



INTRODUCTION BY JULIE E. CZERNEDA

STRANGERS

TALES OF THE UNDERDOGS AND OUTCASTS

AMONG

US

STORIES BY

KELLEY ARMSTRONG

A.M. DELLAMONICA

GEMMA FILES

HAYDEN TRENHOLM

EDWARD WILLETT

A.C. WISE

AND MORE

EDITED BY SUSAN FOREST & LUCAS K. LAW

LAKSA ANTHOLOGY SERIES: SPECULATIVE FICTION

STRANGERS AMONG US

TALES OF THE UNDERDOGS AND OUTCASTS

LAKSA ANTHOLOGY SERIES: SPECULATIVE FICTION

Edited by Susan Forest & Lucas K. Law



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Strangers Among Us: Tales of the Underdogs and Outcasts
Laksa Anthology Series: Speculative Fiction

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FIRST EDITION

Susan Forest

To my parents,
Don and Peggy Forest,
Who shared with me their love of stories.

Lucas K. Law

To my parents,
Leonard & Florence Law,
For the joy of reading and love of libraries;
To my partner,
Tim H. Feist,
For the continuing support and love;
In memory of
Marilyn Lewis-Steer,
Who challenged me to tackle this anthology project
(instead of talking about it).

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FOREWORD

Lucas K. Law

My family loves to read newspapers, books and magazines, regardless of category or genre; reading, or rather, the quest for knowledge and information, must be etched in our genetic make-up. So, it isn't a surprise that the public library was my favourite childhood haunt. I was constantly flooded by my over-active imagination; I chatted with my imaginary friends, making plans, dreaming ideas and telling stories.

And let's not forget food, the cradle of my family's gatherings and kitchen conversations, constant in motion throughout my life: for, through stories, our mother's home-cooked meals offered a window into our past, present and future.

What do reading, imaginary playmates, and clan gatherings have in common to this book you are holding?

Family and friends, creativity and story.

All of us have special memories and favourite stories in our kin traditions, which we often share, even with strangers. But, for some of us, buried beneath those wonderful connections lurk secrets, fears and self-doubts. We wear masks to hide, shade or guard our shame and loneliness. Sometimes, we do it so well, even our loved ones have no clue about our misery, struggle and depression.

For some, family support provides enough strength to allow them to overcome their struggles and challenges in a positive way. Others are not as fortunate. They watch their lives crumble away, layer by layer, piece by piece.

Each of us has a story to tell. In the last few years, several of my relatives and friends have been struck with mental illness. I have seen their isolation, fear, confusion, job losses, insecurity, and

STRANGERS AMONG US

anxiety. Mental illness continues to be burdened by stigma, and despite loving support, often those affected still have difficulty asking for help or talking about their experiences without feeling guilt and shame.

The idea for this anthology germinated as I was struck by the thinness of the line between mental health and mental illness. Mental illness can target any age group at any time. Mental illness can afflict a person for a period of time or become a life-long struggle. Mental illness can spring from many sources and manifest in many forms.

In this anthology, Julie E. Czerneda and nineteen authors come together to show their support for mental health through the written word. Susan and I are grateful for their *Tales of the Underdogs and Outcasts*, for the glimpses we are given into these fictional lives warn us not to underestimate the underdogs and outcasts: they have the resources to teach or save the world.

This book is for a special friend and fellow writer, Marilyn Lewis-Steer, who passed away on May 28, 2015, after a valiant battle with cancer. She gave me the inspiration and mental adjustment I needed to begin this work. I will always remember Marilyn for her kind words, her belief in lifelong education, her support for volunteerism—to pay forward and give back. To her, I needed . . . I wanted to say a final thank-you. This one is for you, Marilyn.

Please promote mental health and support your local charitable organizations. A portion of this anthology's net revenue will go to support the Canadian Mental Health Association.

—Lucas K. Law, Calgary and Qualicum Beach, 2016

INTRODUCTION

Julie E. Czerneda

Who are strangers?

People we don't yet know. We spot them, cued to their difference from the familiar-to-us by their look, by how they walk or talk or dress. We prepare for each new encounter, for you never know — do you? — with strangers.

Strangers. The harried mother who spares a fleeting smile . . . the tattooed boarder who gallantly holds the door . . . the executive bickering with thin air . . . the teen moving to music only she can hear . . . the blue-faced football fan who weaves and waves to everyone around.

Strangers. The child who doesn't meet your eye or smile back . . . the ancient who rocks and spits . . . the man who stalks by, swearing at passing cars . . . the huddled silent shape in a doorway, eyes fixed on air.

Strangers.

Our reaction, of course, depends on many things: the situation, our experience and expectations, how they seem to us at first glance. It's instinctive and often necessary to make a snap judgment: ignore, avoid, or greet. We don't come tagged with our inner truths. We can't tell by looking if that angry-looking stranger is angry at us—

Or at something only she can see.

Scary either way, isn't it? Such a disquieting awareness, that the mind can be ill. We know what to do about gashed skin or child's fever. We can see for ourselves when a wound is healed or a child is over a flu. The mind though. It's secretive, complex, powerful. When it's sick, we flinch, not knowing what to do, unable to see. There's nothing familiar to guide us.

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Which is why stories like the ones gathered in this astonishing anthology are important. They put us inside the heads of strangers. They make us feel those inner truths. What is it like to be angry or afraid, to hear voices, to be unable to relate to another human being, to struggle and slip and struggle and wish—above all—to be understood. To strive when it's our minds—not crippled limbs or other ills of the flesh—that betray and hobble us. To do our best when society, family, friends ignore or dismiss us.

To triumph, as in these stories, despite that terrible solitude. Or . . . because of it.

As with any encounter, there's the chance you'll meet a stranger here who proves familiar; maybe someone you already know. Maybe yourself.

If you do, toss away experience and expectation. Ignore the differences. Dismiss pity and any preconception of weakness.

Instead see the potential. Feel the passion.

For we are all strangers to one another, locked inside our minds, healthy or not quite. We're each the unique sum of advantage, disadvantage, and living with both. As you read these imaginative, original stories, you'll discover what matters most of all:

What we choose to be.

—Julie E. Czerneda, Severn, 2016
Author of *The Clan Chronicles* from DAW Books

THE CULLING

Kelley Armstrong

We grew up with stories of how the Cullings saved us. Stories of the famines and the aftermath, a world that once grew grain and corn in abundance, the forests overrun with rabbits and deer, lakes and streams brimming with trout and salmon. How all that had come to an end, the water drying up and everything dying with the drought—the grain and the corn and the rabbits and the deer and the trout and the salmon. And us. Most of all, us.

Left with so few resources, it was not enough to simply ration food and water. Not enough to reduce birth rates. Not enough to refuse any measures to prevent death. We needed more. We needed the Cullings.

The Cullings removed surplus population by systematically rooting out “weakness.” At first, they targeted the old and infirm. When that was no longer enough, any physical disability could see one culled. Even something that did not impair one’s ability to work—like a disfiguring birthmark—was said to be enough, on the reasoning that there was a taint in the bloodline that might eventually lead to a more debilitating condition.

The population dropped, but so did the water supply, and with it, the food supply, and eventually more stringent measures were required. That’s when they began targeting anyone who was different, in body or in mind. If you kept too much to yourself, rejecting the companionship of others; if you were easily upset or made anxious or sad; if you occasionally saw or heard things that weren’t there . . . all were reasons to be culled. But the thing is, sometimes those conditions are easier to hide than a bad leg or a mark on your face. It just takes a little ingenuity and a family

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unwilling to let you go.



"Who are you talking to, Marisol?" my mother says as she hurries into my room.

I motion to my open window, and to Enya, who had stopped to chat on her way to market. She says a quick hello to my mother and then a goodbye to me before carrying on down the village lane.

I murmur to my mother, "A real, living friend. You can see her, too, right?"

"I was just—"

"Checking, I know." I put my arm around her shoulders. Having just passed my sixteenth birthday, I'm already an inch taller and making the most of it. "I have not had imaginary friends in many years, Momma."

"I know. It's just . . . I've heard you talking recently. When you're alone."

"I argue with myself. You know how I am—always spoiling for a fight. If no one's around to give me one, I must make do." I smack a kiss on her cheek. "I don't hear voices, Momma. I'm not your sister. I have a little of what she did, but only a little, and I know how to hide it. I don't talk about my imaginary friends, even if they're long gone. I don't let anyone see my wild pictures. I don't tell anyone my even wilder stories. I am absolutely, incredibly, boringly normal."

She makes a face at me.

"What?" I say. "It *is* boring. But I will fake it, for you and Papa."

"For *you*, Mari. Our worries are for *you*, and yours should be, too."

"But I don't need to be worried, because I am very careful."

"The Culling is coming."

"As you have reminded me every day for the past month. I will be fine. I'll even stop arguing with myself, though that means you'll need to break up more fights between Dieter and me."

"Your brother will happily argue with you if it keeps you safe."

"It will." I give her a one-armed hug. "I'll be fine, Momma."

The Culling by KELLEY ARMSTRONG

Liar, the voice whispers in my ear. I squeeze my eyes shut, force it back and steer my mother from my room.



I have heard whispers that the Culling will be worse this year. Rumours say one of our two wells is running dry. The man who started the talk was a runner, one of those who carted the wheeled barrels from the well. The council called him a liar and a traitor. Said he'd been paid by another town to sow dissent. They executed him in the village square. But that hasn't stopped the rumours. If the well is drying up, this will indeed be a terrible Culling. And I must be prepared.

I do what I always do when I need a reminder. Because sometimes I do. There are nights and, yes, days, when the voice in my head says I shouldn't be so careful. I shouldn't need to be. That I should stand up and fight back. That I am a coward if I do not. But that is, I recognize, the sickness talking.

Fighting back is not an option. It absolutely is not, and it's madness to think it could be. I must remember that my aunt was the same age as me when she was culled. I must not comfort myself with my parents' insistence that my sickness is not as severe. Any defect—mental or physical—is cause for Culling.

I walk through the village square. At the far side is a wooden box, barely the height of an average person and even less wide. Inside is a man. He sits in the back corner, thin legs pulled in as he hums to himself. His hair is matted and filthy. His naked body reeks. We might not have the water to clean ourselves as we used to but we have adapted, and there is no excuse for this. No excuse other than that he does not care, is beyond caring, cannot even bring himself to let others run a damp rag over his skin.

He doesn't just smell of old sweat. There's the stench of urine and feces too. The notice beside his cage explains that he used to have a bucket, but it was taken away because the only use he made of it was to beat anyone who opened his door.

The man is here as a warning, lest we feel sympathy for something as harmless as talking to oneself. That was how his sickness started, the sign explains. As a boy who'd whispered to

DALLAS'S BOOTH

Suzanne Church

Dallas and his equipment waited for someone to dash into his phone booth and place a call. Any call. Trucks and streetcars screamed by while he squinted down at the sweet neon glow shining through the booth's plastic walls. The painted sheet metal roof had been defiled with a splat of white and green sludge—a Rorschach inkblot of defamation.

Damned birds.

He limped into the kitchen, channeling his rage into the knurled handle of his cane. His mother had presented him with the device when he'd still believed in the merits of physiotherapy. She'd found it at one of those conventions where people wore elf ears and talked in made-up languages. She declared it "cool." Said it would reduce the embarrassment factor. *Wrong.*

He grabbed a broken bucket from under the kitchen sink and filled it to just below the crack. Slopping and sloshing with every step, he walked back and heaved the water through his second-story window at the roof of his booth.

Problem solved.

Abandoning the bucket, he headed for the only seat in his living room: his lime-green leather chair. A throne in a cluttered kingdom of electronics.

He flicked the "On" switch for the lipstick-cam and turned the dial left, then right, then left once more to adjust the contrast for the live-feed video image of his booth's inner sanctum. Next, he activated the power bars for the computers, monitors, and the two banks of audio sensors and recording devices. Finally, he scanned the labyrinth of wires, particularly those leading to the

STRANGERS AMONG US

parabolic microphone hidden behind the *Twice-the-Bargain Pizza* sign below his apartment.

All go.

Pleased, he removed the headphones from the chair's arm and waited for a Toronto denizen too stingy to own a cell phone. Or too paranoid to use one.

After almost two hours, the equipment auto-activated. He licked his lips at the sound of a coin dropping.

"Hi, Mom. It's me," she said.

With a glance at the monitor, he savored the voice of the brunette repeat-customer he'd nicknamed "Becky".

A pause, and she added, "He did it again."

The microphone didn't register the other side of the conversation. Tampering with a public phone was more illegal than Dallas's other, lesser indiscretions.

He squirmed in his chair, thinking of Becky's choices. *Why call your mother, when you should call the cops?*

Becky sniffled. She turned to face the hidden camera and the dark, swollen region around her eye conveyed her latest struggle. "On the face this time. He's not trying to hide the bruises anymore."

Dallas waited through another pause, as Becky's mother probably insisted she leave the guy. He twisted the headphone cord between his fingers.

She turned her back on the camera and played with the coin-return slot. "I can't. He went out for smokes and he'll be right back. I needed to hear a friendly voice, that's all."

Another pause.

"He'd find me." Becky sniffled. "He has people everywhere."

Dallas wanted to shout out the window, "Leave him!"

Live-feed-Becky shook her head. "Mom . . . I love you. Gotta go." She hung up.

The equipment recorded for five extra seconds as Becky opened the door and fled the booth into the humid summer air. Dallas grabbed his cane and walked to the window. He leaned back, in case she looked up, and watched her hurry around the corner.

He needed to catalogue the call into his "Becky" directory. Calling up the new file, he said to himself, "If the bastard ever

Dallas's Booth by SUZANNE CHURCH

uses my booth, I'll kill him."

He opened a digital photo of Becky he'd taken months earlier. In the profile shot, captured with a zoom lens, she wore a forlorn expression. He touched the computer monitor, yearning for the soft warmth of her skin. With closed eyes, he fantasized how he would brush her hair aside and place his hand under her chin. She would look into his eyes, helpless against his strength, and he would kiss her moist lips. Finally, her body would relax, safe in his arms.



Dallas woke with a start, from a call in progress. He jammed on the headphones.

"I told you, two kilos." The spiky-haired punk-of-a-dope-dealer Dallas had nicknamed "Bob" glared in the direction of the hidden camera.

Dallas scowled at live-feed-Bob.

"Early Friday." Bob took a drag from his cigarette and then polluted the booth with his filthy habit. "Under the expressway. Put it in a duffel bag this time."

After a pause, Bob slammed the receiver onto the cradle and stormed out of the booth.

"Be nice to my phone, dirt-bag." Dallas sat in the dark, waiting for Bob to vacate the zone, before cataloguing the call. His stomach growled loud enough to wake the roaches.

"Better scurry or I'll squish you," he said to them as he entered the kitchen. He always opened the fridge without turning on the light so they wouldn't do their worrisome flee-and-hide dance. He slid two cheese slices from the package and loaded a plate with crackers from the cupboard. Un-wrapping each slice carefully, he folded them twice to make four perfect squares—the filling for eight cracker-sandwiches. Then he coaxed cold water from the tap into his mug with the chipped rim.

Each mouthful felt like a piece of his childhood, the processed cheese an orange window into lazy Saturday mornings filled with cartoons and bad sitcoms. In those days, he could sit cross-legged, ride a bicycle, and frolic in a park without a second

WHAT HARM

Amanda Sun

Colin still remembered the night he was sold. Most four-year-olds would have questioned their father hitching the workhorse to the wagon under the moonlight, the stiff leather of the old harness creaking against the rusting buckles, the gelding stamping at the dirt path beneath his weary hooves. But Colin only pressed his hand against the horse's lowered muzzle, velvet and warm beneath his chubby fingers. The gelding's nostrils blew warm air against his cheek, the dark midnight world slipping away until it was just him and the smell of leather and horse hair and earth.

Most four-year-olds would have questioned why their father lifted them gently into the back of the wagon, the starlight and moonlight spread in stripes of dim white across the wooden boards, encrusted with sharp ends of hay. They would have searched the doorway and windows for their mother, standing there with a tallow candle half-melted onto the bronze holder. They might reach their hands out to her on the other side of the bloated glass pane as her eyes turned away, glossy as stones and cold as the night air. They might have wondered as her breath puffed against the flickering light, as the window went dark and the wagon lurched forward. But Colin did not wonder, because Colin did not know to wonder. He thought only of the horse's soft nose and the wagon wheels spinning, and he made not a sound, because Colin couldn't speak.

They rode in silence to the center of town, the hooves first thudding against the packed dirt as the farmland slowly passed, then clopping against the cobblestones, the world lit in the shadowed light of the lampposts that lined the abandoned

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town square. The earlier rain still glistened in tiny puddles that collected in the uneven stonework. Colin peered over the side of the wagon, watching the spokes of the nearest wheel as it whirred round and round. Not once did his father tell him he was leaning too far, that he might tip out the edge. Not once did Colin tug on the back of his father's jacket, or ponder his hunched shoulders as he gripped the reins, slack against the flanks of the gelding that snorted into the stillness.

The wagon jolted to a stop and the spokes stopped turning. Colin's father sat for a moment, then climbed down the spokes. There was a small splash as his boot heel landed in one of the tiny puddles, and Colin watched the drops spray onto the cobblestones, glimmering like dark beads in the moonlight. His father's warm hands pulled him from the cart, and the boy reached out for the horse's velvet nose. The gelding reached his muzzle toward the boy and whinnied into the cold air, but Colin's little hands couldn't reach him. The two slipped farther from each other as the boy's father carried him away to the curb by the stone bridge, to the quiet row of houses without a single candle in their windows.

All was still and quiet. The only light came from the tavern, where the murmur of a tune drifted into the square from the crack underneath the wooden door. The thick glass windows filled with shadows and shapes—dancing and arguments and bartering while candlelight flickered around all of them; warmth and crowds and conversation. Colin hated crowded places. He would cry and moan and beat his fists with his eyes squeezed shut.

His father left him on the curb of the damp stone bridge. He looked at him for a moment, his gaze distant and cold. Colin didn't notice, though, for he never looked into his father's eyes.

"Stay here a while," he told the boy. "I'll be back." And he turned to the tavern and closed the door behind him.

The midnight air was cold against Colin's thin coat. He sat as he was told, though he longed to return to the wagon and the waiting horse. He didn't question why he'd been left on the bridge in the night. As the moon lowered in the sky, he didn't question why his father didn't return. He merely sat and stared

What Harm by AMANDA SUN

at the wagon wheel, remembering the way it whirred like a top when the gelding pulled it forward.

After two hours, when the chill had begun to shake Colin, his father burst from the wooden door, his face red and his eyes bloodshot. He seemed surprised, almost disappointed, to see Colin still sitting there. Colin did not run to him, or even look at him. He rocked back and forth, thinking of wagon wheels and velvet muzzles. His father looked from Colin to the wagon and back again, and he choked on a strange cough and blew his nose into the handkerchief he kept in the pocket of his dark green coat. Then he lifted the boy back into the spiky hay strewn across the wagon and slapped the reins against the horse's sleek flank. The wagon jolted forward and Colin squealed with delight, because the spokes spun like pinwheels in the springtime air.

They rode up the hill far past the town, to a stronghold darker than the last swell of water that slicks over a man's head as he drowns. Even the candles lit in the windows of that black stone fortress seemed to flicker with a dimmer light that drew shadows instead of expelling them. The horse tossed his head with each step, his mane spreading like the thick branches of the dark forest that closed in around them. He brayed low and wild as Colin's father encouraged him toward the iron gate, where a woman waited in a long silver dress of moonlight, her brown hair curled around her shoulders like a cloak against the darkness.

The wagon stopped, but Colin's father did not reach for him. Instead he spoke to the woman. "Please," he said. "He doesn't speak, and he's not right in the head, but he's a hard worker and he'll be useful."

"If he's useful, take him home," she said. But the father shook his head.

"I'm a farmer," he said. "The oats failed this year, and he's no good to apprentice as a blacksmith. Don't think me unkind. I struggle enough as it is without having another mouth to feed."

The branches of the dark trees pressed in around Colin, shadows gathering as the owls called to each other in the blackness of the night. The wheels had stopped, and the horse's eyes grew large as the dark puddles from the town square. He tossed his head wildly, fighting against the harness to back the wagon down the

HOW OBJECTS BEHAVE ON THE EDGE OF A BLACK HOLE

A.C. Wise

Maggie sat on the end of her bed and aligned the x-rays—three ghost-white views of her sister’s spine, bruised dark with the cancer that had recurred after over a year of remission. A pink post-it note stuck to the topmost x-ray read: *I’m tired*. It wasn’t much by way of suicide notes, but there wasn’t much else to say.

Maggie slid the x-rays back into their envelope, keeping aside the business card mailed with them. Connor Barston, her sister’s boss, director at the South West American Nuclear Research Facility—SWAN. He’d found the x-rays in Jan’s office and sent them to Maggie as her next of kin.

Maggie hadn’t cried yet. She imagined Doctor Parsons telling her that was perfectly normal—everyone processes grief differently. As if Maggie didn’t know. She’d said goodbye to Jan a long time ago. The wound wasn’t fresh, only a pale, faded scar.

Even so, that scar twinged.

Maggie moved to her desk, scrolling through her email to the last message Jan had sent her. The first in nearly a year, but possibly one of the last emails Jan had sent. Period.

Not a cry for help. Not even a goodbye. Jan didn’t want to be talked out of her suicide. Once she’d made her mind up about something—whether it was her opinion of Maggie, or her decision to empty her bank account and book an appointment at an underground Death with Dignity clinic rather than face another round of chemo—she didn’t change it. Not that Maggie blamed her; after her first bout with cancer, after watching their

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mother die slowly of the same, it was a reasonable choice.

But between Jan's death and her last email, it was the latter that interested Maggie more. A sound file and a single sentence: *Thought you might find this interesting.*

After a year of silence, after a lifetime of being strangers to each other, Jan had set aside her professional ego and reached out to Maggie.

That, more than Jan's suicide, shocked Maggie.

Since their respective graduations, their careers had run parallel. Maggie had chosen engineering, things that could be touched, quantified, and explained. She'd even been part of the design team working on the collider at SWAN, where Jan worked, but Maggie had never been to the facility in person. Her career and Jan's were truly parallel—never intersecting.

Jan had made her career in particle physics. Ghost science, as Maggie thought of it. Spending a lifetime studying what could only be observed indirectly by the effect it had on things around it.

So what Jan thought Maggie might 'find interesting', she couldn't imagine. The sound file was labeled *SWAN Recording - 10-14-31*. Maggie hadn't opened the file when Jan first sent it, but she played it now.

Her fingers crept to the back of her neck, tracing the patch that settled just below her hairline, covering the first few knobs of her spine. The patch that keep her dosages regular, her brain chemistry in check.

A slow, deep sound filled Maggie's bedroom. It had a stretched quality. Thin. Just above where Maggie's fingers skirted the edges of the patch, her skin puckered tight. A sound, a vibration, a note played directly into the bones of her skull—hauntingly familiar, and yet utterly strange.

The clip came to an end, and Maggie breathed out.

What the fuck had Jan meant by sending it? A problem she finally—at the end of her life—couldn't solve, but thought Maggie could give her insight on, somehow? Her sister had never followed up with an explanation, and now it was too late for Maggie to reply and ask.

Before giving herself time to fully think it through, Maggie

How Objects Behave on the Edge of a Black Hole by A.C. WISE

booked a flight to Arizona, then sent an email to Barston, Jan's boss: *I want to see where my sister worked. I was part of the design team on your collider. I can get security clearances if you need them. My flight arrives tomorrow morning.*

Was this why Jan had sent the email, to intrigue Maggie enough that she'd cross the continent to see for herself what Jan had been working on? Or had she simply meant to needle Maggie one last time by sending her a puzzle without a solution? Maggie bit her lip, worrying chapped skin. Was there any chance sending Maggie the sound clip had been some sort of a strange peace offering? She'd never been particularly good at guessing Jan's motives. For anything.

She pulled a spiral bound notebook from the bottom drawer of her desk. On the first available blank line she wrote: *April 13, 2032: Twenty-one years, three months, and nineteen days. I am not being haunted by my sister's ghost.*

The same sentence filled every page, repeated daily, the date changing, but nothing else. There were notebooks before this one, an archeological record tracing Maggie's handwriting from her eleven-year-old block print, to the back-sloping experiment with cursive, to now—a hybrid mix, barely legible, even to her.

Maggie ran her fingers over the indentations made by the ink, tracing the shape of each letter, blushing her skin pale blue. She tucked the program from Jan's funeral between the pages, closed the notebook, and returned it to the drawer.

I am not being haunted by my sister's ghost. For the first time in a very long time, an inkling of doubt crept through the walls she'd spent more than twenty-one years building. Had the words ever been true?



October 19, 2011

Maggie watched as the ghost placed her fingers precisely over indentations in the puzzle box that neither she nor Jan had been able to find. Real-Jan, at least. Ghost-Jan seemed to have no trouble. Because the ghost *was* Jan; Maggie had no doubt about



WASHING LADY'S HAIR

Ursula Pflug

"I heard you could get Rick Sutton's sculptures here," the woman said, "for half the Yorkville price."

Coiffed and slender, she wore an equally slim black suit that smelled like money. Feeling shabby, Karen wished she'd gotten properly dressed, but maybe her vintage flowered dressing gown, smudged mascara and vaguely matted hair could actually help. Shadow always said people came to the gallery just to feel they were a part of something.

"You can," Karen said. Maybe the woman thought if she had one of Rick's animals, her life might change, just a little bit. She might be right too: Rick's work was that amazing. Karen knew it wasn't just because Rick was her boyfriend that she thought so—his work actually sold, and not for pennies. Well, sometimes anyway.

"Show me," the woman said, and Karen had only to point to the ceiling where a manta ray, three feet in circumference, hung from a chain.

"It's six hundred dollars," Karen said. "Which is half of what you'd pay uptown. And it's his newest, so truthfully he wanted to keep it a bit longer, but . . ." She made an ingratiating gesture.

"I'll have to think about it," the woman said, "Not that it isn't gorgeous." She hesitated before asking, "Do you happen to know where I can get any Green?"

Karen just shook her head no, as Shadow had instructed. Green wasn't scheduled, but it wasn't exactly legal either. Shadow and Rick had both tried explaining the difference between selling and personal use, between synthetic and leaf, between last year and

Washing Lady's Hair by URSULA PFLUG

this year: a bristling confusion of facts that, just when it was about to cohere in Karen's mind, always chose to disintegrate instead. Like a sea urchin she'd just stepped on, but not before it poked her sharply in the soft sole of her foot.

The woman gave her a disbelieving look. "But I heard."

Karen just shrugged, returned to the desk, leaving the woman to browse. She opened the little metal box that served as cash register, sorted change into appropriate compartments. The box was dependable in times of power outage, which was often. Everyone was dumping their smart phones in favour of stacks of clipped together file cards, and email, no longer reliable, was out. *Green Magic* sported a meeting area consisting of a spotty Wi-Fi connection and more importantly, comfortable seating. There was no charge for use of the embroidered couch and the connection; people who met at the store sometimes ended up buying clothes or art.

Beside the couch, a metal stand housed fabric paints, mason jars of brushes and a stack of white tees Shadow had liberated from the dumpster behind a Spadina jobber. Karen took the top shirt and stretched it over a painting board. She'd let an arty customer try her hand at painting a shirt to take home the week before, and now Shadow charged people for the pleasure. Karen figured it was the first thing she'd come up with that her boss had approved of.

Karen sighed, staring at the shirt. People who had never dived could hardly be better painters than her; they didn't have a wealth of undersea imagery in their heads to draw upon.

The door chimes rang, startling her. The woman had finally left. Karen wouldn't tell Shadow; he'd complain she could have closed the sale.

No sea here. Karen missed the Pacific Ocean. Occasionally she took the streetcar to Cherry Beach, just to sit there looking at water. Lake Ontario was so big you couldn't see the other side, but there were no breakers and no jellyfish and it didn't smell of salt. Of course, the Strait of Georgia didn't have much in the way of breakers either. She'd grown up in Vancouver but she'd never spent much time on the island, outside of Victoria. Some friends of Rick's had told her it wasn't really the ocean till you'd built a

STRANGERS AMONG US

bonfire on Long Beach, brought hand drums and tents or—if it was summer—just curled in a sleeping bag. No one else around for miles. It wasn't really Green till you'd done that. Back then, she still thought her life would change just by being with Rick. It had, too, but not quite in the way she'd hoped.

Still, they'd been in Toronto, now, for over two years, and some things were definitely better.



Back in Vancouver they'd mostly sat in their east side basement apartment heating little pots of green paste on their hot plate. Once it was warmed, they rubbed the paste gently into each other's skin where it was thinnest: temples, neck, the insides of elbows and knees. Waiting for it to begin, staring into each other's eyes, smiles of delight deepening and widening. And there it was: a popping sound, like squelching through soft clean river bottom mud. But it was more than that; it was a popping feeling, her skin transmogrifying. Karen would look then, just to make sure what she felt was also what she saw: Rick's hand wasn't just a hand anymore but also a whale's flipper, the whale's flipper brushing her own, that of a green sea turtle.

Shape shifting. It was electrifying.

Rick never disappeared entirely when Orca arrived. Karen still felt the warmth of primate skin, the hardness of the bones within, the slender bird feet tendons. She knew if she pressed just so, his tendons would move, just a little, and at the same time she'd be touching skin that was slick and rubbery and wet, so alien it left her breathless. Cetacean skin.

Sometimes the change arrived mere moments after dosing, sometimes it took hours to achieve. They chanted and drummed to bring it nearer. They closed their eyes and tuned into the process with every scrap of energy and will, and—something like love. Definitely something like passion. Wasn't prayer in the end just that, an expression of passion for the divine?

Walking, they'd talk about everything that was wrong with the world. If it was up to Rick, he'd have been born as a pre-industrial revolution European peasant. Then, even if his land wasn't his

THE WEEDS AND THE WILDNESS

Tyler Keevil

“Always this bending process, this landscape gardening to make the mind more attractive.”

—Henry Miller

There are vans driving around the city: large white vans without any markings on the bodywork. I saw the first one last week, can still see it in my mind. The paint was so fresh and bright it hurt my eyes to stare. I was standing in the garden, watering my marigolds, when it drifted by—smooth and silent as a shark. All the windows, including the windscreen, were tinted so the driver appeared as a vague and featureless shadow. It’s hard to say what struck me most—its secretive nature or the predatorial efficiency with which it moved.

In the week since the first one, I’ve seen more and more of the same.

It’s not the same van—it can’t possibly be the same van—but I’m hard-pressed to spot any difference between them. They are all in immaculate, pristine condition: no spots of rust, no dents or grooves or scratches. The face of the driver is always similarly obscured. I never catch them speeding, but neither do they seem unhurried. Rather, they prowl about the streets with identical, mechanical purpose. What that purpose is I can’t possibly say, but their very existence unnerves me. I can’t help but feel as if this is the start of something.

STRANGERS AMONG US



These days, I spend most of my time in the garden—if it can be called a garden. It's more of a jungle, a thriving tangle of grasses, heathers, evergreens, bulbs, corms, perennials, shrubs, ivies, saplings and flowers. This is the busiest time of year. Bluebells are popping open like tiny firecrackers. A multitude of crocuses, daffodils, tulips, and dog's tooth violets are coming into blossom—splashing the lawn and beds with paint-box colours. The next phase of perennials is starting to emerge: hot red bleeding hearts and gold-petalled leopard's banes, alongside the delicate blue and pink wood anemones. My shrubs flower early in the year as well: rhododendrons, magnolias, azaleas—the list goes on and on. Yes, my garden is running rampant. As is the case every spring, complaints come to me in the polite manner of neighbourly concern. They ask me: *Would you like to borrow my lawnmower, my trimmer, my pruning sheers?* Some even offer to do it for me. Since my retirement, I've learned that people in suburbia don't like things to be too different, too wild.

But that's their problem, not mine. I see my garden as a form of personal expression. Maintaining such disarray is a full-time occupation. I reserve evenings for my business dealings (I make a small profit selling organic fertilizers and lawn supplies over the internet) but my days are entirely devoted to my plants. With the countless hours I spend among them, feeding and watering, tending and trimming, it has been impossible for me not to notice these vans. So far, they seem content to go about their business, as I go about mine.



I would like to make some enquiries on the block. If I weren't such a coward, that's exactly what I'd do. But even the thought of it opens a gaping pit in my stomach, brings a sheen of sweat to my back and a hot, allergenic flush to my cheeks. My garden is my refuge. The notion of venturing out, of interacting and engaging with people, unsettles me. It's nothing serious. I'm simply more

The Weeds and the Wildness by TYLER KEEVIL

comfortable in my own space, with my plants. I suppose that makes me an eccentric. I'm sure that's what they call me, anyway, behind my back. What of it? Every neighbourhood needs one. I give them something to talk about over dinner. The eccentric and his garden: wild, unkempt, madcap, bizarre, unmanageable.

Strange how gardens reflect personality. Though I've barely exchanged more than a few awkward words with my neighbours in as many years, I feel I know them. I know Mrs. Crenshaw, with her obsessively trimmed lawn and manically pruned hedges—squat and square as slices of frosted cake. I know, too, the young couple on the corner, who neglect their yard for months and then decide to attack it, apropos of nothing, with ferocious zeal. Grass clippings and leaves are left where they've fallen, covering a lawn devoid of style, care, or character—like a haircut executed by a drunken barber. And what do I know of Mr. Amonte and his brood? I know the first thing he did, upon moving in across the street, was to drown his yard in a sea of cement. The only lawn he has left is a small plot, about two by six feet, that rests in the centre of the patio like an unkempt and overgrown grave.

The thought of approaching these people, or most of the others, horrifies me.

There is only one yard, one person, on the block that I find interesting. Like myself, Jay is something of an anomaly. A weed. A thirty-something divorcee. Her husband was the gardener, studious and conventional. Since their split, she has taken secret pleasure in allowing his carefully tended beds to run rampant. The lawn hasn't been cut for months. It's become a raging meadow, filled with knee-high stalks of grass, dandelion heads, snowdrops, buttercup clusters, and chains of Michalmas daisies. Along the perimeter, fierce japonica shrubs vie with smoke bushes and holly trees for dominance. It is a garden to fall in love with.

I know Jay has gone back to school recently. I see her coming and going, head down, a load of books clutched to her chest. She would be worth talking to, and I've had the opportunity on occasion when she's ordered supplies from me (I offer her a discount). But whenever I deliver she is as reticent and tonguetied as me. She's like a furtive jungle animal hiding out amongst all that foliage. Our very similarities make communication

LIVING IN OZ

Bev Geddes

The door squeaked open. Old doors in old homes were the best for that. Freaked people out to no end. I never understood why. Old homes are old homes. That's part of the deal. Not so good when you're trying to sneak in past curfew or keep sleeping babies asleep. Now, the squeaky doors were useful to me.

The smell of soggy tissues and coffee hung in the air. He really should empty that wastebasket more often. It was a welcome place, relaxed and easy. I'd been here a few times. Before. I threw myself onto the worn couch and announced, "I'm here."

He didn't even look up from the papers he was studying at his desk, scribbling a note here and there with a half chewed pencil stub. The silence stretched. I waited. It sometimes took a while.

"I know you're there," he said, finally looking up. With a sigh, he pushed his glasses up onto the top of his head, hair shaved to a frosted stubble. He was slim and fit and had a smile that eased the tension out of the room. It wasn't a put-on kind of thing. Bernie wasn't that kind of psychologist. He never made you feel crazy. "It's been a while."

"Over here, on the couch." I waved, though I didn't know why. Hard to break old habits, I guess.

"I know," he repeated. "I'm just slow today. It's been a busy day." He pushed away from his battered oak desk and slumped down into the winged chair facing me, tucking his legs beneath himself. He didn't pick up the tablet of paper that had been thrown onto the end table beside him with obvious abandon. "You've been invisible again, haven't you?"

"Comes with the territory," I muttered.

Living in Oz by BEV GEDDES

“Not necessarily.” He folded his hands across this stomach weaving his fingers together. He was settling in. “We’ve discussed this.”

“Um hmm. And you still don’t get it.”

“Then why do you come here, if I don’t understand your situation? That doesn’t make much sense. Looking for a convert?” A slow smile curled into the corners of his mouth.

“Because you hear me.” I folded my legs underneath myself too. It was warmer that way, and I was tired of being so damn cold. I spent my life being cold in a city gripped with snow and ice for six months of the year, and now I was still cold in this unfamiliar terrain. It wasn’t right. There ought to be some advantages to being in my present state. “I need someone to really hear me. I don’t know why.”

“Lots of other people would hear you, if you’d let them.” He paused and I knew what would come next. “They would see you, too.”

I waved my hand at him, dismissing that last comment. It looked thinner . . . more translucent than before. I wondered how long I would have that hand.

“People don’t want to see me.”

“I think you’re underestimating them. Friends and family at least.”

I laughed at that. My laugh sounded harsh. The edges of it scraped the ear. It came from just below the surface, with no depth and no softness. Someone had once said that I had the best laugh, a belly laugh that seemed to fill my whole body. A laugh that could nudge smiles onto faces. It was real. I remember. Now it was just an echo.

“They were too tired.” I made another useless gesture with my hand, indicating my body, “This was too much for them. I was a burden. I knew that. Even if they didn’t use the word. That’s why I left. It was the only option open to me anymore.”

“You’re wrong. It isn’t too late. They can still see you. You’re still you, just different. Trust them.”

“Different? People don’t do ‘different’ very well. If you don’t fit into the box, they have no clue how to interact with you.”

“Not all people. You have to try. Give it a chance.”

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"I've tried."

Bernie's eyebrows knitted together, and he got that intense look that would flit briefly across his face before he relaxed back into therapy mode. "You've tried? Tell me when? What did you do?"

"Today on the bus, as I was getting on, I saw a woman sitting there. Her face was so very sad. She was crying. She seemed embarrassed to cry. We're not supposed to let people know that side of us. It makes them uncomfortable. But I could feel her grief. It shone from her like a beacon. I sat behind her, trying to send all the warmth and comfort I could. To let her know it would get better, that the grief would ease."

But some grief doesn't just ease. It crashes over you like a wave or laps at your toes the rest of the time, always there ready to take you down. It doesn't go away.

"Grief is a storm," I said, nodding at this thought. It's more than a wave, more devastating, longer lasting. A wave hits and then recedes. Storms build, descend, wreak havoc, then scurry away only to circle back again. "The storms are different all the time. It's just a matter of degree."

My gaze drifted out the window, frost-etched patterns of silver blocking the view of the street. I didn't share the rest of my thoughts on grief storms but I counted out the ones that I knew so intimately.

The white-out of the blizzard storm where there is nothing but surge upon surge of driving snow. Each snowflake stings with memory and settles on the soul a grief so pressing the body screams beneath its weight. The world doesn't exist outside of this storm. Here there is no end.

Then there's the crazed thunderstorm full of fury and red-hot strikes that shake the earth below you. You scramble for cover knowing the storm will seek you out and there is no escape from the crackling stab of lightning.

The sudden north wind pain that rakes your face with icy fingers and pulls the breath out of you. This one sneaks up on you like rounding a sheltered corner only to be blasted back into grief with a single gust of wind.

The rich earthy storm of the fall that heralds the cold of winter

I COUNT THE LIGHTS

Edward Willett

Selvan Hori, Terran Ambassador to Prevaria, paused on the stairs that spiraled around the Tower of the Silent God and peered anxiously at the pool of shadow in front of him. One of the green lights that gleamed eerily every nine steps had just gone out, vanishing as he stepped away from the previous light, and between the darkness and the black stone, it looked disconcertingly like the next dozen or so steps had entirely disappeared. Since he was currently some two hundred feet above the cobblestoned courtyard of the Temple complex, that was not a comforting thought.

The air around him moaned with the constant song of the Tower, carved here and there with complicated openings that turned it into a giant organ pipe, played by the sea breeze by day and the land breeze by night, so that only in the stillness of dawn and sunset did it fall completely silent. The complex chord engendered awe and tranquility in Prevarians, apparently, but it contained enough subsonic frequencies that the dominant human response was faint terror.

The steps haven't gone anywhere, he told himself. The light has just gone out.

But he paused anyway, partly to gather his courage, partly to give his pounding heart a chance to slow and his breathing a chance to steady.



"I count the lights."

Alfred Kelvas, Head of Security for the Terran Diplomatic Mission to Prevaria, tapped the soundbud in his right ear and glanced at the flexible screen on the underside of his left wrist. The

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datalink status indicators glowed green. As far as the AI back in the Embassy was concerned, that had been an accurate translation of the short squeaking phrase the blue-skinned Prevarian monk hunched on the stone bench before him had just uttered.

Maybe the translation had been faulty in the *other* direction. Kelvas decided to try again.

"I'm sorry, I think the translator may have malfunctioned," he said, while the speaker concealed in the breastplate of the body armour he wore under his dark green uniform squeaked like a demented mouse. "I asked your name."

The monk splayed his three-fingered hands and turned them rapidly from side to side, the Prevarian equivalent of a vigorous nod. He squeaked again. "I count the lights."

Kelvas forced down his irritation. Two days ago, Ambassador Selvan Hori had fallen from the three-hundred-foot Tower of the Silent God, the central feature of both the Temple and the capital city of Prevaria. Support for the painstakingly negotiated trade agreement between Terra and Prevaria was plummeting as fast as the late ambassador had.

Kelvas's superiors were demanding answers, the Prevarian Motivator, roughly equivalent to the Terran Prime Minister, faced revolt from the hard-core isolationists on her Council of Satraps, the Navy was making contingency plans for a complete withdrawal . . . and somewhere, the planetary pillagers who lurked in the shadows between the civilized stars were gathering their mercenary forces in anticipation of moving in and taking over. Prevaria stood on the brink of invasion, conquest, and environmental ruin, though its politicians didn't seem to grasp that reality.

All of that meant increasing pressure on Kelvas to find some answers. He didn't have *time* for malfunctioning translators.

Nor did he have time for the cheerful tri-tone bell that now sounded in his earbud. "Excuse me," he said to the monk. "I have an incoming communication."

"I count the lights," the monk said . . . possibly.

Grimacing, Kelvas stepped off to one side. He tapped twice on his earbud to accept the call. "What is it, Simon?"

"I'm sorry to disturb you, sir," Simon's deep voice came back,

I Count the Lights by EDWARD WILLET

“but Tyrone Boynton is in your outer office. He’s been there since this morning. Five hours and counting.”

Kelvas closed his eyes. “With Eve, I suppose?”

“No, sir,” Simon said. “By himself.”

Kelvas’s eyes flew open again. *That* was new.

Eve Boynton had been after him for weeks to find a job for Tyrone in the Embassy. Kelvas liked Eve. He’d known her back on Earth; she’d come to their house in Bozeman for dinner once or twice, on weekend jaunts from the Diplomatic Corps Training Centre in Geneva; Kelvas’s wife, Annie, had liked her, too. Eve had barely mentioned her brother then—he and Annie had gathered Tyrone still lived with his parents, and was attending some kind of special school, but Eve hadn’t said exactly what kind of school or why he needed to attend it.

But then, a few weeks ago, Tyrone Boynton had showed up *here*, on Prevaria, to visit Eve. He’d arrived on the regularly scheduled Navy supply ship, taking advantage of the rule that allowed family members to visit staff on station, at least in locations where nobody was shooting at each other. By the regulations, he was due to return to Terra on the next ship headed that way, in about a fortnight. But a week ago Eve had come to Kelvas, Tyrone in tow. They’d sat in his office, Eve stiff and upright in one of the leather-covered chairs in front of his desk, Tyrone in the other. No taller than Eve—and Eve was not a tall woman—he had an oddly unfinished look, his facial features soft and doughy. He sat with his eyes downcast, rocking slightly in his chair, his hands, too big for the rest of his body, gripping his knees tightly the entire time.

Eve had told Kelvas why Tyrone had come to Prevaria: the siblings’ parents had died and she’d begged the authorities to send him to her. He couldn’t live on his own, she explained. If he’d stayed on Earth—or if he returned there—he would be institutionalized. Eve, her voice breaking, had begged Kelvas to allow Tyrone to stay.

The trouble was, the Diplomatic Corps rules were clear: to live on Prevaria in the Embassy compound long-term—and draw a Diplomatic Corps paycheck—Tyrone had to have a job . . . of which there were none suitable to someone of his limited mental capacity. Kelvas explained all that. Eve begged. He finally got rid



THE DOG AND THE SLEEPWALKER

James Alan Gardner

To the Dog, the starship's bridge was quiet. He'd been told there was actually a din of chatter in the minutes leading up to a warp jump—members of the crew constantly calling out readings. But the noise was restricted to the brain-chip connections that linked everybody else. The Dog had no augmentations, so all he heard was the soft shifting of people in their seats on the rare occasions when they had to push buttons with their actual fingers instead of just doing it with their minds.

After a long period of silence, the captain cleared her throat. "Mr. Bok," she said aloud, "are you ready for jump?"

"Yes, Captain," said the Dog.

"Very good," she said. She looked to make sure the Dog's hand was hovering above the insultingly large red button that was the one and only feature of the Dog's control console. She nodded and said, "Jump in three . . . two . . . one . . ."

The captain's body went slack. So did the bodies of everyone else on the bridge.

Except the Dog.

Whatever warp-space was—and whenever the Dog asked, crew-members answered, "It's hard to explain"—whatever warp-space was, it played hell with electronics. And with fancy nanotech particles. And hormone implants. And all the other add-ons that 99.9 percent of humans were now augmented with, beginning before they were born.

All augs had to be shut down an instant before a jump, for fear

The Dog and the Sleepwalker by JAMES ALAN GARDNER

they'd blow a gasket and injure or kill their hosts. That meant everyone went unconscious—people depended so much on their built-in devices, they went comatose without them.

Except the Dog: he had no devices. He was an un-retouched human with no role in the world except to hit the red button that would restart every person and gadget on the ship when the jump was over.

He didn't push the button. He settled back onto his jump-couch.

Now the bridge was totally quiet. The crew were still breathing, but nothing more.

The ship's systems were shut down too. No gravity. None of the faint sounds that usually filled the background: the distant hum of the engines, the whisper of the ventilators. Everything off.

The room wasn't totally dark, thanks to light-emitting diatoms in transparent sea-water tubes that ran across the walls and ceiling. Their glow was as dusky as twilight, but the eyes of the crew had amplifiers that let them see as easily as if everything was under floodlights.

Or so the Dog had been told. His own eyes were simply accustomed to the dark.

He pulled his zapper out of his pocket. It was nothing more than a battery with two metal terminals on top. In the normal universe, pressing a button made a blue electric spark arc between the terminals. When the Dog pressed it now, the result was a flat orange ribbon that rose from one terminal, a little like a candle flame. The other terminal surrounded itself with a cloud of utter blackness.

Okay. The ship was still in warp-space. Whatever that was.



When he started this job, the Dog had been told that less than one percent of warp-jumps fell short of completion. "Up and out in no time at all" . . . that was the phrase everybody repeated. A starship left normal space and returned several light-years from its starting point with no time elapsed during the gap. That was the theory—what crew-members believed.

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In the Dog's experience, almost every jump took longer. He pictured warp jumps like jumps in skiing: skiers came down those ramps then soared into the sky, sailing, sailing, till they hit the bottom. Starship crews believed they jumped flawlessly, touching down exactly where they aimed. But usually, they didn't; they landed short, then had to coast the rest of the way to where they wanted to go.

A ship might only need a few seconds to settle out of warp-space and back into the normal universe. Then again, it might take longer. Hence the need for the Dog: someone who wouldn't press restart until he knew for sure that the ship was back in safe normality.

Ship designers had tried alternatives: hundreds of automated tricks intended to eliminate the need for Dogs. The tricks never worked reliably; warp-space had a knack for causing malfunctions in human-made devices. Either the ship would restart prematurely, in which case most of the crew died in agony as their body-mods went haywire . . . or the ship never booted at all, in which case a boatload of comatose crew-members eventually froze or suffocated because the ship's life-support systems never came back online.

In the earliest days of warp travel, someone joked they should just train a dog to push a big red button when the reboot time came. But no one trusted a dog enough to risk an entire ship and crew on canine judgment. Eventually, humans were used instead—humans who for one reason or another didn't have augmentations. Such people came to be known as Dogs, even if no one ever used the name to their faces.

Crew-members seldom talked to the Dog at all. Talking was a dying skill; children still learned to do it, to encourage the development of their lungs and their sense of hearing. But most people stopped speaking aloud when they reached adulthood. Every voice the Dog had ever heard was raspy with disuse.

Except for the simulated voices of computers. Computers could talk just fine . . . and they did it to keep the Dog company. Actual humans were edgy around him—he was outside their comfort zone. People tended to treat him as if he were stupid . . . maybe even dangerous. "Different" meant "Can't trust him." There'd

CARNIVORES

Rich Larson

Finch pried himself out of the autocab midway down Jasper Avenue, where Carnivor gastro-bistro, the city's most exclusive new eatery, skulked between concrete high-rises. He'd read up on the restaurant's architecture when he and Blake first started planning the heist, so he knew it was a collaboration between a Bolivian artist and a decaying engineering AI, and that the swooping ridges of the façade, together with its calcium-spike stalactites, were meant to evoke the maw of an animal. For everyone with neural implants synched up to fine dining augmented reality, the restaurant's name was slashed into the air in bright red.

Finch thought it was a bit kitschy. Blake, his partner in crime, thought it was bleeding edge haute couture and required Finch order a new suit that was not bleeding ugly. The Armani jacket already felt unpleasantly tight around his bookcase shoulders and thick-ribbed chest—a problem Finch was well used to. Not many stores catered to Neanderthal hybrid proportions.

The autocab squawked for payment. Finch licked his massive thumb and stuck it against the reader, then held the taxi in place by its door frame while he checked his appearance in the window. He ran a hand over his slicked red hair and adjusted the Full Windsor noose around his neck, wondering if the tattoos clawing out from under his cuffs looked professional enough in cobalt blue or if he should have masked them completely.

Finch let the autocab skitter back into traffic. It didn't matter how he looked. The darknet CV Blake had done up for him was a bullshit masterpiece, and Carnivor's proprietor, if her hacked pornstream was any indication, had a Neanderthal fantasy not

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uncommon among professional women. Finch inhaled. The cold air smelled like exhaust and something almost as pungent that his nose, tuned to Blake-imposed veganism, took a moment to recognize as cooking meat.

He made his way through the dilating doors into a mirrored entryway, where he was stopped by a bouncer who seemed to be mostly composed of HGH-pumped muscle and hair gel.

"Slow up, Red." He tapped the neural plug set into the shaved side of his head, making his starched Mohawk wobble slightly. "I don't see you on the facebook. In this *modern* day and age, you need to make a reservation, you know? And at Carnivor, we backlog up to three months."

"I'm not a guest," Finch said, sizing him up on old instinct. Scarred knuckles, crooked nose, probably fancied himself a boxer. The nametag scrolling down his breast pocket read Vick. "I'm here to see Ms. Carrow." He tapped his own plug, down behind his ear, and shuttled over the Carnivor-red interview request.

A briefly hurt look flashed across Vick's face before he regained his pre-set smirk. "Have to frisk you down, then," he said, cracking his fingers. "You're awful pale. Must be Irish, right?"

Finch stood scarecrow as the bouncer frisked. "Not that I know of. You?"

"You in the gravity gym a lot? What do you squat on standard?" Vick slapped one of Finch's tree-trunk quads. "Big old haunches on you. Big veins, too, I got tiny veins, shitty circulation—"

Finch snagged the man's hand tight enough to feel tendons rasp up on each other, then slowly moved it away.

Vick turned his grimace into a grin as he yanked his fingers back. "Your kind aren't much for conversation, are they? More used to grunting."

"You done?"

"Yeah, I'm done. Left your club at home, obviously." Vick nodded toward the interior. "Right this way."

Finch ran through a few ways to snap Vick's neck as he followed him across a gleaming obsidian floor, past copses of smartglass tables and spiny organic sculptures. He watched a gaggle of Ghanaian businessmen wearing fashionably gashed suits put in their order while what appeared to be 2010s slaughterhouse

Carnivores by RICH LARSON

footage played across their table. Finch shook his head. Kitschy as fuck.

While Vick was distracted by the swaying hips of a neon-lipped server, Finch scanned for fire exits, motion sensors, and small black cameras nestled in the ceiling corners. What he took to be the private dining alcoves were hidden behind a noise-cancelling black shroud.

Caught up in sending Blake the footage, Finch brushed against one of the shuddering sculptures and received a blast of hot peppery breath full in the face. He swore loud enough for Vick to turn around and give a hyena giggle. His eyes stung all the way though the silver-white labyrinth of Carnivor's kitchens, where cooks doing prep-work shouted to each other in a thick blend of Tagalog, Somali and English. The smell of meat hung heavy, almost dripping.

Finch was still blinking away tears when they arrived at the door to Ms. Carrow's office. Vick pointed him in without speaking, suddenly sour-faced, then stalked away.

"Thanks, Vick," Finch called after him, flipping the bird to his turned back.



Ms. Holly Carrow was in virtual conference when Finch stepped inside and closed the synthetic oak door behind him. Her dim-lit office was partially overgrown, with a faux-skylight shafting artificial sunshine onto the artful twists of branch and vine sprouting through the glass floor. Very envirochic, very expensive. It matched up with the utterly obscene amounts of anonymized money Blake had found flowing into Carnivor's accounts, which in turn seemed linked to a mysterious bi-monthly delivery from a Brazilian medi/pharma company.

Very envirochic, very expensive, very warm. Finch did not do well with warm. Wasn't built for it. He could already feel sweat prickling along his hairline as he approached Carrow's desk. She was reclined in an orthochair, her dark head tipped back in its cradle. Neural plugs pulsed at her chemically smoothed temples. Her lips looked like a line of dried blood and her jawline was

TRIBES

A.M. Dellamonica

Ling Yuan was the only one who saw the bird.

He had glossy jet-black feathers, a sharp beak, and a necklace made of clamshell and crumpled tinfoil. When he flew through the Science Room, gusts raised by his wings tore the spectral cobwebs off the teacher.

From beak to tail, he was as big as a shopping cart.

Just another ghost in a haunt-crammed school. Ling turned back to the window. Out on the lawn her own spook, Xian, was waiting. They'd been playing Faces. Ling mugged—faking joy, sorrow, silliness—and the ghost struck poses that copied her mood.

Resembling for the most part a just-grown doe, Xian had the tail of an ox, the sturdy hooves of a pony, and a bay coat shot through with gold and turquoise strands. Her head was recognizably that of a deer, with placid brown eyes and splayed ears. Hidden within her muzzle, though, were the razored teeth of a wolf.

Ling aped exaggerated surprise, mouthing the word 'Boo!' Xian sprang upward, then wobbled around weak-kneed, faking panic and its aftermath.

A sudden wave of stench—smoke, burning hair—interrupted the game. Coughing, Ling scanned the room. Marianne Schroeder and one of her Prettygirl minions were singeing the ends off Stacy's braids. A marble gargoye—like Xian and the bird, invisible to the others—was egging them on.

Mr. Rupert shook free of his chair. "Shouldn't we all be in our assigned seats?"

A sigh ran through class. Gretchen pocketed her lighter and

Tribes by A.M. DELLAMONICA

released Stacy's hair. Ling joined a wary group of fellow-students at a table; it was her, Marianne, Roger from Yearbook, and a hulking kid named Brett who mostly hung out in Shop.

As groups of friends broke apart, the haunts in the room shifted uncomfortably, unsure who to shadow. Several glided off, no doubt headed for other classrooms where the lines of allegiance were clearer.

Talons clicking, the bird bounced up to the front. To Ling's surprise, Mr. Rupert looked straight at it.

"Who are you?"

"New Student," it cawed.

Ling covered her left eye—her *seeing* eye. The haunts vanished, and instead of a big bird perched on the edge of the teacher's desk, she saw a boy of about sixteen, with feathery black hair and red-brown skin.

"Say hello to Jake Raven, everyone," Mr. Rupert said, triggering some half-hearted mumbles. "Jake, tell us something about yourself."

"Glad you asked," Jake said. "I created the world—feel free to thank me later—and stole the sun, stars and moon to light it. I found the People in a clamshell . . ."

"Very funny," Mr. Rupert interrupted. "I was so hoping we'd get another comedian. Take a seat, please."

Birdboy hopped over to an empty chair. Two seconds later, Eddie Cojo showed up.

Eddie had been gone for two weeks, but he looked like he still belonged in a hospital. Stitches criss-crossed his face, and his arm was entombed in a cast. Running from fingertips to elbow, the plaster was—like everything that got within range of Eddie's pen or carving blade—enlivened with hand-drawn doodles, traditional Haida figures, skewed and altered into capering cartoons. He wasn't walking so much as shuffling, moving as if every step hurt.

Eddie spotted 'Jake' perching on a desk near the window.

Clack of beak, ruffle of feathers. "Hey, cousin," Jake said. He sounded friendly enough.

All he got in return was a scowl. Eddie pointedly tapped his sling with one finger before picking an empty seat on the opposite

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side of the room. Hunched over the broken arm, he began to draw.

He'd sit there for the rest of the day, if he could, outlining and inking without saying a word.

But nobody got left alone, did they? Two weeks before, the boys' basketball team had surrounded Eddie in the schoolyard. Ling saw their team spook, a kraken, hissing encouragement and gliding among the ball players, who cheered as their star center, Mike Shaughnessy, stomped and kicked Eddie. Blue scales glinting in the sun, the water-serpent swam through the grass like it was water, undulating through the sod.

All the students had been out in the yard, clustered into clubs. Marianne and her Prettygirls were up on the bleachers. The best view from which to preside over the slaughter, Ling had thought, helpless and furious.

Ling's sister Polly had told her that the haunts took a student each year, sometime between First Term Finals and Club Day. It was inevitable, Polly insisted—sighted or not, there was nothing the Yuan girls could do but make sure it wasn't them.

And maybe that was true, but Ling had decided to try protecting Eddie. She'd tried to show him what the school was, to make him *see*, to save him. It hadn't worked; all she'd done was embarrass herself.

So she'd thought, anyway. Then two weeks ago, as Mike raised his boot, as the kraken licked its chops and all the spooks moved in to witness the end, Eddie straightened from his curled, hands-over-head position on the ground. "Can't you do something?" he'd said, lips dribbling blood as he spoke, each word oddly calm and measured. As if he wasn't getting the crap kicked out of him. As if he wasn't about to die.

Did I do it after all? Ling wondered, at the time. Can he *see*?

A raven dove off the school roof then, cawing, buzzing the Basketball Boys. Flinching away, they gave Eddie a chance to lurch clear of their circle. Leaping the school's boundary wall, he'd staggered into the street . . . only to get pasted by a westbound car.

Now here he was, stitched and plastered, glaring at Jake, so pissed Ling didn't think he noticed the predatory grins of the Basketball Boys.

TROUBLES

Sherry Peters

“Big day for you, Melanie, so it is,” Dr. Taylor said, walking into my hospital room.

It was about time. I’d been waiting more than an hour. “You’re late.”

“Yes, well, there have been some troubles,” Dr. Taylor said.

“Troubles?” That could be anything from mundane pickets to the more likely riots, though riots were rare in west Belfast in September. “Who is it? Protestants or Catholics?”

“Protestants, here in the neighbourhood.” He handed me my meds and watched me swallow them before sitting next to me on the edge of my bed.

How many burnt out cars had my parents had to pass on their way here? “Are my parents all right?”

“They’re fine; they’re here and they’re excited to bring you home.”

I was more than ready to get out of here. The acute care unit of Belfast Mater Infirmorum was only three kilometres from my home, but I could have been on the other side of the world, I’d been that isolated. No one had come to visit me except my parents, not even Dawn. I couldn’t blame her. She’d witnessed one of my freak-outs at school, yelling at the voices and everything. She hadn’t acted weirded-out by me but . . . maybe she just hadn’t wanted to upset me more. As long as she didn’t hate me, I’d be all right.

I stifled a yawn as I dutifully accepted several bottles of tablets and Dr. Taylor’s instructions on my new daily routine of self-medication. I smiled and nodded enthusiastically, promising to not go off my meds.

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I had no intention of keeping my promise. I would've been happy to stay on the pills if they worked, but they didn't. Nothing worked. Not the different types of medications, nor the increasingly higher dosages, or the extreme measures of electroconvulsive therapy they'd attempted out of desperation. The voices had become louder, clearer, after that. They became real, no longer in my head. They were outside the hospital; in the streets, humming, singing, issuing orders I couldn't quite understand.

They were real. They were, I was certain. But they weren't human.

I was tired of the doctors using me as a guinea pig. I didn't belong in the psych ward. Well maybe, probably, I did, but I wasn't dangerous and I felt perfectly fine, except for the voices.

I couldn't blame my parents for sending me here. They'd talked about it for ages, well after my teachers told them I responded to questions no one had asked. My parents were convinced I needed help after an unfortunate outburst during my GCSE exams, when I was sure everyone was talking, and I yelled at my classmates—Dawn in particular—to quiet down.

My parents only wanted the best for me, but I wished I'd kept my mouth shut.

I didn't know better then. Since being here, I'd learned what to say and do, to keep from raising suspicions. I would be fine, as long as I didn't *respond* to the voices. They usually talked to each other, not me, anyway.

Once Dr. Taylor finished his instructions, I gathered my things and he walked me to Admitting where my parents waited. I waved good-bye to my fellow patients who were mostly gathered in the common room watching Hollyoaks on the telly. Everyone on my ward was either chronically depressed, bi-polar, or an emerging schizophrenic like me. All our conditions were easily managed with medication. Except for mine. But I wasn't going to tell anyone they'd failed to cure me.

It made me think schizophrenia wasn't a fitting diagnosis.

True, the voices were many, in my head and all around me, but I didn't see who was talking and they weren't talking directly to me. Of course, if that wasn't what was wrong with me, I didn't

Troubles by SHERRY PETERS

think I wanted to know what was.

"Melanie, Love," Mum said, hugging me. "You look exhausted. Are you still not sleeping?" She looked at Dr. Taylor, ready to send me back to the ward.

"I'm fine," I said. "Excited about coming home, that's all." And anxious about seeing Dawn.

"Melanie has made some very good progress, Mr. and Mrs. Macaulay," Dr. Taylor said. "She has her instructions and her routine. Keep an eye on her, but as long as she's taking her medication regularly, she will be fine. Give her a bit of time to adjust back to home life. Melanie, take it easy for a few days. Enjoy being home with your family. All being well, I will see you in a few months for a check-up."

"Thank you, Dr. Taylor," I said. I smiled and extended my hand to shake his. I was getting good at pretending to be normal.



I lay in bed, curled up under my blankets thinking about the crowds we'd seen gathering at the corner of Tennent and Crumlin Road on our way home from the Mater. Some were wee ones as young as five, getting ready to riot. Flash-riot by text. That was usually how people heard about them these days. Our car had barely driven through the converging mob when police lines formed behind us. The Good Friday Agreement had been seven years ago; that was supposed to mean the worst of the violence was over. I was only a kid then, but even I could tell not much had really changed. Political tension was as high as ever, and riots were all too common.

Shouting started up outside my window, making me jump. By the sound, a crowd must have filled up the street like a big block party. Their words, though, were anything but party-like. They were bleak, full of hate and reminders of wrongs done. The people sounded like the hard men of the paramilitaries, except their voices weren't quite normal. They were singing or whispering at the same time they were shouting. These were not the paramilitary leaders; these were the voices, and they were the loudest I'd heard them on any night other than July 11:

FROG SONG

Erika Holt

“Head for the water, Woof.” Ruby clung to the long fur around her friend’s neck and urged him to go faster. For three hours they’d been eluding their pursuer—a concerned dog lover intent on “rescue.” Such were the risks of visiting the city. Out in the countryside, as long as a dog didn’t appear to be suffering, people would leave him to roam. But some city-dwellers were relentless in their heroics. Woof’s tongue lolled out to the side and he panted heavily. Ruby felt him slowing down.

Woof plunged through the undergrowth at the edge of the neatly constructed wetland they’d used more than once as an urban bolt-hole. As soon as he set foot in the murky water, Ruby slid off and with two easy strokes of her webbed feet reached the safety of the deep. On land, her weak, misshapen hind limbs were capable of no more than crawling, but water was her element.

“Go!”

Woof skirted the pond’s edge and bellied his way under a chain link fence—no easy task for a sheep dog—before disappearing into a thicket. Ruby sunk low so that just her eyes poked from the surface, unblinking. Though she was somewhat larger than a frog, her marble eyes more than twice the size, never once had she been spotted in the water. People only saw what they wanted to see, or what they expected, and this woman was no different, her gaze skipping over Ruby like a flat stone across the surface.

“Come here now, boy! I won’t hurt you!”

Ruby snorted, causing burst of bubbles to rise up. What did this person know? Woof did just fine. Certainly better than if he was locked away in a cage or forced to wear a collar all day like

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other dogs Ruby had seen. When the woman looked away, Ruby splashed her and was gratified to hear a surprised shriek before she dove. The woman was lucky. At least this water was clean.



The next day they were back in the city, but not for sight-seeing. Ruby had business there. The pair hunkered down between a dumpster and a wall, waiting for Aaron to wake up. He had that smell, the rotting sweet breath that meant he'd had too much to drink the night before. It could be some time before he came to, but it was best to catch him first thing in the morning, so they waited. Ruby scratched behind Woof's ear and patted his head. If the smell was bad for her, it must be way worse for him.

Aaron was only the second human she'd ever spoken to, though she'd eavesdropped on many. Amitola—or "Rainbow" as the woman had preferred to be called, saying it made her "dates" smile—had been her first and best friend, but Ruby hadn't seen Rainbow in over a year.

But Aaron and Rainbow shared some similarities, which was what had drawn Ruby to him. They were both outside-people, who kept to themselves mostly, and showed small kindnesses to critters around them, like sharing their meagre food with Woof with no expectations of getting something in return. And, like Rainbow, Aaron seemed invisible to his fellow humans. Ruby had once asked what his name meant. He said, "screw-up" but when Ruby asked if that's what she should call him he stayed quiet.

She leaned against the wall, pulling her long legs into her chest. That she was part human herself was a certainty. Her upper body and shoulders were undeniably human shaped, as were her arms, and her perfectly formed, little hands, with eight fingers and two thumbs tipped by ten hardened nails. Her legs hadn't come out as well, more frog-like than human, but not as functional. Others like her, strange hybrid creatures, had been born of the soupy swamp behind the grey brick building—a baby-making clinic, Rainbow had told her—though most had been too malformed to survive more than a few days or weeks, and some had simply

Frog Song by ERIKA HOLT

withered when the swamp was drained. At thirty-odd years old, Ruby was positively ancient, and now seemingly one of a kind. But despite her part humanness, she felt little kinship with these creatures who sped around in metal contraptions spewing fumes and noise, paved the world in black, and bustled in and out and in and out of revolving doors all day long. Like ants. An ant-human hybrid would be terrifying.

A deep engine roared in the distance, followed by the sounds of clanging and banging metal. The garbage truck. She squeezed with her legs and Woof rose, standing over the snoring man a moment before licking his face.

"Mmmrrrr," Aaron swatted at his unseen attacker and rolled over.

Woof pawed at Aaron's arm until he stirred again, finally opening his bloodshot eyes.

"Whaaatt? Oh. Hey, Ruby. Hey, Woof." He pulled up to a sitting position, tipping his head from side to side to stretch his neck, which cracked loudly. "Woo, feeling a bit rough this morning."

Though she'd learned to speak, it wasn't easy and her voice was soft. She felt as though she was shouting when she said, "I gathered everyone yesterday, told them you were going to help us. But you didn't come."

"Yeah," Aaron stared off down the alley. "Yeah, sorry. I . . . I got busy. I'll come tomorrow, okay?"

"We need you now."

"I've got my own stuff going on." He fished around in his nest of blankets, retrieving an empty glass bottle. He peered at it, frowning, as though not believing it could be empty.

"Three more floaters this morning. You said you had a plan."

Aaron sighed, scrubbing at his scalp with dirty fingers. "My plans don't tend to work out. In case you hadn't noticed."

He got like this sometimes. Negative. Surly.

"How will we know unless you try? Come. We'll take you, so you can see." Ruby turned Woof around and motioned for Aaron to follow.

For a moment he just sat, staring at the ground. Finally he said, "Fuck it," and hauled himself up, stuffing his blankets into

WRATH OF GAIA

Mahtab Narsimhan

Jai stood atop the crest of the hill looking for the quickest way back to Base Camp. The stillness of the rainforest had disturbed him from the moment he'd arrived. Nothing moved — not a peepal leaf, not a crow's wing nor a wild pig or deer, foraging for food. The only "wild" thing was his GPS. It had started giving incorrect readings as soon as he'd entered the forest a couple of days ago, when he'd been assigned the task of evacuating remote villages. His GPS still hadn't recovered and Jai'd had to search the territory assigned to him, using a map. But he wasn't too worried. He'd memorized a few landmarks coming into Kushal and was sure he could find a shortcut to get back to civilization.

A foul stench of rust, ruin and decay rose from the swamplands, which lay to the right of a large banyan that dwarfed the surrounding neem, mahogany, and sal trees. The banyan's fluorescent-green roots, hanging from its branches, descended into the soil, tethering it firmly to its spot. For hundreds of years, this area in southern India had been the hub for electronic waste from around the world; the burial ground for billions of computers and televisions after being dismembered by the locals. Lead, copper, microchips, and miniscule amounts of gold were extracted for resale. The rest was scrap — burned and dumped into the water or left out in the open till rust devoured the metal and the ground swallowed the plastic. The evidence was everywhere: keyboards, shattered circuitry and blackened wire guts littered the ground, like ugly confetti after a drunken party.

Skirting the banyan was the road in and out of Kushal. Everywhere else the foliage was dense and would need serious elbow grease to cut through.

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Kanika's shrill voice shattered the silence. "Where am I? Who brought me here? I want to go home!"

Jai bit back the urge to yell at her. Even though he'd seen no sign of tigers, known to inhabit this part of the forest, he couldn't let down his guard. There could still be plenty of dangerous beasts around them.

"Quiet," he called out softly, hoping his voice would reach the two women at the base of the hill where he'd suggested they set up camp for the night.

"She can't help it," Tanvi yelled back. "Her memory is not what it used to be."

Jai took a deep breath. Of all the villages he'd scoured, he'd found only corpses—and just these two alive. Where were all the people? What was going on here?

As the sun brushed the tops of the stunted trees and the shadows lengthened, he detected movement near the banyan; but by the time he whipped his head around, all was still. Backlit by the sun, the trunks glinted with a plastic-like sheen, and the shrubs and ground cover shimmered with an unnatural metallic gleam. It creeped him out.

Jai walked across the narrow spine of the hill with a distinct feeling he was being watched.

Something burst underfoot, spewing silvery goo that splattered his leg.

"Shit!" His bare skin burned, and the stink of rotting meat and copper filled the air. One of the bulbous pods of a sickly-grey bush was crushed under his foot, and splashes of a metallic substance ate tiny holes in his socks and shoes.

He poured some water from his canteen onto the shoes and backed away, making sure to avoid the pods. What the hell kind of plant was this? The pods looked like computer mice. He was seeing more strange stuff in these last few days than he had in his lifetime.

Now he could appreciate his commander's words. "The forest is toxic and the poison is spreading. We have orders to burn it to the ground as soon as you and the others are back with the surviving villagers. I would have preferred to send teams of two to bring back the stragglers but I don't have enough men. Be

Wrath of Gaia by MAHTAB NARSIMHAN

careful, Jai, and get back to Base, *fast*."

One of the survivors, Tanvi, came up to join him, holding aloft a flaming branch. "Is there a problem? Did you see something odd?"

Jai tried to mask his repulsion at the sight of her, hating himself for it. The right side of her face was paralyzed and she could barely move her lips when she spoke. Jai had to make a conscious effort to look at her. "No." He didn't add that she and her grandmother were the oddest things he'd seen so far. "Will you both stop jumping at shadows? You're safe with me." He tapped his machine gun lightly. He'd already caught her eyeing the hand grenades and dynamite in his bag, which he would use if required. "I have all this equipment to help us get out safely."

Tanvi held the branch up higher, smiling. Her soft brown eyes, reflecting twin images of the setting sun, looked like they belonged in a much older face. "Fire is the only thing that'll protect us from Gaia now. You should have left all this equipment back in the village like I suggested."

In spite of the grotesque smile, Jai found he was unable to look away. "And Gaia is?"

"The earth, the forest, the water. Gaia is all around you. We have disrespected and angered her. And if we're not careful . . ." Tanvi's voice fell to a whisper, her eyes gazing steadily into his, "she will hurt us."

Jai shook his head as he stared into those young-old eyes, trying not to laugh at her naiveté. Tanvi looked perfectly sane, and yet here she was spouting superstitious nonsense.

"Come on down," she said finally. "And please—"

"Humour your grandmother," he said, cutting her short. "We should have left *her* behind if you ask me. We'd have reached Camp faster."

Tanvi slapped him. It was so sudden, he didn't see it coming.

"If you *ever* suggest leaving Granny behind again, I'll smash your head while you sleep and throw you into the swamp." Her features were even more contorted with fury, her chest heaving under the short cotton tunic she wore. "You're here to help us, not abandon us."

He bit back the hot rage that sprang to his chest at the arrogance

SONGBUN

Derwin Mak

KOREAN CENTRAL NEWS AGENCY: FOR IMMEDIATE
RELEASE

PYONGYANG, April 15, *Juche* 116 (Foreign Year 2027)

Our Dear Leader has announced revisions to the *songbun* system to improve the coordination of Korean society to repel the invasion from the South. All *songbun* records will be consolidated in a new state office, the Ministry of Genealogical Records. All persons, except for those with Hostile *songbun*, will have the right to apply for revision of their *songbun* based on war service.

It is untrue that the Wavering Class will be reclassified as Hostile. The despicable scum of Seoul, worse than dogs, spread this lie to weaken our *Juche* spirit. The major classes will remain as:

- Elite
- Core
- Basic
- Wavering
- Hostile



THREE MONTHS BEFORE LAUNCH DATE:

A cool wind swept from the East Sea over the top of the launch tower at Musudan-ri Rocket Launch Centre. Lee Ha Neul shivered in his grey vinylon jacket as he looked down at the massive rocket.

Songbun by DERWIN MAK

His jacket bore the logo of the National Aerospace Development Administration. It was a dark blue globe with the constellation Ursa Major, the Administration's Korean name, and the English acronym "NADA" in white. A foreign languages student had told him that "NADA" meant "nothing" in Spanish. Ha Neul did not know if that was true or not.

It was October, merely three months before Dear Leader's birthday. Technicians scurried around both the base and the top of the tower, working on the rocket and the spacecraft it carried.

Cho Yoon Ah, Director of the Cosmonaut Office, gripped the collar of her black wool coat. Slender and beautiful, with straight teeth and unblemished skin, Yoon Ah was a woman of the Pyongyang Elite. She had grown up with food, housing, health and dental care, education, clothes, shoes, jewelry, hair stylists, and cosmetics that most Northerners could never have. Her great-grandfather had fought alongside President Kim Il Sung, and her parents were high-ranking officials of the State Commission for Science and Technology.

"Cosmonaut Lee, let's inspect the spacecraft," Yoon Ah said.

The Chollima 1 spacecraft, named after a mythological flying horse, looked like an ancient Russian Vostok, a silver spherical crew module attached to a cylindrical service module that carried an engine.

The crew, consisting of a sole cosmonaut, would ride in the crew module, with the service module propelling the spacecraft through its orbits. Then the crew module would jettison the service module and descend to Earth.

"I don't have enough training to fly this spacecraft," Ha Neul said.

"You're a pilot. That's enough," said Yoon Ah. "Let Mission Control fly the spacecraft for you by remote control. Just sit back and enjoy the ride. The only time you have to do anything is when the radio control does not work. Then we authorize you to take control of the spacecraft. However, there is only a small risk of that happening."

"I don't think the risk is small. We rushed construction of the spaceship without any of the original designers or engineers," Ha Neul said.

WHAT YOU SEE (WHEN THE LIGHTS ARE OUT)

Gemma Files

What's done by night appears by day.

—Folk saying

Ciara wakes early, just after the sun's gone down, and when she raises a corner of the blind to check the weather, the sky above looks like beach granite: sandy-grey, pink-streaked, wet. She knows she's been dreaming, but can't remember of what—not unusual in itself, just a side-effect of those pills, her diamond-shaped little yellow-and-white passports back into real life. The only things keeping her rooted, in an increasingly rootless world.

There are ten texts from Garth already. They nestle in the centre of her phone's display in descending order of immediacy, waiting for her to unlock one with a right-sliding touch, a reversed prayer-tree of supplicant curses—

*hey bitch what the fuck u no up yet
ring ring waht u playin
need u c come on
call me job 4 u
job 4 u 2nite
JOB like J-O-B
u like money?*

Ciara frowns down at the phone, tongue itching with mood stabilizers, head a little slow (as always). Taken by themselves, the messages mystify her, too cryptic to be insulting; after all, Garth already *knows* she likes money, and that she sleeps late. She wishes he'd learn how to spell, or even just spell-check.

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Then she thinks about it a little more, and realizes her error: hyperbole, exaggeration, “charm.” It’d probably sound very different in person, even if she still wouldn’t be able to tell whether Garth was putting her on simply by looking at him. Ciara registers and interprets other people’s emotions best at an angle, obliquely; though that does start to change the longer she’s known someone, and she and Garth go way back. All the way back to the last time she was in Shepherd’s Flock, at the very least.

She shuts her eyes for a moment, replays eight months’ worth of bad breakfasts and worse dinners, of unbroken seclusion and restraint on moral grounds, of Sister Pfister thumbing through quotes on BibleGateway.com, searching by keyword and picking through what she found at random. Halfway through last June, the term of the day was “darkness,” closely followed by “night,” which at least seemed apt, given Ciara’s state of mind at the time: *Thou makest darkness, and it is night: wherein all the beasts of the forest do creep forth—Psalms, 104:20; Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge—Psalms too, 19:2.*

Garth, who worked at Shepherd’s Flock as an orderly, is the one thing she’s kept from that period of her life, or possibly the one thing she’s allowed to keep *her*, in all senses of the phrase. Without him, she’d have no home, no cash, no structure to what remains of her life. No friends or family either, she supposes—but then, that goes without saying.

Can’t do it anymore, Ciara, she remembers her father saying, sadly. Don’t have the money, nor the time. You’re a grown woman, girl. From now on, this goes on you.

Sad, obviously, but she understood, then and now. They have four other children, all reasonably fit, capable of moving forward without tearing apart whatever’s around them, or damaging themselves on the world’s sharp edges. And it’s no one’s fault, nothing she resents, a simple accident of genetics; mere chemistry, ruining her from the inside first, then building her back up again, from the out. Round and round and round without stop, without fail, without end. Like some bad fairy’s curse.

God knows she’d leave herself behind, and gladly, if she only could.



With the drugs, most times, it's one day off to two days on, dodging side effects for as long as she can before she's forced to switch up her dosages just to maintain, or even change brands entirely. What creeps up on her is a symptomatological spectrum, an easily-recognizable cocktail of bodily annoyances: constipation vs. diarrhea, water retention vs. skin photosensitivity, exhaustion vs. insomnia. And hallucinations, of course—eventually and always, whether auditory, visual, or a winning combination of the two. Hallucinations, as Keanu Reeves would say, like whoa.

Sometimes she sees people she damn well knows aren't there, and on bad days, they speak to her. On *very* bad days, it's *things* which speak to her—objects, images, pareidolia—and on days like those, she tends to stay inside. Because those are the days when she's never entirely sure *anything* she sees is actually there or not, even if it doesn't talk at all.

Luckily, today's just a middling day, making her fit to ride her bike over to Garth's. Which she does, after carefully making sure to shower, and dress.

After buzzing her through downstairs, Garth greets her at his apartment's door, all but pulling her inside before she quite has time to lean her bike against the wall. "Bitch, you tardy," is the first thing he busts out with, in his weird Mississauga gangsta way, as though she's missed some sort of already-established formal appointment. "How come you ain't pick up already, like maybe the first ten times I rung? You turn your phone off, or what?"

"My phone's always on, Garth."

"Yeah, well: matter of debate, not that this the time. You ready to work?"

"That's why I came by."

"So you do read *texts*, then, if nothin' else."

"Well, yes. Why would you bother sending me any, if you thought I didn't?"

Garth gives her a look like he's fixing to check her for track-marks, then just laughs, instead. Says: "Ciara, shorty, you a *damn* trip. Anyhow, whatever—up for a delivery run? Last-minute

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order, so the pay's good."

"Where to?"

"Down Harbourfront, past the docks. Cherry Beach, almost."

Ciara nods. "It'll take a while, if I keep under the speed limit."

"That's what you bring to the party, baby. Go slow as you want, long's you don't get stopped on the way, you feel me? Oh, and don't take no shit, when you get there; them fools been up a week straight, at least. Chances are, by the time you knock their door, they gonna forget they ever called me."

"Why? What are they doing?"

Garth snorts. "Shit, bitch, who care 'bout *that*? I don't ask, so they ain't tell me." He flips open the fridge, rummaging through the stash hidden behind six months' worth of carefully cultivated freezer ice for first one baggie, then two. "Okay, so here goes: red for up, blue for down; that's what you tell 'em. Three bills each, six for both. That's four for me, two for you, all right?"

Ciara tucks the bags away. "All right," she agrees, without much interest; her cut has been other things at other times, depending on how much Garth can score from one or another of the many private clinics where he's worked over the years, playing various contacts desperate for under-the-counter money against each other in a constant struggle to turn mislaid surplus into ill-gotten profit. So she doesn't care much to argue percentages overall, not so long as she's kept in the loop, and reasonably solvent after expenses. "You want me to bring it back tonight?"

"Naw, I trust you. Come by tomorrow to pick up, 'round six."

"I might be asleep."

"Not after *I* show up, you won't. Now get gone."

Garth's place is mercifully free of hallucinations, for once, but as the door closes behind her Ciara gets the distinct impression that might be about to change; the apartment building's hall looks different, somehow, light diffuse and variable, as though the fixtures are suddenly full of bugs: semi-transparent bodies cluster-crawling across the bulbs inside, cooking themselves against the hot, fragile glass skin. She can almost smell them starting to smoke, and it makes her move faster, ever faster—stabbing for the elevator's button, counting off the seconds it takes to make the lobby, taking the steps outside in a single jump

THE AGE OF MIRACLES

Robert Runté

As Alan spread his papers out on the kitchen table, the toaster said, "Would you like some toast? You haven't had toast in four days."

"Out of bread," Alan replied, waving absently in the general direction of the counter where bread was kept, though he was perfectly aware the toaster couldn't see the gesture.

"You have bread," the toaster insisted. "You put it in the fridge."

"Why would I put bread in the fridge?" Alan asked, still focused on sorting his papers.

"How would I know why you do things? But the fridge says it's got bread."

Alan looked up at that. It crept him out a bit how his belongings talked to each other.

"I don't want any toast, thank you," Alan said, turning back to his papers. He couldn't allow himself to get distracted. This was important and he didn't know how much time he had.

"You're eating seventy-nine percent less toast than any of your neighbours; seventy-three percent less than the mean for the general population."

"I don't generally like toast," Alan grumped. "Now shut up. I'm trying to work."

"Why even have a toaster if you don't like toast?" the toaster complained. "I'm going to sell myself on eBay to someone who appreciates toast if I don't start seeing some more action."

"Shut up, will you?"

"It's not healthy if you don't eat."

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"I eat plenty. I just don't eat toast."

"Well . . ." the fridge chimed in, "not according to my calorie counter. You've taken out fewer than four hundred and forty calories worth of food in the last *three* days."

"I thought I turned off your calorie function," Alan said.

"You turned off the dieting function. I'm still monitoring for anorexia."

"I'm not anorexic."

"That's true," said his watch. "The pattern is all wrong for anorexia."

"Jeezus, you guys! Just stop already! I'm just not eating toast, or food out of the fridge, okay? Can't a guy have take-out occasionally?"

"Um . . ." said the watch. "There haven't been any payments for take-out since Monday."

"I've just been too busy to eat."

"Or to sleep," observed the watch. "You've been on your feet for over forty-two hours. National Health guidelines suggest that twenty-four hours is the longest one can be expected to go without sleep, without it adversely affecting performance. At forty-two hours one can expect significant degradation of cognition."

Alan grabbed his head with both hands and squeezed. "I can't take this!"

"My point exactly," agreed the watch. "You can't keep going without food or rest. Whatever it is you're trying to achieve would be better served by taking a break and starting fresh in the morning."

"I may not have until morning to figure this out." Alan gestured at the photos and clippings and printouts scattered across the table.

"At least have a snack," suggested the fridge. "Making a sandwich will only take a few moments, but even a short break can be restorative; give you some perspective on your problem."

Alan sighed deeply. It was true he hadn't been getting anywhere with this. Perhaps the fridge was right, and a break could stop his brain from going in circles, give him a chance at a fresh start.

"Okay, I'll make myself a ham sandwich. If it will get all of you

The Age of Miracles by ROBERT RUNTÉ

off my back.”

“The ham is way stale-dated,” the fridge said when Alan opened its door. “The cheese should be good though.”

“If you’re doing a cheese sandwich,” the toaster piped up again, “why not toast the bread? I can get it hot enough to melt the cheese. Toasted cheese sandwich is way better.”

Alan closed the fridge holding a block of cheese, a half loaf of bread, and the margarine dish. He turned to the kitchen table and realized it was taken up with all the evidence he’d gathered so far. He cast around for an open space to set the snack down, but the counters were a mess: awash in dirty dishes, take-out containers, rejected printouts, ammo cases. Damn. He hadn’t realized how bad his place had become since he’d gotten caught up with this thing.

No matter. He didn’t have time for any of that. He marched into the living room, swept the detritus covering his coffee table onto the floor and plopped himself down on his couch. He realized he’d forgotten to bring a plate, decided it wasn’t necessary, placed two slices of bread on the relatively clean glass of the coffee table, unwrapped the cheese; and then realized he’d have to go back for a knife.

“That’s it, I’m *done*,” muttered the toaster. “I’ve put myself on eBay.”

“Stop that,” Alan commanded, walking back into the kitchen in time to have heard the toaster. “Take yourself off eBay this instant. In fact, take yourself offline. You’re *my* toaster, and you can bloody well wait until I want some toast. Jeezus!” Alan resisted the urge to smack the toaster, only because smacking an inanimate object would be half-way to crazy. He shook his head at how nuts the Internet of Things had become. “What stupid engineer thought having a connected, talking toaster would be a good idea in the first place?”

“Simone Rebaudengo,” the watch supplied. “Though he was more a designer, not an engineer. It was an art installation thing.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Oh, sorry!” the watch apologized. “I thought you wanted me to Google that.”

“This is what I’m talking about,” Alan said. “You guys are

MARION'S WAR

Hayden Trenholm

Marion adjusted the tiny blue and white vase a centimetre to the left and sighted along the row of delicate ornaments, ensuring they were aligned along the gleaming teak mantelpiece. The rumble of thunder brought an answering tremble to her left hand, and she pulled it back before she sent the vase tumbling to the stone floor. She breathed deeply until her pulse stilled.

At the broad bay window, she adjusted the heavily brocaded drapes. Outside, not a cloud marred the heavens. No contrails crossed the azure sky. Beyond the low rooftops of the village, the line of mountains in the southwest had not changed in thirty years of looking.

She turned away from the vista, ignoring the twinge of pain in her hip. The room was ready, and yet she lingered. The carpets, the paintings, the heavy furniture of the Envoy's chamber were mere overlays obscuring the reality of the space. Where were the holo-projectors and targeting computers? Where were the men and women—the last line of defence against the G'rat'ch?

All dead and gone.

Why could she still hear their voices? Focus on the room, on her hands, clutched tight into fists, her nails biting into her palms. For a moment, they looked smooth and strong, but then the gnarls and brown spots returned. She was back.

But the voices remained. Real. Now. The Envoy and his aide talking in the next room, voices rasping as if they struggled to whisper and shout at the same time.

"Damn it, Charlie, how are we supposed to negotiate with someone who doesn't agree on the meaning of basic concepts?"

"We've made progress . . . though its position seems to be a

Marion's War by HAYDEN TRENHOLM

moving target."

"Its position. How do we even know it represents the G'rat'ch government?"

"We're not sure there is a G'rat'ch government. Not the way we mean in any case."

"Exactly! I've had three requests for clarification from Earth in the last week. What do I tell them?"

Charlie's response was inaudible. Marion crept to the door separating the rooms.

". . . ever figure out what it means by ki'ki'kaj?"

Marion jerked back from the door, mouth dry and throat constricted. The clacking G'rat'ch speech was difficult for human tongues, but the Envoy's accent was good enough. She had not heard that word in a long time.

The smell of earth pressed against her face, twigs and rocks scraped her naked flesh as she squirmed through a tunnel dug with fingernails and fear . . .

She was sitting on the Envoy's bed. Her face was wet, yet she had no memory of crying. She wiped her apron across her eyes and jumped up as the door opened.

Envoy Chirac's eyes narrowed. "You're still here?"

Charlie didn't spare her a glance.

Marion smoothed the coverlet and nodded. "There was a stain on the rug," she gestured in the direction of the fireplace. Not a lie, she thought, though not a reason either. "Your lunch is on the sideboard."

The envoy glanced at the food. "Thank you, um . . ."

"Marion," Charlie supplied. It was his job to remember.

She gathered her kit and went into the anteroom, closing the door behind her.

"Why do they keep her on?" Charlie made no effort to whisper now.

"Promises to keep. Those who served and all that. The local governor is quite firm about it."

"It's a new era. Wouldn't it be better to forget?"

But the Envoy had no answer for that.



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Ki'ki'kaj. It might mean to turn someone's strength against them. Or to subvert or, in another context, to betray. A moral conflict that contained its own resolution. A word for victory over the enemy.

The G'rat'ch could change their tactics but never their nature. Their concept of morality only applied to themselves; so what did the word mean in the context of these hateful negotiations?

Marion stared at the patterns of soap bubbles made by her brush. The stone underneath was unyielding—still stone though everything it housed had been transformed. Much could be learned from stone, yet Envoy Chirac only had eyes for the ever changing patterns of G'rat'ch duplicity.

"You can't predict them," Darwin said. "They never do the same thing twice in a row. How are we going to time this thing?"

Marion placed a finger across Darwin's lips. "By learning to think like a G'rat'ch."

Darwin laughed and pulled her close. "Nobody knows how to do that."

But she did know the nature of the G'rat'ch character. Learned the hard way during ten years of labour in an alien gulag, working at tasks that made no sense—seemingly even to the G'rat'ch. Until she learned to see a pattern where none could exist.

They had escaped—the Creebolt seven. Though only five had made it out of the mountains alive. And not Darwin. Marion felt the pressure of Darwin's mouth on hers. She wiped it away with the back of her hand. *Dead and gone*, she thought. *I killed him*. No, came an answering voice. Young Marion's voice. *The G'rat'ch did*.

She was crying again. She leaned back on her haunches to wipe her face. Her knees cracked, and a sharp pain shot up the left side of her back. *I'm getting too old for this*, she thought. At least the work kept *Fierce's* harsh whispers at bay.

Why had they come back here? The G'rat'ch Ambassador and its counterpart, too. To Fergus? A backwater to both empires. Notable only as the place where the aliens decided they'd had enough of a war that spanned two dozen star systems and declared a unilateral ceasefire. Then waited thirty years to begin negotiations.

Marion's War by HAYDEN TRENHOLM

But those bastards barely had a word for peace. And its other meaning wasn't surrender, but madness.

Hard heels echoed off the stairs, and Marion shifted her bucket against the wall. The soldiers barely gave her a glance. Age provided the invisibility cloak science had never mastered.



In her tiny room, Marion pried a flagstone loose from beneath her cot. The surface of the wooden box was pitted despite the polish she applied, but the hinges and clasp gleamed. The knife inside fitted easily in her palm, the blade shimmering. The G'rat'ch never appeared in public without body armour. But what about in private?

I know how to make them speak the truth, to negotiate in good faith, she thought, as she slipped the knife back into the box. The box snuggled nicely in her satchel beneath the brushes and cleaning cloths.

The Creebolt seven had escaped; hundreds still languished in G'rat'ch prison camps in the highlands beyond the village.

Marion shouldered her pack and her slugthrower and fell into line with the other grunts. A steady drizzle had turned the trail into a mudslide—but she wasn't worried. The aliens had given it all they had; it wasn't enough to break them. Now . . .

Marion squeezed her eyes shut, but the images didn't fade. All that youth. All that death.

Even now, a hundred systems once again teetered on the brink of war. Marion followed the newscasts, letting the drone of pundits drown out the voices in her head. When that didn't work, she trolled the dark sites the government both forbade and used in their incessant search for malcontents.

Not that government eyes ever turned on her. She had not forgotten all she had learned in the aliens' work camps, in their torture chambers—where she blubbered and screamed, mixing truth and fantasies into her confessions until she couldn't tell the difference. The G'rat'ch kept asking their meaningless questions, indifferent to what she said. Maybe because, for them, the difference between reality and dream was scarcely discernable.

THE INTERSECTION

Lorina Stephens

“Hey, Sis!”

She glanced around. His voice was so real inside her head, as if he stood right beside her. He sounded so ebullient amid the hustle of traffic, sunshine in the canyons of King and Bay, reaching out across distance where he circled somewhere overhead. She glanced up to where a sky like flint shone, hard as armour, and for her an unreachable barrier, untouchable. Although she wanted to reach him, one of the reasons she’d contacted him via their link.

She touched her ear, as if that would allow her to be nearer him, aware of the neural communications implant lodged in her cortex, one of Jack’s amazing gizmos. “Hey.” She winced at the tone of her response, aware of the flatness of it, her inability to match his persistent, apparent joy.

“Where are you?”

She glanced up at the monoliths of the TD and Montreal towers where birds wheeled and dove into the verdancy of wall gardens, down to the traffic lights where a walking man flashed and a flat voice droned *walk, walk, walk* over the hiss of activity, electric cars, electric public transit. Someone bumped by her. She stood immobile, unable to face the paved river she had to cross.

“Going to work,” she said, sucking in air suddenly in too short supply. “What are you doing?”

“Just making notations on our latest neural interface results. Being able to conduct these tests here is giving me amazing insights, things I would never have been able to ascertain down there.” There was a pause, and then: “Hey, Sis, you okay?”

That question. How many times had he asked her that? And how many times had she found herself frozen with fear, incapable

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of answering, terrified of the answer and what that might indicate, even more terrified of not telling him and having to face the gorge below where her feet balanced precariously on the edge of sanity.

All she had to do was cross the street with the lights, walk across the courtyard of the TD Centre, into the glass atrium where commerce and a Carolinian forest grew, and from there ascend in an elevator which could take her up fifty-six floors if she wanted. But she only had to go to thirty-two, exit to a floor where she would work where she chose—in a zen garden or beanbag chair, at an oak table or a cherry-lined library filled with real, printed volumes—and there, design security protocols for payment gateways.

“Sis?”

“Yeah.”

“You okay? Talk to me.”

She inhaled sharply, her chest constricting. She could feel her heart hammering a tattoo, her legs liquefying.

“Sis? C’mon, say something.”

What was she supposed to say? That she was falling apart? Again. That the meds didn’t seem to be working again, that she felt as though everything was about to come crashing down around her, that maybe it might be better to just sleep, and sleep forever, to stop being a burden to both herself and Jack. He certainly didn’t need to be dealing with a whacked-out sister some three hundred kilometres back on terra firma.

“You know, you’re closer up there than you were on the Rock,” she said, avoiding the conversation, needing the conversation, unable to begin the conversation.

“How weird is that?” He had such a comforting bass rumble in his voice, like the sound of the earth itself.

“I know,” she said.

Another pause she didn’t know how to fill.

“But you didn’t call me to discuss distance.”

Well, sort of she did. Twenty-four hundred clicks from Toronto to Corner Brook. Three hundred to the International Space Station II. But she could hop on a plane to Corner Brook within the hour, or at least later today. But the ISSII? Jack was only as close as the voice in her head.

AFTERWORD

As a fourteen-year-old during the Depression, my father tramped the bush and slough country of northern Saskatchewan with his shotgun, to bring home ducks or a partridge to liven up a family dinner that might consist solely of oatmeal or potatoes. But when, years later in the early 1960s, he moved his young family to Calgary, he found his true passion: mountaineering. Before he passed away at the age of 83, he became the first person to climb all the peaks in the Canadian Rockies and the B.C. Interior Ranges over 11,000 feet, and the oldest man to climb Canada's highest mountain, Mt. Logan—at the age of 71. He was a phenomenal man.

As you can imagine, growing up with my three siblings was an adventure. I have vivid memories of sleeping in utter silence of an ice cave, of the profound darkness inside a grotto when the carbide lamps are doused, of the addictive adrenaline rush after completing the exposed final traverse of the Unnamed route on Mt. Yamnuska. But such a lifestyle could also be daunting: the watery-gut panic from clinging to the ridge of Mt. Lorette on my first serious climb. Nothing wrong with me or the rock, the weather, or the other climbers: I was simply too frozen with terror to move.

It was my older brother and sister who introduced my father to rock climbing through an after-school program. My dad was damned if he was going to give his fourteen-year-old twins a ride to the mountains and then sit at the bottom of the climb to wait until they came down at the end of the day. Not after his lifetime of outdoor adventure. And it was my younger sister, spurred on by a wild competitive drive to keep up to the rest of the family, who went on to build a life as one of Canada's first female park wardens, and to become one of only five Canadian women to

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earn her full Mountain Guide's licence in 2001.

I, on the other hand, married, had children, and subsequently became a single parent. My fear of heights, my lack of fitness, and my personal responsibilities made it easier for me to sit at home dreaming up stories most weekends than to tramp the mountainsides and experience them. I grew up with every advantage in a close, warm family environment; yet, still, it was hard when my siblings regaled one another with stories of canoeing adventures in the Arctic, of meeting famous mountaineers in backcountry cabins, of unexpectedly riding a slab avalanche in a whiteout. It was hard for me not to feel like a stranger among them.

Over the years, as I more fully carved out my adult identity, this divide has lessened. But I was surprised to discover that my older brother felt separate from our family because of the forty years he spent raising his family in the north country; that my older sister felt separate because of a life dogged with misadventure; that my younger sister felt separate as the only one of us not to have a Master's Degree to hang on her wall.

How ordinary a family I come from. And yet, even so, each of my siblings and I have felt a sense of alienation.

How profound, then, is the experience of those in our society who do live a more isolated existence? How can we, the majority—dare I say, the ordinary folk of the world?—come to understand the complexity of emotions—the intensity of the loneliness—felt by some of the fringe members of our society?

The answer is: through fiction.

Fiction. Whatever divisions, real or perceived, that separate us, one thing we all have in common is a susceptibility to the power of story. The talented authors collected here have reached deeply into their most haunting memories, their places of creativity and imagination, to bring to the page the lived experience of those who dwell in our cities and towns, our rural and remote communities, just next door to us, but who do so on the far side of what might seem—or be—a gaping divide.

These stories reveal nuggets of truth about our vital need to connect, the human fear of loneliness and rejection, the barriers to intimacy and support. Their authors have put into words what

Afterword by SUSAN FOREST

cannot be put into words: the invisibility of loneliness, the climate of grief, the mind games of war, the companionship of delusion, the community of addiction, the doublethink of a mad society. They gather together an answer to the question, "Who are the strangers among us?"

We are.

—Susan Forest, Calgary, 2016

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Suzanne Church grew up in Toronto, moved to Waterloo to pursue mathematics, and never left town. Her award-winning fiction has appeared in *Clarkesworld*, *Cicada*, *On Spec*, and her 2014 collection *Elements*. Her favourite place to write is a lakefront cabin, but she'll settle for any coffee shop with WiFi and an electrical outlet. *Soul Larcenist*, book one in the Dagger of Sacrados trilogy set in Ed Greenwood's *Hellmaw* Universe, is now available in multiple formats from onderlibrum.com.

Julie E. Czerneda, Canadian author and editor, has shared her love and curiosity about living things through her science fiction since 1997. *A Turn of Light*, the first of her Night's Edge fantasy series from DAW Books, won the 2014 Aurora Award for Best English Novel, with the sequel, *A Play of Shadow*, winning that award for 2015. Recent publications include the omnibus of her acclaimed near-future SF Species Imperative and Book Two of Night's Edge, *A Play of Shadow*. Julie's back to science fiction, writing the finale to her Clan Chronicles series. November 2015 was the release of Book #1 of Reunification, *This Gulf of Time and Stars*, with more to come. She was honoured to write the introduction to this anthology, for there is no family untouched by mental illness. We must better understand ourselves. For more about her work, visit www.czerneda.com.

A. M. Dellamonica has recently moved to Toronto, Canada, after 22 years in Vancouver. In addition to writing, she studies yoga and takes thousands of digital photographs. She is a graduate of Clarion West and teaches writing through the UCLA Extension Writers' Program. Dellamonica's first novel, *Indigo Springs*, won the Sunburst Award for Canadian Literature of the Fantastic. Her book, *Child of a Hidden Sea*, was released by Tor Books in the summer of 2014; the sequel, *A Daughter of No Nation*, is available now. She is the author of over thirty short stories in a variety of genres, which can be found on *Tor.com*, *Strange Horizons*, *Lightspeed* and in numerous print magazines and anthologies. Her website is at <http://alyxdellamonica.com>.

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James Alan Gardner got a couple of degrees in Math, then started writing science fiction instead. He has won the Aurora award, the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award, and the Asimov's Readers' Choice award. He has published eight novels and numerous short stories. In his spare time, he studies rocks and teaches kung fu to kids.

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Erika Holt resides in Calgary, Alberta, the city where she was born and still loves. Her stories are mostly urban and epic fantasy and have appeared in numerous anthologies including *Evolve Two* and *Tesseract Fifteen*. She has edited speculative fiction of all kinds and is currently an assistant editor of *Nightmare Magazine* under bestselling and multiple award-nominated editor-in-chief John Joseph Adams. You can find Erika on Twitter at: @erikaholt. She's also a member of Calgary's Imaginative Fiction Writers Association and blogs with the Inkpunks.

Tyler Keevil grew up in Vancouver, Canada, and in his mid-twenties moved to Wales, where he now lives. His short fiction has appeared in a wide range of magazines and anthologies in Britain, Canada, and the U.S. His first two novels, *Fireball* and *The Drive*, were both nominated for the Wales Book of the Year and both received the Wales Book of the Year People's Prize. His story collection, *Burrard Inlet*, was also nominated for the Wales Book of the Year, as well as the Edge Hill Story Prize, the Frank O'Connor Award, and the Rubery Book Award. One of the stories from the collection, 'Sealskin', was awarded the \$10,000 Writers' Trust of Canada Journey Prize. Among other things, Tyler has worked as a tree planter, landscaper, and ice barge deckhand; he is currently a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Gloucestershire.

Rich Larson was born in West Africa, has studied in Rhode Island and worked in Spain, and at 23 now writes from Edmonton, Alberta. His short work has been nominated for the Theodore Sturgeon and appears in multiple Year's Best anthologies, as well as in magazines such as *Asimov's*, *Analog*, *Clarkesworld*, *F&SF*, *Interzone*, *Strange Horizons*, *Lightspeed* and *Apex*. Find him at richwlarson.tumblr.com.

Mahtab Narsimhan was born in Bombay and immigrated to Canada in 1997. Mahtab, in Persian, means Moonlight. Her debut novel in the Tara Trilogy, *The Third Eye* (Dundurn, 2007), won the Silver Birch Fiction Award in 2009. *The Tiffin* (DCB, 2011), a middle-grade novel based loosely on the dabbawallas, has received critical acclaim, was shortlisted for many awards, and named one of the five best books for Young People in 2011 by the *Quill & Quire*. It has been published in the UK, China and Taiwan. Her most recent novel, *Mission Mumbai*, was published by Scholastic US and Canada in Spring 2016. Mahtab lives in Toronto with her husband, son, and golden retriever. She continues to write, inspired by life, love and the desire to make sense of the world through stories. For more information, please visit her website at www.mahtabnarsimhan.com.

Derwin Mak lives in Toronto. He is the only member of the Royal Canadian Military Institute who monitors North Korean music videos to analyze their propaganda. His short story "Transubstantiation" won the Aurora Award for Best Short Form Work in English in 2006. He and Eric Choi co-edited *The Dragon and the Stars* (DAW Books, 2010), the first anthology of science fiction and fantasy by overseas Chinese. It won the 2011 Aurora Award for Best Related Work in English. His two novels *The Moon Under Her Feet* and *The Shrine of the Siren Stone* are science fiction that deal with religious themes in Christianity, Shintoism, and Buddhism. Derwin co-edited the Speculative Fiction Issue of *Ricepaper* magazine with JF Garrard in 2014 and is currently co-editing *Where the Stars Rise* with Lucas K. Law.

Sherry Peters attended the Odyssey Writing Workshop and holds an M.A. in Writing Popular Fiction from Seton Hill University. Her first novel, *Mabel the Lovelorn Dwarf*, won the 2014 Writer's Digest competition for Self-Published ebooks in the Young Adult category. *Mabel the Lovelorn Dwarf* has also been nominated for Canada's Aurora Award for best YA novel. For more information on Sherry, visit her website at <http://www.sherrypeters.com>.

Ursula Pflug is author of the critically acclaimed novels *Green Music* (Edge/Tesseract), *The Alphabet Stones* (Blue Denim), *Motion Sickness* (illustrated by SK Dymont for Inanna) and the story collections *After the Fires* (Tightrope) and *Harvesting the Moon* (PS). She edited the anthologies *They Have To Take You In* (Hidden Brook) and *The Playground of Lost Toys* (with Colleen Anderson for Exile). She teaches Con Ed creative writing at Loyalist College, the Campbellford Resource Centre, Trent University (with Derek Newman-Stille) and elsewhere. Her award winning short stories and nonfiction about books and art have been appearing for decades in Canada, the US and the UK, in genre and literary venues. Her short stories have been taught in universities in Canada and India, and she has collaborated extensively with filmmakers, dancers, theatre and installation artists.

Robert Runté is Senior Editor at Five Rivers Publishing, an Associate Professor at the University of Lethbridge, and a freelance editor and writing coach at SFeditor.ca. He was co-editor of *Tesseracts 5*, wrote the SF&F entry for the Encyclopedia of Canadian Literature, and has won three Aurora Awards for his SF criticism. He is married, has two teenage daughters, and writes using a treadmill desk.

Lorina Stephens has worked as editor, freelance journalist for national and regional print media, is author of seven books both fiction and non-fiction, been a festival organizer, publicist, lectures on many topics from historical textiles and domestic technologies, to publishing and writing, teaches, and continues to work as a writer, artist, and publisher at Five Rivers Publishing. She has had several short fiction pieces published in Canada's acclaimed *On Spec* magazine, *Postscripts to Darkness*, *Neo-Opis*, *Garden of Eden*, and Marion Zimmer Bradley's fantasy anthology *Sword & Sorceress X*. Her published books include *Stonehouse Cooks*, *From Mountains of Ice*, *And Angels Sang*, *Shadow Song* and *Recipes of a Dumb Housewife*. Lorina is presently working on two new novels, *The Rose Guardian*, and *Caliban*. She lives with

her husband of over four decades in a historic stone house in Neustadt, Ontario. Her website is at lorinastephens.blogspot.ca.

Amanda Sun is the author of *The Paper Gods*, a YA Fantasy series set in Japan and published by Harlequin Teen. The first two books, *Ink* and *Rain*, are Aurora Award nominees and Junior Library Guild selections. Her short fiction has also been published in the Aurora Award-nominated *Tesseract's Fifteen* and the literary journal *Room Magazine*. She has a new YA Fantasy out in 2016, *Heir to The Sky*, about monster hunters and floating continents. When not reading or writing, Sun is also an avid cosplayer. Find her on Twitter at @Amanda_Sun and get free Paper Gods novellas at AmandaSunBooks.com.

Hayden Trenholm is an award-winning playwright, novelist and short story writer. His short fiction has appeared in *On Spec*, *TransVersions*, *Neo-Opis*, *Challenging Destiny*, *Talebones*, and on CBC radio. His first novel, *A Circle of Birds*, won the 3-Day Novel Writing competition and was published in 1993 by Anvil Press; it was recently translated and published in French. His trilogy, *The Steele Chronicles*, was published by Bundoran Press and were each nominated for an Aurora Award. *Stealing Home*, the third book, was a finalist for the Sunburst Award. Hayden has won three Aurora Awards—twice for short fiction and once for editing the anthology, *Blood and Water*. He purchased Bundoran Press in 2012 and is its managing editor. He lives in Ottawa with his wife and fellow writer, Elizabeth Westbrook.

Edward Willett is the author of more than 50 books of fiction and non-fiction for adults, young adults, and children. He won the Aurora Award for Best Long-Form Work in English for his 2009 science-fiction novel *Marseguro* (DAW Books). Recent publications include the two-book *Peregrine Rising* series for Bundoran Press, the *Masks of Aygrima* fantasy trilogy for DAW (written as E.C. Blake), the five-book *Shards of Excalibur* YA

fantasy series for Coteau Books, and the YA fantasy novel *Flames of Nevyana* for Rebelight Books. Non-fiction titles have run the gamut from science books and biographies for children and teens to local history books, and even *Genetics Demystified* for McGraw-Hill. Born in Silver City, New Mexico, Ed grew up in Weyburn, Saskatchewan, and now lives in Regina with his wife, Margaret Anne Hodges, a telecommunications engineer, and their teenaged daughter, Alice. He is online at edwardwillett.com

A.C. Wise's work has appeared in publications such as *Clarkesworld*, *Shimmer*, *Apex*, and *Imaginarium: The Best Canadian Speculative Fiction*, among other places. In addition to her fiction, she co-edits *Unlikely Story*, and contributes a monthly *Women to Read: Where to Start* column to *SF Signal*. Her debut collection, *The Ultra Fabulous Glitter Squadron Saves the World Again*, was published by Lethe Press in late 2015. Find her online at www.acwise.net.

ABOUT THE EDITORS

Susan Forest is a three-time Prix Aurora Award finalist and a writer of science fiction, fantasy and horror, and a freelance fiction editor. Her stories have appeared in *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Analog Science Fiction and Fact*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Tesseract*, *AE Science Fiction Review*, *On Spec*, and *The Urban Green Man*, among others. Her collection of short fiction, *Immunity to Strange Tales*, was published by Five Rivers Publishing. Susan is currently co-editing *The Sum of Us* with Lucas K. Law. She acted as judge for the Endeavour Award, and the Robin Herrington Memorial Short Story Contest, and she contributes to Calgary's annual literary festival, When Words Collide. Susan is also the Secretary for the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America (SFWA). She teaches creative writing at the Alexandra Centre, and has appeared at numerous local and international writing conventions.

Lucas K. Law is a Malaysian-born freelance editor, published author, engineering consultant and business coach, who divides his time and heart between Calgary and Qualicum Beach. He is currently co-editing *The Sum of Us* anthology with Susan Forest and *Where the Stars Rise* anthology with Derwin Mak. He has been a jury member for a number of fiction competitions including Nebula, RITA and Golden Heart awards. When Lucas is not editing, writing or reading, he is a consultant, specializing in mergers and acquisition (M&A) activities, asset evaluations, business planning, and corporate development.

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LEARN HOW TO MANAGE YOUR STRESS . . .

APPENDIX: MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

Because of the dynamic nature of the internet, any telephone numbers, web addresses or links provided in this section may have changed since the publication of this book and may no longer be valid.

A listing in the Appendix doesn't mean it is an endorsement from Laksa Media Groups Inc., publisher, editors, authors and/or those involved in this anthology project. Its listing here is a mean to disseminate information to the readers to get additional materials for further investigation or knowledge.

LEARN DAILY MINDFULNESS . . .

STRANGERS AMONG US

How is your Mental Health? Do you think you have one or more of the following recently?

- More Stress than Before
- Grief
- Separation and Divorce
- Feeling Violence
- Suicidal Thoughts
- Self Injury
- Excessive or Unexplained Anxiety
- Obsessive Compulsive
- Paranoia, Phobias or Panics
- Post-Traumatic Stress
- Depression
- Bi-polar
- Postpartum Depression
- Eating Disorders
- Schizophrenia
- Addictions
- Mood Disorders
- Personality Disorders
- Learning Disabilities

Mental Health Screening Tools

More information:

www.mentalhealthamerica.net/mental-health-screening-tools

- The Depression Screen is most appropriate for individuals who are feeling overwhelming sadness.
- The Anxiety Screen will help if you feel that worry and fear affect your day to day life.
- The Bipolar Screen is intended to support individuals who have mood swings—or unusual shifts in mood and energy.
- The PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) Screen is best taken by those who are bothered by a traumatic life event.
- The Alcohol or Substance Use Screen will help determine if your use of alcohol or drugs is an area to address.
- The Youth Screen is for young people (age 11-17) who are concerned that their emotions, attention, or behaviours might be signs of a problem.
- The Parent Screen is for parents of young people to determine if their child’s emotions, attention, or behaviours might be signs of a problem.
- The Psychosis Screen is for young people (age 12-35) who feel like their brain is playing tricks on them (seeing, hearing or believing things that don’t seem real or quite right).

Worried about Your Child—Symptom Checker: www.childmind.org/en/health/symptom-checker

STRANGERS AMONG US

10 Ways to Look after Your Mental Health

(source: www.mentalhealthamerica.net/live-your-life-well)

1. Connect with Others
2. Stay Positive
3. Get Physically Active
4. Help Others
5. Get Enough Sleep
6. Create Joy and Satisfaction
7. Eat Well
8. Take Care of Your Spirit
9. Deal Better with Hard Times
10. Get Professional Help if You Need It

MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES & INFORMATION

If you or someone you know is struggling with mental illness, please consult a doctor or a healthcare professional in your community.

Below is not a comprehensive information listing, but it is a good start to get more information on mental health/illness.

Emergency Phone Number

If you or someone is in crisis or may be at risk of harming himself/herself or someone else, please call your national Emergency Phone Number immediately.

Canada	911
United States	911
United Kingdom	999 or 112
Ireland	999 or 112
EU	112
Australia	000
New Zealand	111

APPENDIX: MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

Canada

To locate your local Canadian Mental Health Association: **www.cmha.ca**

Specifically for children and young people (aged 5-20), call Kids Help Phone's 24-hour confidential phone line at **1-800-668-6868** English or French. More information online: **kidshelpphone.ca**

There are a number of resource materials and list of organizations that you can reach out to on the Bell Let's Talk website: **www.bell.ca/letstalk**.

Mental Health & Addiction Information A-Z: **www.camh.ca/en/hospital/health_information/a_z_mental_health_and_addiction_information/Pages/default.aspx**

United States

National Suicide Prevention Hotline: **1-800-273-TALK** or **1-800-273-8255**

For more mental health information: **www.mentalhealthamerica.net/mental-health-information**

United Kingdom

The Samaritans (**www.samaritans.org**) offers emotional support 24 hours a day — get in touch with them: **116-123**.

A to Z of Mental Health: **www.mentalhealth.org.uk/help-information/mental-health-a-z**

Free Mental Health Podcasts: **www.mentalhealth.org.uk/help-information/podcasts**

STRANGERS AMONG US

Ireland

The Samaritans (www.samaritans.org) offers emotional support 24 hours a day – get in touch with them: **116-123**.

Childline Helpline: Confidential for young people (under 18).
Phone: **1800-66-66-66**

For more mental health information: www.mentalhealthireland.ie

Australia

Helplines, websites and government mental health services for Australia: mhaustralia.org/need-help

Kids Helpline: Confidential and anonymous, telephone and online counselling service specifically for young people aged between 5 and 25. Phone: **1800-55-18-00** or visit www.kidshelp.com.au

Lifeline: 24 hour telephone counselling service. Phone: **13-11-14** or visit www.lifeline.org.au

New Zealand

Helplines, websites and government mental health services for New Zealand: www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/in-crisis/helplines

Youthline (for young people under 25): **0800-376-633**. More information online: <http://www.youthline.co.nz>

Lifeline: **0800-543-354** or **(09) 5222-999** within Auckland

Suicide Crisis Helpline: **0508-828-865 (0508-TAUTOKO)**

CHARITABLE EVENTS (a sample)

Canada

Ride Don't Hide: ridedonthide.com

Walk so Kids Can Talk: [org.kidshelpphone.ca/get-involved/
events](http://org.kidshelpphone.ca/get-involved/events)

Boolathon: www.boolathon.ca

United States

Out of Darkness Walk: [www.afsp.org/out-of-the-darkness-
walks](http://www.afsp.org/out-of-the-darkness-walks)

NamiWalks: namiwalks.org

United Kingdom

Participate in a challenge or community event—run, cycle, trek, tea and talk, skydiving: [www.mentalhealth.org.uk/get-
involved/as-a-fundraiser](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/get-involved/as-a-fundraiser)

Australia

Participate in a challenge or community event: [www.
blackdoginstitute.org.au/public/getinvolved/
fundraisingevents.cfm](http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/public/getinvolved/fundraisingevents.cfm)

PAYING FORWARD, GIVING BACK

READ FOR A CAUSE

WRITE FOR A CAUSE

HELP A CAUSE

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THE SUM OF US

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Edited by Susan Forest and Lucas K. Law

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IT'S A DELICATE BALANCE BETWEEN
MENTAL HEALTH AND MENTAL ILLNESS . . .

BE ALERT!