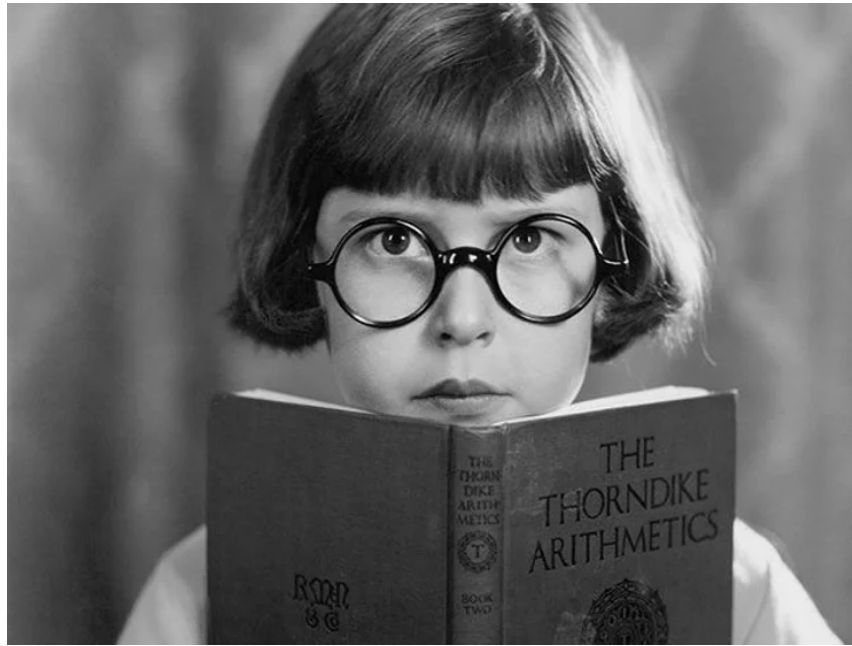
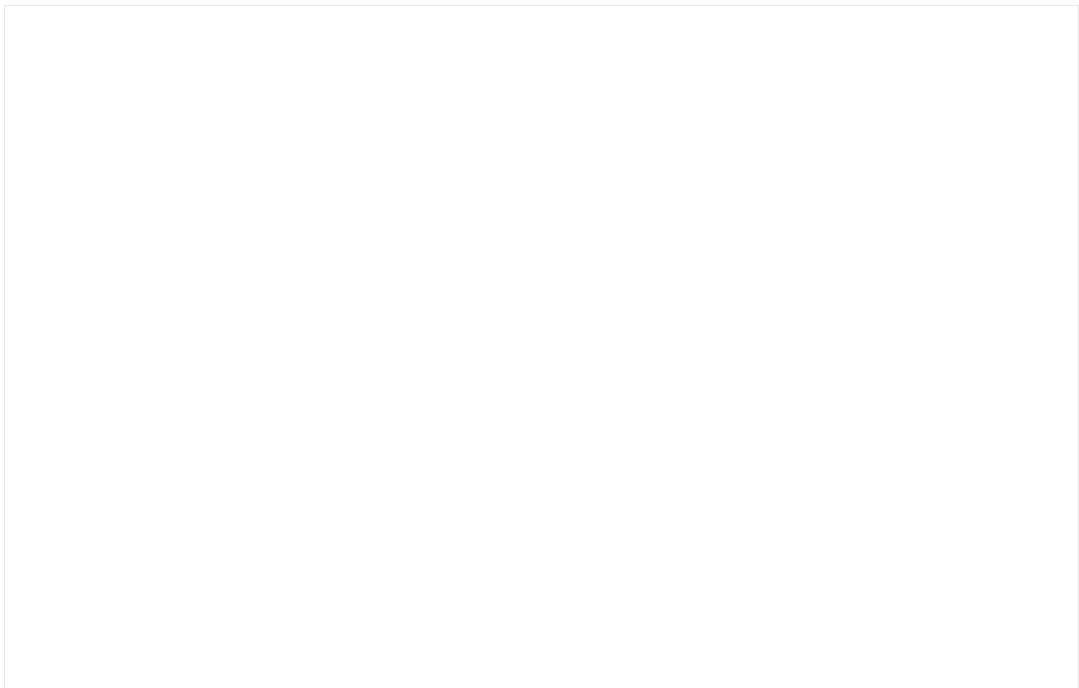


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And finally,
As I wake up and squeeze my eyes
Hiding my face from the sun
I feel free.
The sun that is burning the empty roads
Is feeling shallow and depressed
It is missing all the human touch

Confined in physical boundaries
Humans are depressed too
Something else has been towering above them
And kicking their ass

It is that time I realize
The time when you know
That destruction is not far away
It is now a distinct possibility

Acceptance feels unreal
 With the infinite potential of mind
 Emotionally, we are limited
 Fate is standing at our door
 And we are not letting it in

I'm no different
 I feel depressed and shallow
 Like the sun
 I am fearful and hopeful
 Like other humans
 The only difference being
 That I'm free.

Shreyans Kanswa is a writer living in Ratlam, India.

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July 2020

MELANIA'S SECRET DIARY ENTRIES Lauren LoGiudice

“She [Melania] left Slovenia around '92 and between '92 and '95 or so, there isn't, it's not really clear what she's doing. The Slovenian documentary filmmakers who did a massive search for photos of her modeling during those years couldn't find anything...”

• Nina Burleigh, author of *Golden Handcuffs: The Secret History of Trump's Women* on the podcast *Krassencast*

“Sorry, but she [Melania Trump] was so stupid. And all the time like a dead fish. It was really hard to work with her. Top model in EU? Please? No, never.”

• Wolfgang Schwarz, fashion agent, in *Melania Trump: The Inside Story* by Bojan Požar

(Translated from Slovenian.)

November 1st, 1993

Dear Diary,

It's November in Paris. The inky clouds descend, leaving a steely sky in their wake. Everyone complains. The dreary cold reminds me of home, which doesn't help me forget that I left architecture school to pursue a modeling career, pawning my protractor for a tube of purple lipstick, a Ted Nugent cassette, and a ride to the border on an ox cart.

Today: another casting, another rejection. The only real job I've booked since leaving my homeland was a shoot promoting Jurassic Park ankle socks for the Oriental Trading catalog. It paid in photos to which I said no thank you.

My agent keeps telling me I have to learn to “move better.” But isn't the task of a model to be totally frozen in place, like starched clothes on a hanger, a Styrofoam mannequin, or a

statue of Stalin?

Still, I must persist. I walk to Place de la Concorde to watch the mimes. A model needs to communicate my agent says. She needs to bring herself to the photograph. These all sound like dangerous games. In my country we were taught to hide personality to avoid deportation to Siberia.

I watch the mime for clues. His ample face paint protects and accentuates his features, makes him attractive. As we say in Slovenia: keep applying layers of makeup and plastic surgery until a shepherd would choose you over his sexiest lamb.

The mime smartly put out a box for tips. Exchanging his skills for cash, capitalism in action. It's why I came to the West. But what else do I need to learn? I thought high cheekbones and a visible rib cage were all I needed to attract monetary success in the modeling industry.

The mime pretends to pick a flower. Gives it to someone and acts bashful, finally getting a kiss. He then pretends like he's falling in love. Well, I can see how that can be a useful skill.

The modeling path is hard. There must be an easier way that I'm not seeing. How can I become an overnight success and rewrite my history to one that is more flattering?

There has to be another way. There has to be another way.

Right, Dear Diary, there has to be another way to become a famous model?

I will find him.

XO Melania

November 20th, 1993

Dear Diary,

Winter is upon us. No modeling work, but I found a job at Les Deux Magots café.

It at least pays. And keeps me busy and away from thinking, a nasty preoccupation, in Slovenia a banish-able offense.

The French don't bother you too much, but it's the American tourists who make me work hard. Always more ketchup this, Sweet'n Lo that. They laugh cruelly when I say I never heard of a food they call "I Can't Believe It's Not Butter."

I try to make joke: can you believe we're lucky enough to have butter that's not rancid?

Undaunted, they press on. Their optimistic insistence that there exists butter that is not butter, but tastes so much like butter, that you cannot believe that it is, not in fact, butter gives me a vague hope for the future.

I linger at their tables. It excites me to see the Americans in their Levis and shirts in splendidly muted colors with the same three letters across the chest. It took me a long time to decipher their meaning. After an evening listening to Ted and dreaming of a better life I intuitively uncovered the solution: G.A.P. = Greatest American Poontang.

If I only I could meet an American to teach me to be as arrogant!

XO Melania

December 2nd, 1993

Dear Diary,

I finally got a job, modeling for a painter. If I can't get in magazines, then I'll at least become famous on canvas. Like we say in Slovenia: it doesn't matter where the money comes from as long as the food doesn't have worms.

Here's how it happened. I was trying to comprehend the

complaints of an American tourist, I think about how our portion sizes were not large enough to leave him feeling nauseous, when I noticed a painter outside. He considered the location, made a decision, and set up his easel.

Every day he returned and painted in front of our café. Then it struck me; like my grandmother always told me: where there are men idling there are business opportunities. So each day for one week at three in the afternoon, when the light is at it's most flattering, I passed him a stale croissant. Finally on the last day he looked at me and said, "Can I paint you, then decide how much to pay you once we're done?"

I went to his studio the next day. After I unrobed he asked me to "act happy." I stood there in confusion. He became less cryptic. "Let happiness come through your facial expressions." I found that odd, but as I'm a professional I gave him "happy," channeling the look of ecstasy when my first cousin found the bone six months after losing his pinky in the combine.

Fun and merriment must have shot out of my eyes right onto the canvas because within an hour the painter threw his paintbrush against the wall to end the session.

He paid me a few francs and said we should definitely, totally, absolutely do something again. I haven't left the apartment in two weeks in case he calls. I think he must be busy finishing our painting.

Plus, it's Christmas season. I bet he's tied up planning his Christmas decorations, doing something really Avant-garde and cutting edge. Who knows, maybe he's going to paint his Christmas trees red???

XO Melania

April 13th, 1994

Dear Diary,

Ciao ciao! It's spring and I am in Milan.

Today I got a job modeling gloves at a prison construction trade show and feel invigorated.

My roommate and I pooled our extra lire and bought a mini-cannoli. I let him take an extra bite. As the Slovenian saying goes, when you don't have money for food give the men your breast milk.

I feel like I am on a roll. For the past few weeks I've been going to fittings for the Greatest European Mega International International fashion show in someplace called Little Saint James Island.

I am not allowed to reveal who is the gentleman who owns the island and is financing the show. In Slovenia we say: writing down a secret is the same as feeding the terminally ill – foolish. All I will tell you is that his initials are J.E. and his last name rhymes with preteen. I hear when he gives you final approval you get to go to the island on his private plane. He's so generous. Back home it's the responsibility of employees to carry their employer's carriage on their back, to and from work, even if the local wolf pack is on a killing spree.

In the meantime, the designers can tell I'm serious and have been offering me BIG opportunities. In one couture collection I'll be dressed as a mermaid lobster. In a second I'll push a wheel as I walk inside it down the ramp — a metaphor for the rat race. And in a third I'll be carted down the runway in a wheelbarrow and will be wearing Velveteen jumpsuit and wrapped in multi-colored flower-shaped Christmas lights. How chic!

To pass the time before the big show I have been reading Alexander Solzhenitsyn's book about the Gulag labor camps

Alexander Solzhenitsyn's book about the Gulag labor camps.
Learning about the depths of denial, especially how humans can
turn a blind eye to suffering, keeps my hopes up.
Hopefully yours,
XO Melania

December 23rd, 1995

Dear Diary,

I'm in Slovenia for Christmas before the big move.

I knew it was time for me to bring my talents to the United States
when I graced the covers of Jana, Knitting Daily, and Modern
Flyfisher.

Excited. Excited. Excited.

It all started right after I didn't get final approval for the Mega
Asshole Fashion Show on Stupid Shit Island because, at 24, I was
twelve years too old. I should have known when the first question
on the casting form was if I was accompanied by my nanny.

My birthday was shortly after my rejection. On that day I vowed
to prove that 25 is the new 15!

Consequently, I met a man named Paolo at a hand-modeling gig
for WC Net, Italian toilet bowl cleaner. I auditioned for him with a
few other girls at his apartment and the next morning he said he
gets what I offer enough to be able to represent me to his people
in the Big Apple!!!

Paolo sees big things for me in the United States like ... involving
... including ...

You know, he doesn't say specifically anything. He just keeps
saying "bella, bella, grande bella" and absentmindedly moving
his hand past my butt while he blows anchovy breath in my face.
He can afford fish, so he must know what he's doing.

But does he?

When I asked my mom if I could completely trust a moderately
successful middle-aged fat Italian man with my future she just
turned her eyes skyward and said, "TRUST?! You've spent too
much time in the West!"

So off I go to the United States — America or Burst!*

I'm optimistic that my future will be filled with ample modeling
work amongst abundant Sweet'n Lo, Levis, imitation butter, and
crowds of demanding, rude Americans.

My ambitions are high and my heart is true.

Mark my words, Dear Diary, I will be the next G.A.P.

XO Melania

*Shout-out to Perfect Strangers.

Lauren LoGiudice is a writer living in New York.

[Read on a seperate page.](#)

May 2020

NOT THE GUY
David Kaufman

There was one thing that pissed me off even more – just a little bit more – than knowing that I'd probably be dead any time now. And that was: Knowing that I should have known better. What the hell was I thinking? For God knows what reason, I had allowed myself to become entangled in a situation that was way below my mental pay grade.

When this guy Hal, who I just met last week, had asked me to cover his pizza delivery job today, did I have it in the back of my mind that I'd end up a cliché in a porn video? Not to push the pizza pun, but – how cheesy is that? And now I'm ending up a cliché in some kind of crime-deal-gone-bad, except it's not a movie.

An hour ago, I parked my Prius under a crusty old weeping willow. I got out of the car and thought, "Yeah, I'd weep, too, if I lived in this neighborhood." The second I stepped onto the curb I knew I didn't belong there. It looked more like an alley than a street, decorated with random tires and broken glass and the odd rusty stove on its side. Dead grass poked through the buckles and cracks of the dead sidewalk. It looked like a lot of things had died around here. Good thing I wouldn't be staying long.

I opened the passenger door and felt better as soon as I had the square blue pouch containing the warm pizza in my hands. The dim light of dusk didn't help as I stared at the faded address on the curb. I guess it would be too much to ask that the number be somewhere visible on the house. Maybe this wasn't even the right place. The peeling paint on the single-story stucco had probably been pink at some point in time. Window shades blocked any view of the interior. I didn't want to know anyway. I don't know what the five-foot high chain-link fence was supposed to be protecting. All I saw was a yard populated by weeds, stones and dirt. No one else was on the street and I didn't blame them.

Then the first sign of life made its appearance, bounding through a narrow walkway on the left side of the house: A mangy, black Rottweiler. It wore a thick chain necklace, not anchored to anything. Looking into the dog's vacant eyes, I'd expect him to bark his head off at me, probably having nothing else to do. Instead, a different sound came from its mouth. The jaws of this beast clenched a dented old transistor radio. From the radio came the sound of a lone acoustic guitar. When the singing started, I recognized the high-pitched, nasal and mournful-as-hell voice of Neil Young. In this context, the Seventies nugget "The Needle and the Damage Done" struck me as disturbingly perfect.

The joyless canine lobbed a guttural growl at me without dropping the radio. I wondered what that song could possibly mean to this dog. I contemplated the condition of the teeth that were clamped onto the hunk of metal making the strange noise. In the battle between steel and tooth, which was stronger? Or had they fused into one? The next question was easier: In the battle between those teeth and my flesh....

My spell was broken by a human bark when the front door burst open. "Diesel! Get in the back!" The Rottweiler turned its head toward the voice. "Diesel!" A tattooed arm extended from the darkness of the house and banged a short iron pipe on one of the two metal rails at the doorway. Still clenching the radio, the dog retreated back through the side walkway where it had come from.

"Homey!" The voice was aimed at me this time. Homey? Couldn't he at least say "Dude"? I mean, I always thought "dude" was a pretty silly word but I had a sudden sense of preferring it. "Homey" had sort of a.... connotation.... "Homey!" the voice shot at me again.

What was my problem? Come on, cut the racist bullshit. Everyone loves pizza and everyone loves dogs, so just get on with it. A padlock had been removed from the gate latch and hung conveniently moot. With the canine coast now clear, I pushed the creaking metal open and ventured into the yard. I held the pizza as level I could as I hustled my way up the worn wooden planks that led to the house.

At the door I was greeted by – no one. The tattooed arm had withdrawn and disappeared behind a closed metal grate. I could tell that a wooden door was open behind it but the grate was too dirty and dense to see much else. A distant voice called, "It's open. Come on in, I'm looking for my wallet." I don't want to go in there, I thought. "Just sit down. I'll be right there." The obvious question was, "Why would I go – in there – when I could stay – out here?" The answer quickly presented itself: Although I've generally enjoyed Neil Young in the past, at this particular moment, as I heard his voice do a fast fade-in, accompanied by a rattling chain and a low growl, I just wasn't in the mood. Comforting pizza in hand, I entered the residence.

But the pizza and I were no match for the three of them, coming from nowhere and taking me by surprise. Twenty seconds and many bruises later I found myself blindfolded and tied to a chair. In the flurry of reflexive flailing on my part and pre-planned pounding on their part, I barely saw the, no doubt, lovely abode in which I was now captive.

"Alright, let's get a look," said one of thugs, inches from my face. Baffled and scared shitless, I made no attempt to respond. There I was, an insect pinned to their board. What did they want to see? And why?

Blind, battered and stunned, I could still make out the terrifying sound of metal, buzzing in short bursts. NO! Then I realized it was only the pizza pouch being unzipped. My bleeding nose was incapable of perceiving the aroma but for just a moment my skin sensed the steam as the pouch was opened and the hot pizza was exposed to the room.

The next sound I heard was something whizzing by my head and hitting the wall behind me followed by a scream. "I said no olives!"

"Shut up about olives. Who cares about olives?"

"Why they gotta put olives in it when I told the guy no olives? I HATE olives!"

"Man? What you talking about? What's a pizza without olives? Whoever heard of no olives on a pizza?"

Wham! I felt something splattering on my pant leg as another slice slammed into the hard floor.

"You're gonna clean that up, homey. You're gonna clean all that shit up. And quit throwing pizza around. If you don't wanna eat that shit, I will."

"I don't see it." This was a third voice. I could tell that this one wasn't concerned with pizza or olives.

Through the sounds of chewing, one of the others said, "Are you sure? It's gotta be in there somewhere." In there? Whatever they were looking for, it wasn't a part of me. Whew!

"I don't see it."

"Look in that blue thing it came in."

"It's supposed to be in the pizza box "

it's supposed to be in the pizza box.

"So, look in the blue thing! The thing they put the pizza box in. The what do you call it? The blue thing. Maybe it's in there."

Mr. I Hate Olives was suddenly interested. "I'm looking right in it and it's not there," he growled.

"Where is it?" He was talking to me! "Is it in here? Do I gotta cut this thing open to find it? Or do I gotta cut you open?"

Paralyzed by terror, confusion and pain, I was now supposed to come up with – what? Words? Something that made any sense at all? Something comprehensible that applied to this incomprehensible situation?

My pathetic whimpering earned me a boot to the chest, knocking me backwards and hitting the floor hard. I gasped for air, winded by the unexpected double blow. Once I confirmed that I could still, in fact, breathe, I made no attempt to move or speak, completely at the mercy of God-knows-who these people were. My brain was a broken fire hydrant which was gushing variations on the theme: "How much worse is this going to get?"

To my right, I heard the sound of a knife tearing through the blue pizza pouch. To my left, one of them said, "Hey, you know what?"

I felt shreds of the pouch being tossed onto me as I lay prone on my back, ankles curled around the legs of the chair.

"I don't think that's the guy."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I don't think this guy is the guy." Were they talking about me? Of course, they were. Who else here could be "not the guy"? I'm not the guy! I'm not the guy! In my state of shock, I couldn't be sure if I was talking out loud or in my head. I didn't know who the guy was but I was pretty sure he wasn't me.

"He don't look like him."

"So what if he's the guy or if he's not the guy. We still gotta do what we gotta do."

"I'm saying it's not gonna work if he's not the guy. It could screw things up. I mean big time."

The third ruffian joined in. "I don't think he's the guy, either. The guy looks more.... the guy looks less.... faggy."

"Hey, that's not cool."

"I'm just sayin'."

"I'm just sayin'.... I got a cousin."

"Will you guys shut the fuck up!" Tense silence. Then they turned their attention back on me.

"Hey!" I felt hard metal on my chin. "Are you the guy?"

The gun barrel traced a line up my cheek and settled under my right eye. Without warning he ripped the blindfold from my face. "Are you the guy?"

"Aw, look! He's crying on your piece! I told you. The real guy isn't so faggy."

"Shut up!"

"You shut up!"

"If he's not the guy.... um.... what do we do with him?"

"We gotta do what we gotta do anyway no matter what. So...."

Total darkness made me question whether or not I had regained consciousness. My aching body was crumpled on the floor but no longer tied to a chair. Cautiously, I raised my arms and felt around to get a sense of my surroundings and found walls close to me on all sides except behind me, which went back a few feet. As quietly as I could, I managed to stand up,

brushing my arm against something smooth and cold at waist level. I slowly rotated the circular piece of metal an eighth of an inch to the right and confirmed that I was locked in a closet. My mind came back into sharp focus.

“So why we’re not icing this guy already? He’s not the guy. We don’t need him.” My three captors were in the room right outside my new holding chamber.

“We know he’s not the guy but they don’t know it. Not yet, anyway. We can still use him to make them think that we got the guy.”

I sat back down. With at least a door between me and my brutalizers, I was free to be tortured by my own thoughts in peace. Obviously, I had stumbled into some den of thieves who were obviously planning on doing some kind of evil deal with some other den of thieves. Obviously, I wasn’t “the guy” but it didn’t really matter because the most obvious thing of all was – I was going to die!

Why was I even here? I’m not a pizza delivery guy. I’m a medical billing guy who had nothing to do on this Saturday afternoon. I barely know that guy, Hal. Hal must be “the guy.” Why did I do this? Oh, yeah. Now I remember. I thought my job was boring because I’m in the same room with the same people every day. Oh, yeah. And the pizza delivery porn thing. Because that always happens in real life. I know. Cheesy.

“Yeah, whatever. Is there any more pizza?”

“Why don’t you lick the wall and the floor, you moron!”

Then to the others, “He freaks out ‘cause it’s got olives on it.”

“Hey, what the...”

What happened next can best be summed up in one word: Bang! Or more accurately, that word repeated what seemed like a hundred times. My feet instinctively dug into the floor and shoved my body as far back in the closet as I could. Listening to the storm of gunfire, I pressed my body hard against the back wall, knowing that it probably wouldn’t make any difference. A bullet could rip through the door and straight into me at any second. Any second now... any second now... And then the gunfire stopped as abruptly as it had begun.

And now the part that makes even less sense to me than what had already happened. I can only tell you that if it wasn’t true, I wouldn’t be here to tell you that it wasn’t true. I heard a voice I had not heard before. “I know you’re in there.”

Oh, my God, here it comes. I didn’t know if it was a good thing or a bad thing that I wasn’t “the guy” so I kept my mouth shut.

“Are you hurt?” Wait! Maybe it was the police!

“No?” I said, hopefully.

“You wanna live, Homey?” the voice continued. Maybe it wasn’t the police.

“Yes?” I said, hopefully.

“Okay, if you want to live, count to a thousand before you come out.” Without further discussion a single gunshot shattered the relative peace and the lock on the door.

“Are you counting?”

“Mm hm.”

“How come I don’t hear you?”

“One...two...three...”

“Is that the guy?” I heard in the background.

“Who cares? Let’s get out of here.”

Ten minutes later I gave the door a nudge and peeked out through a crack. I knew that only some of the red stuff on

the walls was pizza sauce. I also knew that my stomach couldn't handle counting the pieces that my former captors were now in. I made an adrenalin-fueled charge out the first door I saw. Seconds later, I was in the back yard.

It was now dark outside. I heard music. Fast rock music. Then I saw my old friend, Diesel. Neil Young was long gone. The radio in the dog's mouth was now playing the endless guitar solo of the Lynnyrd Skynnrnd song "Free Bird."

Darting to the left, I found the walkway on the side of the house. Diesel took up hot pursuit of the moving object that was exuding fear (i.e. me). I yanked on two overflowing plastic trash cans to create whatever barrier I could between me and the frenzied beast. When I made it to the gate, unlike before, the padlock was now effectively engaged. With Southern rock's most frantic guitars blazing, Diesel made it over the pile of garbage just as I made it over the five-foot-high chain link fence. My car and my future were now back in sight.

David Kaufman is a writer living in California.

[Read on a seperate page.](#)

May 2020

THE CROW Cantney Gessner

If I had an identity, it would be David Jonathan Bass. That's who I wanted to be. Not to have the life he had, but to have the life I wanted him to have. He knew who I was. I was the young man he wanted to kill. He had always watched me and desired to do things to me only he kept to himself, as I'd appear to him throughout the years he was raised by his new daddy, and his wretched mother. He did kill me. And I was glad for it.

Jon Bass had a fascination with squirrels, because everytime he would see me in the distance, I'd be toting a squirrel that obeyed my every command. One day, he saw that squirrel in the woods by his house in Greensboro I watched without his knowing. His new daddy would never allow him to own a gun, like he wanted, but with his pecker-toy B.B. gun, he aimed and shot that squirrel. BAM! He scored. The squirrel fell over and crawled, wounded in the gut, but not dead; a gasp suddenly grabbinq his regretful

heart, he
rushed over in his army surplus garb to save the nut collector to
bring
home and dress himself in his surgeon gown, with twitching
hands. His
friends were knocking on his bedroom door, laughing at him, as
he
explained the situation of having found his victim like this. There
was no
saving the gray squirrel, he would simply call, Gray. It was slowly
dying,
and all his friends continued to laugh at his seriousness, because
he
didn't have the heart to be the bad guy he was. He had killed me.
And I
was glad for it, as he stuffed me in a box and buried me in the
woods. The
only confusion Jon Bass had was that where one squirrel was,
there were a
thousand more to take its place.

"Jon-a-tha-a-a-an!" his mother named Peggy Jo pamperingly
cooed him from
his sleep, one morning, when news broke out that Brandon Lee
was dead. The
young Actor was killed by a gunshot to the stomach, on set of
The Crow, in
Wilmington, North Carolina. I knew Jonathan would get really
worked up
about that, since he was on the verge of receiving his black belt
as a
Japanese Samurai (one who serves with absolute loyalty-even to
the death!)
It would entirely transform his staunch pursuit of acting he had
begun, by
his recent auditions in Wilmington to become some big-time
Movie Star.

"What is it, Mother?" he asked, as he took the bowl of soup she
had made
for him in bed. Jo had always preconditioned in him that he was
sick since
he was young and had been known as 'Huck' on the pig farm in
Christmas
Town, N.C. (aka: McAdenville), where I first met him.

"I just got the news that your cousin Marcus killed himself.
Committed
suicide by shooting himself in the stomach. They say he did it
because he
was 'gay,'" she emphasized with hushed carefulness.

Jon could barely remember this cousin Marcus, who was David
Huckaby's
youngest sister's son-David being Jonathan's real dad. It was
only a vague
memory of a bleary cousin, with blond hair and blue eyes, whom
Jonathan
would constantly see in the corner of his eye. A squirrel on an
equally

tall and lanky strut of a familiar boy's shoulder, pretending to be musing in his own lost thoughts, while wandering in the background. Marcus was only 24-years old. That's when Jonathan woke up, just 17-years old, when he ignored his mother's reminder of the estranged cousin-turning on the news, instead, to the unexpected and sad death of Bruce Lee's son, Brandon.

Cantney Gessner is a writer living in California.

[Read on a seperate page.](#)

May 2020

HABITS Jennifer Ledbury

My favorite view has always been the White Cherry blossoms, in the last hours of a late Summer's afternoon.
The elasticizing heat, the deep color draining from the sky.
Still feel you scooting closer,
I relish the early mornings, rolling out of bed; 7:30 AM.
Blurry-eyed, raindrops pelting
against your head, bobbing just above the sill.
Grey clouds blotting out your smile, clinging to the glass.
It's always been you.
Remember, when? We were wrapped up in the outlawed playlists, crooning through the soundwaves. Craving the old rules saved for a casual Friday.
Now, you turn to me through tremoring waves, and fragmented technicolor.
Your eyelashes lift, asking what's next?
I shake my head, as your lazy smirk dims,
revealing a ghostly outline.
I don't want to know what it's like, not racing to you every morning; perfecting old habits.
And without a last chance to weave my fingers through yours, we sleepwalk through a glass darkly.

Jennifer Ledbury is a writer living in California.

[Read on a seperate page.](#)

May 2020

VISITATION Joe Gillis

This took place in Hollywood on an evening in May of 1958 and let's be clear about one thing right at the top: Dixie Kincaid (name at birth Emaline Shimelplatzer) was not a hooker. She was a working actress. A fully paid member of the Screen Actors Guild, she earned no less than six thousand dollars a year for each of the four years since she moved from Albuquerque, New Mexico to Los Angeles, California. She worked regularly. In the six weeks prior to the evening we'll be discussing, she appeared as the pre-title victim of a werewolf, two cigarette girls, a hat check-girl, a secretary who has to lean provocatively over a filing cabinet to retrieve a pencil, and had been promoted from Fourth Harem-Girl to Second Harem-Girl (with additional dialogue) in a Bowery Boys picture when the original actress cast refused to work with the camel.

Dixie Kincaid had no illusions of stardom. She realized very quickly after arriving in town that she simply didn't have the ambition...and maybe not the talent...to make it really big in Hollywood. But, to her relief, she also learned quickly that there are ways to be in Hollywood without being a star. That you can have some fun and get paid. The money she was making now was better than what she got paid when she started, mainly because she was smart and got a lot of upgrades on the set, like the Harem-Girl boost. Casting people liked her because she wasn't a bitch and assistant directors liked her because she was dependable, sober, and not looking to fuck anything on a set that could get her work.

But, to be completely honest, she wished she was getting paid more for her acting. Fortunately, Dixie was dependable in other ways. This led to a situation where some might, without examining the situation, consider Dixie a hooker.

Her name and phone number were in the back pocket of several talent promoters. Dixie Kincaid would take money from agents and managers for something that looked like sex but wasn't. That is to say it was supposed to look like sex. She was prepared, in anticipation of cash payment, to be seen in the company of young actors...and some not so young...who were either queer or suspected of being queer. In all the time Dixie went out with these men, she never met one who wasn't as queer as the day is long.

She was not revolted to be in the company of homosexual men. She just thought it was a terrible waste that these good looking boys and men couldn't get it up for girls. It seemed, from Dixie's perspective, a darn shame.

She would get dressed to the nines in something designed to hug her impressive curves and go out with these actors who were always terrific dancers. She would cling to them during the evening, smile at the photographers the press agents sent around to make sure their client was seen with his arm around a good looking girl. She went to parties and premieres, which did

her good with the casting people, too. She even got a couple of nice weekends in Palm Springs out of the arrangement.

Yes, she received payment for her time with these gentlemen, and she was seen in public with so many of them some thought the polished blonde with the alabaster bosom was, at best, promiscuous. But the absolute truth was that Dixie Kincaid was not a hooker. So there.

Which brings us to the evening in question. Dixie had contracted to be at the side of a dazzlingly attractive, astonishingly virile Universal contract player who was deeply in love with an equally handsome, unchallengeably masculine actor signed at Paramount. Dixie wore the Schiaparelli she and three other girls chipped in to buy and now shared with a detailed schedule. Of the four, no one wore it better than Dixie.

The hem fell to the floor with the drama of a black waterfall, majestically parted by Dixie's fabulous gams when she walked. The satin shimmered across her hips, cinched her waist then turned to rise and present her breathtaking cleavage as if it were a gift from the gods. There was also a mink stole leased from another consortium of actresses.

So attired, Dixie Kincaid and an actor who shall remain nameless walked along a red carpet to attend a CinemaScope premiere at Grauman's Chinese on Hollywood Boulevard at 6:45 P.M. The house lights went down at 7:15 and by 7:30, Dixie was saying goodbye to her escort at the theater's loading dock. He graciously gave her an additional one hundred dollars from his own pocket, an honorarium on top of what she was getting from the actor's representation, and wished her well before leaving for an assignation at the Tropicana Inn on Fountain Avenue.

It was a beautiful evening and there was still plenty of light in the sky. It seemed to Dixie, as I'm sure you'd agree, a terrible waste to take herself back to her apartment so early, shimmy out of the dress she had expended considerable effort to climb into, wash off her make-up, put up her hair, and settle down to read the comics in the Los Angeles Herald Examiner.

It had been a good week. She'd played a girl of clearly loose morals in a police line-up and the sweetheart of a sailor shipping off on a submarine. The sailor had onions on his hamburger before their kissing scene, but she got extra lines in the police show when the director realized she was the only girl who could climb the steps to the line-up stage in high heels without looking down at her feet. And now she had an extra hundred dollars in her purse and the evening to herself. This was a night for indulgence and self congratulation.

So Dixie walked over to Highland then down to Hollywood, savoring the whistles from various and sundry wolves, and over to Cherokee to a little bar she liked called Benny's Rendezvous.

She pulled open the heavy door with its three diamond-shaped windows of green glass and stepped into the bar. Hector the owner looked up from the bar and Dixie posed in the doorway for him.

"Is this the YWCA?" she asked

is this the TWCA? she asked.

"It sure is, Miss. Come on in and have a seat," Hector smiled and gestured toward the stool closest the cash register.

Dixie liked to be appreciated, acknowledged for the effort she put into being a knock-out. And she never tired of demonstrating how much good a long-legged gal could do for herself and the world just by walking across a room. She perched on the stool, turning to let the slit of the skirt find her left leg, and ordered a martini.

It was early. A handful of serious drinkers folded into two of the booths, a man with the swift angularity of a process-server keeping the brim of his hat low over his eyes at the far end of the bar.

Dixie watched Hector make her drink. For all the time she'd been coming here there'd never been a Benny at Benny's Rendezvous. Hector bought the place when he got out of the Army after Korea. He wasn't sure he could make a go of it, so the expense of changing the name on the neon sign felt like asking for bad luck. Hector left it alone and business had been just swell ever since.

Hector set a glass on a napkin in front of Dixie and poured her drink from a shaker. There's nothing this side of the north pole as cold as a martini the way Hector makes them.

"What's Cinderella doing all dressed up for the ball with no prince?"

"The prince had personal business back at the castle. I'm stag. Going to have one or two of these delightful martinis, then go home and see how Dick Tracy is doing."

Hector shook his head. "What a waste."

"You're a doll, Hector," and then she lifted her glass and sipped her drink.

Things are about to change in this story, so take a moment now to consider Dixie Kincaid in a low-cut slinky dress, balanced on a bar stool like a figure on-top of a music box. A beautiful girl, sipping a martini, red tipped nails holding the stem, faint ghost of her lipstick on the rim of the glass when she puts it down on the bar and sighs. Take your time with that, and move on when you're ready.

The door to the street opened behind Dixie, evening light pushing the process server's fedora lower over his eyes.

"What have we here?" Hector mumbled out of the side of his mouth as he moved along the bar.

Dixie kept her eyes on her drink. You don't want to turn around and look at every guy who walks in a bar. Makes it look like you're worried about getting stood-up.

The feet of the bar stool two down from Dixie dragged across the floor and somebody dropped himself into the red leather seat

like he was dropping a bag of cement.

A man's voice said, "I'd like a drink."

"You've come to the right place," Hector told him. "You want to narrow that down for me a little?"

"Oh, yeah, Sure. I guess. How about gin and tonic?"

"I can manage that."

Hector went off to make the drink. Dixie made like she was adjusting the mink around her shoulders and snuck a look at the newcomer. He was unique, you had to give him that. Maybe thirty, shaved head, silver looped earring in the ear Dixie could see. What looked like a bowling shirt under a pale blue sports jacket. Dungarees and funny shoes that looked like sneakers with overgrown laces. Crazy. Nice looking, but looking kinda nervous. Like he went in the nearest bar he could find after almost getting run over by a taxi cab.

Hector brought the tall glass of gin and tonic and put it on a napkin in front of the guy. The young man reached into his back pocket, took out his wallet, slipped a red plastic card, about the size of a playing card, out of the wallet and put it on the bar. Hector looked at the card.

"What am I supposed to do with this?" Hector said, flicking the card with his finger.

"I'll start a tab," the young man said.

"Not with that thing, you won't. Seventy-five cents American."

The young man seemed very confused by this.

"Seventy-five...cents?" he asked.

Hector concluded that whoever or whatever this guy was, it amounted to trouble.

"Okay, pal..."

Dixie slipped off her stool and moved next to the young man. She pulled a five out of her bag and put it on the bar in front of Hector.

"I'm buying," she said.

Hector picked up the bill. He looked from Lincoln to the nervous young man to Dixie.

"Okay," he said. "I'm going to suppose you know what you're doing."

Hector took the bill to the cash register.

The young man looked at Dixie. Or he tried to look at her. It was as if he was having trouble focusing, staying in the room he was in. He picked up the red plastic card.

"The card's good. I pay my balance every month," he said, as if that explained anything.

"I'm sure you do, Honey. Cheers."

Dixie tapped the base of her martini glass against the side of the stranger's gin and tonic and took a sip. Her new friend lifted his glass and took a significant swallow.

"What the hell happened to you?" she found herself asking.

The stranger laughed.

"I'm not sure. Actually, I have no idea what's happened to me."

"How about we move over to a booth and make this private?"

Dixie didn't wait for an answer. She picked up the gin and tonic and with a drink in each hand, moved toward the booths, leaving the young man to follow the trail cut by her rolling hips.

The two strangers sat across from each other in the back booth. The young man finished his gin and tonic in three swallows. Dixie sipped her martini and then gestured to Hector to prepare another round. Hector made a sour face, but started making the drinks.

"I'm Dixie. Who are you?"

"Ralph. Ralph Donnegen. Thanks for the drink."

"I don't get to buy drinks for a lot of guys. You look like you needed some support."

"Yeah, well..." and it seemed to Dixie that the young man named Ralph was really looking at her for the first time. It was like watching the sun burn through a cloud.

"Wow," he said.

"Thank you," she said.

Hector arrived with the fresh drinks.

They drank.

The young man put his glass back on the table then lifted his eyes from the glass to Dixie. Dixie smiled.

"Can you get drunk in a dream?" he asked her.

"I don't know," she answered. "I once dreamt I was a mermaid, but I still don't know how to swim when I woke up."

"Well, I guess we're going to find out." And he took another deep swallow.

"Go slow, Honey. The night is young. You drink like something was chasing you."

"I just hope it is a dream and not a fever. Or something worse."

She reached across the table and touched the young man's forehead with her hand.

"You're cool as a cucumber."

The young man inhaled.

"That's amazing. I can smell your perfume."

"For what it cost me, I hope to heck you can smell it."

"Smelling things that aren't there, that's something that happens when you're having a stroke. Wouldn't that be something? Getting this far and falling down in the middle of Hollywood, dead from a stroke."

"You don't look sick, Honey. Just a little confused."

She let the mink slide off her shoulders to help him focus on things.

Dixie took the cigarette case out of her bag, opened it, tapped out an extra long Fatima and held it in front of her.

"Do a lady the honor, would you?"

He didn't seem to know what she was talking about at first. Dixie dropped her eyes to the ash-tray between them on the table and tapped the book of paper matches with a crimson nail.

"Oh, wow," he said then picked up the matches. "Sure. That makes sense. I suppose."

He lit a match and held the flame to Dixie's cigarette as she touched the filter to her lips. As the young man was about to take the match away, she reached for his hand and drew it close to her face. She parted her lips ever so slightly and blew out the match he was holding.

The young man studied Dixie's face.

"I feel like I've seen you someplace. I mean, I must have. I must have seen a picture of you or something."

"Well, I am an actress."

"That makes sense. I must be remembering you from something. Something old. Something in black and white."

Dixie artfully exhaled blue smoke between them. Then she picked up her glass.

"Here's to us, Mr. Donnegen."

They drank. She put her hands on the table. He reached out and touched the back of her right hand, touched the fake emerald planted in the ring she wore.

"It's going to be tough waking up from this," he sighed. He looked at her, taking in every inch of her, and ended up looking her clean in the eye. "I couldn't take it anymore. Understand. I hit the limit a long time ago. Don't know when. Time's all screwed up. All stretched out and sticky like taffy. I've got an apartment over on Ivar. Little box of a place. It's okay, really. It's just you're not suppose to stay in it day after day after day, never getting out unless you put a mask on your face and gloves on your hands, go out for what you need and then run back like something was chasing you. Something is chasing you. Just like you said. All the people in masks...all you can see are their eyes. Some of them look angry. Most of them look scared. Scared of getting sick. Nothing like this has ever happened before. Nobody knows when it's going to end. Nobody knows who's going to be left to see it end. It's too much. And he doesn't seem to care. He's just looking for somebody to blame. He talks and talks and you can't believe how incredibly stupid he is. And, God, stupid would be okay, if he weren't so...so... I mean, people are dying, and he sounds like they're doing it on purpose just to make him look bad. That's not stupid, that's crazy. And I haven't been sleeping so I guess it makes sense when you can't sleep your dreams have to show up somewhere else. I had to walk around, get out of the apartment and just walk someplace."

The young man reached into the pocket of his jacket and took out a red paisley bandana.

"So I put on my mask and walked out the door, walked down to the boulevard. Everyplace is closed. All the movie theaters are closed and that hurts more than I ever thought it could. Hurts like a toothache when you can't get to the dentist."

"Honey, maybe we should go someplace where you can get something to eat."

"All the restaurants are closed. Only take out. People scurrying around with bags full of food, keeping their heads down, walking in the gutter to keep away from each other. Like mice scuttling back to their holes after stealing some cheese. I couldn't take it anymore. I just couldn't take it. How are we supposed to keep on being people? I felt kinda dizzy and I leaned against the side of a building...which you're not supposed to do, you're not supposed to touch anything because you don't know who else might have touched it. And I cried. I'm ashamed to say it, but I just started crying at the corner of Wilcox and Hollywood. Crying for how everything was changing, everything was going away and would never come back. And then the building wasn't there anymore. Instead there was this door with three diamond shaped windows with green glass. I pulled the door open and walked into this bar and asked for a drink and they wouldn't take my credit card and you came up to talk to me. Now we're sitting in a cozy booth in the back of a bar and I'm looking at you and smelling your perfume and cigarette smoke and starting to feel the gin and I think I saw you in a Bowery Boys picture. The one where Sach finds Aladdin's lamp and wishes them all back to Arabia. You were in the harem. And Sach gets you off someplace and he gets ready to kiss you, but a camel sticks his head in the tent and gets between the two of you and Sach kisses the camel instead of you. That's you, right?"

"Yeah, that was me. You liked that bit?"

"It was very funny. You looked terrific."

Dixie smiled.

"Thanks," she said. Then Dixie Kincaid (a.k.a. Emaline Shimelplatzer) blushed behind her powder and rouge.

In the middle of the smile and the blush, she remembered something.

"Wait a second," she said. "I just shot that movie last week. Do you work at the studio? Did you see the rushes? Did the producer like me?"

"No, I don't work at the studio. I saw the movie. A long time ago. When I was a kid and they'd show those movies on Saturday mornings on t.v. You were in a couple of those pictures."

"No, I just did that one. Arabian Night Knock-Out."

"No, you were in a couple. You were a secretary in Wall Street Rumble, and you were the queen of Venus in Flip Me That Flying Saucer."

"I'm sorry, honey, you've got me mixed up with some other blonde."

"Maybe. But I don't think so." The young man thought for a moment and wondered out loud: "Maybe you haven't made those pictures yet."

Dixie stubbed out her cigarette in the ash tray then reached across the table to take the young man's hands in hers.

"Look, Ralph. I'm really thinking we should go someplace and get you a hamburger, maybe some chili. I don't know what happened to you, but it don't take Dr. Kildare to see you've been going through something bad. That place you're talking about, with the crazy guy in charge and everybody wearing masks and getting sick? That sounds like a terrible place."

"It is. It used to be really nice. Nobody knows if it'll ever be nice again."

"I know what you mean. I was just a kid during the big war and I was scared all the time. It was all happening somewhere else, but it was still scary wherever you were. My dad was in the Pacific, his brother was killed in France, and all I could do was hide under the covers every night and cry. Is this thing ever going to end and what are we supposed to do if it doesn't end? And if it does end, what are we going to do then? Pretend it didn't happen? Forget about everybody who was killed? It was awful and sad, but it did end and nothing was the same, but there was something else. And if something else is all you've got, you make the best of it."

Ralph looked across the table to Dixie Kincaid. He was certain now: She was the queen of Venus in Flip Me That Flying Saucer.

It was a big part, as these things go, and she was really good in it. Sexy and funny and amazingly regal for someone in a metallic space bikini and see-through plastic cape.

He knew this couldn't last. Any second he was going to be yanked back to where he came from and he'd never see this girl again except in old movies and tv reruns. Maybe a lifetime of reruns in an apartment he'll be stuck in forever.

Any second, it was all going to vanish.

Dixie gestured to Hector behind the bar that they were ready for another round.

Joe Gillis is a writer with a couple of B pictures to his credit.

[Read on a seperate page.](#)

May 2020

GIMME MY BANANA John Smithwick

I went to Sam's last week and unlike a couple weeks prior, at least half the people wore masks. And they wore them correctly, too. Three weeks ago, some people only had their mouths covered. I didn't see any of those people today. Maybe they learned the hard way and got sick and died. Or maybe not. Maybe I just didn't recognize them with their nose covered. And maybe I don't care because I'm that tough guy you hear about, the holdout. The last time I wore a mask someone took my prostate. I'm not making that mistake again. For me, I will continue to face the wind and charge ahead, virus be damned.

But today I met my match. Stopped cold by a banana.

After I charged through Sam's, I got into my car and with the windows rolled down and "Born to Be Wild" by Steppenwolf blasting on the radio, I drove over to Diego's, my favorite fresh fruit and vegetable market. It's a hidden paradise of smell and sight. Cantalopes that should be illegal. Strawberries so big you're embarrassed too eat them with your fingers. And peas that redefine the color of green. But the bananas - from God to me. So delicious they should be a sin. Bananas, so tempting. So firm. So yellow. So...

..."Sorry. You can't come in."

"Huh?" I looked down at the young girl blocking the entrance and wearing a mask.

"You can't come in. You have to wear a mask."

"Huh?"

"New rule. You have to wear a mask if you want to come into the store. It's for your own good."

I looked past her and see the bin full of yellow, glistening bananas. Bananas just waiting for me to take them to their new home. "Huh?"

"Sorry. It's the rule."

I hesitated, stunned by her words. A burley woman and her friend, both wearing masks, push past me. "Oh, look," I heard one say. "Bananas." The young girl smiled and followed them into the store. The door closes and I'm left alone, on the sidewalk, sans mask and bananas.

I get into my car and start the drive home. I turn the radio off. I just don't feel like a Steppenwolf right now. Maybe Barry Manilow but not Steppen.

I get home and put my bananaless groceries away and think about my problem. I need a mask if I ever want to eat a banana again. But where do I get a mask? I heard that the stores have sold out and people are making their own. So I google face masks.

Google is wonderful. Lots of pretty women on Google but not one is wearing a face mask so I refine my search. I'm led to several sites that at one time sold face masks but are now "sold out." So I turn to Facebook.

Facebook is wonderful, too. Lots of crazy people on Facebook. Some make face masks. I find one who tells you how to make a mask out of old tee shirts. I'm told I can fold under the arm pit stain to hide them. There's another mask made out of the flag. Depending upon how you fold it, your mask will either show stripes or stars. But not both. You have to buy that one. But they're sold out. I even found a crazed women showing how to make masks out of recycled cloth diapers. Do they still make cloth diapers? And who would wear one on their face, besides this woman?

I lean back. This is becoming a bigger problem than I thought. I suppose I could just tie a handkerchief around my head and be done with it. But that's too easy. I did that when I was a kid playing Cops and Robbers. My bananas deserve better, so I keep looking.

Millie, my Siamese cat, jumps on my desk and settles in next to my keyboard. She looks at me and I look back. Maybe she needs a mask, too. I read that cats can get this virus. I wonder how she would like to have a mask tied to her ears. Nah. Probably not. Maybe I can just pull her sweater over her head, pin it and be done with it. But that's a problem for another day.

I turn back to Facebook and keep looking. Then I find what I'm looking for. I again lean back and study the photo on my computer. I look at Millie and then back at the computer. Perfect.

My mask arrived today. I opened the box and pulled it out. Just like the photo, I thought. The nose and mouth, the whiskers. I looked at the pointed ears. They look so real, and they help hide the elastic strap the goes around my head. I nodded my approval. It's a well balanced mask.

Millie hopped on the chair next to me, curious to see what was in the box. I showed her and she pulled away, slightly confused. I put the mask on. She arched her back, gave a little hiss and ran under the table and behind the curtain.

I stood, walked into the bathroom and looked at myself in the mirror. Looking back was a cat. A Siamese cat with plastic whiskers, a cloth slit for a month and cloth holes for nostrils. Bitchin' I thought. This is the Steppenwolf of face masks. They want me to wear a mask? Well, they got me wearing a mask. Take that, short girl standing in the doorway! Just try to keep me from my bananas, now.

John Smithwick is a writer living in Florida.

[Read on a seperate page.](#)

May 2020

THREE STATES Emma Valentine

Ketchum, Idaho

Miranda thought it might have been Tuesday. Or Wednesday. She'd stopped keeping track and couldn't find a reason to start again. She had decided to take a walk alone today. It was beautiful out, and the sky was clear, blue, and unwavering. She hadn't done much of her work for school, even though it was due the next day, but she simply did not have the motivation, which was uncharacteristic; Miranda was typically very motivated, almost hard-wired to perform with compulsive competence. However, ever since the current situation had grown dire, she'd switched to online schooling, which she loathed because it felt somehow less significant. Since she'd left home, Miranda found everything she did to be more difficult than it once was, even though she was in a notably idyllic place. In fact, it made her feel more than a little guilty that she was surrounded by such natural beauty while her family was trapped in the confines of their home. The epidemic was becoming more and more severe, and she knew that it was the right decision to have left home, but it didn't make leaving any less challenging. Miranda's father and brother suffered from a number of immunity issues; they were at risk, and she knew it. She'd watched enough news to recognize that they were among the most threatened by the disease, which made it all the more frightening. It's not that she didn't miss

made it all the more frightening. It's not that she didn't miss them, because she did, tremendously; but, in truth, the hardest part about being away from home during this time was being away from her mother. Miranda didn't like being in a different state while her mom stayed home with her brother and dad. She'd done it before, like when she first moved into her dorm room across the country, but this was different. There was something much more frightening about being away from home during worldwide cataclysm than being away from home for school. And Miranda had never experienced a worldwide cataclysm before or, at least, she hadn't been old enough to recognize and internalize what was going on. What she did know for sure is that the whole situation made doing schoolwork seem like a profoundly futile endeavor. In fact, when she thought back on her previous preoccupations, they all felt laughable in the face of the apocalypse. In that moment, she looked up at the snow-covered mountain tops, and she could just make out the afternoon sun gleaming over the top. Miranda felt like the hapless girl in the horror movie confronting invisible threats that lurked beyond every corner. She remembered her grandmother talking about her childhood memories of World War II and the evil Nazis. She remembered her mother talking about the fall of the twin towers during 9/11, and the villainous terrorists. But now, she was confronting an amorphous entity, a new kind of beast, that could take any form and waft into the window on a soft breeze and linger like a kiss on her fingertips. She imagined swatting away the invisible microbes in front of her. Miranda watched the clouds move quickly through the sky to reveal the mountain tops once again. Amidst all that was going on, the peaks were still bold and unchanged. She knew they would be waiting for her, as soon as the danger passed.

Los Angeles, California

Julie walked the dog up the street for the fourth time that day. But this time, the dog planted his feet, refusing to continue up a route he had walked so many times in the past couple of hours. This particular street was usually populated by people walking and children playing; now, it was empty and quiet, almost silent. It was unnerving. Julie had already done two three-mile runs today. Perpetual motion was the only thing that could distract her from the anxiety that threatened to overwhelm her. Running let her concentrate on the immediate sensation of breathing and the rhythmic sound of her feet hitting the pavement, and not the chaos and looming tragedy around her. It was hard being alone in a house with just her husband and son, just as it had been hard when Miranda had first left for school the past summer, but it was especially trying in a time of such mass hysteria and vulnerability. She missed the feminine energy in their home. While Julie longed for the easy companionship of her daughter, she recognized that Miranda was in a place that was both beautiful and safe. And Julie, herself, recognized the relative privilege of her own situation; she could take walks and look out over an expansive backyard, a safe haven from the threat that lay beyond in the congested region. As she turned to walk back, a car sped by and the dog cringed, frightened by the harsh churning noise of the engine. Julie winced too, realizing that she couldn't even characterize what it was that she was afraid of anymore, and they continued to walk back towards home. She dreaded these returns more than anything. Later that night, Julie called her mother, as she did most nights.

She was a ninety-year-old woman living at the epicenter of the pandemic in an apartment that was large by New York standards but small by any other. They talked for an hour as Julie sat at her desk with the dog sleeping at her feet. The sun had set long ago, but a thick layer of clouds could still be seen in the sky. She assessed the span of the front yard, her guarded kingdom, and tried to remember what it had been like to break free of those barriers.

New York, New York

Ruth sat resignedly in her worn armchair, allowing the heat of her apartment to envelop her. She kept the temperature set at about 80 degrees; she liked it that way. Ruth watched the news and thought to herself about the many crises she'd experienced in her lifetime over the course of nearly a century; the Second World War, Vietnam, and 9/11, all of which had a distinct, tangible quality to them in a horrific and tragic way. When she'd recently made one of her many attempts to organize her apartment, Ruth came across the dusty composition notebook she'd kept as a young girl, in the early days of World War II, when war was still exciting. This was her "war book"; it was filled with clippings and pictures that she had painstakingly clipped from newspapers to chronicle the momentous and thrilling events of the time. It was only later that she understood how destructive war was and how many lives were lost. But, as a young girl, she viewed war as a battle between good people and bad people with clear-cut villains, easy to understand and define and sometimes justify. As a child, she had felt untouchable, invincible. Not this time. Ruth idly watched the news on the television, which seemed to be speaking directly to her, cautioning her. Outside, the rain continued to fall steadily. It wouldn't stop for this. The world that existed outside her clouded window didn't care if she lived or died. Even if she was gone, the sun would continue to shine and the wind would continue to blow. Ruth tried to wipe the condensation off of her window, but it kept clouding up again in a monotonous cycle. Her view of the outside world was fully obscured, so she couldn't even rely on the city to keep her company that night. She was frightened of forgetting what it looked like.

Emma Valentine is a writer living in California.

[Read on a separate page.](#)

May 2020

NEXTDOOR
Martin Call

Kristy Dennis, Sunset Square

PEOPLE ARE RUDE!

I was walking Beebee, my Shib Tzu, on the sidewalk this

I was walking Peaches, my 5 year old, on the sidewalk this morning and a man came down his driveway to get his paper and he wasn't wearing a mask and he coughed.

What should I do?

Thomas M. Adams, Pico Estates

Take a photo of him and post it on social media. He needs to be shamed.

Annelise Caputo, Sunset Knolls

I saw a man watering plants in front of his house and when I walked by, he wasn't wearing a mask! I bet it was the same guy.

Kristy Dennis, Sunset Square

Was he wearing a Dodgers cap?

Annelise Caputo, Sunset Knolls

Yes, Annelise Caputo. I knew it was the same guy!

Michelle Foster, West Valley

Chill out! You don't need to wear a mask in your yard.

Kristy Dennis, Sunset Square

You're wrong, Michelle. It's mandatory to wear a mask when you leave your house. This is serious! Don't you care? It's a matter of life and death!

Michelle Foster, West Valley

Your yard is part of your house. And of course I care, but I think it's important we understand the facts.

Annelise Caputo, Sunset Knolls

When I yelled at the man who was watering his plants and said he needed to put on a mask immediately, he told me to go fuck myself.

Thomas M. Adams, Pico Estates

You should take his picture and post it on social media.

Kristy Dennis, Sunset Square

Did he cough on you, Annelise?

Annelise Caputo, Sunset Knolls

No, but he was shouting. So the virus was probably in his spit. Should I call my doctor?

Michelle Foster, West Valley

Hello! They weren't doing anything wrong. The chances of them

..... they weren't being anything through the
having COVID and infecting you are tiny.

Thomas M. Adams, Pico Estates

Do you have bear spray, Kristy and Annelise? You can get some at Big 5. I always carry bear spray. If I see someone and they're not wearing a mask, I'll pull out my bear spray and – BZZZZZZ – right in the face.

Michelle Foster, West Valley

Jesus Christ! Are you kidding me?

Annelise Caputo, Sunset Knolls

That's a great idea, Thomas M. Adams! Thanks for the advice.

Michelle Foster, West Valley

Oh my hell. Why don't you just get a gun, Annelise?

Thomas M. Adams, Pico Estates

Those damn libtards tried to shut down all the gun stores. I went out and got a new Glock 19. You can borrow it, Kristy or Annelise.

Annelise Caputo, Sunset Knolls

That would be awesome!

Kristy Dennis, Sunset Square

I don't want a gun in my home, but thanks for the offer, Thomas. I don't suppose you have yeast. I can't find any in the stores.

Annelise Caputo, Sunset Knolls

I have yeast. I made Rosemary Garlic Focaccia the other night and it's yummy!

Thomas M. Adams, Pico Estates

You're not one of those kooky anti gun people, are you, Kristy? I could loan you one of my machetes.

Michelle Foster, West Valley

I don't think Nextdoor wants us loaning each other guns and bear spray and machetes. You're complaining about a man who was getting his paper and a man watering plants – that's not illegal.

Annelise Caputo, Sunset Knolls

We're sure they're the same person, Michelle. We have to protect ourselves. He's a danger to our community.

Kristy Dennis, Sunset Square

Annelise is right. And yes, Thomas. I would love to borrow your

machete. Could you give me lessons?

Thomas M. Adams, Pico Estates

Aim for the head, Kristy. Always aim for the head.

Annelise, I'd sure like some of that Rosemary Garlic Focaccia if you have any left over.

Annelise Caputo, Sunset Knolls

You've got it, Thomas. PM me and I'll leave some on your front porch.

Don't worry, I'll be wearing a mask!

Thomas M. Adams, Pico Estates

It's a beautiful thing when neighbors come together.

Martin Call is a writer living in California.

[Read on a seperate page.](#)

May 2020

CORONADREAMS Jake James

The alligator strolls across the room and plops down on the sofa. He removes his Boston Celtic green Air Jordans, lays his feet on a mahogany coffee table and picks up the remote off of the side table. He switches on the TV to the Animal Planet channel and yells out for a beer and chips. In a few minutes the alligator is snoring.

A man sits at his office desk entering numbers onto a computer spreadsheet. A few minutes later that same man is standing on a busy sidewalk during evening rush hour. He's surrounded by men in tailored business suits holding their precious briefcases but he's dressed in a black pencil skirt, a crisp white blouse, six inch heels, and his hands clutch a black Gucci handbag.

A peacock lays on a psychiatrist's couch talking casually about a bank robbery she and an alligator - who was dressed like a butler complete with a bowler hat - pulled off with the help of a man dressed like a woman who drove their getaway car wearing a yellow dress and red wig. We gave some of the stolen loot to the Salvation Army and the rest to the 3rd Avenue Food Bank. Why did you do it, asks the psychiatrist. For the fun of it, replies the peacock, it was easier than we thought.

* * *

At first Jack Wainright wrote off the symptoms he had to that of Valley Fever which he had contracted a few years earlier before they left California for Italy. The night sweats, the shortness of breath, cough, fever, fatigue, muscle aches and joint pain, and, of course, the headaches were exactly the same as those of COVID-19.

Jack is awash in sweat. Maybe it's time we get you to a doctor, says his wife, Kelly. Jack tries to sit up but can't.

* * *

Dreams, says the doctor, his broken English softened by his accent, according to Freud, and in reality, also have "day residue." This is the leftover unfinished business of the day that we try to catch up on, and resolve in our sleep, he says. They're a reflection of what's going on in our conscious mind that becomes part of our unconscious, and we process it during sleep. Jack is perplexed. What are you saying? What do dreams have to do with any of this? Is it or isn't it the Coronavirus, he asks the doctor. The doctor pauses...

* * *

Oh, man, how I love to see her run like this, Jack smiles. Violet gobbles up the ground in huge, leaping strides, vaulting over rain-worn field furrows and racing down a barely visible path. It's as if she can't run fast enough, can't stretch her gait long enough, and then something snags her attention — some inscrutable sound or scent or the flash of a rabbit's tail — and she turns into the woods without skidding sideways an inch. Jack stops to watch. No leash. No fences. No worries about cars or bikes. No restraints and no concrete. She races across the Italian countryside, and it's impossible to watch her run without feeling a similar sense of freedom and release. He cheers her on. Run. Go. Find it, girl.

Freedom is a beautiful thing.

Sweet Violet is a Labrador retriever mix. She's a hunting dog, and she might be a better one if she weren't also a bed dog, a sofa dog, a head-in-the-lap-during-dinner dog, a ride-in-the-front-seat dog who gets her own vanilla scoop when they stop by the gelato shop. And, sadly, Violet is a city dog, so while she gets to run more than many of her pooch pals, even the ones who lollygag near the cafe they frequent every morning, her day-to-day is still limited to daily walks through their Aventine quartiere. And that walk is on a leash, tethered to city regulations and polite society such as it is in Rome, so Jack loves to see her run like this. The Seven Hills surrounding Rome is a sprawling mosaic of ruins and tourists. Beyond lay a patchwork of latticed trails and pathways unencumbered by the electricity of Rome's lifeblood, and she starts whining at the truck window as soon as they turn onto the narrow path leading to a dream. Now, far down a farm path, there's nothing to hold her back. She races through the woods, appearing and disappearing in the trees, her tan coat flashing like a Morse code signal in the alternating sun and shade. At one point along the edge of a forgotten amphitheater she seems to vault from tree trunk to tree trunk, trying not to touch the ground. Jack laughs out loud. What a goofball, he thinks. What freedom, he thinks.

And then, suddenly, she's gone. Jack pulls up short. Violet is nowhere to be seen. He knows what's happened: That dog loves

a deer chase like no other dog he's ever met. For the most part, Violet stays pretty close. She'll range out 40 or 50 yards, then come flying back to check on Jack every few minutes. But with a snout full of deer scent, all bets are off.

Jack whistles and hollers, and moves back out into a nearby field so the sounds carry farther. After five minutes, his heart starts crawling into his throat. She always comes back. She always has. Another few minutes pass, and he starts to sweat. More whistling. Hollering louder. She'll be back, he tells himself. Quit worrying. She knows the way.

When she bursts out of the verdant underbrush, her tongue is halfway to the ground. The half of her that isn't still wet from morning dew and matted with cocklebur. On her face is the biggest dog-smile ever.

What's up? she seems to say. Man, you missed it! You should have been there. You should have come along.

You know better, Jack admonishes, like she understands English. Like the same way she knows better than to pull garbage out of the kitchen trash can, too, but Jack still finds lemon rinds in the living room.

She stays close for a minute or two, but Jack thinks of all those days of all those miles on the leash. Take off, Jack says, holding both hands open in front of himself, palms facing out. Take off! In an instant, she's beyond the ruins and first rows of trees.

Jack uses that command — "take off" — as a sort of blanket permission. It's a release command: Go on, go ahead, run, take off. Most of the time, Violet takes a few tentative steps and then looks over her shoulder as if to ask: Really? You serious? Then she's off and gone and rarely looks back twice.

Suddenly, she's gone. Violet is nowhere to be seen. Jack's heart starts crawling into his throat. She'll be back, Jack tells himself. Quit worrying. She knows the way.

Jack and Violet are together now, off the path, following a faint animal trail deep in the trees along an edge where pines and hardwoods meet. Minnie runs through the middle of every mud puddle with her nose an inch underwater. Jack has no idea why. She stops to chomp on a stob of pine. Maybe it smells like pizza? She rolls around in old, mossy bones. She points out all the poop — wolf poop, bear poop, wild boar poop, deer and goat poop. She's very helpful that way. That's one of the benefits of following a dog in the woods. They find treasures humans walk past a million times.

* * *

Jack lays in a bed with tubes doing his breathing for him. He's watched closely by a nurse and doctor. It's decision time and it doesn't look good for Jack.

A dozen feet outside his room Kelly sits on a bench. Tears fill her eyes as the doctor approaches. He reaches for Kelly's hand and speaks to her gently. You have a decision to make, he says. It's been twenty-eight days and there's been no sign of improvement. Your husband has lost weight, his vitals have dropped very low, and, frankly, unless a miracle happens even if he lives he'll be nothing but a shell of himself, a vegetable, his mind will be mush, says the doctor.

The walk back to Jack's room seems like eternity for Kelly. Once inside his room, Kelly asks now what? The doctor and nurse go about the business of removing Jack from the life support system which has kept him alive for four weeks.

The nurse leaves the room, briefly touching Kelly's hand as she exits. The doctor speaks to Kelly gently. He says I'll be brutally honest here, no sense giving you false hope, it may take minutes or hours before death occurs...

Everything in the room is eerily silent.

THEN

A gasp from Jack.

When we go home, can we get a dog?

Jake used to be a writer in California, he doesn't write there anymore.

[Read on a separate page.](#)

May 2020

PIRATE'S DREAM Jeff Nesvig

The water was still and silent as the moon cast its reflection
across her
She holds the bounty of a sailor's dreams inside her bosom
And every ship at sea will search for the treasure that lies within
her
Even in the depths of her watery grave a heart still beats.

Hands that touch the sails of a pirate's masterpiece hold on to
her dreams
And guide these painted ships by the stars up in the sky
When the winds come to a place that bring a salty breeze you'll
know you are there
You know that she has delivered her treasure and her dreams
into the salty air

Treasure that shines like a king's ransom in gold never sees the
sun and never grows old
The dreams of her wealth come alive in the storm and the vision
of a pirate's masterpiece
Is waiting on the ocean floor.

Things that were seen through tired eyes have shown the
mystery of her seas
Mermaids and serpents that protect her gold have come to steel
a pirate's dreams
Painted ships with windblown sails headlong into her watery
grave can feel the calm
And touch the still and silent water that has brought the sailor
home.

Jeff Nesvig is a writer living in Florida.

Read on a seperate page.