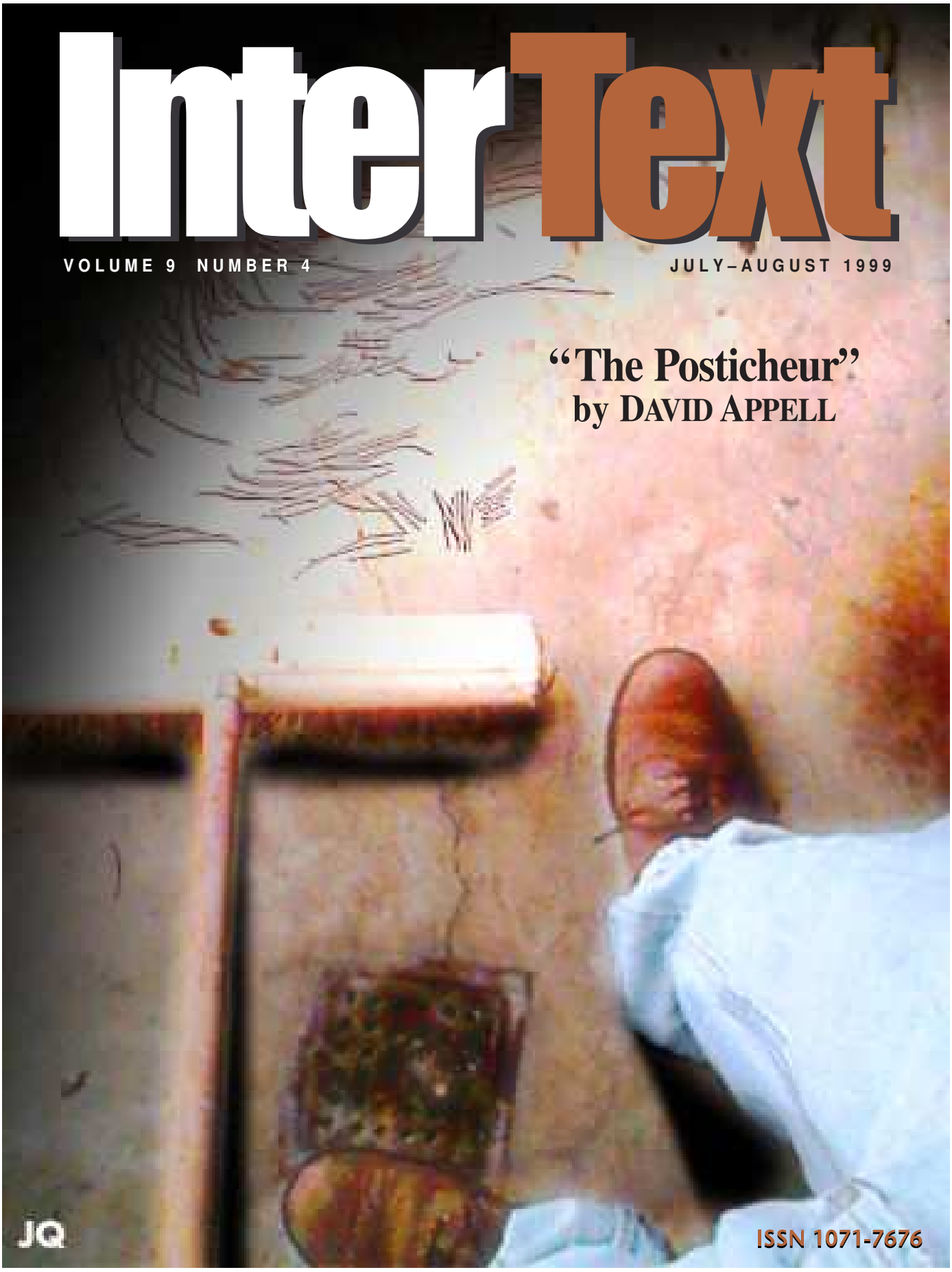
InterText

VOLUME 9 NUMBER 4 JULY–AUGUST 1999



"The Posticheur"
by DAVID APPELL

JQ

ISSN 1071-7676

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JULY–AUGUST 1999
VOLUME 9, NUMBER 4

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Baby Girl

WILLIAM ROUTHIER

How can you even begin *to describe the ways a parent affects a child's life?*

SO THERE I AM DRIVING DOWN THE HIGHWAY, she's beside me in the front seat making little baby noises, strapped into the kid-driving-seat thing I bought special for the occasion, and I see the sign and I think, all right, *this* is still New Hampshire… here comes Massachusetts… state line, automatic federal case. You're in it all the way now. I mean, it's not like I didn't know what I was doing, but I'm thinking, well, here I am, deep shit again.

All I wanted was to be with my baby girl, that's all. There was no sense in mulling over consequences at that point. When a thing's done, it's done, and you deal with it strictly on those terms. Any other way of looking at life just makes you crazy.

For custody the court was gonna side with Donna, naturally. All it would take was one look at my sheet. Done time twice, numerous arrests. Assault with a deadly weapon. Repeat offender, career type. Yep.

He said I have a low boredom threshold, one of the prison shrinks. Hyperactive, starting when I was a kid. Too smart to be content with a normal life, basically insecure, and needing to prove myself on a large scale, like, with society in general. Problem with authority, stemming from a bad relationship with my old man. Yeah, you might say that.

So his advice was, when I got out after my eight months or whatever, if I wanted to change, I'd have to find a proper outlet for my excessive brainwave activity. Higher aspirations, loftier goals, maybe think about returning to college, take up philosophy, dentistry, archeology. Become a lawyer. Then, after I finish, pay off all the loans, by the time I'm fifty, I can start earning a decent living. This is advice he gives to a guy they know has a low boredom threshold. This is an expert.

Hey, everybody carves their own niche in life, you know? You make it however you can, put together what works. I don't say I'm a prize, but I'd never do anything to hurt my little girl. I want the best for her. But you think any judge is going to see things that way?

Yeah, sure, I'm dangerous. Christ, I know it, I've been around myself longer than anyone else, right? Yeah, get in the way, wrong day, wrong place, and I'm dangerous. But does that mean I'd hurt my daughter? Fuck no.

So I'm driving, feeling good enough, Jennie sitting there looking out the window at things going by. I turn on the radio, a slow country heartbreaker comes on, weepy steel guitar, and she just beams at the sound of it. My heart leaps and I think, well, she's got her old man's good taste in music, anyhow.

See, people paint you all one color. Oh, he's a criminal, pushes drugs, shot a guy in a 7-11. *It sure was lucky for Bobby the guy didn't die, or he'd still be up the river and not out on the street.*

I don't say I'm a prize, but I'd never do anything to hurt my little girl. I want the best for her.

Well, yeah, okay, I did it. I got reasons. Maybe I came into this world a little bit bent out of shape from the start. Try living through what my old man did to me, when you're a kid and don't know shit, get smacked on the back with a two-by-four, ten years old, 'cause you didn't clean up the garage good enough. Get locked in the cellar for a weekend for talking back. Watching him do worse shit to your Mom. Then tell me how you feel about the world in general.

So when you're someone like me who never had, what you'd call a fair shot, you find out something else. People can smell it on you like dog shit on shoes. They can see it in your eyes, the fear you have just saying hello to an adult. They just say you're an unbalanced individual, but you're more like a scared animal. And people make judgements, say things behind your back about you, and this is when you might still have some vulnerability left, full of pain, hurt and hatred, maybe, but still got them tender young feelings, right?

So what do you get? Understanding? Nah. Judgement.

Do you know what judgement is? Judgement's a stone wall. You can hit it with a rock, you can bash it with a baseball bat, you can run up against it with your head until your brains are on the floor and that wall will stay there just like it was, not busted up even a tiny bit. That's when you start getting the idea the only thing that will knock Judgement down is something big enough to get everybody's attention. Something like dynamite.

You meet a new neighbor kid's mother who shuts her door in your face after saying go home and don't ever come back because you're one of them Gilkins and she heard about you and she don't want you playin' with Jimmy and you run away crying but secretly in your heart agree with her that you're no good. Or there's some chick, when you're a little older, and she flirts you along until you're half crazy and when you finally get to her front

door for a date and her old man who tells you screw, he's heard things about you from the cops and there's no way in hell he'll ever let you alone with his daughter. *Slam.*

See, it makes you feel testy, makes you sort of surly. Anything good that ever happened to me happened because I pried the lid off the sucker with a crowbar and stole the goods. So. Now that I got a bit more leverage in this world, I'm supposed to let my baby girl be taken away, just like that?

Who would've known how much Donna would change after having Jennie? I mean, it used to be I'd come home with five grand and a quarter key of coke, she'd be as happy as me. Well, first few times, she'd be acting nervous, talking scared and sensible, whine about the risk, stomping around, but in the corner of her mouth there was a little curl-up, you know? She was itchy and into the danger, I could tell, the thrill, the money, Jesus, of course the money, and the "dangerous-but-smart man doing dangerous-but-serious money-making things" turn on, and before you could say boo we'd be knocking the chairs aside and doing it right there on the kitchen floor, she'd be so wet and open I'd be sliding in and out like a schoolboy and I'd grab her cheeks and go slapping her on the linoleum until we both screamed like someone was cutting our throats. That's when it was good, me and Donna, that was our honeymoon time.

Then, for some reason—"Because of Jennie," she said—it all had to stop. Okay, Bobby, you have to get a real job and cut this shit. Huh? Am I hearing you right? I have to get another job? Since when are you in charge of me? Oh, for the sake of the baby. Okay, well, let's look at this. I have a prison record, so that leaves out politics. And just about everything else. Okay, how's about me working as a bouncer someplace, breaking my knuckles for chump money, never have enough to be able to really save anything, like for college for our girl, probably not even enough to afford health insurance, for Christ's sake.

This is Donna being sensible.

I know! I can ask down at the McDonald's if they have any local outreach programs and maybe give me a whirl at burger flipping. A couple of years, and it's straight on up to manager, then maybe ten more and I buy the place and they make us into a rehabilitation story on *60 Minutes*. Jesus.

It's like, we have a kid and reality suddenly goes flying out the window. Can't have this stuff going on around the baby. Okay, Donna, relax, I agree, hey, no problem. Honest. I keep everything away from home, won't even talk about it, when she gets old enough I'll tell her I have a number of different businesses. We'll make something up. I'm in construction. How's about that? I can see no trouble there. And maybe sometime in the future I will be able to go straight, but not just yet. I got to keep working out these various angles I'm into. The timing's wrong.

She won't settle for that. She says something's changed. She says she sees things differently now. She says I got to get straight. Real soon. For the sake of the baby.

Then one day she's gone. And Jennie's gone. I go out, come home, they're gone. My wife. My kid.

My kid. See, the important word here is my kid. Donna, she's like everybody, she's got me all one color. She thinks I'm gonna corrupt Jennie, like I'm gonna make her into a monster, as if anything could sour that sweet baby, least of all me who loves her. Hell, I want to spoil her awful. But Donna thinks I got to drain all the color out of me that she don't like, all the old James, that's what I need to do to fix things. Like after I do that I'm still gonna be me. Fuck that. I'm what I am. One piece. Good or bad, like it or don't. I won't be cut open, gutted like a fish, stuffed and sewed up and told I'm better now. That's a dead man. That's nothing. That's what all the good people would like me to be.

So I stole my baby back. One good turn. I'm driving and thinking and Jennie's looking around, flexing her little hands the way kids do, smiling, happy. Thirteen months old and I haven't even seen her for ten. Man, it's still like she just jetted in from some place where they go on *Star Trek,* you know? Her eyes, those eyes, right from some deep sleep, fresh out of the universe, man, it's like they were washed in a magic pool that gives them a shine nothing on this earth could ever take away. Yeah, sure. But, like, this here is my kid, man, that's the difference this time. She's gonna keep that shine in her eyes if I have any fucking thing to do with it. Damned if I'm not going to make sure she's treated right and gets everything a little girl should have and doesn't ever want for a thing, never ends up holding the short end like yours truly.

Donna's not always too bright. I wouldn't trust what kind of guy she might end up with. I didn't care about her leaving me, I mean, I was already getting sick of her. So that I didn't really mind, though it pissed me off she was the one breaking it off. After she took off with Jennie, she calls, finally, a couple of days later. Okay, you want to split up, fine, I say. Oh, you say you've got a restraining order and you're going to court for custody and are going to keep me from having any contact with my baby? Ahhh. Not so fine.

So we wait and wait and then we go to court and they say I can't see her, can't see my baby girl. I'm deemed an unfit parent. Not that I had any arrests or violations lately. The past was enough. She talked about cocaine in the house and some other deals I was involved with recently. Allegedly.

So the judge judged me guilty. What else is new?

And at first I let it go, said fuck it, even though I'm burning inside, I let it go, for months and then one day I say no, I can't let it go no more.

Jennie's not crying, even after an hour on the road. I figured she would be, but she's not, seems happy as hell, cooing and looking around out the window interested at things, guess she still remembers and likes her Daddy, fuck you, Donna.

All I'd figured out at this point was I'd sneak her with me into a motel someplace and then think about what to do next. What I didn't think of was her shitting her drawers so quick. Then she started crying. Okay, I find a CVS. Get the Pampers, pull into a Burger King on the highway, check the lot out for State cops, bring her with me into the men's room with the box of the things, everybody smiling at me, nice daddy. Change her in the stall, she's bawling and it's not real easy and it stinks, but we do it, dump it, clean her up, put a new one on and she's happy now, I get her a soft ice-cream cup, and we drive out safe.

I'm in a rental. I'm not worried about being spotted because I took it out on the primo credit card I'd been saving for just such an occasion. It's a card copy, valid magnetic tape, cross-checked social security number on the matching I.D., forged signatures, the whole bit. This inside guy at the credit card company does them. I got turned on to the racket by a mafia friend of mine. They do things right. Clean. With them it's strictly business. My kind of people, except for the paisan thing. They're a little bit… what I'd call exclusive.

Anyway, the card holder never has his card stolen, so he doesn't think there's anything wrong, has no way of knowing I've got a little vacuum hose attached to his account until the charges show up at the end of the month. It's perfect. Plenty of lead time. Just don't make any strange withdrawals. So I wasn't worried about being tracked.

I'm pretty sure no one saw me going into the apartment Donna was holed up at. That was a beauty too. This cop I'm friends with found out about her case, got into the file and checked where they relocated her. He owed me. I bailed his ass out of a touchy matter once, eliminated a certain problem. He was sympathetic besides, has kids and knows what cruel bitches women can be. I cased her house from a hill half a mile away with binoculars. I felt bad about tying up the old lady who was taking care of Jennie while Donna was out, but it was just duct tape and clothesline, and she wasn't all that old. I'm sure she was all right. I wore a gas company hat and that fooled her. Jesus. Some people are so dumb it's criminal.

Jennie sleeps, wakes up, cries a little, I give her this pacifier I bought and she's happy again. I drive, and when it's night I find a Red Roof Inn and rent a room. I got on glasses and I'm wearing a Red Sox hat to cover my hair, I got my fake I.D. and credit card, I'm not doing anything high profile, so far so good, we're still okay, I'm feeling all right. I carry her around to the room without anybody seeing us.

I put her on the bed—she'd peed her diaper. I change it, and she's real sleepy and not sure what's going on, so I put her under the blanket and she seems happy about that and she's out cold instantly, sleeping like a goddamned baby, you know, and so I go out quick, just down the street to the liquor store for a fifth of Jack Daniels. I'm gone only, like, less than five minutes, and coming back I'm jumping out of my car running up to the room, my hand shaking putting the key in, thinking she woke up and is touching the electric outlet, smashing the little glass in the bathroom cutting herself even though she couldn't reach it. She's strangling herself choking under the covers.

I run up to the room, shaking, thinking she's choking under the covers or touching the electric outlet.

I flip on the light and she's just like she was, little sleeping face. I put out the light, turn on the bathroom light, take the paper off the glass and pour a good long shot.

I sit there on the chair beside the bed looking at my baby girl. She doesn't know what any of this means. She's innocent, beautiful, a blank slate. I'm considering that I was probably something like that before my old man got to me. I'm staring at her and I know it's just me thinking but it's suddenly like she's worrying in her sleep, and then I'm thinking tomorrow sometime she'll look at me wondering what the hell's going on here, and she's gonna wonder where her momma is and start crying. And we'll be moving all the time, driving, I'll be changing her diapers and trying to keep her quiet with McDonald's and eventually she'll be crying all the time 'cause her momma isn't there and I won't know what the fuck to do.

A streak of anger shoots up, from the liquor I guess, but I'm suddenly feeling real mean about this whole thing. Something flips over like a card you weren't expecting in a poker game, a loser card. It seems no matter what, I can't ever get it to work how I want, that's how it hits me. This anger rages red hot, and I want to hurt her bad, hurt the baby, just for what I know it would do to Donna. I hold myself in check then the room goes dark, I don't know for how long. When it comes back into focus, I'm afraid to look down, actually, for what I might see. But she's there sleeping, peaceful, just like before.

That split second, I know something about my old man, about him drawing the loser card, always, about the things he couldn't ever beat or understand, and suddenly I get this weird rush of sympathy, warmth for the bastard.

At the same time I can feel him inside my gut twisting it, telling me how good I'll feel, trying to force me to do something I absolutely don't want to. I'm shaking hands with the devil and I know it. He smiles. Winks. My body's shaking. I suck in some air, sneer at him, say "Fuck off, old man, I ain't you. Fuck off and die," and I drink another one. Then I'm all right, I get back my control.

I stroke her head and pretty soon I fall asleep.

In the morning before dawn I call the cops from the phone booth outside the motel, tell them where my baby girl is, tell them she's fine, sleeping, then I beat it quick right out onto the highway, drive west, try not to think. A thing's done, it's done. Go. Just go. I love my baby girl. That's worth something. I know it is.

WILLIAM ROUTHIER

lives in Boston and has written for Stuff *Magazine,* The Improper Bostonian, The Boston Book Review, *and* Living Buddhism; *his fiction has appeared in* Happy *and* atelier. *He is currently working on a novel and a book of essays.*

The Worlds of My Desire

STEPHEN DOE

An active fantasy life isn't always such a healthy thing.

ALL GAUL WAS DIVIDED INTO THREE PARTS—AND I was about to lose them all. Which was *not* the way it was supposed to happen.

I was reliving the conquest of Gaul (the interesting parts, anyway), and for a while things had gone my way. I had just taken command, you might say, of the armies of Caesar, when the Aedui—treacherous brutes—renounced their alliance, took my base at Soissons, and prepared to drive me back to my—I mean, Caesar's—province. All of which had my men mightily disturbed, stoic Romans that they were.

The situation looked grim, but of course I knew what was to come next—the conquest of Gaul, and later, Rome. But I wasn't interested in that part at the moment. As Caesar had once done, I gave orders to march on Alesia, where word had it that an army of Gauls was gathering.

And as I had wanted, I found myself caught up in the moment: the desperate march of an embattled army, racing through country filled with foes—quite exhilarating, even though I always knew, deep down, that I was never going to be in any physical danger at all. When was the last time you were truly hurt by your fantasy?

Things began to go wrong after we reached Alesia.

My army and that of the Gauls were of about the same size; that made the Gauls reluctant to fight. Instead, they holed up in their city, hoping that help would arrive. So far, I had followed known history to the letter (even though that was not really necessary). As my army laid siege to the town, I called my lieutenants together, to prepare for the great battle to come.

I had just had my headquarters set up—a big, leather tent, half my living quarters, the other half a workspace, mostly taken up by a large table covered with maps of Gaul and recent dispatches. A half-dozen of my aides and I were seated around this table, discussing tactics, when a messenger rushed in, still breathing heavily.

As Caesar had done, I gave orders to march on Alesia, where word had it an army of Gauls was gathering.

"There's an army of Gauls coming," he gasped. "And it's *big.*"

I raised an eyebrow. I knew this army would come, but this was sooner than I expected. "How many?" I asked.

"Almost two hundred thousand," he said, wincing.

One of the officers—I didn't see which one—gave a low whistle at this figure. Mostly they remained calm, but I could see by the flicker of their eyes that the messenger had certainly gained their attention.

"General?" said the one seated to my immediate left.

"Yes, Marcus Antonius?" I don't remember if Mark Antony had actually been there or not, in history, but it pleased my fancy to think that he might have been.

"I hate to say this, but perhaps we ought to retreat. The men will fight to their last breath, of course, but against so many…" He left it there, clearly uncomfortable.

I frowned; it seemed out of character for Mark Antony to make such a suggestion. (Though of course, he was a

good general in his own right, and was perfectly capable of counting.) At any rate, it jarred my suspension of disbelief, and I didn't like making mistakes like that.

So I sighed, and said, "That would indeed be prudent. However, we have already been forced to retreat once. All of Gaul is now in open revolt. If we retreat now, we have lost Gaul. And we must not lose Gaul—at the very least, Gaul must serve as a buffer against the Germans. Not to mention that the Gauls have shown themselves capable of attacking Rome on their own account. Gaul must be pacified, and it must be pacified now." Then I smiled at them. "Do not fear too much, men—remember that Caesar's fortune is with you."

The men filed out, unexpectedly cheerful at that pronouncement. They really believed that stuff.

Now, what happened in real history was that Caesar's army sandwiched themselves between two walls of earth, the inner wall surrounding the city, which was still besieged, and the outer defending against the Gauls coming to lay siege to the present besiegers. After about a week of futile attacks, the Gauls outside gave up and left, being relatively feckless and low on supplies. The starving Gauls inside the siege then gave up their chieftain, and Gaul was from then on territory of Rome.

Well, this time it didn't turn out like that at all.

My hackles went up immediately when I saw how quiet and disciplined they were. In previous battles, I had seen them wild and barbaric, reckless, quick to attack but also quick to run away when outnumbered or outfought. These Gauls took their time arraying themselves against our ramparts, waiting for the word to attack.

Then all at once they charged us, silently. They usually screamed bloody murder. Two hundred thousand screaming Gauls would have been bad enough, but this was worse, somehow. The way they charged, all in step together, and silent, like zombies—truly creepy.

Then they opened up on us. With rifles.

Can you picture a barbaric Gaul, trousered, wearing torcs and ornaments of gold, hair and beard streaming behind him as he charges you—with a fucking *rifle* in his hands?

I despise anachronisms. Some people enjoy them, but God, I hate them.

And now I have to admit that I am really no general. By the time I caught my breath, half my army had been mowed down, with hardly a Gaul injured. Even when a Gaul did go down, felled by the occasional javelin or arrow, the others paid no mind, but just kept firing. And just then those bastards *inside* the city charged out to join the battle. And yes, they had rifles too.

Up until now, I had done nothing really extraordinary, aside from re-creating the battle in the first place. Now, I did what I could to resist the Gauls, though the attack was so swift the battle was already nearly lost.

I found that if I concentrated, hard, on a group of my soldiers, the bullets would do them no harm, and they could attack the Gauls. But there were still just too many barbarians attacking, and I couldn't focus on all my soldiers at once. Here and there, desperate bands of soldiers held out for a time; but there was no victory to be had here, only a brave death.

Inside an hour, the battle was over, lost. I was the only Roman left standing. All the others were dead.

The Gauls didn't celebrate, though. In fact, they made little noise at all; they just slung their rifles over their shoulders and began drifting away.

Except for two, who approached me, rifles trained on my midsection. Not that weapons would do them any good against me—I had already been through the thick of the battle, unscathed.

"Come with us," said one.

"Where?" I said.

"Our leader would meet with you."

"Your leader, eh?" I said, sardonically. I had a pretty good idea who this might be.

After a moment, I said, "All right. I have a few things to say to him myself." Outwardly calm, I had the desire to commit serious mayhem on their busybody leader.

"Follow us," they said, and we left the field of carnage. It all seemed to dissolve into mist behind us as we walked.

Gradually, we approached a cluster of tents—one of the Gallic camps, no doubt. It had been bright and sunny out, but as we approached the camp the sky seemed to become more overcast and gloomy. A perfect match to my mood.

We passed through the camp. I saw more silent Gauls about, eating, drinking, some incongruously cleaning their weapons. As sour as my mood was, I had to grin wryly at that.

The largest tent seemed to be the headquarters of their leader. Two men, big even for Gauls, guarded the entrance. One of them nodded to my escort as we passed within.

Two tent flaps had been pulled back to light the interior. There were two more big Gauls, flanking a crude wooden chair. And seated on this chair was a rather small man, clean-shaven (unlike the Gauls), leaning back in rumpled tweed, eyes twinkling at the sight of me, clearly pleased with himself.

I felt like decking him. Instead, I let my breath out in one long, exasperated sigh, and said, "Dr. Friedman."

"Hello, Dan." Then he said, a bit melodramatically, "So, we meet again!"

I couldn't help it; I had to wince at that awful old line. The man just has no imagination at all.

THE FIRST TIME I MET DR. FRIEDMAN, I WAS building a city in ancient Egypt.

I was being Pharaoh for a little while. I had begun at Cairo—not actually an Egyptian city, but I wasn't being picky about historical accuracy—and passed through it to the road leading to the Pyramids; I stood on the summit of the Great Pyramid of Cheops for a long time, gazing out over the sand. I also saw the Sphinx—I didn't like that it didn't have its nose, so I put the nose back on. Then I sailed down the Nile at my leisure, down to Memphis, the most ancient capital of Egypt, then to Luxor, and finally down to Karnak, sixty acres of the mightiest temples ever dedicated to any gods. And everywhere I went, I made Egypt look not as it does now, but as it must have in its days of glory. I strained my imagination to the limit. And when I returned to Upper Egypt, I decided to try building my own city. Why not? It was my Egypt; it was my dream.

I assembled a typical complement of slaves and granite blocks and architects, but I could see right away that building my city would take about twenty years. Well, that wouldn't do; so I made some of the slaves "super size," and made the others work much, much more quickly than humanly possible. The city began to grow before my very eyes.

By noon, I could see the outlines of my city. The giants were stacking up great blocks of granite, and the other slaves were blurs of motion, raising obelisks and covering every available surface with hieroglyphics. There was going to be a great wall around the city when it was done, with sphinxes guarding every gate, temples and palaces faced with marble and filled with gold, lush and intricate gardens crammed with statuary, and beyond the city walls, to the west, solemn tombs suitable for the greatest of long-dead kings. A fitting city in every way for a Pharaoh, and one I would explore by evening, perhaps.

That's about when Dr. Friedman arrived.

He came dressed as an explorer—khaki shirt and shorts, pith helmet. Very similar to what I was wearing, really. I suppose we both looked out of place, what with all the slaves running about in their loincloths, and the overseers and architects in their Egyptian gear, but I couldn't bear to put on the Pharaoh outfit in this heat (I honestly didn't think of lowering the heat at the time). This guy who just didn't belong was coming right toward me. I supposed I would hear his story before long.

I frowned. When I bought the dream chip, I had been warned that things like this might happen. "The Ultimate in Virtual Reality," they had called it, and the implant almost lived up to its hype. But, I had been warned, occasionally my subconscious would spontaneously throw up images out of sync with my dreams. Obviously, this man was such a character.

I watched all this from a seat upon a high dais I had made. There were seats for maybe two or three people, and a low table upon which rested a tray of suitably royal delicacies, and of course my queen sat beside me, watching the city rise. *She* didn't seem to mind the heat, royal outfit or no.

My new arrival walked right up and sat down next to me, without even asking, which annoyed me to no end. "Hello, Dan," he said.

My city was growing before my eyes, fit in every way for a Pharaoh. That's when Dr. Friedman arrived.

I drew myself up haughtily. "Who are you, to address Pharaoh as a familiar?" I felt I had to stay in character, even with this oddball.

He smiled at me, and spent a few minutes checking out my city. Up close, I could see that he was actually a short, wiry guy, with moist, brown eyes that seemed to bug out slightly. Actually, he looked a little bit like me, even if you don't consider the explorer outfit. "That's quite a city," he said, finally.

"It will be."

"I'll bet the real Egyptians could have used a few of those fellows," he said, pointing to one of my giants.

"They seemed to do all right on their own."

"I suppose they did at that."

"You know," I said, "you really don't belong here. So you may go now." Brusque, I know, but it *was* my dream. Besides, simply dismissing out of place characters often worked.

But not this time. "Dan," he said, "do you know where you have been for the past three weeks?" He said this in a very unctuous tone—like when a talk-show host tries to draw out a reticent guest.

I was going to get tired of this guy real fast, I could see. "I've done a lot of traveling. China. Paris. Mars. And now Egypt, as you can see."

"No, Dan," he said, smiling sadly, "for the past three weeks you've been in a coma at Massachusetts General Hospital. You're suffering from dream-chip addiction. And it's way past time for you to snap out of it."

"Says who?" I sneered. I hate being patronized by my own dream.

"I'm Dr. Friedman. I'm a psychiatrist. And I'm not part of your dream, Dan. I'm interfacing with your implant, through my own. Here, let me show you." Suddenly, the desert was gone, and we found ourselves standing in a hospital room. Very dim, after the desert, and hushed, save for the beeping of some medical gadget

or other. I turned and saw myself lying in bed, IV needle dripping into my arm; a second Friedman sat in a nearby chair, this one not in explorer khaki, eyes closed, head back in slumber. Our dozing doppelgangers both had electrodes stuck on their foreheads and temples. A very concerned looking nurse stood nearby, monitoring a computer console.

I didn't like this scene, so I shut my eyes and began spinning.

After several seconds of this, I heard Friedman say, "What are you doing?"

I stopped and opened my eyes, saw I was still in the hospital room. "I was spinning. You know."

But I could see he didn't.

"Sometimes spinning is enough to trigger a change in the dream scenery," I explained, suddenly feeling foolish.

"Oh. I didn't know that."

"You must not be much of a doctor, if you don't even know *that* about using your dream chip."

"Well, to tell you the truth," he said, grinning sheepishly, "you're my first case of dream-chip addiction."

"Wonderful. And I'm not any 'case' of yours. You're probably part of my dream too."

Friedman raised a finger, as though conceding the point. "But even if I am just part of your dream, what harm is there in listening?"

I thought it over. "All right," I said, finally, taking a seat. "I'll listen—for a while. I want to be back in Danopolis by nightfall, though."

"Oh, of course." Friedman rested his chin in his hand for a few moments, then: "Consider this, Dan. Ever since the invention of the dream chip, people have been able to control their dreams, almost absolutely. You can be anything you want—a rock star, a king, a private eye, anything—and go wherever or whenever you wish. And, you can do this for as long as you wish."

"What of it?"

"What do the ads say to you, Dan? You can have dreams more vivid, more real than real life. 'Dreams so real, you never want to wake up.' " He paused for a beat, and then said, "And that is just what we are finding, with people like you, Dan. You just don't want to wake up."

"Well, it's great fun, of course," I said. "And I can see how it can be addictive—like TV, in my grandmother's time—but three weeks…"

"But just think of all the places you have been to already! When is the last time you remember waking up, hmm? Tell me that, does it feel like only one night, or longer? Maybe a lot longer?"

"Time can feel different here," I said. "And the implants aren't supposed to allow more than eight hours of dreaming per day, real time. Besides, I've never heard of such a thing happening."

"Some people can learn to override that restriction, sometimes without even consciously wishing it. You have already shown you are skilled in the use of your implant." He paused a moment, then said, "Of course, they are trying to fix that in the latest versions. That doesn't help you, I'm afraid."

"Then just shut it off, *Doctor,"* I said, laying on the sarcasm.

"That's too risky; the shock of it would be too great. They've tried it before, you know. It could kill you. Certainly, you'd be a real vegetable then—worse off than you are now. No, all I can do is talk to you, try to convince you to wake up on your own."

"You have an answer for everything, don't you? But I'm not convinced."

"Why do you resist the idea so, Dan? Maybe because deep down, you sense it might be true after all?"

I smiled. "No, Dr. Friedman. It's because I am, as you said yourself, skilled in the use of my dream implant." I stood up suddenly, and clapped my hands together, and we were back in the desert, outside my city.

Dr. Friedman looked dazed by the sudden transition; I had caught him on the hop, as I intended. The queen gave a start at our sudden appearance, but immediately covered it over with royal hauteur. (As for the overseers clustered near the dais, they said nothing, because obviously, Pharaoh can do as he likes.)

I continued, "I have seen my unconscious throw up some pretty weird stuff while I've been here, you know. Frankly, you're small potatoes, compared to some things I've seen." I called out to a couple of nearby guards. "Take this man from my presence, and don't let him come back." They leapt forward at once to obey.

As they dragged him away, I heard Friedman shout, "Dan, stop this—you need help, listen to me—"

I turned. "Doctor, listen to me. Even if, by some miracle, what you say is true, *I'm not ready to go back."*

I ceased to listen as they took him away. I sat back down, next to my queen, and watched my city rise in splendor as the sun set.

OF COURSE, I SAW DR. FRIEDMAN AGAIN.

On three other occasions, he appeared at totally inappropriate times. (On one occasion, I happened to be in bed with an actress whom I have often fantasized about. You can bet I was particularly irate on *that* occasion.)

And each time, he was more difficult to eliminate. I could never again have a dream underling get rid of him—he learned that same invulnerability trick I learned long ago. So I had to get rid of him myself, which frankly, meant killing him—or at least, his dream image.

To be honest, I've killed many times in my dreams, but this was a lot more disturbing—it's usually some monster

I've dreamed up, not a person. And he did plant the idea in my head, that he was a real person, outside of the dreaming… just supposing it *was* true, did it hurt? But he never talked about it—he just became more difficult to vanquish.

He was learning, you see. That's something that also should have disturbed me. I don't know why it didn't.

And now for the fifth time we met, in a Gallic camp after battle, and this well-meaning putz had just cut down thirty thousand of Rome's finest.

"Dr. Friedman," I said, "you are a real shit! I put a lot of work into setting up that battle you just ruined."

"I'm sorry, Dan," he replied. "Though I have to say, it interests me that you often re-create these detailed historical scenes. Not everyone does that. To be blunt, a lot of people just go for constant fantasy sex. You seem to have more imagination."

"Hey, I go for the sex plenty—you know that quite well," I said heatedly.

"I know, I know. I just find your other fantasies interesting. I suppose if I were here as long as you've been, I would construct ever more elaborate fantasies as well."

I refused to respond to this.

He sighed. "Look, Dan. It's been almost six weeks now. Aren't you getting tired of this?"

"No."

"Don't you miss your friends? Your family?"

I let out a sharp breath. "Even if I believed you… Those aren't really good enough reasons."

"Oh, come on. I know you have a sister; she's been here to visit."

"Yeah, maybe… but I'm not close with the rest of my family, and my friends… well, I think they can manage without me—Wait a minute! What am I doing, talking to some dream shrink in the middle of ancient Gaul? Jesus!"

"Stranger things have happened. Now, what about your health? Aren't you concerned about your body? After all, whatever is going on here, you're a vegetable Outside. Would you like me to explain, in full medical detail, what will happen to your body if you spend months or even years in a coma?"

"Oh, please, not on my account. I was never a health nut anyway."

"You're whistling in the dark, Dan."

"No, I've been thinking about what you have been saying. If you really are just a part of my dreams, I will eventually wake, after a normal eight hours of sleep. But if you're for real… in a weird way, I'm free. I don't ever have to go back to that life—I can have adventure, excitement here, for a long time." I shrugged, and asked, "Why give that up?"

"Dan…"

"See, I'm hopeless, Dr. Friedman. Might as well give up and move on to some other, more promising patient."

Dr. Friedman was shaking his head slowly. "Oh no, Dan. We aren't finished yet. Not nearly finished. You need even more help than I thought." He sighed, and slowly rose. "You people just don't listen to reason. You always have to go to an extreme."

It was time to end this. The Gauls hadn't bothered to disarm me; I drew my short sword and prepared for combat.

But he didn't bother to arm himself. Instead, he looked to the Gauls. "Seize him," he ordered.

"Do you want me to explain what will happen to your body in a coma?"
"I was never a health nut anyway."

Each Gaul beside me grabbed one of my arms. I twisted about, but astonishingly, their grip held. I struggled some more. "Unhand me!" I cried, as they forced me to drop the sword.

The Gauls ignored my orders. I struggled uselessly in their grip. Slowly, it was beginning to dawn on me—that I was unable to either order or overcome these dream characters.

I gave up struggling; I could feel the blood draining from my face, as I stared at the doctor in wonder.

He shrugged. "I've been learning too, Dan. And, of course, the chip manufacturers have managed to augment my dream chip. The world—the *real* world—does not stop, simply because you shut yourself off, Dan. I think I am as adept as you are, now. I think I can make you leave this place."

"You said it was up to me—you couldn't pull the plug, or force me to leave—"

"You'll leave of your own free will. It's just that now, I have the power to help you more effectively. Now, if I can't bring you to the hospital, I can bring the hospital to you." Now he looked at the Gauls, who had changed into hospital orderlies while my attention was on the doctor.

"Bring him," said Dr. Friedman.

He drew back the tent flap and stepped outside, and the former Gauls dragged me out as I cursed them. Instead of being outside, I found myself being dragged down a hospital corridor. I looked back where the tent had been, and saw instead a pair of swinging doors.

I looked ahead, and saw Dr. Friedman standing next to a gurney. I shouted and cursed now, trying futilely to grab at passing doctors and nurses, to at least get their attention, as the two orderlies lifted me up and strapped me down. The straps were drawn tight by my useless struggles; I could already feel the blood to my arms and

legs being cut off. They even pulled a strap over my forehead, so I was as immobile as possible.

Then they pushed the gurney down the hall, fast. I still tugged at the straps as I watched the hall lights passing overhead.

Finally, they turned right, and I heard a door being opened. I was in a small, white, bare room, as far as I could see. There was a bright, white light directly overhead. And that was really all.

I heard Dr. Friedman say, "Leave him here for a while. Sometimes this is enough to send them back." He and the orderlies filed out of the room.

It was when I heard the lock turn that I began screaming in earnest.

SO, THAT IS HOW I COME TO BE HERE, IN THIS dream "hospital." (Yes, I know it *seems* real—that's the whole point, isn't it?)

Now, I'm no fool, and as soon as I was strapped to that gurney, I tried to end the dream program. Dr. Friedman said it is up to me, when I leave, right?

Except it's not working. I keep trying to wake up. I *know* how to do it; it's hard to describe just how it's done, but I know how. It feels like surfacing when you've been underwater. Except I can't do it, now.

Something has really gone wrong.

Dr. Friedman says some part of me is still resisting the idea of going back and is still stronger than my conscious wish to return. I keep urging him to check my implant for a defect, but he says that has already been done, and that they can find nothing wrong with the implant itself.

Maybe he is right. Or maybe they messed up the implant and are being quiet about it. Who knows, maybe he is just a sadist.

Or a dream character who has gained control.

He figured out, at any rate, that solitary confinement wasn't going to do the job. So I get to wander this "hospital" at least, and I talk to Dr. Friedman a lot, and I tell other people my story. I keep looking for patterns, something that will get me out of here. And to keep my spirits up I tell the story in different ways, or I talk about other dreams I have had. I try, at least, to be entertaining when I tell these tales.

But now that I have reached the end of the tale, I have to tell you: I dread the next "treatment" Friedman comes up with. Because he thinks I have to be broken before I'll let myself out of here.

He's wrong. I want out *now*.

I really do.

STEPHEN DOE

Is a resident of the Boston area, where he works as a software developer. Before that he lived in New Mexico, where he pursued a degree in astronomy. He is now at work on his first novel.

The Camel Story

MELANIE DIXON

Didn't your mother ever tell you not to talk to strangers?

MIKE WAITED PATIENTLY FOR THE DOOR TO slide shut behind him, then looked around the cell. To his pleasure, it was everything he'd imagined from TV and the movies. Gray brick walls; a dirty, seatless toilet in the corner; flat benches on either side of the cell; even a liquored-up bum asleep on the floor.

"The handcuffs, Mr. Welke," the cop behind him said.

Mike obliged by sticking his hands back out through the opening in the bars. He tried not to wince as the cop pulled them back further than they wanted to go. Instead, he looked over and saw that one of the cell benches was occupied by a man who, like Mike, wore a rumpled suit and tie. He was sitting with his elbows resting on his knees and his face planted in the palms of his hands. Hell of a night out for him, too, Mike thought with a smile. As the cop removed the cuffs, Mike watched his cellmate, waiting to make eye contact if the opportunity arose.

Once the cuffs were off, Mike rubbed his wrists like he always saw on TV and started toward the unoccupied bench. The cuffs hadn't really hurt him, but he'd never been arrested before and wanted to make the most of the experience. Ever since the cops had come to get him, he'd been taking mental notes; it was going to make a hell of a story for his buddies back home. Guess what happened on my Vegas trip, guys? First they cuffed me, then they read me my rights, put me in the back of their squad car, booked and fingerprinted me, and then I had to wait in a holding cell until my brother posted bail.

Mike sat down and sighed, hoping his cellmate would look up. When he didn't, Mike decided to take a different approach.

"So will they bring me a drink of water if I ask them?" he said. He watched as his cellmate slowly raised his head from his hands. The man paused for a second as he studied Mike and then he dropped his arms to his knees. Mike noticed how bloodshot his eyes were and how he really needed a shave. He hoped he didn't look quite that bad, but he knew it was wishful thinking.

"Doubt it," the man shrugged. He ran his hands through his short hair, which made it stand up on end. "In fact, I doubt you'll hear from them again until someone posts your bail. That's my guess at any rate. I don't make it a habit of frequenting jail cells."

"It's the first time I've been arrested, too," Mike confessed. "First time in Vegas, first time arrested."

"First time for everything, I guess," the man said. "My name's Louis, by the way." Louis offered his right hand to Mike.

"Mike Welke," he said. He had to get up off the bench and lean forward to shake it.

Louis smiled and then pointed to the sleeping drunk. "I'd introduce you to him, but he's been sleeping one off ever since I've been here."

Mike grinned and felt himself loosen up a little. He reached up to undo his tie and was slightly surprised that it was gone—he'd forgotten that the police had taken it away from him before putting him in the cell. The truth was, he'd had a lot to drink earlier and some of the details weren't exactly clear. When he looked up again, he saw Louis watching him. For the first time, Mike noticed that Louis was wearing a particularly nice suit, wrinkled though it was.

"I feel like an idiot asking this," Mike said, "but that isn't Armani, is it?"

Guess what happened on my trip? First they cuffed me, then they read me my rights and put me in the back of their squad car.

"Hugo Boss," Louis replied. He leaned back and examined his lapel and sleeves. "Looks like it's salvageable, too. Nothing a good dry cleaning can't fix."

"Me, too," Mike added, taking a quick look over himself. "So are you like me and just had a little too much fun tonight?" Mike saw a playful glint appear in Louis's eye and watched him shrug.

"What can I say? I've been bad."

Mike laughed out loud but had to stop as soon as he realized it hurt his now-throbbing head. Still wincing, he looked back up at Louis. "I'm out here for a bachelor party, my brother's bachelor party, actually. A bunch of us drove in from L.A. for the weekend. It's been pretty crazy."

"Older or younger brother?"

"Older, but we're pretty close. You have any brothers or sisters?"

"I did," Louis said. He inched himself back on the bench and with his hands locked behind his head, leaned against the brick wall. "I had an older brother but he died a few years ago."

"Sorry to hear that," Mike said. "Were you close?"

"Well, we were always pretty competitive growing up," Louis explained. "Actually, there were times when I hated his guts. It's too bad, really. There's not much I can do about it now."

"I guess I'm lucky," Mike said. "My brother and I get along really well now. We had some fights growing up but not anymore. In fact, I'm going to be the best man at his wedding next month."

"That's great," Louis remarked, not changing his facial expression. "I guess my brother and I never grew out of our fights. He was quite a guy, though. A real clown."

"Good sense of humor?"

Louis glanced back at Mike and frowned for a half a second. Then he shook his head. "Well, actually, he *was* a clown. It was his hobby since high school. He did kids' birthday parties, events at the zoo, local store openings, that kind of thing. I always used to hear, 'How come you can't be more like your brother the clown?' "

Mike chuckled until he noticed that Louis was staring at him. He wondered if Louis hadn't meant it as a joke.

"You get tired of hearing that kind of thing after a while, you know?" Louis added. "Ah, well, nothing I can do about it now, I guess."

"Do you mind if I ask what happened?" Mike said carefully. He saw Louis's face grow darker and decided he probably shouldn't have pressed him.

"The police ruled it was a suicide," Louis answered. "No note, but his wrists were slit. I don't know, it's sort of too perfectly ironic, isn't it? A clown who commits suicide."

Mike remained stoned-faced, not sure how to react.

"Anyway, his death was sort of a turning point in my life," Louis continued. "I knocked around for a while in various places and I've been in Vegas for the past couple of years," he said. For some reason, this made him stop. He turned back to Mike, studying him hard. "You know, Vegas is a pretty easy place to get along in without getting into too much trouble. Mind if I ask what you did to make them arrest you?"

This time, Mike felt he would probably be okay when he responded with a laugh. "Well, I asked you about your brother so I guess it's only fair," he explained. "I told you things got a little out of hand. It was because we'd been drinking and gambling since early this afternoon. Doing shots, cruising the casinos. Anyway, we started at the north end of the Strip, and were making our way down. We were pretty hammered by the time we got to New York, New York, but it was a bachelor party so we weren't about to stop. You know how all the casinos are connected to each other by moving walkways down there? You can walk through five blocks and five hotels without touching the street. We crossed over to the Excalibur on those walkways to keep drinking and gambling. Then my brother decides he wants to check out the Luxor, so we grab a few more drinks and hop on the next moving walkway. Now, right at the point where you are entering the Luxor, there are these two animatronic camels that welcome you to the casino and wish you luck or whatever. You ever seen them?"

Louis nodded. "Big things, right?"

"Well, they're camel-sized, like something you'd see at an Arabian Disneyland. Anyway, they move their heads around in kind of a jerky, animatronic way and say stuff like, 'Welcome to ancient Egypt, where the slots are as loose as Cleopatra's dress and the crap tables as hot as a summer on the Nile,' " Mike said, making his voice deeper for the camels' part. "So there we are, coming down the moving walkway, and we spy those things. We start shouting at them and making fun of them and suddenly my brother says that he wishes someone would just put those camels out of their misery. I'm drunk enough, it's his bachelor party, and the bottom line is, I take it as an invitation. I leap over the handrail and start pummeling those two camels. And I mean pummeling them! Left! Right! Left! People all around us stop and stare. At this point my brother and his friends are on the ground laughing hysterically, which only makes me wail on them some more. It doesn't take long for a couple of security guards to come over and wrestle me to the ground, and before I know it, I'm being handcuffed and put into the back of a cop car. So now I'm here, waiting for my brother to post bail, I guess."

Louis let a smile develop on his lips and nodded at Mike slowly. "Well, like I said, I've been here a few years and I don't think I've ever heard of anyone pummeling the camels at the Luxor before," he offered.

"First time for everything, right?" Mike said. He pushed himself all the way back on the bench and leaned against the brick wall, not unlike Louis was doing. "Hey, Louis, you make it out to L.A. much?"

"Actually, I have been thinking about moving there, a few years down the road maybe."

"Well, let me give you my card…" Mike said, leaning forward again. As he reached for his back pocket he realized that he didn't have his wallet. He frowned. "Uh… the cops have all my stuff. Do you have a pen or anything? I could write it down."

Louis shook his head. "They have all my things, too. Look, don't worry about it—"

"No, I'd feel bad if you came out and couldn't look me up. I'm in the book, I guess, if you can remember my name until then," he said.

"Well, no offense, but it's a long time to remember a name," Louis said.

Reluctantly, Mike nodded. As he thought about what else he might do, he brushed his hand against his breast pocket and realized he'd stuck a couple of cards in there before going out that evening. "Look at that, I've got one after all," he said as he fished a card out and leaned over to hand it to Louis. "I put them in there just in case I met

any contacts in the casinos tonight. I'm in commercial real estate and always looking for good leads. I never thought I'd be handing out my cards in jail."

Louis continued to lean against the wall for a few seconds longer, staring at Mike with an oddly self-pleasing expression. Something about it made Mike want to retract the offer, but by the time he fully considered it, Louis had snapped the card out of his hand.

"Good," Mike said, forcing a smile and trying to usher those few unsettling thoughts out of mind. "So I've been going on and on. Why don't I shut up and you can talk for a change? Let's start with what you're in for."

"Punching a clown at Circus Circus in the face."

"Really?" Mike said brightly. "Now that's irony, huh? Here I am for punching the animatronic camels at the Luxor, and you punched a clown at Circus Circus."

Louis stopped and considered this carefully. "Well, there was that and the fact that I stabbed him repeatedly with a steak knife."

Mike smiled as he waited to be let in on the joke. His smile started to fade, however, when Louis's expression remained unchanged.

"The unfortunate thing is that this one lived and also, I suppose, that I got caught," Louis continued. Slowly, he turned toward the ceiling with a faraway look in his eyes. "See, it's not that I have a phobia of clowns. I just hate them. I hate all of them. Must have started with my brother, I guess, although, they weren't able to pin that one on me. I was smart about that one, more in control. Then there was that clown in Kansas City, but he deserved it. I whacked off his head with an axe. A few more clowns here and there through the years, not that I make a hobby of this, and trust me, they always deserve it. I just do it when it needs to be done and so far no one has bothered me about it. Oh, and Mike, I'd certainly like to keep it that way."

Mike slowly felt himself start to slump backward. All the color had drained from his face and he had no doubt now about the veracity of what Louis was telling him.

"I'm just not big on clowns, sort of like you're just not big on camels," Louis said. "It's really is… how did you put it? Ironic? I'm thinking you understand, though. I'm thinking someday you'll find yourself at a zoo or somewhere and there'll be a camel and all of a sudden you'll just start pummeling him, Mike, just like you pummeled the camels in the Luxor. I see that in you, Mike, and that's why I'm telling you all this."

Louis stopped and smiled, still holding Mike's complete attention. Then he raised his right hand and Mike glanced at it, suddenly realizing that Louis still held his business card between his thumb and index finger. The business card, with his home, work, and cell phone numbers on it, not to mention his address. Without it, there was always the hope that Louis wouldn't be able to remember his full name. He even admitted it would be difficult. But the card, Mike thought, well, that changed things. As the true realization of what he'd done came over him, Mike sat up and struggled to remain calm. He began to try to figure out how he might get the card back while Louis gently waved it back and forth in front of him.

Then Louis paused as if reading his mind, and then let go of the card. As it began to float harmlessly downward, they each focused their eyes on its slow motion descent. When it came to a rest on the ground, it lay almost halfway between them.

Then there was that clown in Kansas City, but he deserved it. I whacked off his head with an axe. So far no one's bothered me about it

"Who knows, Mike?" Louis said, looking back up at him. He held Mike's gaze as he leaned forward on his knees, making himself just a few inches closer to the card than Mike. "Maybe you and I have a fine future scheduled together. You pummeling camels and me stabbing clowns."

Mike hesitated for a moment, then broke from Louis's gaze just long enough to gauge exactly how far out of reach the card was for him. Seeing this, Louis flashed a thin smile and sat back upright. He placed his hands on his knees as if deliberately indicating to Mike that he'd given him the edge, and daring him to go for it.

"Mike Welke!"

At first Mike thought the call had come from Louis. But he'd been staring at his face the whole time and he clearly hadn't said anything. The voice had come from outside the cell. Out of the corner of his eye, Mike saw there was a cop just outside the bars.

"Mr. Welke, your brother just bailed you out," the cop said. "He's waiting by the station desk. You are free to go." The cop sifted through the ring of keys on his belt until he found the one he was looking for. He unlocked the door open and slid it open. "Lucky for you, Mr. Welke, the Luxor said there was no damage to those camels and so they aren't pressing charges. Just don't go back in there any time soon, understand?"

Mike dared to steal only a quick glance at the cop before returning his full attention to Louis and the business card. Louis remained completely motionless, his hands still on his knees. The business card waited on the ground between them.

"Mr. Welke, did you hear me?" the cop said. "Mr. Welke, you're free to go as long as you don't go back to the Luxor."

Mike's eyes were still fixed on Louis. Slowly, he watched as Louis raised his right hand up by his side and flexed his fingers like a gunslinger, smirking at Mike the whole time.

"Mr. Welke!" the cop said, his voice much louder now. "If you don't look at me and tell me you understand, I'm going to come in there and crack you over the goddamned skull until you do. Do you get it? Do you get it, Mr. Welke?"

Mike whirled around toward the cop. "I get it!" he yelled. In a split second, he turned back again, but it was too late. In the moment it had taken to acknowledge the cop, Louis's hand had shot out and snapped up the business card.

Once he had the card again, Louis took a few moments to read it and then smiled and leaned back against the brick wall. "Thanks for the card, Mike," he said, placing it into his inner breast pocket. "It was good to meet you. Do me a favor and remember not to say anything about what we discussed. When I get out, probably two or three years I'm guessing, I'm planning on giving you a call."

Slowly, Mike dropped his gaze to the ground and turned away from Louis. Without lifting his eyes, he rose from the cell bench and brushed past the cop into the hallway, then stared straight ahead as the cop closed the cell door, not flinching even as Louis's deep laugh began. Mike followed the cop out of the lockup area, the laugh chasing him the whole way. Then again, Mike feared that laugh would be chasing him for a long, long time.

As soon as Mike was out of earshot, Louis became quiet. He took out the business card and looked at it for a moment. Then he tore it up into little pieces that he let fall out of his hand onto the ground. That one was the best story so far, ten times better than any of the ones he'd told to the guys in here before Mike.

They were all idiots, believing every ridiculous lie he could come up with. At least it was making the time pass, Louis thought. And he had no shortage of time. With his wife out of town until Monday, there was no telling how long it would be until his bail was posted.

Louis heard the door to the lockup area open and his ears perked up. As he listened, he could detect two sets of footsteps starting down the hallway toward the holding cell. Right away, he knew one belonged to a uniformed cop and the other was undoubtedly a new victim. Smiling to himself, Louis immediately started coming up with his next story.

MELANIE DIXON

Grew up in Hawaii, graduated from Yale, and recently completed her first novel, Jules' Housemates*. Her Web site at* www.meldixon.com *contains excerpts and a synopsis of the novel, other short fiction, and links to other e-zines that publish her work.*

The Posticheur

DAVID APPELL

The wisps that allow us to retain our humanity are sometimes no wider than a single strand of hair.

RACINO OVERSLEEPS; HE DID NOT FINISH THE Marguerite plait until late, and now already it is time to go to work. Of all days to be tired. He will be on his feet for ten hours, and probably both ways on the Transit as well. By tonight he will be exhausted when she arrives. It will not be the way he wants it, he can tell already. Not that it ever is.

He skips hiding the tube—too tired, and too much else on his mind anyway. He doesn't realize it's raining until he steps out the door of his apartment, and goes back inside to get his hat. Standing in the drizzle at the Transit stop, Racino feels his body wanting to sag back into sleep, back into bed, back into the darkness. The brim on his hat begins to droop, and it does not do much to keep his head dry, either. He should buy a new one, he knows; someone might ask why he hasn't, and what can he tell them. Sorry, but what little extra money I have is going toward plastic and thread? Hardly. It's one of the smaller chances he takes, and if he's caught a warped brim will be the least of his problems.

Inside the Transit he moves as far down the aisle as he can, reaches for the plastic bar above him and removes his hat. Small drops of water cling to the short fuzz on the top of his head; he'd like to run a hand over it, to dry it off and, while he's at it, check its length, something else he forgot to do this morning. It's been ten days since his last cut, and only four remaining until he must go again, though length is more important than the interval, they all know. Nothing longer than a half centimeter; a cut every fourteen days, regardless. It hardly seems frightening anymore.

Soon the Transit is stuffed full, and Racino is pushed further back. It's hot and stuffy, and the mood is hushed, like the weather. Looking down at his chest, he counts the stops. At four he begins to get excited; at five, he begins to get aroused. Suddenly at six he has a thought: what if she doesn't show up, what if she's changed her mind, or, worse than anything, what if she's been caught since yesterday? Racino's heart beats faster; his face grows warm. At her stop, seven, he hears nothing, like a vacuum—but then, he sees the side of her face as she comes aboard. By the time the Transit is moving again he's calming down, and she is standing sideways in the aisle near the front of the vehicle, wet people crowded around her, but in Racino's line of sight. A minute later—Racino wonders if she too counts to herself—she turns her head slightly and his brown eyes meet her blue. Neither of them smile, and their faces remain blank. How are you this morning, Peter, he imagines her asking; fine, thank you, and you, he imagines asking her in return. Then, to confirm yesterday's signal and tonight's meeting, he brings his hand to his mouth and coughs into his fist, watching her carefully. She reaches up to remove something from the corner of her right eye, and he coughs again.

AFTER CLEARING SECURITY HE WALKS FOR FIVE minutes, down long concrete halls that the rain will never reach. It's only 8:15; he's already weary, and has to force himself to walk fast. At his closet he puts on his work smock; while tying it in back Jones comes along and, as if Racino wouldn't notice him anyway, taps him heavily on the shoulder.

What can he tell them? Sorry, but what little extra money I have is going toward plastic and thread?

"Big haul out in the desert last night," Jones says, grinning widely. "Six of 'em, holed up in some commune or something. Came in early this morning."

"Good morning to you too, Jonesie," Racino says, straightening his outfit.

"Yeah, yeah," Jones says, his head jerking to look down the hall.

"So where are they at now?" Racino asks, as if he doesn't care.

"Huh? Yeah. The women, four of 'em, they're done already, shaved slick as a baboon's ass." Jones' head jerks to the right, to look down the hall in the other direction. "The guys, two of 'em, big as bulls. They just strapped the last one down a few minutes ago."

"That so?" Racino says, reaching inside for his broom.

"Yeah, huge mothers." Jones continues to look over his shoulder while scratching at his ear. "Derelicts, probably."

"Probably," Racino says, bending over for his dustpan. "Or worse."

"Were, anyway. Gettin' theirs now." Jones laughs quickly, and his head wavers back to look at Racino.

"So where they cuttin' em?" he asks.

"Two-twelve," Jones says, and starts to walk away.

Racino is disappointed—his area stops at Two-ten, and Two-twelve might have already been swept by the time he can get there. He calls out after Jones, moving away down the hall.

"Jonesie…."

Jones' head jerks back around, nervously.

"Jonesie, have a good day, huh?" Racino tells him.

"Worthless derelicts," Jones mumbles, turning back around.

RACINO CARRIES HIS BROOM AND PAN DOWN THE hall and looks into each of his five rooms. None has been used yet this morning, and probably won't be for another half-hour, before the regular Cutters arrive at nine o'clock. He wants to linger in each room, if only a minute, to grab a sort of mobile nap. What he wants most is to crawl up onto one of the tables and let himself sink away. It would be so easy. But the conversation with Jones is pressing on his mind.

From 210 he can hear cursing in the next room, and the sound of electric razors—Jonesie was right. Racino leaves the room and turns right instead of left, and goes slowly past the doorway of 212, carrying his broom on his side, trying to make it conspicuous.

"You!" someone yells from inside the brightly lit room, just as he had hoped. Racino stops quickly and steps in.

"You. Where the hell have you been?"

He vaguely recognizes the Cutter who is shouting at him—Bursley, or Bursty, something like that. He has on a blue smock, a surgical mask and cap, and thin white rubber gloves on his hands. He's holding a pair of electric shears, the heavy ones, Racino can tell, and standing in front of the strapping table—all Racino can see are the man's boots, heavy and dirty, with a buckle on the side. The rest of him—"Patients," they're called officially—is obscured by Bursley's assistant, but he's there in the room, on the table, like a stone.

Racino acts taken aback by the sharpness of the question, and looks down. He begins to mumble an answer. He won't explain that this isn't his room unless he's asked. "Sorry," he says.

"I'd hope so," Bursley spits out. "Get in here and clean this filth up."

Racino quickly begins to sweep. It is as good as he suspected. Long hair covers the floor beneath the table, curly blond locks and some straight, long brown. He could use it, certainly—for another plait, or the pin curl he has been thinking about. If only he had his tube. These days he can fill it in five seconds, and be in and out of the toilet before anyone could possibly suspect anything. The yellow curls, especially, would lay beautifully in a small postiche. He has to find a way to keep them from going to waste. If only he'd put the tube up inside him this morning.

His fatigue has been pushed away, and Racino's eyes roam across the floor. He is careful not to look too far up, careful to act dumb. Then, twisting his neck slightly in order to look underneath the second table, he sees long, black strands, lying scattered on top of itself like coiled string, one cutting after another. His heart jumps. Pure black is rare, jet black, and now there it is, waiting for him. Exactly what he wants.

He works quickly, sweeping around the first table, underneath where they are cutting. By being thorough and fastidious he tries to ensure that they will finish before he does. The Head Cutter curses continuously, and Racino is able to sneak a few glances at the Patient, grounded like a captured whale.

"What a mangy bastard," the Cutter says, throwing down a clump of brown hair. Racino sees that the Patient's beard has already been shaved away, and is relieved. His face is cut and bloody, and it must have been a long, difficult job. Usually they anesthetized them first, but sometimes they lash them down, thick straps across the head and neck that they tighten pneumatically, and rough them up for fun. Then they knock them out in order to shave the head. Racino has found teeth beneath the tables, chipped and bloody, and once even a piece of an ear. This one they should be finished with soon.

A few minutes later the Head Cutter turns off his shears. He peels off his rubber gloves, snapping them from his fingers one at a time, and says to his assistant, "Why don't you finish this dog and then come down to 220—Roach said there's a whore they're bringin' down from Booking."

"We'll make her up nice and pretty," the other one says.

As the Head Cutter walks away he adds, "Ought to be a good time for everyone."

TEN MINUTES LATER, JUST AS RACINO IS SCOOPING a large pile of the blond and brown hair into a numbered bag, the second Cutter shuts off his shears and steps away from the table.

"Have someone take him down to Cleanup," he says without looking at Racino.

"Yes sir," Racino says, standing up.

He leaves the room and Racino is alone with the drugged Patient. His heart suddenly begins to pound so he can feel it in his chest, harder than on the Transit this morning, and even before he has done anything he feels guilty. He rushes to finish the first table, reaching all the way under where the Cutters had been standing, and quickly bags up what he has. He would like to keep it too, smuggle it out one day at a time, but there is more at stake. There is not enough to fill the bag—he'll probably get a reprimand for turning it in low, but separating the black hair would be impossible if he put it in too. Taking out a new bag, one number higher in sequence, he moves to the

second table and begins to scoop up the black hair. It is smooth and fine, and longer than he's seen in months, undoubtedly from someone young. He places it in the new bag, then sweeps up the scraps and dust, scooping it into the other bag and tying it shut. He tries not to think of what he is about to do.

With the room clean—he glances back from the doorway to be certain, and takes one last look at the table—he carries his broom, pan and the two bags back down the hall. This biker, the hippy—was he stupid, or just unlucky? Racino drops the filled bag at the Disposal Station; Kurnicki, fat and oily, his own shaved head shaped like a squashed cone, hands Racino a receipt and asks about the other bag.

"I'll have it here before the end of the day," Racino says, forcing himself to sound calm.

"Better," Kurnicki says. "No fuckin' around in this sector."

"I know," Racino says. He didn't notice the bag wasn't completely full. "There's one in 212 ready to ship." Who turned them in, Racino wonders, and what did they get for it?

Kurnicki pulls phlegm up his throat and spits. "How fuckin' wonderful."

Kurnicki inspects the closets every other afternoon, so he can't stash it there. The floors are all concrete, the ceilings like a warehouse. Kurnicki's room? He doesn't know if they inspect there or not—probably they do. Everyone is inspected, sometime, aren't they? No one hides anything anymore. Racino wants this, has been looking for it for months, since he started sweeping here, it seems, and now he has to find a place to hide it, somewhere he can get at it once a day and steal it away, one tube up his ass after the other. He has to find a place for this bag in his hand. Has to. He can't carry around a partially-filled bag forever.

Suddenly he thinks: or can he? Maybe it would work. He has to hand the bags over to Kurnicki in sequence—the bastard checks, every time—but what if every time he got a new one, he transferred the black hair to the new bag, and filled up the one he already had? He'd have to carry one bag around with him at all times, keep it in his closet at night, but it might work. It might, and he can't think of anything else that will. Maybe he's too tired. Maybe when he's fresh he'll think of something.

But for now he tightens his grip on bag 1018 and walks back to see if the regular Cutters have started yet, feeling, for a moment, full of light and air.

BACK AT HIS APARTMENT IT'S NEARLY DARK, NEVER soon enough on nights like this. It was raining still on the way home, and Racino is past weariness and dripping into fatigue. He'd skip dinner and go straight to bed if she weren't coming. A cough, something in the eye, another cough. He doesn't know who chose it, or who she works for. What if he's caught? All he knows is what he wants.

Drops run down the plastic windows, as if to wash away the murky view they offer of the world. When the light is gone he's aware of the sound of rain, and nervousness begins to bore into his mood. Probably another hour, at least. Will she come in the rain? How will she keep the plait dry? He's hungry but can't eat. What a day this has been. The black hair, and now she's coming over. There's a bare bulb hanging from the ceiling, a table, a bed and a picture. The bed, nothing but a cot, really, is about twice the size of the table, and, when he's home, the picture hangs above it. That's all, except for a sink and a toilet and what he keeps inside it. The picture is of his parents, fading more every year, hanging on the gray wall—his mother's long hair is slowly turning the color of dirty water, and his father's teeth are a chalky, yellow gap in the middle of his face. He remembers the way her hair fell down around her neck, how his father's was long and neat, swept across his forehead from left to right. That, he's found, is the best way to try and remember them.

He's hungry but can't eat. What a day this has been. The black hair, and now she's coming over.

Ten o'clock. She's right on time, but still the bumps on the door make him jump. Two, then a pause, then three. Bumps, that's all they are, like it's her shoulder. Still it makes him jump, just like the other two times.

When he opens it she hurries in without waiting to be asked. Racino steps back, out of her way. She's his height, in a long, dark coat, dripping wet, and a hat that comes over her face. She removes her gloves before she looks at him with the blue eyes.

"Some weather," he says.

"I suppose."

"Can I take your coat and hat?" he says, trying a small smile.

She looks right into him. "No." Nothing on her face.

"It's good to see you again."

"What do you have for me?" she asks, glancing quickly around his apartment.

He watches her for just a few seconds, then turns into the bathroom. "In here."

She stands at the door while he lifts the lid off the top of his toilet and pulls a dark green plastic bag from inside.

"How the hell do you ever flush that thing?"

"I don't," he answers. "I try to only go at work."

She huffs, but he ignores her. He unwraps the plastic and pulls out what's inside.

"That's it?"

"Yes, that's it," he says defensively. He hands the Margeurite plait to her, one simple braid of brownish-blond hair, about thirty centimeters long. There's a clip on top, and it tapers off on the bottom, just like in his book, except it's only one braid, not two. Racino is especially proud of the clip, which he was able to form from a plastic fork. She holds it in front of her like a dead animal and inspects it.

"Well," she says finally, "it's not what the Major had in mind, but I suppose it will do." He waits for her to go on—what else can he do? "Actually," she says slowly, "actually it's not that bad. It's not full, like I thought, but sexy, in a way." When she says it, she looks at him, and his face lightens for a moment.

"So how is a person supposed to wear it?" she asks.

"Here," he says, digging into his bag. "I made this band." He pulls out a thin strip of cloth, brown. "It clips on here," he takes the plait out of her hand, "and then you wear it around your head, like this." He brings it around his own head so the braid hangs down the back of his neck.

"Oh," she says, in a way he's dreamed about. Then she comes back. "OK, give it to me." She takes it, and opens her top to put it in her bra.

"Wait," he says, gently. She looks up at him.

"Could you wear it? Please?"

She huffs again, but then opens the cloth strap and quickly puts it around her forehead. She ignores him reaching up to help her.

"Come on," she says, agitated. "Let's get this over with."

Slowly, sheepishly, he unfastens the belt around his waist, and unzips his pants. They fall down around him, and he waits, embarrassed and still aware of it. Finally she says, nodding to his underwear, "And those?"

He places his thumbs inside the loose band and peels them off his waist. He won't look at her now. When they fall to the floor she gets down on her knees, and Racino leans back against the wall, the bare bulb prying through his eyelids. When she gets close the brim of her hat bumps up against him and falls to the floor.

She puts her hands on his hips so he can't thrust as much as he'd like. His hands come down onto her head, and he feels the tiny hairs which cover it, like felt. As he tries to push her nose bumps up against his bald, shaved groin.

When she stands up she says, "Next time, how about something bigger. Fuller. OK?" He nods. At least she does not spit into the sink, like last time. After she leaves he remains standing against the wall, pants still down, exhausted, listening to the rain on the roof.

HE HAS TO FIND A WAY TO GET MORE.

Racino is laying in bed early the next morning, thinking. The tube is only eight centimeters long, and about three in diameter—bigger than the first one, but still it took two months to get enough just for the plait, small scraps he was able to glean each day. A full wig needs more, much more. And he wants something to give her again, too, as soon as he can.

He has saved a few plastic pouches, rectangular, with a seal across the top. He's been thinking about where he can hide it—working up the nerve, really—and now seems the time to try. It seems impossible, but then the tube once did, too.

She doesn't look at him on the Transit, which is just as well, because he has other things to think about this morning. He knows how he's going to do it, where no one will walk in on him or watch from under the stall. Like the bag he carries around all day, he's learning that the best hiding places are right out in the open. So just before the end of the day, when he's returned from the toilet, he kneels down in front of his closet and casually lets part of the partial bag, a new bag two numbers higher into which he's shifted the black hair twice during the day, fall out onto the hallway floor.

When he opens the door his hands are shaking; he leans his broom against the wall and kneels forward and down on his left knee. By kneeling and appearing to reach toward the back of the closet, he can keep one foot and two hands inside long enough to remove his shoe. Quickly, frantically, he unstraps his shoe and digs out the wrinkled plastic bag. Reaching back and underneath for some hair, he wants to look down the hall but can't—it would look suspicious to anyone who glanced his way. The tube juts and pinches inside him. His hands are shaking as he fills the pouch and stuffs it back into his shoe, thinking he'd better stand up soon. He lines the bottom of his shoe with it, leveling it as best he can, and steps in. Restrapping it, Racino is up and out of the closet, breathing hard, sweat on his forehead.

It is strange walking, like it might be on water, and he tries to compensate so nothing appears strange. He's done it—at least, it's hidden. Now to get out. Will it be a simple pat down, or something more extensive?

It's been three months since they removed their clothing and searched through every pocket and seam. They're getting complacent. They're supposed to look in the mouth, too, but rarely do. And never down below. The pouch in his shoe is the equivalent of two weeks worth, or more. Three months since the last search—does that mean it's time for another one, or that the odds are on his side?

Walking toward the exit, he forces himself to regain control. Jones walks in front of him, twitching and mumbling, unaware of anyone. The tube has found a niche in which to settle, and the plastic pouch seems smaller, too, but he knows it's there. He feels like he did

the day he smuggled the first tube out—his tongue is dry and his ears ring. It would be too suspicious to put his shaking hands in his pockets, so he squeezes his fingers together, and rubs them against one another. He doesn't know if it will do any good, but he doesn't know what else will. He keeps as much weight as he can on his right foot.

But the Security search is a simple pat-down, and unenthusiastic. Kurnicki seems not to even recognize him. Before he knows it Racino is out the door, like air coming out of a balloon, a smooth, bald balloon, like his head, like all of their heads.

HE'S EXCITED AGAIN, AND THIS TIME IT'S FRESH. At home he takes the pouch out of his shoe and removes the hair; it's mashed and dirty, but still long, black and magical. Before anything else he sits in his chair, puts his head back and dangles the hair over his face, letting it lightly touch his nose, his cheeks, and finally his lips. For a moment it feels like electricity running across his mouth, like sucking on metal. He's aroused; confused; wants to cry; doesn't want to care.

Racino leans forward and begins to comb out the dust and dirt with his fingers, then with a fork. He fills his bowl with hot water and adds detergent, and works small sections of the hair in the water, then rinses. He lays the hair out on a towel and looks at it. It still shines. It will be dry tomorrow and he can begin.

He wants more.

The next day he puts a pouch in both shoes. If he's going to get caught two won't matter any more than one, and already he cares less, and wants what he wants more. Today she looks at him, briefly, but he looks away. He wonders how she looked when she had hair—blond, probably, but she's the type to have had brown at the roots.

Every day he avoids her and clenches the bag of black hair with a fist. His face is flush when he rushes to fill each pouch, but soon for other reasons. Risk is beginning to elevate anger over his fear. At the pat downs he plays dumb, and feels hatred. He seethes at his twice-monthly cut; they shave it away, but now he believes that he's letting them, that it's his idea. In the Transit what he wants to do most of all is punch out a window, or smack the driver across the side of his fat head, or punch a hole in the sky and jump away into cold, black freedom of space. It's only been a week.

EACH DAY HE STUFFS AWAY AS MUCH AS HE CAN, and each night he's up late, blankets and towels over the windows, washing and combing and drying, the picture brought out and placed on the wall. Halfheartedly he also works on another plait; he wants what it can get, but it's not enough. Racino has a mane of black hair now, like the tail of a horse. Often he dangles it over his face, lets it drag lightly over his skin, sometimes playing with himself at the same time. Sometimes he opens his eyes for a second and glances at the picture, a simple mat in a plastic frame, and his hatred for them climbs another step.

He's reading, too, the book she gave him. *History of Ladies' Hairdressing,* by Mallemont, translated 1904. He has no idea how it's survived, or where she obtained it. She brought it over the first night she knocked on his door, the first time he'd ever met her, the first time she showed him what he could get for what they wanted. It's old, its pages yellow—they tear away if he's not careful as he handles them. He's read it many times, always at night, and now he reads it again, more intently than ever. He's trying to weave scraps of string into a wig net, experimenting. It will not cling to a head the way elastic might, but it is the best he can do for now. He'll put a thin tie on it, to go under the chin.

He wonders about her breasts, and about her name. And where she takes the plaits.

She signals him on the Transit with coughs and dramatic wipes at her eye, and he ignores her. He ignores her! He wonders about her breasts, and about her name. He wonders where she takes the plaits, if she gets more for them than he does. Once the side door of their Transit jammed, and he had to exit through the front. She bumped into him when he tried to pass. "Not yet," he whispered through clenched teeth, and dared to bump back.

Racino spends two nights trying to fashion a knotting hook from a plastic fork, holding it over a candle, warming, bending carefully, warming again. He has four tines to get it right, but each breaks under the stress. Frustrated, he kicks at the table, stubs his big toe, and has an idea. He cuts his biggest toenail down to the quick, carves it into a hook with the clippers, and melts the fork handle around it. It works, if he's careful, if he's gentle.

Single knots are quicker. Double knots and point knots are more secure, he learns, but difficult without a solid hook. He works half the night, knotting the black hair to the net, until his eyes feel like rocks. He glances up at the picture above him, at his mother's dark hair, and tries to recapture the way it lays, the way it fell from above. The coughs each morning are beginning to sound menacing, but he looks right back at her without blinking, not yet ready, enjoying the small defiance. One day Kurnicki searches everyones' pockets on the way out, but doesn't think to look in the shoes. One night there is a knock on the door. Racino sits at his table, everything laid out before him, his heart jumping up his collapsed throat. He

waits, thinking suddenly about the straps, the razors, about what they can do if you're caught. But it goes away. When he's sure he sets the black wig aside and resumes work to finish the plait. The weave is loose and the end is ragged, but the next morning when she glares at him he brings his fist to his mouth and coughs.

RACINO IS PRETENDING TO WORK ON THE BLACK WIG when she knocks. Two, then three. He's managed to fill in most of the net; there are gaps, but only in the back, nothing he can't imagine his way around. When he lets her in she is livid, shouting at him in whispers.

"What the hell has been going on?" Spit flies when she speaks.

"Nothing," he says. He is calm—he's getting good at it, at masking what's underneath. But it's there, even more now. "I just wasn't ready, that's all."

"Well, I was," she says, glaring at him.

Racino refuses to respond. Finally, she asks, "So what do you have for me?"

"Can I take your coat and hat?"

"No. What do you have?"

He stands as straight as he can and looks at her. After his jaw tightens he says, "Not until I take your coat and hat."

Something narrows around her eyes, until she says, "Oh, all right. Here."

"Thank you," he says, reaching for them.

She is slimmer than he thought. Her shoulders slope gracefully away from her neck, and the brown button-down fits her perfectly. Heavy pants and leather shoes with a strap. The same thing everyone wears, but he sees them on her in a different way, as a costume, as something she wore just for him.

"Now," she says, impatiently, "can I see it?"

He glances at the small, brown ridge across her chest. "Sure. In here."

Racino steps back into the bathroom, watching her over his shoulder. He waits before removing the ceramic lid and pulling out what's inside, but as he steps back to the hallway she's already moving away from the door, toward the table, toward the wig. Just as he hoped.

"What's this?" she asks, like a window has suddenly opened, like unused air is flushing through the room.

"Oh, that." He follows her, slowly. "Something new I've been working on."

"It's beautiful," she says, drawing out the word.

He steps behind her, and looks over her shoulder. "It's not quite finished yet, of course."

She picks it up. "But it's beautiful already," she says, holding it like it's electricity. "It looks finished to me."

"Thank you," Racino says. "Tonight, though, I have this for you." He holds out the plait for her to see, which she looks at only for a second. She returns to the black wig, which she's kneading softly, massaging in her hands. She rubs it against her face.

"But I want this." She looks at him. "Please, Peter."

His face flushes. They've never used names before, let alone the first. He didn't even know she knew it. He didn't know anyone did.

"I'm sorry," he says after a pause. "I'm flattered, but I want to keep that one for myself."

"Oh, Peter, please," she coos, and begins to kneel down before him. No, he tries to say, but already she's digging into his pants.

"No," he says again. "For this," and again tries to show her the small, brown plait.

"I've had those," she says, glancing up at him with big eyes. "I want the wig." By now his pants are open and he's already hard, unable to control it.

"No!" he says, throwing her hands off his legs.

She looks back up at him, hurt. "No," he says, quietly.

"What then?" she whispers. "What?"

He's looking down at her but doesn't know how to say it. His pants have fallen down around his ankles, and he suddenly feels guilty.

Before he says anything she reaches down and unfastens her own pants, and quickly peels them down around her knees. She moves away just a bit and turns around, still on her knees. Then she puts her head down to the floor and says softly, back and to the side, "Go ahead."

Racino looks down at her, a vacuum again filling his ears, like a dream. His jaw is unclenched now. His knees are weak. Everything seems reduced to what's right in front of him. One quick step and he could be behind her. And then in. Go ahead, she said to him.

Straining. Throbbing. Resisting. "No."

"Please," she moans, deeply.

"No," he says again, and begins to pull up his pants.

She waits, but finally gets up on her knees, slowly, and then stands. Without a word she pulls up her pants and then looks at him, her lips pressed tightly together.

Racino looks at her, right in her face, and says, "That's not what I want."

"Well then, what?"

"Here," he says, quietly. "Sit over here." He points to his other chair.

Her face is tight again, her eyes again small. Just for an instant she shakes her head, but then sits behind his table.

Racino picks up the black wig and opens it from the bottom. Spreading the flimsy string net, he lowers it over her bony-white scalp. His hands are shaking, and his erection rubs up against her through his pants.

It fits about as well as he expected, but that doesn't matter. When it's in place he untucks the tie strings and, from behind her, reaches down around her neck and under

her chin, and ties them in a bow. Finally he picks at the dry hair, rearranging it and covering the gaps. He moves from behind her and sits on the other side of the table.

She reaches up and pulls the side of the wig so it falls down her neck and in front of her shoulders. Then she looks at him and smiles.

After he stares at her for several minutes he says, very quietly, "What's your name?"

"What do you want it to be?"

"No," he says. "What's your name?"

She smiles again, and then says, softly, "Brenda."

"Brenda," Racino says softly. He looks at her, studies her, for a long time. She lets him, smiling back occasionally, fingering the hair on her head, holding it to her nose and lips, letting it rub against her cheeks.

Finally she says, slowly, "I need to get going, Peter."

"Yes," he says, breaking his gaze. "I guess you do."

She stands up with the wig on. "Thank you," she says, beginning to untie the bow under her chin.

"Yes," he replies softly. She slides the wig off her head as he reaches out to take it; suddenly her face changes and she tries to lurch away. Racino gets a hand on the wig, but she's already pulling.

"What are you doing?" he says. "You're going to damage it!"

"No!" she says, her voice suddenly loud. "It's mine."

"No it's not," he says, shocked.

"I did what you wanted."

"No, that's yours." He nods toward the plait. "This stays here."

"No!" she says, pulling more, shaking her head. She pulls harder, and the string net rips out of Racino's hands. He's left clutching a handful of hair, and she's left holding the broken net, gasping.

She throws her piece back at him. "Fix it!" she spits. "Fix it by tomorrow!" She glares at him. "Or else."

"Or else what?" He glares back at her, for the first time ever.

She pauses and says, suddenly calm and quiet, "Or else we'll find someone else, Racino. Like we found you. It's that simple."

He's clenching his fists; his arms drop slowly. A piece of the wig tumbles to the floor. The room is drifting away, and his vision begins to cloud over, without a fight, like a loosening, like the way plastic windows look instead of glass, like the way they took away their pictures, their reflections, their very selves. It's too much, all his anger with no place to go, nothing to strike at, nothing to hold on to but a plastic bag, ten hours a day. Brenda. That's not what he had guessed. Jennifer, maybe, or Melanie. He should have gotten a new hat. He remembers the sound of rain on his roof, the way it feels to walk on water.

"Good night, Racino," she says flatly, picking up her coat and hat. "I will see you tomorrow night."

He stands there after she leaves, until he picks up the two pieces of the black postiche. He sets them on his table and sits in his chair, staring at them until he falls asleep.

ON THE TRANSIT THE NEXT MORNING SHE GETS ON and stands backward, looking right at him. Racino is in back, staring through her when she brings her finger to her eye, when she coughs, even when she wets her lips. She tries them each again, one more time, but he keeps her out of focus, looking beyond her, to what's after her. She turns around, shakes her head, and stays that way. At his stop she departs ahead of him. It's never happened before, always she stays on and rides away. He sees it, but he's back in a vacuum, separated from the world, the sound of nothing ringing in his ears.

At the entrance she breaks away to the left. The metal detector quietly clicks; in the corner he sees her speak to Kurnicki, and then he's swallowed into the long hallway. Of all people, he knows what they can do to you. He arrives at his closet; by now a Security team will already be knocking down his apartment door. He ties his smock, nodding nervously to Jones; they'll be into the plumbing, probing spigots and drains. Racino closes his closet door and starts to walk again down the hall; he imagines a sledge making the first hole in his gray plaster wall, shaking the building. When he rounds the corner Kurnicki is coming toward him; Racino clutches the partially-filled bag and stops, thinking of the illicit picture of his parents that would now be bouncing up off its hook. His veins puff up as he makes a fist and clenches his jaw. "Racino," Kurnicki barks in a gruff, ugly voice, dark hair twisting around and around in its frame, falling down, tumbling toward Racino's mind. He knows exactly what they can do, sees it all the time, wakes up at night thinking about it. "There's a holy mess in two twenty-six." Kurnicki allows a thin, quick grin. "Make sure you get it all, huh?"

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