



Juvenilia

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Sitowski

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MAGIC HOUR

John Marshall fumed as he watched the old woman push the push-mower, pathetically, at a turtle's pace, while her 40-year-old son stood on the porch watching and maybe smiling? Can someone get my damn binoculars somewhere? He barked out and cracking up into a smile halfway, remembering that the wife and kids had just left to go to Blockbuster. I'm gonna beat the hell out of this dude, damn. The old woman stopped and started fanning herself, dripping sweat and clearly frustrated by the futility of using the rusty push-mower against such tall grass that the lazy, fatslob across the street had let grow the past six months since he'd moved in, not cutting it once despite neighbors protesting and notes left at his door. Based on what he was seeing here, watching from his kitchen window, somehow, John presumed, this slob had roped his elderly mother, or just some old lady, into doing it for him using some BS rusty-ass push-mower you'd find at a frickin antique store.

He walked out to his truck, looking for nothing. Slowly eyeing the guy, standing there basking in the sun like a bearded dragon, wearing sunglasses and no T-shirt, he simply stood against the back of his pickup and contemplated the scene, how mundane and pitiful it all was. Maybe the guy isn't mentally right, that'd make sense but I've seen him partying and grilling and just being a slob. The dude didn't work, pretty sure he ain't got a car. / think / saw him with some lame-ass bike, some Yamaha BS. So yea, the dude's just a lazy redneck. And his 700 year old mama is out here cuttin his grass.

John's wife and son pulled up into the driveway, and he snapped out of his internal monolog as his wife looked over and rolled her eyes.

"Who the hell is that mowing his lawn?"

"Haha, I'm pretty sure that's his mama."

"No-"

"She kinda looks like him..."

His son, Hector, was still in the car, fanning out his DVD cases from Blockbuster and wondering which to watch first. Fingers tracing over the bizarrely jurassic textures of those cases like a braille-speedreader.

The Marshall's had moved to this subdivision a year after they had their only son, and John and his wife had been comiserating over the anarchic, trashy state it was in recently. The town they lived in was beautiful, had great schools, not too much crime, but each subdivision had its own flavor, and theirs had turned into a haven for teenage pranks, airsoft guns and constant, unrelenting games of ding-dongditch recently. Not to mention a ll the mo-peds, go-peds, BMX bikes, crude wooden ramps left out in the street and a ll the detritus and pyrotechnics that comes with young boys with video cameras.

He knocked on the car window and Hector rolled it down.

"Son, would you go over there and mow that idiot's lawn before that poor old woman has a heat stroke?"

Hector rolled his eyes, but he didn't actually mind.

"Come on, dude, you got like 5 movies there. Just go on and get it over with."

"Yes, sir. Do I need to pump the red button on the mower, I forgot."

"Not with the new one I got. Go on, git it over with and roll it out, I'll be right back."

He jogged over across the street to the old woman. Oh, snap, she better speak English. She was sitting on the curb drinking some sort of aloe vera drink, looking almost bored.

"Hi ma'am, hows it going? My name's John Marshall, I live across the street."

She didn't say anything.

"You know ma'am, that grass is way too high for that pushmower, if you don't mind I asked my son Hector to get our mower and help y'all out with this grass."

She just looked at him, still sweating. She didn't actually look too old, or at least her skin didn't have too many wrinkles.

She looksjust like her son, dang. Same stupid face.

He looked over at him, still standing on the porch, but with different body language; he was clearly nervous, at least a little bit now that John his neighbor was here, talking to his mother while his teenage son approached with a big red power-mower.

"Is he bothering, you, ma?" the guy belted out. "We can cut our own grass."

She looked up at him, and John couldn't tell if her face was saying See what I've had to deal with? or Yes, he is bothering me, but at least someone is getting the job done.

"Your son is very handsome."

She got up and walked inside as Hector plowed through the suburban tallgrass and the guy just stood there staring at John, who watched his son patiently until he had neatly finished the job, and then cautiously walked over to him.

"I don't need the help, I like my grass. You embarrassed me in front of my mother and my girl."

John wondered for a second what girl the slob was referring to, and shook his head, saying enough is enough, you fat slob.

"What's your name, neighbor? My name's John Marshall, and that young man who moved your lawn is my son Hector. Tell me your name, let's get friendly, come on, gimme something to work with so I don't knock the hell out of you for being a slob and a nuisance."

"I don't have a name. You're a cop, right?"

"SWAT. You see this?"

He pulls his shirt off to reveal a foot-long scar across his chest, along with three faded bullet-wounds near his heart.

"You see this, no-name? And by the way, you're gonna tell me your name before I leave your property, because that's what normal people do, along with mowing their lawn and being friendly."

The guy just stared for maybe ten seconds, and took his sunglasses off; his eyes were cross-eyed and bloodshot.

"My name is Tony. I'm sorry for being a nuisance, but I got my head smashed on a job site two years ago and I'm just so retarded these days. I just take pills and it just wipes

my whole day out. To be honest with you, bro... well. I probably won't remember this conversation next time I see you. So sorry. I'm sorry."

John felt somewhat moved, but had the suspicion he was just getting played, as if Tony had already run this script in a parking lot somewhere trying to get \$20 bucks to "get the next Greyhound" or some crap.

"You know, John, it's magic hour. Do you know what magic hour is?"

John laughed, because he did in fact know what magic hour is. It's a photographer's most important time each day; when the sun is about to set and everything has a glow and the light is just perfect; right when the day concedes the light to dusk, at that handshake, about 45 minutes or so. John had taken several photography courses in the early 90s, and had fond memories of having to develop his negatives in a pitch black room and then shaking it around and then unspooling them and letting them dry and ah, / don't remember what we had to do after that, something about contact sheets or some sort of special paper. Back then, a cop who knew his way around a camera was considered a good apple (or a Boy Scout).

"Yeah, it's a nice magic hour. You got a little photography hobby there, Tony?"

Tony laughed. He looked at Hector, who was across the street spraying water onto his bike. John was feeling somewhat mellow now; the guy is clearly fucked up in the head and took too many Deadhead tours on acid or something, but at least he isn't as arrogant as he looks.

"I've got an 80 thousand dollar lens in my basement. Made in Switzerland. Yeah is l sa hobby, you could say that. Or a money pit."

"I only ever had some crappy little stock lenses myself. Do you hunt at all, Tony?"

"No."

"Well how 'bout this, next time I go hunting with my son and some other guys around town, you should come along and take some photos for us- that is, if you feel like it."

Tony put his sunglasses back on and looked up at the single cloud in the sky.

"Hey, check out that cloud, man. It looks like Texas, like the shape of the state. Dudn lt it? OK, I'll go fishing with you guys, and well, I won't bring my best lenses but I 'll bring some other ones."

"Okay, Tony, I'd like that, man. Look, hey, I'm glad to clear this a ll up, I'm sorry if I seemed angry or aggressive, it's just- a lot of the neighbors been complaining about the grass and you seem like a decent guy so let's shake hands and well, let's be neighbors."

Tony looked at him, almost sizing him up and then looked back at the single cloud, which didn't look like Texas so much as it did Africa or India. Tony extended his hand to John's, and shook it, and almost giggled, and John nodded his head as he started walking away, and then-

"Hey, Jon? If you want, if your son wants to anyways, he can cut the grass any time he wants. He's a handsome kid, and he looks just like you!"

K.C.'s GUN

There was no lampshade on the lamp and everything in the room looked so grotesque, crickets chirping and a busted battery fizzling and ringing inside of a cheap safe that couldn't be opened because the batteries were dead. Two cats idled around a pair of crickets tucked away into a rolled up rug in the corner.

"It ain't loaded because I'm not a fuckin' idiot but I swear on my son's life that this right here is the gun that Kurt Cobain used to kill himself with."

He held the shotgun up into his mouth and reclined back, the cats both looking up at him alarmed for just a tiny beat before going back to the cricket.

"This is how Kurt did it, I swear to God. It's the real gun. My buddy got it at a police auction, they got it all mixed up in the evidence locker and it was a whole thing. So some other gun is out there probably in some rock and roll museum or in the Cobain estate's vault and it's just some random old shotgun that got mixed up with the real thing, which I have right here." I had a bored suspicion that he was about to try and pawn it off on me, but then said-

"I am never selling this thing in my life. I hate guns too. But Kurt was such a legend that I have to honor him."

His friend walked in.

"Is that the Kurt gun? Oh man, that's the gun right there."

The friend was extremely affable and kind. I didn't know their names yet, but I was enjoying the frequency these men were tuned to after such a chaotic turn of events earlier that night.

"You can even see his initials, or at least it looks like a KC."

A third friend emerged from a basement somewhere, wearing a Michael Myer's mask and a long blond wig.

"Check this out, let me hold it, and take the picture. I got it perfect."

His phone went off, very loudly, suddenly and he went oh shit, still wearing the mask and wig. You could immediately tell that it was his girlfriend or wife, and he darted outside, ready to be bitched at for a half hour while the crickets chirped and the laundry machine went berserk and then lapsed into a clunky rhythm, and then a groove, and it was like 2am and I still didn't know these guys names. We smoked so much weed. I looked at the gun, and indeed the letters KC were scratched into it. I left a half hour later, and the third friend was still on the phone with his lady, wearing the mask and wig and just saying Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

LIFE IS SHORT

The priest had started going man-to-man in the audience, asking either inappropriate or unfunny questions like an overconfident comedian doing stage work as a measure of last resort.

"How much money you got? Put more in the tray next time, Hernandez."

None of them seemed to care that he was trashed or that this was a church service. Hernandez just waved his hands and flipped the bird while his kids started crying. He moved on to the next guy.

"I don't remember your name because it ain't my job. But you're not dressed for church, and you ain't got a family. Lost soul. Lost soul, that's you, little man."

"Peter, look at me when your priest is talking... Peter, you've been good to this church, but we all know how cheap you are. Why are you so cheap, Peter? If you got money problems, just tell us.. right here, right out in the open. I want to hear how many dollars you have in your bank account."

Peter was about to cry. His teenage daughter glared at the priest.

"He makes more money than you, you freakin bum."

The priest laughed.

"None of you ever seem to want to put a lot of money in the tray. What gives? Do you just feel like hanging out here? Why don't you just- you know- go to a better church, or somewhere else."

The teenage girl just got up and walked out.

He moved on to the next man, Jameson Earl, who stood up and sat back down as he made eye contact with the priest and held his wife's hand.

"Earl, you are such a sack of shit about everything. Lighten up! You're in church, act like it. This is the best congregation in East Radio, and you're stickin out like a sore thumb with your terrible attitude. I don't even want your money this week, go take your pocket change and go find a good ferris wheel. Lighten up! Life is short!"

THE STORM

Much could be said about the Storm and all the destruction it caused. An entire book of tales could go into painstaking detail. One day it probably will - but I couldn't fathom such a thing, as all my books had been destroyed. My beloved older brother and both of my parents - gone to flooding or flame. 'Twas me and my youngest sister Edith who survived - paddling on some wretched boat we had stolen from some miserly elders trying to make a quick buck. The only man left to provide safe and dry harbor was the terrible curmudgeon Dr. Longestfellow-Darnzt. Like the scheming, cackling salesmen selling the most basic of merchandise at some comically immoral mark-up, Dr. L-D had nothing to offer to the world but incessant cackling and an insufferable disposition. A decrepit old man howling "I told you so!"

I had no interest in his games and told him he had a duty to provide a roof and a meal for a night. He cooed to Edith and

told her to sit on his lap, ignoring what I had said, and the poor girl screamed as she looked into the blacks of his eyes, running towards the door of his miserable shack as I ganged up on the man, mustering the most ill tempered manner I could imagine as I shook the old Geezer back and forth and told him exactly what I was going to do if he touched Edith again, and the terrible husk of a man cackled even louder than before, pointing his reeking yellowed finger at Edith and bellowing,

"Now you understand, after this ruinous, vengeful storm! Now you understand what prayer is, little Edith!"

The old man, this horrible old pervert, illiterate and cruel - cackled again, and threw up in his lap, right into the pages of his Bible.

THE HERMIT

I am 7 years old, and my father has just arrived in his helicopter after a months-long "personal adventure mission" to procure a "true hermit" for the grounds. It had been talked about for years, and I took it upon myself to do as much research on "true hermits" that the local library system permitted. Soon, to my horror, other children - some of them from wealthier families yet - began to hone in on my fascination, and using their dinnertable curiosity, soon became aware of my father and his company's boardmembers fixation on authentic hermitage, and one of them managed to find public filing documents which included an anonymous poem, or at least a poem by Madam Anonymous, attached:

*Over the clouds sailing along the mountain top
Far from the world, in an austere abode aloft
Lived the hermit*

*Tranquil amid books and art
In a pine hut, center of a pristine alpine heart
Content with lone majestic thoughts and deeds
Aloof from society's frivolous needs
Solitude was the goal, solitude was the reward
Life was fulfilling, life was satisfyingly broad
Thus lived the hermit*

*Her contributions to the world were none
But the freedom from others' oppression was won
If living a full life was the sole purpose of her birth
She had achieved it
In the fierce light of her solitary hut's hearth
The hermit*

As soon as the helicopter landed I could see that it was packed to the brim with men, although not all of them candidates, I presumed. It is said much by those with a poverty for adventure that no true hermits exist anymore, and until what happened next I took this as fact.

Dogs I had never seen before rushed the men as they were all pulled out in a chain-gang, my father cackling as a fuming little cigar almost fell between the crook of his back broken tooth.

"Get 'em boys! Hah!"

Everything seemed to swirl around as I immediately gave up any hope of diffusing or de-escalating what was happening. My father and his men all looked at me, cackling still, as if they had opened the wrong jar in some pyramid...

"Sport! Look at all these men! Put the bags over their - yeah!"

Bagged and chained, it didn't matter. All of these men - "hermits" - looked identical as they flopped around in terror. Bearded, emaciated, oil paintings of men. None of them wore anything that wasn't tattered remains barely clinging on.

"We bagged 5 of 'em in a cave system! Over 2000 feet deep. They say they don't speak any English, have no clue what reality is like outside the cave. He talked to them in Latin! These guys must be the oldest men alive. Well, gotta be careful. We lost one on the way there..."

A few of them started moaning and praying. I began to cry.

"Aw, don't worry. This way they're never going to leave the estate. Imagine if Validmir Putin found them running around the woods one night. He'd take all their wisdom for bad!"

"Wasn't Osama bin Laden kind of a hermit?"

"They stone hermits to death in Al Jazeera."

"Light up another little cigar, would you, squirt."

I don't have a light or a little cigar.

COLD BEER AGAINST MY SWOLLEN EAR

Jeremy Leonard could have never possibly fathomed such a place. He had imagined Texas through films and cartoons - harsh desert, lonely diners, cowboys kicking up dirt along their lonesome plains. As his family drove into their new subdivision, their neighborhood, and to their home on the cul-de-sac he found himself struck with deja-vu several times as he recognized the same house design he had seen printed out in his father's office, the house they were closer and closer to until they pulled up, his father triumphant and mother sighing with relief as his younger sisters woke up. As he got out of the car, he quickly and simply realized that he had a new life now. At the age of 15, he had handled himself well in his hometown of Terrace, OH - developed a healthy fascination in a robust range of topics, socialized in a precious way and would find girls bashfully staring at him every once in a while. But that Jeremy Leonard could disappear for many reasons, he thought to himself as his parents urged him to enter their new house - he still entranced by the valley of subdivisions in the distance, wondering how far it all goes. He asked his mother - pointedly - when all of this had been built and her eyes lit up for a second as she said "None of this was here two years ago. Can you imagine that? I guess all the big companies have been investing in smaller cities - towns - I don't know. The internet companies are all signing contracts with umm...

"I'll send you the article later- let's go inside! Come on, I've been waiting !"

And she walked inside, and Leonard just started walking. Everything was so clean, and he did not subscribe to these childish notions that the suburbs have no soul or value for America - even if his new house had doppelgangers. In a paper he had read once, he read about "house sisters," and realized that his new house had many sisters. Leonard had two sisters, who modeled themselves after him and took reading, cinema and photography very seriously for their age (7 and 11). He has tried to get both of them to play chess and piano, hoping he could unlock a latent genetic artifact deep in his bloodline that might give his family one remotely talented musician. Sadly, they took mostly to the percussive actions of the piano and would play monstrously repetitive rhythms of the lowest notes possible, which Leonard recorded out of a begrudging fascination towards this primitive and (literally) childhood display but stopped asking them to play his piano shortly after, telling them he needed to return some of the strings as a result of their idiosyncratic style that "put a lot of stress," on some "delicate low notes."

He walked for hours, and realized that this wasn't some giant byzantine maze, but rather a somewhat orderly cluster of subdivisions all connected through a very long creek and wooded path that must have stretched on for many miles. He discovered that each subdivision was a bit different; he could feel a sense of suburban anarchy as he ventured farther away from his home - kids his age burning things in the street, shooting each other with air-soft guns., stray kittens abound and men without shirts on.

In his hometown, Leonard knew everything and the entire city was constructed in a very linear way; "vertical streets" were named after trees or flowers, and "horizontal streets" were simply numbered. There was one high school, two churches, two bars and a video store next to a wonderful diner that he had already forgotten the name of.

By the time he made it back home, his father laughed and threw a football at him and hit him right in the head as he gazed out again at the initial view of subdivisions baked in sun - now in a dark-purple magic-hour hue. He just let the football bounce off of him, and then reacted to the pain a couple minutes later as his ears swell up and he told his father about the new town and how many subdivisions there were and how they all fed into golf courses, creeks, parks, schools and ponds that you could actually fish in. Everything was connected, it was like a perfect system. He put a cold beer against my head and told me to take a sip as my ears swelled up to twice their size and as I chugged the beer out of general dehydration, he gently took it back and thought to himself, The kid might be concussed.

"Hey Jeremy, what year is it?"

"2002."

"Who is the president?"

"Well, the other day you said it was Dick Cheney."

"And how many fingers am I holding up?"

"None. One hand is holding the beer and the other hand is -"

And Mike Leonard quickly flipped the bird, stuck his tongue out, did a bit of a moonwalk and wrapped his arms around his son's shoulders, urging him to finally, for the love of God, go check out this new house.

"I AM GOING TO BUILD A SWORD."

"I am going to build a sword that can only be held by its creator. Anyone else that tries to hold it gets burned, and the blade crumbles to pieces as they advance towards their enemy, who may be the sword's creator itself - you know,"

"And then like, so, everyone in this world has a sword and you can do anything, you use it like your ID, your soul is embedded in your sword,"

"And when you die, your soul will be embedded within your sword. Yeah. A crystal which holds the sword together, the crystal that will hold your soul."

The boardmembers, all visibly disturbed and recoiling in unison, scanning the room to find anything to look at but him, or each other, or the camera in front of each of them, knowing this "sword" was going to be built whether they liked it or not. And collectively, they all started clapping, cheering.

"Thank you all. God Bless, and may you all think swords today. Because they were made for a reason. Think on it. I don't need to give you clues. I don't need to worry. I don't need the sword. You do."

NEIGHBORS

"I want love letters, not junk mail! All I ever get is junk mail. Do you know how embarrassing it is to just get junk mail every day and letters from collections agencies in red envelopes saying that they're going to put me into debtor's jail? Are you- listen, bitch- are you even going to pay my comisary money in debtors prison when those motherfuckers come to get me for probably the lousiest bills possible. Where the hell are my love letters? Or just gifts, why doesn't your sister send us samples of the candles she makes. Just a damned sample, I don't want to pay money to her again," he said, exasperated. He had been going on and on about how this wasn't working lost distance but there was not a fat assed chance in hell he was going to break up with his new girlfriend, who was already halfway out the door as lightning struck his house, and probably every house in the neighborhood, and the phone went dead. He stared at the window and started ranting aloud.

"All I ever get is junk mail! I don't ever get love letters, or well-wishing thoughts from old friends, or photos of my neices and nephews or anyone! What a jip. I spend tens of thousands of dollars on this woman and the least she could do is write a brief, tantalizing note with her scent on it and

lipstick from a kiss to me from the page, at the bottom of the letter where she has written her name so effeminate and-

"SHUT THE FUCK UP! STOP IT! WE CAN ALL HEAR YOU! IT'S LATE!!!," his neighbor barked out at the paper-thin wall between them, his neighbor he had never seen before but talked to many times, a crude and one-dimensional man. He looked at his watch and fumed.

"IT IS 7:30, ARE YOU AN OLD MAN? Be serious with me now!! TELL ME, ARE YOU AN OLD MAN, BECAUSE YOU SHOULD BE IN A RETIREMENT HOME IF YOU'RE GOING TO TELL ME TO BE QUIET AT 7:30 P M" He walked right up to the wall and spoke normally to the man, calming down, adjusting his glasses and khakis and sitting down patiently- almost excited to bicker with this unreasonable curmudgeon yet again.

"The sun hasn't even set. How is it late? Answer me, you son of a bitch who is apparently one of the biggest snoopers I've ever met. I have every single right in America to talk to my woman in peace and if you are even half the man I am, then you will see where I'm coming from when I say that I am God damn sick of junk mail. That, is simply it."

The guy didn't say anything for half a minute, and then:

"WE ALL GET JUNK MAIL. EVERYDAY IT IS JUNK MAIL. EXCEPT FOR ME, BECAUSE I JUST GOT A LOVE LETTER, AND IT CAME

FROM THE WOMAN YOU JUST TALKED TO ON THE PHONE! HA HA HA HA!"

And our guy just shakes his head and rolls his eyes, as if he isn't talking to a wall and the guy can see his reaction. This old, decrepit grinch of a man, he thought, what a nuisance he has been and a snooper, and yet I do feel less lonely knowing he's always there on the other end of the wall.

"DID YOU HEAR ME? I SAID I'M SCREWING YOUR BITCH. SHE'S SITTING ON MY LAP RIGHT NOW! HA HA HA!"

"Can I ask you a question? A serious question for once, since you've just become a broken record and a snooper. You know, you were once funny, and I had to actually stifle my laughter as you berated me for being too loud at "bedtime," when it was probably like, noon or something. This is my question: what the hell kind of television shows and movies and books did you grow up with?"

"I HATE ALL OF THOSE THINGS. NEXT QUESTION."

"What about pornographic movies?"

"I DONT KNOW WHAT PORNOGRAPHIC IS. I DONT KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT THE WORLD! HA HA HA."

"Yes, you do. You know what a love letter is, you make crass and sexual jokes all day, so come on. Fess up. But I'm not gay, and we both know the truth. Be a man, you son of a bitch. I swear to God that you just lie in bed all day and probably have tremendous bedsores and back problems. Be a man and answer me for once, or maybe I will have to just call the police and have them do a wellness check on you. I'm sure once they see the rancid state you're in that you will be immediately committed to some sort of distant, faraway sanitarium and someone quiet and friendly will move in, to replace you, and they won't snoop or yell as much either. Should I call the police? Tell me, be a man, you son of a bitch."

"SHUT UP I AM TRYING TO SLEEP AND YOU ARE ASKING THE GAYEST QUESTIONS OF ALL TIME," and started singing, "GO TO SLEEP, TO SLEEP, GO TO SLEEP LITTLE PERVERT, GO TO SLEEP AND CLOSE YOUR EYES, THIS IS A HOMO'S LULLABY. GO TO SLEEP, GO TO SLEEP, OH PLEASE GO TO SLEEP, GO TO SLEEP YOU BABY MAN, GO TO SLEEP NOW LITTLE ANGEL, GO TO SLEEP YOU DUMB BITCH."

"IS THAT ENOUGH FOR YOU HOMO? IF YOU SAY ANOTHER WORD I AM GOING TO DRILL A HOLE THROUGH THIS WALL SO I CAN SEE WHAT A FAT COWARD YOU ARE. AND THEN MAYBE I WILL JUST START PUNCHING AND KICKING INTO THE HOLE HAHAHAHAHAHA!! AND YOU WILL COWER IN FEAR AS I TEAR DOWN THIS FLIMSY WALL AND I WILL BE WEARING A MASK AND

I WILL HOLD A CHAINSAW IN MY HAND AND SHOW YOU WHO IS THE MAN OF THE HOUSE, HOMO!"

The rain fell, and nothing was said, and all the steam had been let out, yet again, for these two men. They had reached a draw. They were at peace.

And as the power came back on, so did their television sets, both tuned to the same channel, the walls so thin that both men could hear the echo of the other television, and abruptly they both turned off their television sets in unison, and just listened to the rain, thinking in their head, scrambling thoughts around and waiting for the next moment.

THE PRIEST

The priest was drooling all over the floor and tossing all of his crosses and religious garments to the floor, occasionally babbling something and looking shocked. The sky was completely black that day.

Behind him, hidden in the darkness rolling through the stained glass, was the priest's twin brother, a most foul and duplicitous man who had stolen so much money from the church that people prayed for him, saying that the Devil made him take such a large amount of money. The churchgoers, sad and defeated and malnourished, all started to walk out as the priest's awful twin brother swiftly walked towards the gentleman holding the collection plate and threw garbage from his pocket in, before boasting loudly that he was going to the casino and that his brother was a retarded, dying coward. He died three days later from liver cirrhosis. The priest recovered not only to full health but recovered as well the stolen funds, which had been sewn into his brother's wool jacket.

'SCORNER II'

The decrepit regime all gawk'd and cry'd,
Splintered to trivia and anec.dote,
Torn into tears and tear'd into motes,
Smooth'd & cadav'rous as their launder'd cash,
Their ruinous artless pride,
Their hepatic, pulsing bloat,
In the highest rez' stands the lowest trash,
Biding time for other worlds,
Greek boats and such,
The wicked witch uncurled,
The brick road's gold untouch'd.

THE TINY CHIMP

I immediately refused to ever acknowledge the Thing by its "name." I was not surprised that others did not participate in my initiative. I didn't mean to make the Thing do what it did. I wanted it to be taken care of by professional-

"Aren't you a professional?"

"I once found a perfect house... perfect neighborhood... me and my girl friend..."

As soon as my face or vocal affect registered - to them, the women harassing me - as soon as they realized they pounced - found nothing, and fled.

Man in the bar says a gazelle is only in the top 80% of the food chain. I tell him that is an advantageous place to be; he agrees. I go to the bar so I don't have to go to the other bar so I don't have to talk or think about the Thing, the Chimp.

It is not just ugly, and has no cosmetic wounds or scarring, no - it is a sort of defiance, almost cat-like but with more energy. I have looked into its eyes. I fear that there is a very little man inside of Banana the Chimp. This is all I think about when I happen to pass by the lab facilities the Thing is being shuttled around to. I see a very little man, as though only my eyes could, and he is a prototype... There will be more, and they will see even smaller men in every scale of creature and insect...

THE PRIVATE BUSINESS CLUB

"Hello, Timothy. It is me, again. You can not hide from me Timothy, and it is so cold. It is freezing out here! Timothy, you need to pay your dues to the Private Business Club. It's been three months since your embarrassing episode, and you haven't submitted a formal resignation. I am here to collect that debt, God dammit, Timothy! Open up. It's so cold. Hello, Timothy? You can not hide from me Timothy, and it is so cold. It is freezing out here! Timothy, you need to pay your dues to the Private Business Club. It's been three months since your embarrassing episode, and you haven't submitted a formal resignation."

Two repetitive, crackling throat-sounds that a fool might call a "cough" emerged.

"I am here to collect that debt, God dammit, Timothy! Open up. It's so cold. Hello, Timothy? The Private Business Club is starting to get impatient from your absence and rumors are beginning to surface that you are too cheap to pay your dues. Hello, Timothy?"

My Uncle grabbed his shovel and almost tore the door into splinters as he thrust the head of it into the little electronic man that had come to collect his paltry dues for the awful Private Business Club which he no longer wished to attend. The little mechanical man went flying off into the freezing tundra, its head at least - as my Uncle pummeled its pitiful humanoid frame down into un-fanned sparkling rubble.

FLINCH

My father was an ill-tempered, miserly man with no sense of humor, a curmudgeon in a league of his own who was known all throughout town for his reputation: “snake oil salesman,” “flim-flam man,” “a loser,” “a con artist,” “a charlatan,” and all of those may have been true, but to this day

I am not sure if “the father from hell” is anywhere close to accurate, although based on his nicknames, monikers and rumors it would be fair to assume that he wasn’t a model parent. He was not a model parent; he didn’t want to teach me anything, discouraged me from pursuing my goals, and was constantly being harassed in public by stronger, dumber men who had gotten roped into one of his terrible business deals and would shake and stutter and plead for the men to leave. He was a lanky man, almost 6’6 tall and with a pencil thin mustache. At the age of 10, I had watched enough TV shows and read enough books to know what divorce and broken families are, and asked him why he didn’t just leave town or make a new life.

“Because I love you, your mother and your brother. You just need to give me time. I am working on something. And I would never leave this family, or this town. I was born here, and I

watched my sons get born here. You don't think that meant something to me? Listen, boy, I am working on something. I have so much love to give. And the entire town will change their praise once they see what I've - what I am working on - but I have to concentrate. So let me concentrate, and we can be happy later. OK?"

It would be years later until he would elaborate further on the matter. I was a teenager by then, and he was powerless to stop me, and I was aware enough to project my own safety and well-being despite the valid concerns of various classmates, townsfolk and school administrators. On the first day of high school, my father was being arrested in the drama department for trying to "borrow" some dummies and mannequins and wigs. They found keys to an 18-wheeler that had been found almost 1000 miles away full of bootleg cigarettes, I would later find out. As I walked in to the school that first day, he was being escorted out at the same time as students pored in and was screaming at me to never join the drama department as girls, friends, teachers, everyone laughed at him, his cheap suit riding up to his knees, his comb over splaying around and the cops doing a bit of a comedy routine, flipping him back and forth and showing how easy he is to manipulate, just like the wooden dummy he had tried to steal that day, which a third cop carried behind them as evidence, holding it like a little boy. It was total pandemonium, embarrassment that only few know, and the laughter was like a symphony, it was almost beautiful looking back now hadn't it been directed at me. The next day, he was caught doing the same thing at a department store. I went to his study after the cops let him go - for some reason they had a begrudging rapport and respect for my father, as if he alone gave them purpose and surprise without violence. I didn't even knock, because I didn't respect him at all. Perhaps a part of me feared him, some residual effect. But he had never hit me; he spent many months once summer getting me to flync constantly, which I always did, everytime. And my mother had to explain it.

"You need to just not flync. One you don't flync, you win, and the game is over."

"Do you still love him?"

“Yes. And you should, too. He’s your father. And he has to concentrate. So stop flynching.”

I walked right into my father’s study, and he was watching a very low-fidelity live TV broadcast of a Taiwanese billiards game. He was awkwardly trying to enunciate a Mandarin phrase over the phone, sweating profusely and staring at the screen as a small boy starts messing with the camera, and is blocking the game and twisting around the focus on the lens and unplugging various cables, and then he sighs with relief for what I assume was his bet on the billiards game going through successfully. He hadn’t noticed I was in the room, and the entire scene was a bit fascinating; he had bought a very expensive and large satellite dish and a “global box” as he called it that could pull in every single TV channel on the planet – including the private ones. Computers, monitors, half-smoked cigars, maybe a thousand or so paperback books. He glared at the child, asking plainly on the phone “Please-fix-camera now? Child-in-camera-way. Child-in-camera-way.” He kept repeating until the line went dead, and looked at his watch, and then back at me, and then looked startled for a second as he pointed directly at the Taiwanese child on the screen and said “The CHILD is in the CAMERA’s WAY!” as the power went out, as if he has struck lightning to the earth at that very moment.

He breathed heavily, hoping it would just come back on and he could resume his frantic, cheap betting and shoo me out of the room.

But the power didn’t come back on, his breathing went quiet, and he lit a cigarette, and then another cigarette, passing one to me. He already knew I had started smoking years ago. He didn’t care.

“You know how much money I have riding on this?”

“No.”

“Not a lot. It’s just for... well- it’s just the feeling of tapping in to the world.”

“What do you mean?”

“I like to connect directly to some miserable, decrepit pool hall or some cricket game in India or just explore the world this way. I like to explore the world this way. If I win this race, I’ll make about fiftythousand dollars.”

“I thought you didn’t put much in?”

“I didn’t need to. The horse only has three legs. And it’s the first race. It’s like a freak show. The horse doesn’t look like a horse even.”

“So why did you bet on it?”

“Because... I had a dream. And I saw this horse. And I know exactly how the race will go. Except in the dream, he has a different name. I won’t repeat it, because it’s a disgusting moniker dredged from my subconscious.”

“So why did you steal all those dummies and mannequins? And on my first day of school? It was like you planned it all, just to ruin my life the day I started a new one, at a new high school. Why did you need to do that? Please tell me.”

I started to weep uncontrollably, immediately, and as the hiccups came he passed me a stale, warm beer that had probably been sitting under his desk for a week.

THE MAYOR

"Hey Son?... I'm on the other end of the door, bud. This is me - your dad that loves you and I can't - unfortunately - take a peek at you... Your Mayor wanted me to say that to you - he calls the shots. You're the man of the house now, so respect the man of the town. I'm gonna be joining the Steperkewisck family for some time, perhaps permanently. If you saw me right now you would never talk to me again. Please don't open the door. OK. Mayor is calling me. I need to answer ---"

I looked over at Jeremy, his face showing annoyance, as if he had just been told he can't rent a video that night.

"OK, bye."

"Bye son, maybe I'll see you again..."

"Okay"

"Bye, I love you son..."

"Love you too. See you never."

'THE MUMMY WALL'

Chipped from a mummy-wall howling
"I am more than innocent, I am a hero,"
Thrown into the drossed pit in the
Drained suburban lake
All these stinking wet dummies of clay and books
Worthless fad books and cracked spines of ephemera
In each one of these reeking
desperate mannequins is about
2 ounces of silver
And some of them
Can be taught to act like children