bedroom. like it was as large as Europe. i read about it in de botton. fought a duel and could have killed a man. confined to his bedroom he wrote his book. a whole nation contained in his small space. a whole world as summary. as precis. contained in one room. inside his head. possibly this is the opposite of reify - to hide or conceal

constance took the coffee mug from my hand and our fingers touched. it was a nothing touch but it was electric and we both felt it. a small touch but it became a large thought

when she was gone from my bedroom i could still smell her. the scent she wore. the coffee

shakespeare again. hamlet. infinite space within a nutshell. So hamlet said of his mind. a nutshell is such a small thing. yet it is only our minds that hold us. compare fortinbrass. his army marches to fight and die for an eggshell. another small thing. but it remains a small thing. a small piece of land

the mind is expansive. the world not so much

### 3. Junie's room

"So, you're Constance?" Detective Smith asked. She didn't have the same manner as her younger counterpart. The question seemed less personal. More like she was establishing facts.

"We really should have introduced ourselves properly," Constable Jones intervened apologetically.

"This is what we need you to look at," Detective Smith said, ploughing on, regardless. The tone set by the Constable's intimate manner when I first entered the station had now devolved towards the more officious and colder spectrum of the human heart. Both Smith and Jones took gloves from a dispensing box and flexed them onto their hands.

I looked down at the wad of paper on the table. It is something about cops, I thought, that makes it easy to feel guilty about absolutely nothing in their presence. So I tried to look interested – felt I had to act interested even though I was bursting to know what this was all about – just to placate them.

Constable Jones reached past me and pulled the mass of paper towards himself. Then he carefully flipped one side, then another, then moved around the table to further unfold the paper. The detective took the other side and between them they performed a careful reveal. I saw lines on the exposed surface of the paper; long straight lines. Then, here and there, a word or two. It wasn't a picture – not a scene or a portrait – but its details seemed familiar. I scanned the edges of this vast representation as it unfolded, spanning the length and breadth of the conference table. Some of it even trailed onto the floor at the far end of the room because it simply wouldn't all fit.

Then I realised. I couldn't help it. Detective Smith heard the intake of my breath.

“You know what this is?” she asked, staring at me intently now.

It wasn't as I remembered. Not the way you remember these things when you wonder over them at night. Not this top-down kind of looking. There was her bed and that must be the top of her wardrobe. But from this top elevation it appeared only as a large rectangle with a label too small and distant for me to read immediately.

“This is Junie's room,” I said quietly. “It's her bedroom. It even looks the same size.”

And roughly two feet from the edge of the drawing where it had tumbled out as the paper was unfolded, lay the book that had set her against me: her diary.

\* \* \*

when i was young the butcher gave me paper to draw on. the paper wrapped my mothers purchased meat but i took an extra sheet and i drew upon it. now i am older. the butcher will not

give me paper. i ask too much. i am not even a customer. i order my own

when frankenstein built his monster it was a thing he stitched and stitched together. taken from the ground. parts and pieces made as one. its grotesqueness beyond the idea of its creation. a dead thing reified by lightning into life

in my bedroom i stitch and stitch. the abstract and real. always fluid

somewhere in this is constance. standing above me legs apart. taking up the whole room. lowering onto me. how to make that real again

maps are ideas that pretend to be real. mercator's projection. a wholly fabricated understanding of the world. the north dominant, the south demeaned

my map is real. each square centimetre. i lay the pieces on the floor but reality is not flat. there are certain practicalities that even an idea must accommodate as it makes its way into the world. i take to measuring photographing recording and transmitting onto my paper

is my map becoming more real. or is my room now merely a representation of my map

i stitch and stitch my creation into being. with tape. with stitches. each part. end to end. side to side

constance was in this room. now the room is on this paper. the closer my map comes to reality the more reality becomes my idea

## 4. The map

They didn't say anything straight away. They left me to examine the unfolded paper, but as I looked I was acutely aware of their eyes upon me, as though there would be a report to write soon and every detail of my reaction would be recorded. In the corner of the room the tiny red light of the surveillance camera still pulsed.

“We’ve read through the diary,” Detective Smith informed me. She reached across the table and pulled it towards us and then offered it to me. I looked at it. I didn’t want to touch it. She placed it back on the table between us.

I stared at its cover. Not wanting to look at what Junie had drawn. Not wanting to meet their eyes again.

“I didn’t understand it, personally. My partner’s not much of a reader, either. Your name’s in it, though. You’re aware, I assume, of Junie’s state of mind? We have certain reasons for concern. We thought . . . Have you . . . ?”

I allowed the intended question to die in the air between us. My eyes still averted, I began to look once again at the details on the edge of Junie’s drawing.

“It’s a plan drawing,” I murmured. There was Junie’s dressing table, there the side table next to her bed. But there were more details you wouldn’t expect to see on a plan. Not the type drawn by architects. On her side table was drawn a reading light, I guessed, looking top down, and her phone as well. On her desk sat her laptop computer. The details were insane. She had included the representation of a book, formalised into the topography of her bedroom map that would otherwise have casually sat upon her desk, along with all the details of its cover. There was her shoe rack with each individual shoe meticulously rendered, and each laced shoe had its laces recorded on this plan, too, whether they were bundled within the shoe itself, or snaked untidily onto the floor. There was a hair brush. There was hair. There were hair clips. The closer I leaned into this enormous image the more details it revealed to me of Junie’s room.

The Constable shifted his weight and I was again aware of their presence.

“I don’t understand,” I finally said. I was supposed to explain this. I was supposed to know. “Why was she stealing a mannequin?”

The Constable started.

“She wasn’t stealing it,” he said. “At least we don’t think so. She had all this with her.” Waving at the map. The diary. “Like she was on her way somewhere. It might have been planned. Like a ceremony.” He shrugged, looking at Detective Smith, knowing he had gone beyond his bounds. “It might have been an impulse,” he finished lamely. But by the way he was looking I could tell he thought it was no impulse. His manner, his doubtful tone, suggested he thought Junie was purposeful.

“She was trying to take its clothes. Too large for her, though,” Detective Smith offered. She gave me an appraising look. “More your size, maybe.”

I looked across the terrain of Junie’s bedroom. Like the representations of contours in a map, its folding and unfolding had left edges and peaks, valleys and crumpled segments in the paper. The light fell on it unevenly and there were sections that were difficult to clearly discern across the width of the conference table, given the dimness of the light. I began to edge around the map, looking for new details that had formerly been hidden or had not been clear.

That’s when I saw it. The final most salient detail that I had either confused, or had refused to consider . . .

“This is not just a plan of Junie’s room,” Detective Smith said, sensing my discovery. “You know that.”

. . . It was more than a detail. It was a feature. It was large enough that my observing it last of all must have seemed peculiar to a cop. There in the middle of Junie’s room was the one feature that was out of character with the precision and detail of the rest of the drawing. Laying there, drawn just like the chalk outlines from a former era, was the outline of a body and a stain.

“We’re not sure what it’s meant to be,” the young Constable conceded, forgetting himself again.

“Something for a ritual?” He gave a nervous laugh.

“Like bringing something to life. Or maybe just a map? Do you know what it means?” he asked, his tone suddenly more serious. I examined the surface of these sheets of taped paper, made for a butcher, my silence tracing awkward moments in time between us.

Suddenly, the Constable's voice was more urgent: imploring, "Constance?" Too intimate. Demanding a response.

But the detective had lost patience, too. She cut him off as he was about to press me again. Her tone was suddenly harsh, jolting me from my dark reverie. "What was Junie doing, Constance? What do you know about this? Surely you know what this means! Tell us where she lives. Where do you think she has put it?"

I felt urgency, fear and panic mount as her voice became more strident. Her demands short-circuited my thinking – I don't know, I don't know, I don't know! The small light, still glowering red in the corner of the ceiling, was watching . . . was watching me. Detective Smith was close. Too close. At my side. I couldn't look at her. I turned to Constable Jones, instead, vainly hoping for some sign of understanding from him. But his eyes no longer contained the warmth I was seeking, only a deep need.

I realised I was collapsing against the table. The map slid along its edge as I leaned into it, creating new peaks and valleys across its surface. Part of it tore. Constable Jones moved instinctively to protect it. I felt constrained though no hand touched me. Only their words. This room. Only this expanse of paper with its dark stain and thoughts growing like a strangling vine. I tried to move towards the door, stumbled. I felt my tears. Now hands were under my arms, holding me up.

"Why was Junie really arrested?" I gasped.







# First Blood

words and image by  
Kyle Patrick Hamilton

Into the dark fog,  
Where we carry our own electricity in:  
My body a mechanical wire,  
A rhythmic snowplow,  
A carriage with a humming joy,  
A hand-crank musicbox.  
Inches vanish behind me  
In a wet white crush.

It's a morning  
Stretched wide by solitude.  
I always think that green gets greener  
When the air is cold.

I stop to admire one shock of red,  
Send a signal off —  
The world whispers back to me  
Virginia Creeper.  
A matching glimpse of hometown  
Waiting still and loud in a land  
Suddenly less distant.  
Both of us matching  
In this color called alive.



**Content Warning:** There is some mention of roaches, drugs, blood, physical abuse, and ghosts.

### ◆ It Sounds Like A Bad Joke ◆

Throughout part of my adolescence, my family and I lived in a "haunted house". I mean this quite literally. To state such a thing so plainly might evoke a cartoonish image, like the horror-themed spin on the family sitcom offered by *The Addams Family* or *The Munsters*. However, as amusing as it would have been to have a disembodied hand as a friend or a giant pet dragon that hides underneath a staircase, it was not a pleasant experience living there at first. How did we get there?

We occupied a small apartment in a sketchy part of town when I was born. Through my father's hard work and good fortune, we entered into progressively nicer accommodations with each subsequent move. Roaches, cement walls, and drug-deals happening a few doors down became a pet lizard, my own bedroom, and neighbors sharing their extra packs of frozen vegetables. Coupled to the attention and care of my mother and grandparents, we never felt lack as children despite any circumstances that might have indicated otherwise.

Our previous home was a duplex within walking distance of an elementary school. Now we were moving to a house closer to the desert at the edge of town, farther away from everything, but not quite a suburb. The house itself was plain, similar to several other houses near it. It was a single-floor plan and the rent was relatively affordable. Later, we would come to find out why that was probably the case. The kitchen had no appliances or tiling on the floor, and a large hole underneath the cabinets led to roaches regularly coming in from the garage that was adjacent to it. Hello again! Both bathrooms had a lot of mold hidden away by a coat of paint that would eventually seep through with enough hot showers. Surprise! Spaces under the front and back doors allowed ants and cold drafts to enter during the summer and winter, like so many uninvited guests. Some problems aren't apparent until one has been immersed within an environment for quite some time, and even then, one might learn to adapt to them rather than change. Hindsight may be 20/20, but foresight often has astigmatism.

I remember the first evening that I stayed there. None of the lights worked yet, so we spent most of that time in the dark. Despite it being the first house that I ever lived in, if I am being completely honest, it felt like a step backwards that night. While the duplex that we had just left had its own problems, it felt more like home. The next few weeks weren't much better either. I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something not quite "right" about being there. I couldn't put my finger on what it was, but little did I suspect that there might have been something sinister about it...

## ◆ What Makes A Broken Home? ◆

The handiness, frugality, and creativity of my family came to the fore. My father put in some adhesive tile as a weekend project. My mother found a used refrigerator for cheap. My sister started to paint the walls of her room a deep blue. The color was elegant, complementing the moon and star-themed decorations that she had accumulated. But it made the room incredibly dark. For some reason, this room in particular felt like it was several degrees colder than the rest of the house, and the darkness probably did not help the situation. I could understand why she would want to paint it though. The plain white walls were probably like a blank canvas begging for the touch of artistic expression. Although, she was not the first.

Small pieces of graffiti were on many spots throughout the house. It wasn't usually apparent when facing them, but if the light caught them at the right angle, one could see writing that had only been lightly painted over before we got there. What was more disturbing was to find what seemed like a **bloodstain** on the wall inside of a closet. I got a sickly feeling when we noticed that the handle on the door of that same closet was actually reversed. This meant that someone could lock it from the outside while someone would be stuck on the inside with no way of escaping it. I seriously started to wonder what type of abuse occurred there and if my sense of unease stemmed from it.

## ◆ Some Chilling Experiences ◆

After living at the house for awhile, my sister had invested in a space heater. Whenever it would power on, it produced an intense glow as the coils that snaked around its internal circuitry started to warm up. One evening, my mother and I heard a click and saw the bright orange light spill out into the hallway in the same way that it had many times before. My sister was not home at the time, so we walked over to the room to turn it off. As we entered, we saw that the heater was not actually on. My mother stated, "Unplug it. Maybe it turned on and off by itself." When I bent down towards the power strip, it was not even plugged in! We both looked at each other in bewilderment.

Sometime later, while I was attempting to get over a sickness, I had a difficult time falling asleep. I went to get some water from the kitchen to quench my thirst. Afterward, I laid down to rest on the couch in the living room and heard my parent's bedroom door open. My father was about to get ready for work at some time around 3 AM, the supposed "witching hour". As I made my way over to the hallway to tell him good morning, I passed out on the floor several feet away from him. I fell to the ground like I was moving in slow motion. Upon my descent, I vividly remember hearing hundreds of quiet whispers overlapping one another and an unpleasant, almost frightening feeling washed over me. It was as if the dark secrets of the house burst into my awareness at the edge of my unconsciousness.

In response to my recalling of these events, I can almost sense Sherlock Holmes walking beside me and stating, "My good sir, surely you are not convinced of the existence of ghosts or of the supernatural by any of that! All of it could be just as readily explained, and more convincingly I might add, as a poorly insulated window, some faulty wiring within this old house, and a fever dream." He looks at me disapprovingly as he puffs upon his tobacco pipe.

## ◆ Reclaiming A Space By Breaking The Hex On It ◆

Whatever the causes, each of us felt that there was some kind of "bad juju" associated with the house and sought our own ways of resolving it. My sister smudged her room with a stick of sage. I walked along the perimeter of the house and offered up prayers that whatever was stuck there would be peaceably removed. My mother played some healing music out loud. All of these activities may only be purely symbolic on the surface, but their peripheral

benefits added up into something meaningful, like the easing of psychological tension.

Moreover, what was most meaningful of all was the fact that we were united in our intentions to shift our environment into something more peaceful for everyone. Places that are "haunted" often have a negative reputation which can be wholly remade into something else entirely. The same is true of neighborhoods filled with poverty and crime. The vision that we hold of an area affects how we respond to the activities occurring within it, and further, it affects what it eventually becomes. What potentials do we choose to unfold?

The Alcatraz Conversion Project by Da Vid Raphael of The Light Party is a beautiful example. It is essentially a plan to transform the prison on Alcatraz Island off the coast of San Francisco, California into a "Global Peace Center". To quote his explanation of it:

*The bottom line is, that by converting what once was a place of pain and suffering into a jewel of light, we will activate powerful forces for healing, reconciliation, and transformation. [...] As I've learned more and more about this process, I've learned more about the Native American understanding of what Alcatraz represented. [...] It is going to be a sacred space, and that is honoring the fact that it once was a sacred space, and it was desecrated. We've desecrated this whole planet. And now we are going to "un-desecrate" it. We are here to heal and regenerate, and that is the process that we're in.*

It is easy to find "cursed places" in which to practice this approach. There are even databases of them, like HouseCreep.com. Unfortunately, people do not always understand how to foster healing within the spaces that they are already in or become a part of.

### ◆ A Bittersweet Move ◆

Over time, we continually grew to appreciate each other, our home, and the neighbors around us more and more. We ended up living there for over 10 years until several sudden deaths split our family apart. As we left, we found a large crack within the brick wall around the corner of the house as if the foundation was starting to give way underneath it. I cannot find a more suitable metaphor for how I felt at the time than the ground crumbling beneath me.

Sometimes circumstances will thrust us out of one space and into another without warning. Do not let it make you fearful or jaded. Hold onto a sense of wonder and use it to make a home wherever you find yourself.

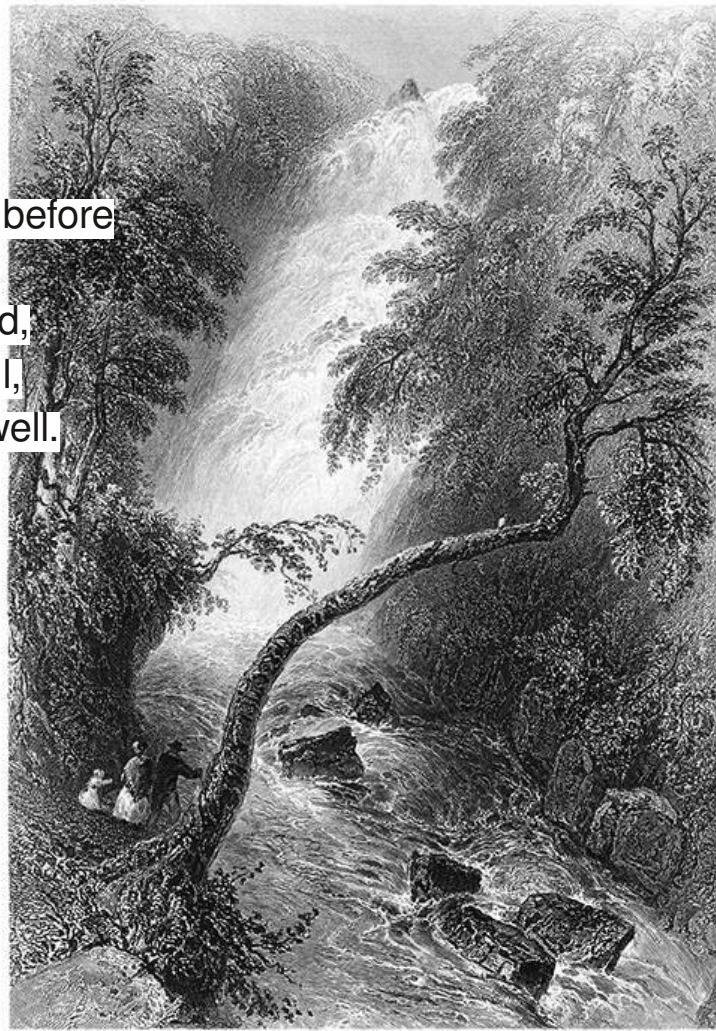


# THE AFFAIR

by *bikerbuddy*

I walked into the bush the other day  
Seeking what, I cannot tell;  
Perhaps some trinket of another's way  
Or faint memory where a footstep fell.  
Before me rose a stand of trees,  
And in the stand two trees that never touched,  
Except here presently, as I watched,  
Two branches, uppermost, entwined in soft embrace,  
Two branches moved by the wind, then not.

I cannot tell if I should understand,  
In Nature's movements from this living breath,  
The movements and the timings of our lives,  
The sweet caress, brief joy and lovers' death.  
Yet, I thought long upon these trees; how long before  
They were not one, then changed;  
In turmoil and in peace, together and estranged,  
Two branches moved forever with a lifting swell,  
As the wind might choose to blow them, ill or well.



# Strife

by Preternaturality



It wasn't something you did if you had options, Enyo was certain. Anyone claiming a motivation for adventuring beyond desperation had to be lying. Enyo would know; she was desperate and lying too. Tales of wanting to help defend her fellow man from terrible monsters tripped off Enyo's tongue, and anyone who caught out the dishonesty kept quiet. After all, why start raising suspicions when they might next fall upon you? Most adventurers were criminals, Enyo could only imagine; maybe fleeing from consequences, maybe trying to atone, maybe left without any skills but violence. It was plausible. It was *neat*. It also didn't accord very well with Enyo's actual experience with them.

She had had her brushes with them, from time to time. Some came to watch her dance, others made their ruckuses within earshot as she worked in places where people would have meals and conversations. They tended to be so... *earnest*. Not ashamed, not hiding it, not even desperate. Some of them seemed perversely excited to plunge headlong into danger and challenge any monster they found. Speaking about their violent brushes with death with joy and pride. Boasting about just what horrible monsters they had slain. It was terrifying.

The thought of living in their company, doing what they did, it made her blood run cold. But the thought of staying in the city any longer was worse, so, *so* much worse. She *had* to leave, to get away as fast as possible. To get out of the city, to breathe fresh air, to be something like *alone*, not surrounded by people. She couldn't afford to get

stopped at the gates, asked what business a young woman was leaving on. And she *knew* she would be stopped. But adventurers? That would be fine. She would be beyond suspicion. They would know she was running away, but for that occupation, they wouldn't care about why.

She had gone to find a group to join. She looked halfway presentable, after drying her face. She had cried out all her tears, retched up everything in her stomach, but it didn't show. She just looked nervous, it didn't show that everything inside her was tied up in knots. She had a stolen sword and the footwork to pretend she knew what she was doing with it. She was pretty, and that might help a little, although she tried not to think about the implications there. She just needed a group to take her aboard. Any group.

One would have to. She was ready to throw her life away. What else did they need?



Enyo managed to find a group before it got too late to set out that day. The fourth member, there weren't *enough* of them to be picky with her. The group was started by a woman, and only women had joined up, and then they were mostly passed over. The woman founding the group, Artemisia, could tell she was an amateur with a sword... But there just wasn't competition. There was not anyone coming to join after her. Even four people was not enough for this sort of mercenary work, not really, but it didn't stop them.

They had been delayed from their expected schedule after such slow recruitment, and so that day they set out. They were barely questioned by the guards on their way out, passing by a simple wagon of passengers bound elsewhere which was being searched.

The fresh air didn't help. She still felt sick.

Only having the company of three other people didn't help. They were too talkative and friendly to feel alone, and what they represented...

Leaving the city behind didn't help. The sight of it behind her made her heart ache. But she didn't have anything to go back to, there. Maybe a sword in her gut.

She stared at the ground beneath her feet as she marched along with her group, listening to the big two—Artemisia and the cyclops, Pythia—laugh and trade bravado. That was probably all that lay ahead, too.

The very short onewas mostly quiet, but piped up with something and it took Enyo a second to realize it was aimed at her. She quickly forced an embarrassed smile to her face. "Sorry, lost in thoughts. Could you say that again, Fiamella?"

The girl—Enyo was pretty sure Fiamella was actually her senior, but it was so difficult not to think of her as that—smiled up at her. "Nerves, eh? Don't worry, try and keep chipper. I was fretting worse when I first set out, I'm not ashamed to say. It all works out. We're here for ya. Not to boast, I'll leave that to Pythia there, but I'm a dab hand. I'll keep ya safe, trust me. Stronger than I look." She grinned wider.

Despite herself, Enyo smiled a little at the thought of hiding behind her. The slender gnome looked closer to a doll than to a mercenary, and wasn't even half her own height.

But Fiamella wasn't simply blustering. She had a grasp on some magic, more than enough to be valuable help. Or a dangerous enemy.

Enyo tried to keep up a ghost of cheer on her face. She needed to get away. She didn't have a plan for what would

come after that, but she couldn't just stay with the adventurers.



It was the middle of the night. Enyo was lying in a sleeping roll, in a tent. She couldn't get comfortable, which at least made it a little easier not to drift off. It had been long enough that Artemisia, in the tent with her, must have been asleep. The other two as well, but they were in their own tent anyways—Pythia was so big Enyo was surprised even Fiamella could fit in with her.

She just had to be quiet. She quickly put the rest of her clothes over her sleepwear, and carefully grabbed the paltry bag of other belongings she had. She wasn't going to rob her would-have-been companions, she owed them that much.

She crept out of the tent on her tiptoes. There was enough moonlight that she could see fine, and slowly made for the treeline. She couldn't move well like this, but once she was in the woods... She could get away, shadow the road, find somewhere safe to actually sleep. Then she could work on thinking where she was going to go and what her plan was.

"Hey."

Enyo quickly spun on her heels to see Artemisia standing just outside their tent, behind her. Enyo's heart started to pound, but Artemisia was still in sleepwear, not holding her sword. Of course. There wasn't any way she could have found out that... Enyo shook her head and smiled nervously. She couldn't bring herself to speak.

Artemisia smiled back, softly. She walked towards her, and Enyo managed to quell the urge to sprint away. "You don't have to worry. We're a good group. I know you're an amateur, but you shouldn't be *scared*, Enyo. You have real talent. No real way to build on that but actual practice."

Enyo blinked. And then she nodded. She still couldn't manage a response, but letting Artemisia convince herself *that* was why she was running away, all the better. She could talk her way out of it, she just needed to think of how to put it.

"And if... Well, if you're too scared and not willing to be a part of this, that's fine. Honestly, Enyo." Enyo's eyes widened. Would it be that easy? "We only lost a day. But at least let us escort you back to the city. It's... Well, of course you know it's dangerous out here, hahah. Don't try to take the road back yourself. Besides, we'd just as well head back to try again at getting a bigger group, you know?"

Enyo swallowed. What did she say? That she wanted out of that city, that she'd be safe on her own in the woods? It would raise too many questions, run too much of a risk of being *found out*. It would still be fresh in people's minds. She couldn't risk having these three on a hunt for her in the woods, she needed to get away *cleanly*.

That would have to come later. Enyo stammered out a "Sorry." and then started heading back to the camp. "You're right. It's okay, you don't need to take me back to town. I should just try and sleep again. With some shut-eye I won't be so nervous in the morning, I don't think. ...Thank you."

Artemisia smiled and clapped her on the back when she got close. Enyo cringed, and felt glad that Artemisia either didn't notice or politely ignored it.



Enyo was shaking. Her head was pounding, and her heart was still hammering away in her chest. She was staring at



her bloody hands as all the others let out cheers and sighs of relief.

She looked down at the maimed body of the *thing* they had killed, and then felt the need to heave. She had killed it. Just a monster, but, but... She broke down crying. *That* the others noticed, but she couldn't spare them any thoughts.

She had killed it. It had nearly killed her, its horribly long jaws snapping shut just shy of her throat once. She had come so close to dying for the second time in her life. She didn't feel relieved. All she could think of was the first time. She went and killed this thing because it was a *monster*, and to protect herself and her fellows once it retaliated.

Was that what drove her would-be murderers as they slaughtered everyone in her tenement? Did they share this same moment of relief afterwards, the joyous celebration over the bloody, broken corpses of all her family, friends, and neighbors? Or did they look down at the death they had wrought and feel regret, pity, compassion, all *pointless*, too late to stay their hands, too late to stop the crime?

She couldn't handle it. The grotesque, squamous animal she had helped to put down was nothing like her or her loved ones, but they were all *monsters* just the same.

Artemisia slung an arm around her shoulders and pulled her back to her senses, but Enyo had no idea what to say. She didn't have any explanation for why she broke down.

The others didn't ask. Artemisia started talking about how she had done impressively well, that she even saved her life at one point, that she could definitely trust her. It didn't make the tears stop.

She couldn't stay with the others. She couldn't do *this*.

But if she saved Artemisia's life... If she had run away, would Artemisia have died? All four of them together barely survived. Could she really just abandon the others?

She would have to wait until they were closer to some other populated place.



Enyo was running out of blood.

She had wasted too much time. She was even burning it at night, *sleeping* with legs. She had to, there would be no way to hide the tail or how much *bigger* she was in her true form, but she had so much less time than she had expected.

She *had* to leave. She didn't want to put her companions in danger, but... What alternative did she have? Let them discover it, kill her, and then go on with just the three of them *anyways*? Enyo ground her frustratingly blunt teeth. She shouldn't have cared about them. She shouldn't have *liked* them. They would kill her without hesitation, if only they knew. They would tell stories about it, laud themselves for the feat and laugh together at the foolish sheep that joined a pack of wolves.

Only they would think of her as the wolf, wouldn't they? And themselves the sheepdogs. Or something like that. But...

That all wasn't true. They *liked* her. They would still kill her, of course they would, but it wouldn't be a happy story for them.

She sighed and shifted in her bedroll. Maybe it *would* be, and she just didn't want to think of it like that. She liked them. Despite everything, she *liked* them! They were... friends, almost. The closest thing she had to friends anymore, at least.

She forced the thoughts out of her head and got up. It was pointless to think any more about it. She had to leave. There was nothing else.

She was creeping her way out of their camp when she heard motion behind her. She froze, staring at the treeline ahead of her. Too far to just make a dash for it and hope to lose her pursuer in the trees. Unless it was Fia, they'd catch up with her first, and then... She turned around to see Artemisia looking at her.

"This is a little familiar, huh?" Artemisia laughed a bit. Enyo couldn't manage to mimic that. Then she sighed. "Sorry. I just... Enyo, what's been troubling you lately? It can't just be nerves this time. Are you still worried you aren't contributing? Because you really are! Still a little rough, but you've been learning incredibly quickly, and we cover for each other well! If... *this* isn't for you, this life I mean, I get it, but... Why do you want to run out into the monster-infested woods? What are we doing wrong that—"

"Enough!" Enyo hissed it out, not too loud but harsh. "This is hard enough as it is! Don't make it *worse* for me by being so kind. I *have* to leave, okay? I'm sorry, but I do. I like you, and Fia and Pythia, but I have to go."

Artemisia made a frustrated face. "But *why*? What could possibly—"

"Because otherwise you're all going to try to kill *me* next!" Enyo actually shouted that. Stupid. Stupid to shout, stupid to say *that*, but it helped take a little of the weight off her chest.

But the starlight was just enough to make out the horrible sense of realization dawning on Artemisia's face. The feeling of lead in her chest worsened so, so much. Her heart was in a vise.

Artemisia had her sword with her.

Enyo just stared, wide-eyed. She couldn't win in a fight, not with a sword. If she ran, Artemisia would catch her. If she gave up her guise, maybe she could win against Artemisia, but it'd wake the others and she couldn't handle *that*. Not that she could even bear the thought of hurting any of her friends. All she could do was hold perfectly still, in the vain hope it would change anything.

Artemisia was frozen, too. Eventually, she swallowed, and spoke in an uncharacteristically faltering voice. "Enyo, are you... You're a lamia."

Enyo's eyes widened. Figuring out she was a monster, but... How did Artemisia realize *that* already? What could she do now? Even if she managed to run away, they would know just what to look for, and... Enyo didn't know how to hide in the wilderness, and they knew how to track monsters.

So she sat down. There was no point in anything else. What point had there been in *this*? Finding companions she was terrified of but came to like, just to make them kill her? She should have stayed in the city, let them find her and exterminate her with the others. She should have stayed in her home and died with her parents instead of turning and running. She wasn't repeating the mistake a third time.

She looked up at Artemisia, the confusion written on her face. "Yes, I'm a lamia. But I... I don't want to hurt anyone. Especially not you. And I don't want to just keep running. I don't have anything left." Tears started to sting

her eyes and made her blink. "So, this is it. If I can ask a friendly favor, make it quick. And I..." She faltered, and took a deep breath. More tears weren't coming, as bad as her eyes stung. She felt oddly tranquil, as miserable as she was. "I can transform first. If you trust me to do that." She swallowed, and only then realized how dry her mouth was. "To make the body easier to explain to the others." It would probably make it easier for Artemisia, too.

Artemisia was just staring at her with wide eyes. Enyo couldn't blame her, but it hurt. She didn't want to wait in suspense any longer than she had to. She had only the thinnest semblance of peace, but even that was fraying.

Artemisia slowly stepped towards her, and then sat down next to her. Enyo's eyes widened, and then she started to laugh. She couldn't help it. Artemisia joined in, briefly, before it petered out.

"You..." Artemisia faltered, and then swallowed. "You don't seem like a monster. I trust you, Enyo. I'm not just going to kill you because you're..." She was quiet for a few long moments. "And I'm... sorry about what happened to your nest. I can't—I can't imagine how that must have been. I hope you—"

"I was there. In the... *nest*. A tenement building, several families of us lived there together. Just one more place in the slums, but the landlord was one of our own. Some other people lived there with us, for... For their blood." Artemisia flinched. "That must sound pretty horrifying. It was... They were willing. Part of our little community. But they were all pretty desperate. Willing to accept being bitten if it got them food and shelter, because nothing else would. The people who stormed in just thought everyone there was a monster, and... Why am I talking about this? Why am I *thinking* about this?" Enyo pulled at her hair as the memories bubbled back up, and she couldn't force them back down. She felt like a dam burst and she started sobbing. She couldn't keep her eyes open, and her chest *hurt* so bad, she couldn't help but cringe and bend in on herself with every sob. She couldn't *think* enough to get her mind off it, and everything hurt, and what was she *supposed to do*?

When Enyo came back to her senses, blinking tears out of her eyes and sniffing, she saw that Pythia and Fia had come over to see what was happening. Of course she woke them up. Artemisia had apparently gotten up to give her space and was standing with the others. They were all looking at her with uneasy expressions. Maybe Artemisia had already told them what she was.

She swallowed, faltered when she tried to speak, and cleared her throat. "Sorry about... that." Then she looked away. Her back ached from the way she had been stooped over, sobbing, and she cracked her back. Physical relief washed over her, at least, and—

Enyo quickly drew her tail close into a tight coil under and around herself. Of course she had lost control of that. No wonder the others were all staring at her like that.

She didn't know what to say. What could she *possibly*? What if they... She glanced away and cleared her throat. "Are you all alright with letting me go?"

Artemisia opened her mouth, but Fiamella spoke first. "Enyo, you're part of our team! You don't have to go at all!" Enyo blinked in surprise. "Even if you're a lamia... I don't think you're up to anything bad. Or you would have left and snuck away a lot earlier, not helped us." Enyo glanced to Artemisia. She smiled a little, to say she would let that first attempt be her little secret.

Then Artemisia spoke. "We're all in agreement on that. We aren't going to hurt you just for what you were... hatched as. You don't have to leave, if you're willing to stay. We make a good team. And we were already all trusting each other with our lives, right?"

Pythia stepped over and pulled her into a hug. Enyo froze up. Pythia mock-whispered in her ear "I'm pretty sure plenty of humans think *I'm* a monster. I'm not turning on you on account of that. Plus, like this, you're actually

reasonably sized, that's cause to celebrate." Enyo laughed a little, and hugged Pythia back.

This was surreal. She was happy, but didn't feel the relief she should have. The knot was still there, under the surface but not undone. But she could deal with all of that later. She just wanted to enjoy her friends' acceptance. Why couldn't everyone have been so...

Enyo took a deep breath. "I need to sleep." She glanced over to the tent. It would be nice to sleep in her proper form for once, but would she and Artemisia even both fit into it? She tried to shift herself back into a human facsimile.

She couldn't. She needed more *blood* to do that. She swallowed. She would have to have an awkward conversation with Artemisia about *that*, but that would come later. She just had to trust that wouldn't be a bridge too far. But it wouldn't be. They knew she was a bloodsucking monster when they decided to accept her anyways.

Enyo mumbled her goodnights and slithered back to her tent. She cleared out a corner to coil up in without hogging too much space for Artemisia to fit, and just hoped this time things would last.



# CONTRIBUTORS

***bikerbuddy*** is a resident of the Blue Mountains, west of Sydney, where he spends his weekdays reading, managing the Reading Project website and poring over old treasure maps. However, his efforts to strike it rich have not brought wealth, merely a fresh sense of purpose. His new hobby brings with it new goals, new skills and unwelcome police attention. You are invited to visit bikerbuddy during the week at his home, but on weekends he can only be found in local cemeteries, wielding a shovel, a robust needle and thread, and waiting for thunderstorms.  
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***Brennholz*** is a piece of wood stuck in the fireplace of an abandoned log cabin somewhere in Germany. He spends his days letting his mind wander while watching the sky pass over him through the chimney's small opening. Visit him at [brennholz.neocities.org](http://brennholz.neocities.org)

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***Preternaturality*** is a hobbyist author looking to acquire more pretend names. She writes serial and short fiction at [preternaturality.com](http://preternaturality.com), which usually falls somewhere under the genres of science fiction, fantasy, or similar such silliness. She can usually be found trying to work on too many projects at once.

***Sage*** is a person who loves learning and tries to apply that knowledge to help other persons. He operates the website *Let's Learn Together* ([letslearntogether.neocities.org](http://letslearntogether.neocities.org)) as a way to facilitate that aim.

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***Mike V.*** is glad he changed his mind midway through finishing this, and hopeful for the future.

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