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GHOST HEART

BY LIZ ROSEN

The bundle on the pathway was about the size of an adult's cupped hands. Wrapped in a dingy handkerchief, it had been there the day before when Paula was walking Maggie, but she hadn't bothered with it then. Normally, she would have picked it up and carried it until she passed a garbage can, but yesterday she'd been thinking about the changes her client wanted to their social media accounts and had only registered the trash with the mild distress she always felt about litter.

Guiltily, she toed the wad, trying to get a sense of what she'd be getting herself into if she picked it up. Usually when she picked up trash on her walks, it was just some crumpled-up food packaging, but once it had been a used diaper. Better safe than sorry. She reached out and poked the wad until it rolled over to reveal the edge of the handkerchief. She pinched the edge with as little of her thumb and forefinger as she could and slowly peeled it away from its contents.

At first, because of the dead white coral color, she didn't know what she was looking at, but then — also because of the color — the object came into sharp focus against the black asphalt of the suburban pathway, and she realized with a sharp gasp that she was looking at a heart. The sound got Maggie's attention. The dog left the grass she'd been snuffling through and came in for an investigatory sniff, but Paula grabbed the dog's collar to hold the basset hound away. Maggie strained toward the bundle, nose vibrating wildly.

Surely, it wasn't real. The heart was alabaster white instead of the usual red. Maybe it was some kind of wax imitation used for teaching anatomy. Or maybe it was an animal's heart, though it looked big for that. Cautiously, Paula pulled away more of the fabric that wrapped the heart, noting that there was no sign of blood on the cloth.

Paula glanced over her shoulder down the empty footpath, then into the branches of the trees that lined it. She wasn't sure what she was looking for, maybe a camera of some kind in case this was some kind of sick punking. But as usual, the pathway that ran behind the development was unpeopled.

She clenched her jaw. Nothing for it. She took a plastic poop bag from her pocket, slid it over her hand, and picked up the heart and its handkerchief. She flipped the bag inside out with the contents inside and tied a loose knot in it, slipping it into her sweatshirt pocket and trying not to think too hard about it. She whistled for Maggie to follow her.

At home, standing over the sink, she put dishwashing gloves on before rolling the heart out of the bag into her hands and letting warm water run over it. Gently, she loosened and washed away bits of thread and dirt that had stuck to it when she'd unrolled it. She turned the heart over, examined every part of it. Even through the gloves she could tell the texture was a weird mixture of fibrous muscle and slick innard, the opposite in every way to the flat, defined little emoji they used every day in their "likes." Raising the organ to her nose, she sniffed it, but all she smelled was the vague metallic scent of tap water.

Pushing the fruit bowl and coffee mug out of the way, Paula placed the white heart on top of its handkerchief on the kitchen island and prepared to photograph it. Then she changed her mind and pulled the fruit bowl back into the frame, slightly behind the heart. To give it context, she told herself, though she knew it was really that her training wouldn't let her deliberately take an uninteresting photo for public consumption. After, she scrolled through numerous shots, choosing the most beautiful one. She considered using a filter to make the photo pop, but ultimately felt wrong about it.

Opening her Facebook app, she scrolled until she found the neighborhood group. She uploaded the photo, adding the caption "Someone missing this?? Found on the community path." She hesitated, then added a shocked emoji, laugh emoji. While she waited, she checked her work e-mail. Pretty soon, responses started posting.

"WTAF??"

"Is that what I think it is???"

"One hell of an accident."

"Report it to the police."

"Sad to think about this happening. This used to be such a nice place to live."

"@mauralikesheetohs did you see this??"

"OMG. Gross."

“Check the ring cameras along the path to catch the scum who did this.”

It was fifty-five minutes and nearly ninety comments later that anything helpful was posted. By then, Paula was seated at the counter, her laptop on, strategizing changes to the client’s IG account. She clicked back to Facebook to see if anything had come up as she took a break.

“That looks like a ghost heart,” the comment by Byzantinegreen183285 read. Underneath it, the predictable hostile response had already started.

“huh?”

“What’s a ghost heart?”

“No such thing”

A few comments down the thread, Byzantinegreen had responded.

“It’s a heart – usually an animal heart - that has been stripped of its original cells so that only the structure of the organ is left behind.”

In the storm of abuse that followed, Byzantinegreen disappeared, but Paula did a search. It was some new way doctors were trying to make transplants work. By washing away all the live cells of a heart, doctors would, hopefully, be able to use an organ as “scaffolding,” implanting it with the unique cells of a transplantee so they didn’t reject the organ.

That’s some kind of Frankenstein shit, Paula thought, glancing down at the heart with a whole new respect. The longer she looked, the more she felt sure that this was not a case of medical malpractice. She couldn’t explain why. Maybe it was the forlorn appearance of the sagging, colorless organ.

She got up and went to the cabinet under the coffee-maker where she took out a Tupperware container. Filling it with about an inch of water, she gently rolled the heart up over the tipped edge and into the Tupperware with a soft plop. She closed the top securely and used her thumb to press the center down, pushing the air out of the container. She swished the water gently around the heart, then she slid the container onto the refrigerator shelf between the leftover lasagna and Greek yogurt.

All through her afternoon Zoom meeting, she kept Facebook opened, periodically checking it as she listened to strategies to steer people away from the news which had just broken about the company’s use of child labor in Tajikistan. Later, she kept an eye on the thread while she chopped salad greens and talked to her mother in Indiana. The comments were still coming in as she finished the Wednesday *New York Times* crossword that night, but none of them were what she was waiting for. It wasn’t until the

end of Jimmy Fallon's Lip Sync sketch that the thing she was waiting for arrived in her direct messages.

"I think that's mine," the DM said.

Paula muted the commercial for an impotence drug on her television and pushed herself into a seated position in her bed. She clicked on the profile of the sender BTSbites, but the account was private. The BTS reference suggested someone from the TikTok generation, though she supposed it could be someone older commenting on the craze. The harsh judgment inherent in the user name hinted that it might be. Propping her phone up against her knees, she massaged lotion into her hands and considered how to proceed. After a moment, she typed out her question.

"How can I be sure it's yours?" She fell asleep waiting for a response.

As she brushed her teeth in the morning, she read BTSbites' reply: *"I can prove it."*

Paula spat her toothpaste out into the sink with a grunt. She didn't bother to reply to the DM, reasoning that if BTSbites was either careless enough that they'd left their heart laying around or was doing well enough to reach out to her, then they clearly didn't need it back immediately. Besides, let BTSbites wait and stew. There was no telling how dangerous it might be to meet up with a heartless person to return the item, and it might be in Paula's favor to appear to hold the cards.

By lunchtime, her strategy had worked and BTSbites had sent a desperate clarification. *"There's an expiry date under the aorta. It's for Tuesday, three weeks ago."*

Before making her lunch, she opened the Tupperware container and poked the rehydrating heart to check its freshness. She lifted the collapsed aortic valve to peer underneath; very faintly, in tiny raised letters of a slightly darker white, she could see a date. It was indeed for Tuesday, three weeks earlier. Satisfied, she added another half inch of water to the container. She considered adding one of those freshness packets that come with cut flowers, but when she read that one of the ingredients was bleach, she decided against it.

It was late-afternoon by the time Paula felt she could reasonably take a break and take Maggie for her walk. She DM-ed BTSbites, *"Meet me in the playground behind the community center at 4 o'clock."* She did a quick re-application of her sunscreen and pulled her long hair into a pony-tail that she threaded through the back of her baseball cap. Then she whistled for the dog and snapped on her fanny pack. Usually she carried Maggie's training treats in it, but today she took the Tupperware container from the refrigerator and tucked it in the pack. After a second, she added her mace.

Paula took Maggie the long way around, approaching the park from the playing fields so she'd have a chance to see anyone at the playground ahead of time. Aside from two

mothers sitting on a bench talking as their children played on the large jungle gym, Paula could only see one other person sitting on the swing, head down, wearing a parka with the hood up. The black jeans and Timberland boots didn't give any further information about whether BTSbites was a male or female, but as she got closer and saw that the mittens gripping the chains of the swing were of the Hello Kitty variety, Paula felt some of the tension she'd been feeling about meeting a stranger in the park dissipate. Squaring her shoulders, Paula marched forward and stopped in front of BTSbites.

"Hello," she said.

She'd been prepared to launch into the reprimand, had, in fact, been mentally practicing during the walk over, but when BTSbites looked up, Paula was surprised to see that he was a he and a very young he, perhaps eleven or twelve at most. His teeth were chattering and his slightly blue chapped lips were sticking unpleasantly to his braces as he tried to smile.

I wonder if it's the refrigeration, Paula thought, her reprimand dying in her throat.

The boy hopped out of the swing and slid both mittened hands into his parka pockets. Yes, tall for his age, and gangly, his bones having gotten ahead of the rest of his growth, but no more than a tween, Paula thought. She racked her brain for age-appropriate facts she had gathered from the job she'd once done for *Owl Magazine*.

"You're awfully young to have lost this," she said finally. She tapped the Tupperware top through the nylon of her orange fanny pack.

The boy shrugged — or at least she thought he did, it was hard to tell in the parka — and looked glum. "It's not mine," the boy said. His voice cracked with imminent puberty.

Paula took a step back, yanked Maggie to her side in case she'd misperceived the boy's harmlessness. BTSbites pulled both hands from his pockets and extended them toward her, imploringly. "It's my father's," he explained quickly. When he saw Paula's dubious expression, he continued, "My parents were fighting all the time. My mother was always crying. Three weeks ago she took off." The boy pulled off a mitten and dug into his pants pocket, pulled out a crumpled envelope he offered to Paula.

Paula leaned down and tied Maggie's leash to the metal post of the swing set. She cautiously took the envelope from the boy, noting his nail-bitten fingers. Maggie's tail banged happily against the metal post as she regarded the winter-clad pillow creature in front of her. Paula kept an eye on the dog as she uncrumpled the envelope and pulled what looked like a sheet of paper towel from it. She unfolded it and began to read it to herself.

"Can I pet her?" BTSbites asked, interrupting her concentration. Paula nodded and moved to sit in one of the swings. The boy knelt in front of Maggie, running a hand over

her back. The dog turned her backside to him and he scratched above her tail until she was blissfully leaning against him. Paula could hear the boy mumbling words to the happy dog, and while he was occupied she finished the letter with its cramped lettering on both sides of the paper towel.

Maggie spotted a squirrel and went rigid under BTSbites's hand. She barked once, twice. The boy rose to his feet and squeezed his winterized body into the swing next to Paula's. He kept the toes of one boot anchored against the dirt rut under the swing, pushing himself back and forth as he waited. Paula perceived that he was looking anywhere but at her, as if the very act of regarding someone reading this most personal of goodbye letters would be enough to make him burst into tears.

Paula refolded the sheet. She slid it back in its envelope and held it out to him. Without a word, he took it back, made it disappear into his parka. She watched as he silently removed the Hello Kitty mitten from his pocket and put it on again. They sat twisting in their swings. Paula tried to think of something to say. It didn't seem right to ask him whether he'd heard from his mother since she'd abandoned them, or how the heart had ended up on the path, or even why the boy and not his father had come to retrieve the organ. It didn't seem to matter, even if the littering had been irresponsible.

"You're not a BTS fan, I guess," she said, finally.

"Duh," the boy replied, but it lacked sting.

Paula looked off across the playing field to where a group of retired older gentlemen were playing their weekly softball game. She made up her mind. Unzipping her fanny pack, she pulled the Tupperware out and passed it to BTSbites. "You can keep the container," she told him. As he slipped out the swing, he took it and held it tight against his chest.

"Tell your father to be more careful in the future," Paula added. Having read the mother's note, she knew this wasn't exactly a fair thing to say, but it felt necessary somehow. BTSbites gave her a doubtful look, but nodded to indicate he would pass on her message. She could see color coming back into his cheeks. As he turned to go, he stooped to pat the old basset hound one last time as if he was trying to delay having to go home to the heartbreak there, to that blank scaffold waiting.

"Hey," Paula said, "why are you wearing all those winter clothes?"

"Oh," he looked down at his parka. "I have the flu."

Paula nodded as the boy pet the dog. "Maggie," she told him.

"Maggie," the boy tested it out. In confirmation, the dog's tail swept back and forth over the dirt.

Maggie and Paula kept an eye on the boy until he'd left the park. Paula leaned back in the swing and pushed off, her long Dance-Bodied legs extending up and out as she swung higher and higher. Maggie barked her head off every time Paula zoomed past her.

She didn't really blame the boy. BTS did kind of suck.

Liz Rosen is a former children's television writer and a current short story writer. Her stories have appeared in numerous journals, been nominated for Pushcarts twice, and she is the recipient of numerous writing residencies, the most recent of which she left early after finding the second snake in her cabin. That she did not leave after finding the first snake is a measure of her commitment to her writing.



MISTER ICE CREAM

BY JAMES PATE

That summer, S and I would drive around the streets of Chicago at night, often winding up at an ice cream parlor on Ashland Avenue. We had met in the spring at a diner. April and May had been chilly, and we'd spent many nights then together at the movies, watching older films from other countries. As soon as it warmed up, though, we would instead drive around an hour or two each night in S's corvette, the top down and the wind blowing through our hair and brushing against our faces, S driving and me in the passenger seat.

We would go down streets like Clark with their buses and crowds and drunken shouts and we'd go down quiet streets flanked by big trees where at most someone might be walking a dog. We'd go to the beach. With our shoes off the sand would be cool, having quickly lost the heat it had absorbed during the day. Before midnight, one of us would turn to the other. We'd ask if we should get ice cream tonight. And usually the other would say yes, ice cream was an excellent idea on a hot night like this.

Webster's Ice Palace was a square white box of a building with brightly-lit windows. A speaker attached to the upper corner of the structure played 50s rock and doo-wop and two stone polar bears badly in need of a fresh coating of paint stood in fierce stances on either side of the glass doors. There was always a line. S and I would wait with our arms around each other. We'd kiss, we'd play with each other's hair, we'd talk about summers from our childhoods. Moths fluttered about and the closer you were to the bright building the more moths there were dancing around your eyes and ears.

Out front set a few picnic tables where patrons could enjoy their treats. One night, while sitting at one of those tables, S told me about Mister Ice Cream. We had the picnic table to ourselves. Though it was late, many young children were around us, eating from their cones and running around, the ice cream drying on their faces and clothes.

“Mister Ice Cream?” I asked. “Is he like Mister Peanut?”

S shook her head. “He’s nothing like Mr. Peanut. He’s real.”

“Well, depending on how you think about it, so is Mister Peanut.”

“I mean real in a real way. Real as in actually living real.”

As we ate our desserts there among the kids and moths, S told me her story.

*

She was six years old and wearing a peach summer dress her parents had bought especially for this party and she sat very still in the backseat of her mother’s Toyota with the present beside her. The friend’s name was Autumn. She attended S’s school. S was not close to Autumn and had only actually spoken to her a few times but Autumn’s parents had invited all twenty or so of her classmates to the party. “This must be the place,” S’s mother said from the front seat.

Her mother pulled up to a massive Tudor-style house. Balloons of different colors were attached to the mailbox and a chalkboard with the words PARTY TIME written on it had been placed on the front porch. An arrow under the words pointed to an open gate. Her mother led her up a curving brick walkway to that gate and the two of them walked through it into a backyard where kids were running, shouting, around a large and circular inground pool. S held her present out and Autumn’s mother, dressed a black crochet top and orange leather skirt, took it from her, and thanked her. S walked over to a group of children standing by the pool. She watched her mother go back through the gate and vanish behind a line of shrubs. Around the pool stood a few adults but S did not recognize any of them.

“Mister Ice Cream will be here soon,” Autumn’s mother announced. “I hope you all brought your appetites. Mister Ice Cream will be sad if you didn’t.”

She looked at her daughter, who treaded water in the pool. “I can’t wait, Mother!” Autumn shouted.

Children’s music played from two speakers on the patio. The afternoon grew hotter. The few clouds that had drifted about earlier disappeared and the party carried on under a bright lidless sky. S had forgotten to tell her mother this would be a pool party and she had not brought a bathing suit. So she sat at the edge of the pool with her feet dipped into the water. Children would swim by and splash her.

She wasn’t sure when Mister Ice Cream first appeared. There was no announcement. From the side of her eye she noticed some of the adults gathering together near the gate and then she heard children laughing and a few even screaming. She lifted her legs from

the water and ran to see what was going on. Standing in the middle of the group was a man in a loose ragged shirt and pants, his skin a chaotic motley swirl of many ice cream types. He was not covered in ice cream. S knew that right away. He was ice cream. He was Mister Ice Cream.

He had no hair and the ice cream that he had been made from had started to drip into his eyes and run off his nose like sweat. "I'm here, children," he said in a voice that sounded as if he were tired but trying hard to sound enthused. "Someone's parents paid a lot for me to be here, and I sure hope I can make it worth it," he added with fake glee.

"I'm sure you will," said the tall man next to Autumn's mother, who S guessed was Autumn's father.

The crowd of a few adults and many children stepped back, allowing Mister Ice Cream to have more space. Mister Ice Cream smiled with bits of ice cream falling from his chin. With a small grunt he bowed and started to dance. His ice cream limbs moved awkwardly around his head. He spun around and told the children to look at him and see how much fun he was having and where he stepped he left splotched footprints of ice cream. After one of his hands melted off from his wrist, landing on the patio with such force that the palm and fingers splattered into a messy clump, he lifted his old eyes to Autumn's parents. In a firm voice he said, "We better get on with it."

Autumn's father took a huge plate from the patio table. Autumn's mother held a long metal spatula. Mister Ice Cream knelt and pointed to Autumn. "Does the birthday girl want to do the honors?"

Autumn grinned and approached him. "I would love to, Mister Ice Cream. Thank you for coming to my party."

The gathering grew quiet. Autumn's mother handed Autumn the spatula and her father held the plate under Mister Ice Cream's head. As Autumn's mother held the squishy sides of Mister Ice Cream's hairless scalp, Autumn pressed the side of the spatula into his neck. An expression of stunned pain twisted Mister Ice Cream's features. Autumn worked the spatula deeper into the neck and part of the head started to tear away. Right before the head came away completely Mister Ice Cream let out a laugh that was not a laugh at all. Then the head tumbled face-first on to the plate Autumn's father held. The children cheered, the adults clapped.

The head was placed on the table and the children gathered around. Red plastic spoons were handed out. S stood a few feet away, staring at her feet. But when Autumn's mother approached her and said she should get some ice cream too, like the other kids, S nodded and stepped forward. She walked up to the partially eaten head of Mister Ice Cream and looked at the children around her with their clothes covered in ice cream of many different colors. She wanted to scream but she also wanted her friends to like her. She lifted her spoon and ate from the ruined scalp of what had been Mister Ice Cream.

*

After S told her me her story, we drove back to her apartment, which was on the second floor of a greystone in the Andersonville neighborhood, and smoked up on her futon. I asked if she had seen Mister Ice Cream at any other parties, and S said no, that had been the only time she had encountered him. We fell silent for a few moments. Then we talked of other things. Around one in the morning we switched off the lamps in the living-room and curled up next to one another on the futon. But I couldn't sleep. I was remembering a funeral home I had visited as a kid. And a great-uncle I had not thought about in decades.

As the birds started to caw outside I got up and in the darkness of the apartment made my way to the kitchen, where I fixed a pot of coffee. When S came into the kitchen a few hours later, she asked me what was wrong. "Your story reminded me of a funeral from a long time ago," I told her, pouring us both a cup of coffee. Her first cup, and my fourth.

She poured sugar into her drink. "A real funeral or a dream you had about a funeral?"

"A real one. Your story jogged the memory loose, I think."

We took our mugs to the back deck that overlooked an alleyway with its dumpsters and garages and I told S my story.

I said that my great-uncle passed away when I was in kindergarten. I had only met him once but my father knew him well. When I came home that snowy afternoon, I glimpsed my dad in the dining room with the lights off, a glass of very red wine in his hands. My mother took me aside and told me why he was so sad.

A few afternoons later, my mother took out my black suit and white dress shirt and placed them on my bed and quietly told me to get ready. Shortly after we climbed into our SUV and my mother started the engine. She wore a black dress and black leather driving gloves. On the way through the potholed streets of our neighborhood, my father turned back towards me. "You ever see a dead body before?" he asked.

I nodded yes.

"Not birds and squirrels," he added. "A human body."

"No," I said.

"You will today. Uncle requested an open-casket prayer service, so he's going to be there in his coffin for everyone to see. Just keep in mind that it's not really him, though, okay? It's only the shell he left behind."

My palms were sweaty. I rubbed them against my pants. I told my father I would keep that in mind.

“One other thing.” He stared at me hard. “Don’t touch the body. Sometimes kids your age see a dead body and they want to touch it just to see if the person, or animal, is really dead. Don’t do that. My uncle, he’ll feel cold to the touch. Frosty. Don’t touch him.”

I promised I would not touch my dead great-uncle.

The cemetery was enclosed by a low stone wall and the grounds themselves were hilly and weedy. Just past a copse of elms rose the funeral home with its stained-glass windows and red-tiled roof. Older graves with markers that had been made illegible by the elements stood around the edifice. In the parking lot my father paused, looking up at the sky. My mother went up to him and touched the back of his scalp and he suddenly reached out and hugged her and buried his face into her neck and sobbed.

There was a small crowd inside, mainly of older people I did not know. Elderly men with worn faces, long white hair. Women in shawls, and other women with black lacy mantillas on their heads. Outside the chapel door rested a huge book and my parents wrote their names on to one of its pages. Then my mother took my left hand and my father the right and we marched down the aisle of the chapel towards the casket. As we grew closer, the air turned chillier.

In front of the casket were three kneelers. My mother and my father and I kneeled there and as I heard my father whisper a prayer I slowly moved my eyes up from the sides of the rose-colored casket to the face within the casket. My great-uncle looked like he was napping. He looked like his eyes would flutter open if someone tickled under his chin or behind his ear. And I was seized by the idea that he truly was only sleeping and that he would be buried in that state and the only way to help the poor sleeping man would be to reach out. Shake him.

My father shifted, stood. I looked up at him and he at me and a thin smile broke out across his face. As he opened his suitcoat and placed his hand into the pocket inside, his grin hardened. “Grief is a confusing thing,” he murmured, taking a spoon from his pocket. He moved to the head of the coffin and my mother stood too and held my shoulders as if I might bolt.

My father brought the big gold spoon down towards my dead relative’s nose. He paused and seemed to need to catch his breath. Then he continued, pressing the tip of the spoon into the face. The nose came off into the bowl of the utensil and my father with trembling hand and closed eyes brought it to his mouth and ate. He swallowed hard and then held the spoon out to my mother. He said, “Delicious,” his cheeks wet with tears and little drops of ice cream clinging to his dense black beard. My mother dug the spoon deep into the forehead and the red ice cream that was beneath the gray ice cream of his face dribbled down my great-uncle’s hair. The relatives who had been in the pews were standing, removing golden spoons from their purses, their suitcoats. They walked and limped carefully forward, towards us and towards the coffin.

My dad returned to my side, crouching so that he was at eye-level with me. "It's all right," he said, wiping his spoon clean with a handkerchief. "He was ice cream all along. It's not so sad if you're just ice cream." His eyes were still red and wet and a muscle in his cheek twitched. "Ice cream makes it so much fucking better." Then he walked to the stained-glass window behind the casket and hit through it with his fist.

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When I was finished with my story, S asked if I'd had any ice cream that afternoon at the funeral parlor. I said I didn't remember but what I did recall was looking into the casket right before we left and seeing a clotted melting mound of what appeared to be strawberry ice cream in the spot where my great-uncle's head had been. His tie and shirt and suitcoat were surprisingly clean and untouched below that mess.

S patted my hand and I patted hers. The sun had risen and the glare of it was in our eyes. I drank one last sip of coffee. We both had to be at work soon.

That night, we went on our drive. There was a ball game and the Cubs won and Clark Street was teeming with young people stumbling about and yelling. Neither S nor I spoke much. To the east towards the lake lightning silently flashed. The wind started to gust hard through the trees we drove under. When we parked in front of Webster's Ice Cream Palace we noticed the line was short and the picnic tables were empty.

S ordered mint and I got the strawberry swirl. "Remember Then" by The Earls played from the speakers.

Once we were sitting at a picnic table, the moths fluttering around us, S said, "Childhood is peculiar. All that ice cream."

I wiped my lips with a napkin. "It's frustrating that I can't ask anyone about that afternoon at the funeral parlor."

"Why?"

"Because my parents are dead."

"Sorry. I thought you meant some other reason."

I leaned forward. "What do you think became of Mister Ice Cream?"

"Still working the children's party circuit. Still doing his little dance. Still wishing he could stop and melt away and be left alone forever."

"Really?"

S shrugged. "I don't know. But I can speculate."

Later in her apartment, we smoked up and listened to the rain splatter across the windows. We had not switch on the lamps. The cool damp air blowing through the screens of the windows felt nice on my arms and face. S paced about and held the pipe to her mouth. As she inhaled and exhaled lightning pulsed and I could see her clearly for a moment and then we were in the dim room again. "My mother used to say you could always eat more ice cream because ice cream goes down the side," she told me.

"And God only knows what it does there," I said.

"It melts and puddles and lurks, waiting for us to remember."

We stayed in the dark a little while longer, listening to the weather swirl antically around us outside, its motley sounds dripping along the windows, dancing along the walls, calling us out to join it.

James Pate (he/him) is a fiction writer and poet. He has had work published in Oculus Sinister: An Anthology of Ocular Horror, Dark Lane Anthology, Black Warrior Review, 3:AM Magazine, Berkeley Fiction Review, Deracine: A Gothic Literary Magazine, Ligeia, Coffin Bell, and Occulum, among other places. His books include the poetry collections The Fassbinder Diaries (Civil Coping Mechanisms) and Mineral Planet (Schism), the essay collection Flowers Among the Carrion: Essays on the Gothic in Contemporary Poetry (Action Books Salvo Series), and the occult noir novel Speed of Life (Fahrenheit Press). He teaches creative writing at Shepherd University.

A microscopic view of several cells, likely yeast or similar microorganisms, showing internal organelles and nuclei. The cells are arranged in a cluster, with some in focus and others blurred in the background.

THE ANGEL OF TEETH

BY BENJAMIN HENRY DEVRIES

I found him camped in the grasslands off Interregional Highway 35. I say camped but I didn't see a tent anywhere. Just a cookfire and some broken bottle-targets. We're talking about the kind of terrain where big-ass locusts have the run of things. The IRS owns all that land. Angel's stripped down, got his arms out to comb the wind. The locusts sound like hail on a window when they strike his skin. I heard a locust bounce off his guitar string, hit a note? I guess that qualifies for music.

He was sharing my scrip for about a month but that didn't mean I saw much of him. About the only time I saw him was when I brought men home. He'd be there on the couch eating pie. Knowing all about bad timing. He took his sweet time clearing out in these situations. Took the time to size up the guys. Sometimes he even got up to their chests and asked them what they were carrying. I think he meant in terms of weapons. Which is sweet when you think about it. What are you holding, fella? One of my regulars took out his dick. The Angel took a look at it like he was trying to figure out the price of the thing. I made the Angel keep his rifle out in that old car. It won't start but the doors still lock so it makes a good safe, the kids can't get into it.

— came in dragging a pot the size of a lamb. I remember wondering what he was going to cook in that pot. It may have been for his laundry. He had eyes for my eldest. This would have been agreeable. The younger daughters had prospects and Sarah wasn't a spring chicken anymore. But then she did something to displease him and as a result he took to hiding her possessions in far-flung places on the ranch. The dogs still dig them up sometimes. They bring them all back, the socks and the underthings. Sarah does not appreciate the memories these items bring upon her. I suppose you might find it strange to hear a father speak of marrying off his daughter to an itinerant so casually, but the truth is she was always disruptive and we would have been glad to be rid of her. We have

many dogs and we let them roam. Among the knacks that Angel can be said to possess is an ability to tell a wolf from a dog in the dark.

Before he did anything he'd build a cookfire. Gather brushwood for the thing, set it up, get it going in the middle of the afternoon so it would be good embers by dawn. From the house we'd see the fire out there in the hills. He was too far out to hear. But if I had to guess I'd guess he'd be doodling around on that guitar. Engaged also in the personal manufacture of bullets. It is true he ate the javelinas. It is true he ate the wolves. The hunts went on at night. He was usually far out enough to make the shots sound cotton soft. You could go back to bed. One rolling cotton shot, roll on back to sleep. Maybe another at dawn. When the sun rose the wind would blow the smells of his cookery down. We all envied his breakfasts in our way. The children lost their taste for pancakes.

He said it was a wolf taught him to shoot. But that was just his name for a woman. She must have been one hell of a shot. He still had bullet casings she had shot. There was something about being taught that you couldn't see in him. He came knowing. But that's never the whole of the thing. The wolf taught him. My wife was the only one around who could draw out the Angel to speak of these things. She listened. She has a habit of listening when she shouldn't and not listening when she should. The Angel could have made all this up to please her, that could have been the case. But let's say it isn't, and the facts stand as he said them: he was taught by a woman. She took measure of a coal heart and found gleaming in a fissure a red glow; she laid the ember bare to the wind and stoked it to a blaze. Taught to build bullets, taught the shine of animals' eyes in the dark, to track, to aim, and taught butchery. She said watch and learn and he did. He bore witness to her deeds. You don't imagine a man like Angel having a mother but she was the mother and the one who steadied his hand. If all that he told of her was really true she would have been a legend in her own right. No one had heard of her. No one knew why. It was a long time ago. Legends die in the spaces between ranches. There are not so many places to commune. The itinerants are charged with passing along legends. They do not always serve. They sometimes stay tight-lipped. Sometimes they call their lover a wolf, sometimes it's their mother, sometimes it's really a wolf and he means it in a figurative way, that a wolf shows a sign they are ready for the bullet. If he loved her as he described it begs the question why he would not go to greater lengths to scatter the news of her deeds. The problem may lie in the shape of his mouth. This is a mouth that looks to be made of other people's teeth. Kissing him is like throwing yourself into a thresher.

You have to understand ranching. The Angel understood ranching. Cows are not complicated animals. They eat. They plop. They walk around. But there are many things standing in the way of these activities. Predators try to predate our cows. They will eat them before we people can eat them. This is the heart of ranching: remove those elements that stand in the way of making cow into beef. I do not care whether he was shit-scared of horses. The Angel understood ranching. Predators do.

One of my daughters got a close look at that guitar. Frankenstein of an instrument, neck bolted onto the wrong body and one of the strings being the guts of an animal, to hear my daughter tell it. She opened up the case, got a look, and she told me about it, but only

later, after all the wolves and javelinas were dead and the Angel was a dust-streak in our lives. We never did hear him play. But there had to be some reason he would take a guitar into the desert on a four-night hunt. It wasn't like he could drink it.

This thing was more like a rhino than a javelina. The kids tried to put a cute name to it but we all decided that would be disrespectful, so the beast went on unnamed. I'd been chasing that fucker around the ranch for the better part of a year myself. I'm not a bad shot. This thing could do damage. Terrified the cows. One died of fright. Couple others wasted away. We had a ranch hand get gored and almost die on us, had to pay the medical bills, that was tough to swallow. The real problem was that my ranch abuts this development with some money behind it. Don't ask me why anyone would live there. Not a lot of people do live there. Giant sandbox. There are half-built houses. If you move in you can see what your life will be like when you're gone. The desert pours in. It has to hurt to drive by a half-built house fucked with sand every day. See a place that's similar to what you pay American dollars for except anyone is allowed to live there. Animals are allowed to live there. I'm not a bad shot. I was honest with the developers about my failures. I can hunt but this fucker didn't want to be killed. There has to be some want in a thing. Some suits came to see me... not actually wearing suits, but they drove up in a (REDACTED), and that told me where we stood. There was money behind this thing. They put up the costs to hire the Angel. I could have covered the costs myself, but... point of pride. Suits talked me into it. If I wasn't going to actually pull the trigger I could at least do the driving. Angel didn't like it, but, hey. It's four in the morning, we're in my truck. I'm driving; he's out in the bed. We've been making tracks across the ranch all night, at a crawl, my eyes are on fire. It's cold. He's working the spotlight. Finally we get to this hill above the development. He shines the spotlight down among the half-built houses. There it is. Sticking its big snout in a piece of house-wrap. It's like an echo chamber for shadows down there, so there's a javelina image flashing on all the houses like a drive-in movie about javelinas. At no point did the animal raise its head in recognition. It just ran. Bang through the house-wrap and out the front door. Angel's shouting at me to floor it. We take the hill and almost flip. Don't know how Angel didn't fall out the truck bed, I heard him knock against the reinforcement bars or something, hit the bed. I swerve around the house and into the cul-de-sac out in front of it. The animal has better sense than to run on the stupid twisty roads they got there. It's going yard to yard. And I'm just hoping these places aren't inhabited, cause I'm driving after, through backyards and through fences. Getting my money's worth from the bumper-bars. I can barely see. We're getting dawn light now, but not much. Angel's shouting directions. Brake, brake, brake! I don't see shit. He gets off one shot. Through someone's goddamn living room. Bang. Window, window, javelina. We only figure this out later. Some kid up watching Saturday morning cartoons sees a bullet fly over their cereal. The house alarm is going off. Angel's out of the truck and walking through the yards. By the time I'm caught up with him he's kneeling over the quarry. It's a weakly breathing thing. Headshot. Angel's reaching in its mouth. I can't make myself get any closer. It's still a fucked up terrifying thing and I think it's going to bite his hand off. But it's going gentle now and he's letting it gnaw on the heel of his hand. The alarm in the house has stopped. The Angel takes off his own shirt to wipe the blood off his hand. Does it very carefully. There's a bruise smack in the middle of his broad, white back.

As far as what you'd call 'distinguishing marks,' there was his higgledy-piggledy mouth, and besides that he had a tattoo of El Kabong on one of his butt-cheeks, couldn't say whether it was the left or the right, but I found it cute. The way he lay face-down on a bed I found cute, too, made you want to take a chomp out of him. He had a good smell. It came from good sweat in the desert, you get whatever you're drinking out quick and then it's down to just you coming out of your pores. I had to beg him to play for me. He made me do this, that, and the third before he would. It was all in good fun, but he asked a lot. My God, I wish I could tell you the words to that song. There was an awful beauty to it. It made me so ashamed. Dried me right out... something over six feet. Two hundred pounds, strong. Greasy hair, body hair, grey eyes. Mouth like a broken fence. Long hands.

He came back with the skulls boiled clean and a steady air as though he'd spent himself. This attitude impressed me. I asked him to stay on for the drive. We were shorthanded and needed steady men. My beef spooks easily. I'd lost a very dear son in a stampede two winters ago. The beef has a certain loathing for me and my family and they attempt to trample us whenever possible. Since then we drive only on horseback. It's quieter. Had I known what a poor horseman the Angel was, I would not have made my proposition, but I did not know at the time. What hands we had were not the best I'd ever assembled. One man among us, a school friend of my son, took a special disliking to the Angel. I suspect this dislike originated with the Angel's true claims about the ease with which he dispatched our wolves. That dispatching occurred while the hand loafed around my house and boasted to my sons about his own marksmanship. The hand's name was (REDACTED), but you can use the name Jack for these purposes. The drive was to take four days on horseback. The Angel packed his guitar: this was cause for remarking. There would be more remarks. Night one we camped in a washed out riverbed. We were at the cookfire and we heard a coyote in the distance. Jack made a remark to the Angel about having let that particular animal go on living. The Angel had for a reply the true fact that he was contractually engaged to shoot wolves and coyotes were provided amnesty. Guess I'll have to shoot him then, said Jack. You shoot that gun, we'll all be under the hooves of 10,000: this is the statement I meant to make to Jack, and I would have made it had Jack not fired his pistol into the darkness, fool that he is. My herd began to stir. The more experienced hands among us ran for cover. The herd shook the earth as they came. I called on God. Into the riverbed the herd flowed like God's wrath. Men scrambled and clawed at the roots on the banks to gain footholds. The Angel did not scramble. He had removed his guitar from its case. I cannot claim to have heard the details of the song under the thundering. But it was an effective piece of music for becalming the together-mind of animals whose minds had become infected with the urge to crash over their masters. The Angel sang. He stood stark in the river's middle and played toll-taker. The vanguard of the herd stopped not many feet before him and set precedent for those behind. In stillness now the herd sent forward a great cloud of riverbed dust that made hidden the player of the song.

...A living angel with love in his heart for me. Despite what anyone says. I know in my heart. There was a heart in the Angel. I know what lived there.

Benjamin Henry DeVries's work has appeared in The Baffler, Bodega Magazine and Enter the Void — you can find more on his website. He lives and works in Belgium.



DOUBLE, DOUBLE

BY NICOLE CHRENEK

On campus I would get mistaken for her all the time. The fact that we almost shared a name made things more confusing — she almost exclusively went by Katie, though, and that nickname had been tainted for me by a bad childhood friend, so I insisted on going by Kate. We both studied Psychology, but it was a large enough department that I never encountered her on my own — had only heard whispers of my “twin,” been called Katie a few times, one of which I thought was just a classmate being overly familiar. The Psychology department was part of both the Arts and Science faculties, so that students could enter the department from either faculty. I was an Arts Psychology student, but she was a Science Psychology student. We both dyed our hair pink — hers was darker than mine, almost the colour of beets, and mine was a more rose-toned pink. The similarities ended there, to be honest — she was a few inches taller than me, usually wore skirts and dresses, always had a multitude of earrings dangling from her ears, the arrangement of which seemed to change every time I saw her. We finally met in an upper-level course that we shared in our final year at the university.

“Heard a lot about you,” she joked, when I finally introduced myself to her. Seeing her up close, I wondered how so many of our classmates had confused us for one another — I’d expected to feel as if I was looking in a mirror, but instead I found we really only shared a few generic traits that were frequently common to dykes anyway (pink hair, nose ring).

We swapped numbers — for studying reasons — and met at cafes on the weekends to go over the course material. We even had, irritatingly enough, the same coffee order — mine made with oat milk, hers with almond. One weekend, we met at a Tim Hortons, and I taught her — an American — about a Double Double.

“They’re really sweet. I used to get them in high school, when I first started drinking coffee.” Despite my attempts to dissuade her, she insisted on trying one — a Double Double with her double. We had both, of course, read Freud’s “Das Unheimlich.”

“Sigmund is losing his mind right now,” she smirked, taking a sip of the warm, sickly sweet coffee. Two creams, two sugars. Katie swallowed, and I practically heard the hot drink trickle down her throat. “Okay, you were right,” she conceded, pushing the paper cup away with a grimace, emphasised for effect. As we talked — occasionally about class, but as our study sessions went on, we would focus less and less on course materials — it cooled, untouched, until she dropped the full container in the garbage bin on our way out. I heard it slosh in the plastic bag that lined the bin, landing at the very bottom with a thud.

They served free wine and cheese at department events, served with tiny plastic goblets and Royal Chinet paper plates. I didn’t often attend these events until I found out about the free refreshments that followed. I’d gone to this one with my roommate, Amy, who I’d convinced to tag along for the free booze, mostly because I was hoping to run into Katie and didn’t want to look like I’d come alone. She was instantly recognisable in the teacher’s lounge, where the reception was held — her hair had faded slightly since I’d first met her, and was now starting to resemble mine a bit more closely. She hadn’t brought anyone with her, and I felt childish for a brief moment — I was 22 years old, but somehow incapable of attending a guest lecture without a friend tagging along for moral support. Amy indulged in three small gobletfuls of wine in quick succession before retreating to the washroom to text her girlfriend, so there was really no point in bringing her along anyway. She usually did this — they’d only been dating for a few months, and every time she got even slightly tipsy Amy would send Claire a variation of the same horny text that led to mild sexual foreplay before one of them headed to the other’s place. Katie saw me standing alone by the table where all the half-empty wine bottles were standing, nursing a room-temperature Pinot Grigio, and strode over. She picked up a Chardonnay and filled her glass with it — she’d been drinking a red wine before, so the wine in her cup had a slight blush to it. She held out the bottle to me, silently offering to top up my glass, and I held it out to her. She unknowingly mixed the Pinot and Chardonnay as she splashed more wine into my cup — it didn’t really matter, they were all *dépanneur* wines anyway. Later, she would tell me that she usually found that a cheap red wine was better than a cheap white wine, but she picked up the white in some kind of solidarity.

“What did you think?” she asked, and I realised that I had two options: feign interest in the lecture I had attended just for the wine and cheese reception that followed, or admit to the truth. I chose a third option that existed between the two that I didn’t know existed until I vocalised it.

“Honestly, I’ve been a little... preoccupied. I didn’t pay as much attention as I would have liked.” Her face turned quizzical, and I fumbled for more explanation. “I’ve just been really tired lately. Hard to focus.”

Conversation drifted toward school, in the more general sense — the workload, upcoming deadlines, balancing classes and work (which she did, and I didn't — I was lucky enough to be able to subsist on a combination of loans and the occasional help from my parents).

“Would you ever date someone in our department?” Katie asked suddenly. I fumbled for a response, perhaps too enthusiastic in the wrong direction with my answer.

“No. Never. I'd have to be smarter than the person I'm dating. I'd be too insecure.”

“Right. Same.”

...

“God, it's so weird from this angle. I feel like I'm fucking my reflection.” When she said this I removed Katie's hand from my chest, turned around to face her. I took her face in my hands, bringing it to mine and kissing it gently. “Is that bad?” I asked, brushing my lips against the corner of her mouth, dragging them slowly along her jawline. “I think we should put a mirror on the ceiling. Then you can watch yourself for real, or watch me, watching you, watching me...”

By this point, her hair had not only faded even more, but also grown even closer to mine in length. People mistook us for each other more frequently on campus now, which didn't really matter, since we were together most of the time. When the new semester started, we coordinated our schedules so that we shared four out of our total five classes. We took our notes in a shared document, studied together, fucked, then walked to class together the next morning. When we found another thing we had in common, instead of laughing in amazement, we would now treat this aspect of ourselves as law, and internalise it so as to make it essential to ourselves. We found out we both liked espresso martinis, so they became our signature drink. A joke about how grilled cheese was one of our favourite foods involved into a need to order any variation of a grilled cheese sandwich whenever it appeared on a menu. Our similarities became our religion.

One night, we attended another department event, this time as a couple. She helped me pick an outfit out of her wardrobe — a simple, midi-length black dress. She wore another black dress, but this one was shorter, just grazing her knees. She didn't wear tights — I wondered if this would be considered “unprofessional,” since I always wore tights underneath my shorter skirts when I knew I would be interacting with my professors, but then considered that this may have been something I subconsciously picked up from my mother, who always wore tights, no matter the length of her dress. The guest lecturer was interesting but monotone. The lecture took place in a theatre in the basement, and we sat near the back, taking turns teasingly stroking the other's leg with our foot. At one point, Katie slid her hand up my thigh — the long skirt covered everything, but it didn't matter. I tensed. “Bathroom's around the corner. Bet it's empty,” she whispered, her warm breath making my neck hair rise. I craned my head to look at the exit, gauge the distance. Then back at the lecturer. “I dunno. I don't want to be rude.” Katie pouted, slid back into her

seat. I took her hand apologetically, and she squeezed back, but I felt a slight frost in the air between us.

At the reception, she wordlessly poured us two glasses of red wine. I took a sip from my tiny plastic goblet. She was right — a cheap red wine usually tasted better than a cheap white wine. Once, she snuck a bottle from an event into her purse, and we got drunk off of wine from the event before going home and polishing off that bottle, too. The sex had been sloppy and clumsy. I asked her to bite me hard, and woke up with bruises on the inside of my thighs. It wasn't so much sex so much as a melting together. I felt like her hands may as well have been mine — I could have reached out, held my face, kissed it tenderly, then hard.

“Bathroom,” Katie mumbled, jerking a thumb towards the hallway. Not an invitation. She was going alone. I leaned up against a wall, held my cup in both hands. Since we had gotten together, we had drifted apart from everyone else. I still saw my friends — just much less frequently. None of them were at the reception. I was usually the one that dragged them along. A salt-and-pepper-haired professor approached me, and I recognised him once he got closer — my Cognition professor.

“How are you?” he asked, and I stumbled over my words to tell him, good, I'm alright, how are you, so relieved not to be standing alone anymore. He was one of the younger professors in our department, and I saw him at many more department events than any of my older professors. He was fairly approachable, and still tried hard to make his lectures enjoyable. He was a harsh grader, though — which I found younger professors sometimes were, maybe as a way of proving their authority. I'd been managing a B+ average in the class, while Katie was hovering between an A- and an A. I usually tried not to let my jealousy show, and she was kind enough never to dwell on the subject. We had just submitted our final paper for that class — one of our final papers of our entire degree. The professor and I made light conversation about the course, and he suddenly reached out to touch my shoulder with a warm look. “I wanted to say, you did well on our last assignment. I know I'm not supposed to tell you before final grades are out, but...” he gave a goofy smile and held up his tiny plastic cup, half-empty, as explanation. I gave as big a smile I could muster once I understood his confusion. As our stilted conversation proceeded, I sipped my wine anytime I needed time to grasp for words. As the alcohol softened my thoughts, I got better at being an imposter. I wore my lover's persona like a mask, smiled and nodded as if the conversation was truly meant for me. Something grew in my stomach. I was too good at being her — I was, too much, her.

I saw Katie in the doorway. I said a hasty goodbye to our professor before reaching for her hand, clutching it as if it wasn't her likeness I was trying to escape.

The moment my apartment door latched behind us, I stood on my toes and kissed her, almost urgently. An apology. I felt as if I couldn't get close enough. I pulled her hips to mine, desperately, wanting to sob when I couldn't possibly have brought her any closer. I wanted to crawl into her skin and be her, be with her, be the hybrid we were slowly becoming. She kissed me back with the same urgency, as if sensing my panic and

realising, yes, we needed to act quickly. Her drunk hands fumbled over my dress, searching for something, unsure of what, before finally peeling it off, over my head, leaving it crumpled in the front entrance. I wanted to tear at the buttons on her dress, but unbuttoned them carefully, remembering our frosty auditorium exchange and not wanting to risk halting what we were now finally starting. The walk to my bedroom felt kilometres long. We sunk into the bed with a continued sense of urgency, not sure for what, but knowing that we had to be close, closer than ever before, had to find a new way to love, to meld. And it had to be tonight. We reached for each other — into each other — hungrily, grasping for something we couldn't name.

The mirror on the ceiling reflected us back at ourselves, and I watched us writhe feverishly, at once detached and part of our frantic union. I didn't so much feel her as watch her, feeling ecstasy from seeing her reflection pleasuring mine. The four of us all contorted ourselves into new shapes, and I watched us the whole time. I reached up to the lovers in the ceiling — they looked so passionate, so engulfed in a love that I wanted to be a part of. They had something we didn't — now that I could see us — them — from far away, from without instead of from within, I could see it now. Katie was oblivious, but the lovers reached out to me, they floated down or I up, Katie with me, the four of us conjoining, a tangle of limbs, and I finally felt that this was what I was searching for, and there were more of us now, reflecting back at each other infinitely, until I didn't know which was Katie and not the one that had crawled from the ceiling, or, eventually, which was me — I was all of them — we were refracting infinitely — engulfing each other — until the mirror fell from the ceiling and crashed down on all of us, shattering.

When the spell was broken we crouched over the broken mirror wordlessly, scraping the pieces into a dustpan with our fingers. I grazed one with my finger and quickly brought it up to my mouth, sucking the blood from it. The metallic taste made my mouth water. Katie watched me quietly, something shining in her eyes. A mixture of hunger and lust.

In the middle of the night, we stretch our arms out to one another. Silently, we wrap ourselves around each other, her legs tangled in mine. We make love sleepily, the moon just barely illuminating her face, our lips grazing cheeks, earlobes, shoulders. We never say a word. I close my eyes, dance the boundary between sleep and wakefulness. Some time later, I wake up on the opposite side of the bed. I reach for a hand and find only a shard of glass.

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