

**Little  
FICTION.**



# **(flash)**

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by Andrew F. Sullivan

# **Good Friday**

by Amanda Leduc

© 2012

# Tammy

drove her children into the lake on a Friday, the weekend that her soon-to-be-ex-husband was away. She swerved to avoid a rabbit that had jumped out onto the road. Tanner, her son, was sitting in the front seat and saw the rabbit first.

“*Don’t hit it!*” he’d screamed. And so she’d swerved, and then they hit a patch of ice and careened down into the lake.

She remembers everything. The coppery surge of fear in her mouth as she felt control of the wheel slide out from beneath her hands; the crunch of the car as it *swumped* across the rocks; the

high-pitched whine of her children's screams as they came to a jolting stop in the lake. The water, seeping in from everywhere.

She fumbled for her belt, unclicked it, and then reached across to Tanner. By the time she got her hand around his seatbelt, the water had risen past his knees.

"Tanner," she said. He was screaming. "Tanner!" She raised her hand and slapped him. He stopped. A thin line of saliva hung from his lip. "You're going to have to swim," she said. "I'm going to open the car door—water is going to come in, and you're going to have to swim."

"I can't swim," he whispered.

The door would not open, so she grabbed the window roller and held his shoulder. "Just kick," she said. "Kick, and push."

The window wouldn't open either. She pulled away from the door and turned to the baby, who hadn't stopped crying. The seatbelt of her car seat was cutting into the space between her ribs.

"It's okay," Tammy said, automatically. It's okay. It's okay. Her fingers shook and fumbled. The water kept rising. Tanner started to cry, great gasping sobs.

"Stop it!" she shouted. They only had so much air.

The baby's seatbelt came undone and Audrey fell forward. Tammy held the baby's head above the water and watched them both. The light faded. They sank.

"Just a minute," she said. Shaking teeth. So cold. Her hand found the door handle again. The pocket of air in the car shrank to six inches. Five. Four.

Tanner's head went under first. Then hers, then the baby's. Tammy surged forward and yanked the handle of the back door. It did not move. She yanked it again, and this time the door shuddered open. She pushed. It was like giving birth with her arms.

She shoved Tanner forward. He kicked. He went up.

The baby floated beside her like a doll. Tammy pulled the child close, kissed her, and pushed again. Her daughter shot up to the sky.



The prosecution does not believe this story. Instead, they talk about the divorce. They bring up the AA meetings. They use words like *unstable* and *unhinged*. At times even Tammy believes them. Wasn't she angry? Hadn't she been weeping, just before the rabbit



ran across the road?

What she does not tell them—what she'll never tell them—is that God came to her in the car. When the children were suspended above her, kicking up toward the light, God rippled into place in front of her and held out His hand.

He was mossy and dark green. His fingers felt like sea kelp, slippery and mysterious.

If you go back, He said, they will take your children from you. Come with me.

But eventually she turned away, kicking up and breaking through the surface to find her children floating facedown on the water. She yanked them close, and smacked the air into them, one by one. Then they wept, in the water, together.



Edward's sister drops by sometimes and tells her about them. Audrey is talking now. Tanner's having baths again. They do not ask about her, ever.

This is okay. At least they are alive.

She says this every day—in the morning, at the courthouse, in

the evenings when she is alone. They are alive, and years from now they will remember this only as the last drive they ever took with their mother. They will remember breaking through the water like newborns. Life will be a gift for them, always.

And God? God will wait for someone else to find Him, hiding there beneath the lake. He is patient. He is kind. He is no stranger to sorrow. He holds Tammy now even as she sleeps, as the jury turns against her.

Eternity, like death, is also green.

# **Don't Lie**

by Len Kuntz

© 2012

# She

sees her son dressing, and pauses to get a good look. The act feels criminal, perverse, yet nostalgically familiar. She takes in his entire back, the tendons and contours, but mostly the ruptured areas. Aaron's home for the holiday, having just arrived yesterday. A college freshman.

At breakfast he watches her eat. She's always been a bad liar, even without saying anything. The affair she'd had years earlier was a radioactive alarm blinking on her face.

"What's going on?" her son asks. He's grown so big, muscular,

a man really. The cereal spoon in his hand looks the size of a cuff link.

“Nothing.”

“You seem nervous.”

“I’m not.”

“Don’t lie, Mom.” But he scrunches his face, the way he did as a young boy, before the divorce and dark years.

She’d been a freshman, once, too. There was fraternity she went to on Fridays with beer kegs and vats of ruby colored alcohol. A boy with David Cassidy hair took her to his room. He had stacked Copenhagen cans in the window, shaped like a pyramid, but outside a streetlight reflected back on the building’s pillars that looked colonial.

The boy’s friends showed up an hour into it. She thought they were joking. They took turns, traded high-fives. Her head was hazy from the Spodie Odie, but she fought back, biting shoulders and arms, only they seemed to like it, told her, “Harder,” said, “Yeah, Bitch.”

She never saw the marks, but she thinks now that they must have resembled the ones she saw on her son’s back earlier. Angry

blackberry cloudburst bruises. Teeth impressions. Who's to say how he got them? He might have a girlfriend, though she'd always thought her son the gentle type. If she asks, there's a small chance he might be truthful and she's not so sure she wants to go there. Christmas is three days away. There are gifts. They might all be happy. When he gives her that look again, she stands, grabs the pot, says, "How about some more coffee?"

# **Ashes to Ashes**

by Peg Daniels

© 2012

# Jeremy,

my brother, served a tray of drinks to the family members sprawled on the sofa and chairs in Mother's living room—we all needed a stiff one after the histrionics of Mother at Father's funeral service.

Aunt Ethel, Mother's younger sister, puffing her way through one unfiltered Marlboro after another, dipped a finger into a proffered shot glass and anointed herself behind the ears. "That's all for me, sweetheart," she said to Jeremy.

Jack Daniel's sloshed over glass rims as Jeremy nearly dropped the tray. Everyone knew Aunt Ethel loved her liquor as



much as her cigs.

“Since when you on the wagon?” Uncle Frank said.

Aunt Ethel blew smoke rings in Uncle Frank’s face. “Since I got a bun in the oven.”

We all choked on our drinks. Uncle Frank had gotten fixed twenty years ago.

Aunt Ethel took another drag off her nicotine stick. “Too bad the daddy won’t be around to witness the birth of the bundle of joy.”

Aunt Ethel picked up the urn containing the remains of Father, popped its cork, and tapped her cigarette ash into it.

Things went downhill from there.

# **Cold, Sweet Grapes**

by Leesa Cross-Smith

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# Satchel

and I wandered away from our trust exercise. I was warm and happy with our fingers laced together, my eyes blacked out behind my thick blindfold. My sight world reduced to the looping swirls of color and occasional starry-smash of white flickering beneath my eyelids.

“Just a little further,” he said, leading me.

“We’re here,” he said, stopping. He lifted the blindfold up but I pulled it back down.

“I want to leave it on,” I said.

“Why?”

“Because I never do anything weird and I feel like being weird,” I said, before asking where we were. I bent down to feel the grass; I heard birds, a lawnmower in the distance, the *ch-ch-ch-ch-ch* of a ticking sprinkler.

“My house. My mom is on the porch. There’s a sidewalk up here and some bushes...”

“What kind of bushes?”

“Azalea bushes.”

“What color?”

“Pink.”

“Pink like what, what kind of pink?”

“I don’t know what to compare it to.”

“Try,” I said, faking frustration. It was my classic go-to flirting move.

“Okaaay,” he stretched the word out and made a little clicking sound with his mouth, “my little sister had a Barbie Jeep when we were kids. She’d play with it outside and leave it in the sun. It faded from a crazy-bright hot-pink color to pale pink. Well, the azaleas are the crazy-bright hot-pink color that the Jeep was before it got all faded.”

“Good work. I can picture it perfectly because I had that same Barbie Jeep,” I said. I smiled and the sun was hot on my face. I reached out to touch Satchel’s with both of my hands. I’d seen blind people do that in movies. He was smiling too. I could feel it.

“Mom, this is Ramona from theatre class,” he said.

I fingered the blindfold’s heavy knot at the back of my head. He took my wrist and led my hand to his mother’s hand and she shook it.

“Hi Ramona. Do you have to stay blindfolded all day or do you switch up?” She sounded tall and dark-haired. Like she was wearing something white and maybe one piece of sparkly, expensive jewelry. I laughed, said it was nice to meet her, made a joke about how I’d have to come back again so I could see her. Her laughter sounded like wind chimes.

“It’ll be his turn soon. I’ll lead him back to school,” I said.

I heard a dog panting. Felt its fur and hot breath on my legs. I put my hand out and it licked me. I bent down and felt for its ears, scratched behind both of them. It pressed its cool wet nose against my knee. And then it was gone.

“Did y’all want something to drink?” Satchel’s mom asked. I wanted water. Satchel too. He said he’d get it for us. Before going inside, he set me down in a wicker chair on the porch. I hoped the cushion was something cozy like yellow and white gingham.

Alone with Satchel’s mother, I told her I loved Satchel Paige and baseball and the fact that she and her husband had named Satchel after him. I told her that my parents had named me after Ramona Quimby. She said she loved those books. Her voice, wistful and pretty. I could hear things better. I could see better and I’d only been wearing the blindfold for thirty minutes. Maybe I’d never take it off. Maybe it was magical. Satchel would come out of the house and finally kiss me. Tell me he’d always loved me.

He came back, sat next to me, put a bottled water and a small bowl in my lap. I said thank you. My hands were probably filthy but I didn’t care. I was a hungry girl and he’d given me cold, sweet grapes; I ate them and ate them and ate them.

# **The Faithful Run To It**

by Vincent Scarpa

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# The

pastor's wife is losing their fourth baby in as many years. They're eating breakfast in the kitchen when Lisa's white sundress blooms red. In the refrigerator are leftovers of the chocolate cake purchased last week to celebrate the end of the first trimester, a milestone in the couple's attempt to fulfill the vow of a fruitful marriage. The pastor drives his wife to the local emergency room and stops for red lights. Blood streaks down Lisa's calves, crimson rivers looking for the sea. They are met at the sliding glass doors by the doctor, a parishioner at the pastor's Lutheran church one town over.



The pastor has baptized all three of the doctor's children.

Bellicose is the word used to explain Lisa's uterus. Hostile is another. The doctor suggests that the couple consider looking into alternatives, but the pastor won't hear it. He is sure of a larger plan, God-given, and will not think of the miscarriages as anything but a test of faith and perseverance. A nurse brings the discharge papers, and, compelled by something he cannot name, the pastor announces that they will try again. Lisa nods, numbed by the heavy dose of ibuprofen.

On the drive home, the car is flanked on both sides by a passing parade of motorcyclists racing down the boulevard. Their staggered formation reminds Lisa of a flock of birds flying south for winter. The men stretch out arms wrapped in leather and denim to signal their turn onto the highway. They fade into the fog, but the scream of burning rubber can be heard long after, even as the pastor pulls into the driveway.

That night, falling in and out of a sweaty sleep, Lisa's dreams take her back twenty years, to the only motorcycle ride she's ever taken. This was before she was saved. In the dream she has just graduated high school, and soon she'll leave California for a college

dorm in Florida. Her sweetheart is Gabriel, a boy who her mother thinks is trouble. He has long black hair that Lisa loves to run her fingers through, and calloused hands that fix beat-up Chevrolets at the garage downtown. On the weekends, Gabriel fronts a band that plays dive bars in Sacramento. Lisa goes to every show, watches from a velvet barstool as Gabriel sings 'I Wanna Be Adored' from her favorite Stone Roses record. She knows that their love is temporary, one that expires when she moves across the country to Jacksonville. But it's August of 1989, in the warmth of a Western summer, and Lisa hasn't left him yet. She is still in Loomis, and she is wrapping her arms around Gabriel's waist as he revs a bright red Ducati. Her long blonde hair ripples in the highway breeze as they chase a setting sun down the California coastline.

At church that Sunday, Lisa is greeted by believers whose names she can never remember. They hold her hands in theirs and promise to pray. Throughout the service, she can feel the congregation shift their eyes to her. She wishes she could contain all of their sorrow and pity, fill a balloon with this collective grief and float it above and away. In his sermon, the pastor quotes a verse from Proverbs: The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the faithful run to

it and are safe. Lisa knows the passage is directed at her, that this is her husband asking for more faith. But she doesn't believe him anymore. She believes in motorcycles. In a secret beach by Petaluma. In a troubled boy, with a cigarette in his mouth and an electric guitar in his hand. Lisa watches her husband, so full of conviction, and she wants to yell the simplest truth of all: She longs for what she was saved from.

# **Hatchet Job**

by Brad Rose

© 2012

# Your

departure was as final as a stone rolled over a newly closed grave. I should have seen it coming. A week before you left to return to your husband, you cut your own hair, using only a butcher's knife, without a mirror.

Six months passed and I got up enough nerve to phone you—not from our old apartment, of course, but from a pay phone outside a bar we used to drink in, together, called Capone's. You answered the phone, but hung up the second I said your name... didn't even give me a chance to say hello.

That's what really killed me.

# **Fractal**

by Paul McQuade

© 2012

# The

train station seethes, the doors sigh piston-fire. Above me a voice with no body informs me of the dangers of intimacy. Stay behind the yellow line, hold on to something—your breath, maybe. The next train is at 9:15, bound for Ikebukuro. I don't even have to get on when it arrives: just give my body up to the crowd, carried forward by its wordless drive.

We press together. Close, touching, breathing in each other's skin. The man in front of me is eye-level but we pretend not to see each other. A vision stronger than x-rays: bones and flesh lost in the

gamma field, removed, at a wavelength, from the primacy of matter. It is the window, the mirror, the perspex eyeglass I see. In its dull nicotine there are two of me. Beside us, a girl pretends not to notice as a man places a hand on her thigh.

Shinjuku. Everyone gets off. I watch, waiting to be moved. Bodies in motion, the physics of commuting. Ghosts empty from the train and there my own reflection goes, inexplicably separate, carried by the rush-hour tide. I remain. In the window, there is only one of me.

The seats have opened up. Without a body I have nothing left to do but to sit down in someone else's blood-heat. It is strangely intimate, this spectral intercourse, the weight and depth of limbs superimposed in time. I curl up in the warmth of it, watch the stations blur by.

The announcer's voice has been moved outside of words, to the surface of words, a state of pure audio without meaning. Nothing he says matters anymore. I am directionless, interminable. The electricity hums and crackles. There is no one else. The seat becomes a bed. I curl up embryonic, listen to the heartbeat, the thunder, the clamour and the being of the city.



Outside the station is alien yet familiar. Everywhere I look a series of signs reaffirms its location: twin-tailed sirens, yellow arches, services of pure abstraction. An eye, a hand, a lip. London, Milan, Budapest. Tokyo, Algiers, Beijing. Same thing. Same cheap capital.

I walk the concrete. No crowds here, just the busy suits on their way to work. Occasionally a mother and child in maternal binding, pram or harness. Hidden among them are ugly little things, almost-human shapes, shadows.

A high rise of apartment buildings, then another. The skyline is an obsolete grey. I step behind a young mother and past the automatic doors, then up the stairs, trying every lock. One of them opens. Same familiar faux pine finish, same limp onion in the fridge. There is a photo of me with a girl I don't recognise. Someone is in the shower. Maybe the girl, maybe me, I can't tell. Someone has left a half-finished sandwich beside the photo. I finish it quietly, listen to the shower administrations.

My body comes out of the shower without a towel. When it sees me it covers its genitals. It has forgotten to forget the shame of its nakedness, its ribald scars. It expels me with a command

and a finger pointed to the open door. An oath, a disconnect, a garbled message.

The streets, the ghost-shapes, the pierced lace of concrete. Repetition. I walk, again, trying not to notice the hulking not-there's between the garbage bags, the ones who have taken on the same shape as the bags. It occurs to me that perhaps they too had lost their bodies once, and, without hope, without love, had crawled up in the trash hoping to find a discarded form.

It is night now, a world of light and blindness. A window out of time. Constellations appear with a switch. There the glowing hum of Yoyogi Station. I check the map above the ticket machines to see if I recognise a name, a place where my body might have gone, but I can no longer read. The Yamanote loop is green. That means it is safe. I know this from the coding of the streetlights.

I step on the train. In the window I am layered, planes gathered to substance only here and there. The rest is phase. Beyond my reflection, Tokyo glows, alive as only it can be. It looks so frail in the neon, like an entire city made of glass. My reflection, too.

Then just like that, it vanishes.

# **The Sum of Us**

by Troy Palmer

© 2012

# Rose

starts her morning reading about body parts. Hands, feet, a torso found in an old suitcase. Teeth, pulled out and bagged. Catalogued. This world is full of sick people, to take another person and do that to them. Somebody's son or brother. Another human being.

She takes a sip of coffee and pretends to check email when her office mate shows up.

“Hey Rose.”

“Morning Jane,” she says back.

“Did you hear about that guy?” says Jane, as she drops her bag

and switches from sneakers to high heels. “The one they found all chopped up?”

“Yeah. It’s pretty sad—”

“It’s fucking *gross*. What is *wrong* with people, right?”

“Yeah—”

“I hope they catch the fucking pervert. Did you hear what he did with the body parts? I heard they found the guy’s testicles on a *plate*. Like he was going to sit down to eat them for dinner.”

Jane exaggerates a shudder. Takes out her phone and starts tapping out a text message. She still hasn’t sat down yet. Rose looks at her, wondering if their conversation is done or not, and listens to the sound of Jane’s fingers tapping glass, the off-rhythm smacking of gum in her mouth.

“I’m going to get a coffee. Do you want one?”

Rose holds up a pale green Ikea mug from the office kitchen.

“Got one thanks.”

Jane grabs a lipstick-stained travel mug from her bag and Rose goes back to reading. They still haven’t recovered all the body parts. She wants to go look for the ones still missing: the head, another foot, parts of legs and arms. She thinks about finding them and

sewing them all back together. Making him whole again. She's been doing scarves and blankets for friends for a long time now. She's gotten pretty good. She fantasizes about how great it would be if we could do that—put people back together, erase the wrongs of all these twisted people.

She thinks about the blood, how much there must have been. And what did he do with it all? Just mop it up? Maybe he drank it. Or bathed in it. And now they don't know even know where this psycho is. Or if there are other victims. There has to be other victims. Nobody just does this one day.

She hears Jane's voice echoing through the hallway on her way back to their shared office.

"...I heard they found his balls on a plate. Like he was going to fucking eat them or something."

Jane sits and half-spins in her chair. "I'm *ba-ack*."

Rose returns a weak smile with the dead man still on her mind: what kind of job he might have had, if he had to work with someone like Jane, have to hear all the gossip that Jane hears, if he started each day the same way she herself does—with coffee and emails

and wondering about what to have for lunch, if his final day started any differently. He probably didn't wake up thinking he was going to die. Or have his genitals hacked out with a kitchen knife.

Rose takes another sip of coffee, checks the weather.

# **Your Wrists Are Small**

by Sara Habein

© 2012



# You

are comfortable in your smallness, your ability to slide in and out of environments unnoticed. You think that no one should ever notice a trench running through the valley, below the right knobby joint, a scar that is the same muddy water as the rest of your forearm. No hair grows along that faint, raised line, as though the follicles have said, “Enough.” Your wrists are what give away your ability to be broken, though you do keep moving, keep those attached hands still occupied. I remember every black hair, every delicate bend, every thin excuse. You say I remember too much. I say I am that scar.

# **Aches**

by Jessica Kluthe

© 2012

# Emilio

had spent more time growing inside her body, those late nights when his heels dug into her side, than he had living inside their fieldstone farmhouse, those late nights when his screams shifted the terracotta shingles. She knew him better than anyone else had.

Seventeen-day-old Emilio Antonio was buried on a Sunday. The day after, the family left for Canada. His tiny bones were placed in the ground in the Maione cemetery, to the left of the oak. The only marker for all those souls. The rock-hard roots had long since pushed out of the dry ground. To the left of the oak.

Twenty-seven years later, Calebrese comes clumsy off her tongue as she tries to recall the word for *heartache* to the neighbor. They slice the apples, slipping their blades through the soft brown spots, and collecting the bruises in the kitchen sink. Whenever alone, the two women recounted their elsewhere stories.

“*Angoscia,*” she finally said. Her pinky poked through the soft skin.

She looked up from the silver drain and through the window. The branches of the tree curved from the weight of the fruit.

# **Stomach Full of Bricks**

by Braydon Beaulieu

© 2012

# He

peels oxygen from the air, dangles it above our waiting mouths. We wrap our tongues around its sinews and roll it between our cheeks. Its slime and gristle tear and pop against our teeth, like slugs we drag home from soggy grasses. He consecrates escargot.

He wears scars through His palms. Scars through His feet, too. So we lean forward in our pews and drool onto the seats in front of us, while He rubs the grain of maple raw beneath the pad of His finger. Streamers of spittle escape His lips, rest limp and slender upon His chin before He eliminates them with a black sleeve.

We ache and moan for those scar tissues, but make do dabbing aloe-dipped ones against our shining eyes. He bottles these tears for use in future sermons. Saltwater He'll pour into a copper basin and bless.

He was a man, once, with a stomach full of bricks. No, two stomachs. He slithered through a world of bare breasts, genital piercings, wrinkled whiskey-sodden sheets. Now He blows dust off a world of books with covers of peat moss and pages of crisp leaves. Now He can wet the tips of His fingers, kiss the knuckle of His index finger. Now He dissects, anatomises, and documents His children, larvae trapped between panels of green and red glass.

We have read that we will receive white stones, each unto each, or we have known someone who has read it, or someone who has, at least, heard whispers and rumours from somewhere in the tunnels. We have wrapped our tibial spurs in worn, rusty carpet and echoed Our Father in heaven, hallowed by Thy name, amen amen amen amen amen amen amen, every night, without variation. We have emptied our purses into the paper pockets of wooden-cross man.

Given unto Him the change left from the lemonade the silver necklace the newly released movie rental the *Playboy* magazine the

cigarettes the milk and sour watermelon candies the lottery ticket  
the new shoes and the self-help book on how to raise your teenager  
the right way (ten simple tricks to a normal family life).

He extracts fishbones from our throats saying we'll all be for-  
given for the bricks in our stomachs, the fishbones that scratch and  
pierce our oesophagi, and we will fill cloud-carven houses with belly  
laughs and fill our stomachs with cloud-sapped honey. We uncage  
sighs. We pickle those clouds. Tonight we can look forward to free-  
flowing honey and antennae massages, can chew off each other's  
faces without fear of lightning bolts stabbing our alitrunks, electri-  
fying our veins.

Rushing wind and cracking kneecaps cue the piano. Hammers  
tarantella under the instrument's bonnet. Tinny notes vibrate the  
air, dangling like spider legs. Then, when condensation soaks their  
exoskeletons, they die. They roost on our shoulders, coat the kneel-  
ers and benches, spread wine spills along the grey carpet. Twitching.  
He has known the spiders to bite and infect, has let poison run  
through His veins and raise leaking sores on His skin. He fans His  
face against the itchy redness, paints green and red enamels on the  
pews, crucifixion depictions we squish beneath our heels.



Still, we line the kneelers for a carved wooden god. An icon.  
A cross to which we raise another glass of blood. Chew another  
wafer of sinew and flesh. We know our father. He's a painting on a  
chapel wall.

# **Lucky**

by Will Johnson

© 2012

# My

friend Kris collects cigarette butts—half-unraveled, crumpled against concrete, stained with lip gloss and brown spit. He collects them in the pocket of his torn snowboard jacket. He says it makes life more interesting, like a scavenger hunt. He smokes them right to the filter and blackens the tips of his fingers. When we were kids he was obsessed with cleanliness, and after washing his hands he would tap the mirror glass with his fingers two, three, four times. Like some sort of ritual. He lived in a suburban mansion three minutes from my house. Now his single-room apartment, an hour away

in the city, is above Mugs n' Jugs and every day he can hear the stripper music through the floor. The communal bathroom down the hallway is smeared with black human shit. He tells me he likes the girls' voices in the hallway. They remind him of his ex-girlfriend Sarah. One day he invites a guy from the street back to his room to get high. He pushes Kris down on the bed. Don't move, the guy says, his knee against Kris' neck. If you move I'll blow your fucking head off. He steals Kris' jacket, all of his drugs and all of his money. You're lucky I don't kill you, bitch. Kris tells me this a week later, standing in the Science World parking lot late at night. I haven't seen him for months. We smoke a skinny joint and he smiles at me. "It's all good, man," he says. The streetlights cast long shadows under his eyebrows. After the guy left, Kris closed his door and sat on his bed for a long time. Later that night he was searching for recyclables and he found a glass bottle in the alley behind his building. Cherry Snapple. In the bottom a cigarette butt was half-submerged in pink backwash. He unscrewed the lid, poured the sticky contents into his palm and rolled the soggy butt between his fingers. He placed it in his pocket for later.

# **Luffy's Girlfriend**

by Jen Neale

© 2012

# Luffy's

girlfriend brought home a whole octopus for their anniversary dinner. No head or anything, but enough tentacles to get the idea across. She smiled.

“We’re having calamari!”

“That’s squid,” he reminded her.

“You love calamari.”

“I love you.”

She chopped the octopus on the kitchen island using his biggest knife, but nothing went right because octopus doesn’t form

into nice little rings. Luffy stood back and watched the thing slide all over the chopping board and her hands grow white trying to hold it still, trying to saw through its legs. Once it was broken into pieces, she sliced the centres and stuck her thumb through to make the rings, only to have the rubbery flesh just close up when she exited. But she fought onward.

Luffy's girlfriend was recruited to Canada for her excellent brain. She's from the Andes so things like octopus really excite her—that you can just purchase an animal that lives 3000m below where she was born. She talked about her home almost every night. She told him once, “There's some spice near the coast, fruit in the jungle, but it's all just potatoes and corn in my area.” She also told him that the corn's no good; it's not yellow or sweet. And the people in her town couldn't cook, she said. It was frustrating.

She doused the pan in oil, maximum heat, and threw in the mangled, breaded pieces of octopus. They screamed when they hit the surface, danced around to keep their butts out of the oil. Luffy's girlfriend danced too. Her hips waggled side to side and the spatula swung in a circle with the motion of her wrist. With her other hand, she reached for Luffy and he came to her. He came from his

corner of the kitchen to the stove, where the heights of the Andes and the depths of the ocean danced a 3-2 rhythm. He inserted the middle ground into their celebration, as a launch point to the sky or the deep. Her hips shook right against his. The octopus spat and screamed for twenty minutes or more, still full of the ocean, but finally settled into being food.

They sat on his front porch to eat, chewed for almost an hour. It hurt their jaws.

It's fine, he told her. The breeding was fine. It was the octopus that turned out to have no flavour.

Luffy's girlfriend stopped eating and tossed the octopus into the garden. Luffy went inside, made tea and brought out his present. It was a red envelope containing tickets to Quito for March 1st. They'd visit her family in Guaranda, climb the hills.

She looked up at him—or at least as far as his lips.

“I wish I could go,” she said, “but I'm heading north.” The way she said it, he knew he wasn't allowed to go. Luffy asked her what was there but she didn't say much, except that it was something to do with the belugas, the bulbous seals, the exposed land. Vancouver isn't Canada enough, she said. It's all rain, no snow. Vancouver isn't



Canada like mauve isn't red. And in a few months, she packed her suitcase and left. And he was going down to the equator, where people always think it's going to be so warm.

# **The Mother of Jacquelyn Butane**

by Andrew F. Sullivan

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# She

was born with one arm that was shorter than the other. Maybe only by an inch or two. No one ever bothered to measure the difference—she still fit inside a sweater. Some people never even noticed at all. Others couldn't put a finger on it, but they noticed right away. There was just something off about Jacquelyn Butane's mother. Something that made them push past her in line at the grocery store and ignore her at the deli counter. She always had to ring the bell twice for service.

Dogs cowered when she passed them in the street, turning in

on themselves like cocktail shrimp. Cats refused to sit in her lap. They hid under couches and pissed in cupboards to claim their territory. This was a woman who destroyed all sense of symmetry and order in the world with her mere presence, destroyed it all with just a few inches of lack. Birds fell from the sky, thrown off by some magnetic field inside her, some imbalance in her body. The windows of her house were splattered with their impact. Jacquelyn Butane had gathered their bodies as a child, gathered up Sparrows and Blue Jays into recycling bins she then left at the bottom of the driveway. Her mother's house was tilted too, its floors worn down by her uneven pacing.

With one short arm, Jacquelyn Butane's mother had manipulated the orbits of those around her, altering the dimensions of every space she entered. Coworkers sprouted headaches, while family members lost control of fingers and toes whenever she came to visit. Dishwashers spat out chunky phlegm onto kitchen floors and ovens refused to raise their temperatures. Time seemed to tilt itself in her direction, stranding words and sentences in stilted conversation. The world was corrupted by her orbit, tilted in her favour even as her husband left her and her daughter fled to the coast, fled from

a house battered by endless birds and unnamed forces.

And she was still tilting everything now from inside her brand new coffin, the one Jacquelyn herself had picked out from the Cathartidae Brothers store just outside town. Her mother was always pulling the world slightly away from its hub, even now drawing all the mourners to one side of the swaybacked chapel as they wept for the eighty year-old woman with two missing inches, the one who caused all their crops to grow at twisted angles toward the sun.

Jacquelyn Butane had to step outside. She couldn't bear to see the contours of that coffin warped by her mother, even after death. Her car sat in the very centre of the parking lot. It was noon and there were no other mourners out on the pavement. The sun stood above her. There were no shadows cast anywhere. Jacquelyn tried to calm her lungs. She tried to breathe, to imagine a world free of worn axles and misshapen clothes and drafty windows always open just a crack, trapped in some strange stasis. Under the noon sun, she sat and waited for the rest of the world to centre itself. There would be no more recycling bins filled with birds, no children fleeing from birthday parties, no more fliers that whispered 'witch'

circling in the mail, asking questions about the lady on the hill, the one who lived with all her dishes stacked in slanted piles.

The world would right itself, Jacquelyn Butane told herself. The world would find its balance once again. She didn't notice the V of geese above the chapel until they plummeted down from the sky, tilted toward the earth like a message from beyond the grave. Jacquelyn Butane tried to ignore the sound as they clattered one by one into the chapel wall, their wings beating back against some unknown force they could not name or master. The sun began to tilt again and shadows sprang from everywhere to mar the asphalt and the glass. Jacquelyn Butane reached for the car door, planning to step out into the carnage of beaks and feathers now scattering the cemetery grounds. Her fingers missed the door handle by two inches, grasping at the air instead.

It was only then that Jacquelyn Butane began to cry.



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