

SHIRLEY

A whole roasted duck is presented on a white ceramic plate with a decorative green floral border. The duck is cooked to a deep golden-brown color, with a glossy, slightly charred skin. It is positioned horizontally on the plate, with its head to the left and tail to the right. The background is a dark wooden surface.

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The Day Jeff Bezos Ate My Little Debbie

BY LATON CARTER

It was a pecan spinwheel to be precise. And yes, there were witnesses — meaning, other people physically watched Mr. Bezos consume a processed pastry item — but no one had the wherewithal to produce a device and live stream it. People get uneasy watching a billionaire eat.

At any rate, it was the last spinwheel in the box. Caitlyn split one with Tom, but no one splits a Little Debbie, so then Caitlyn had her own and Tom had his own. That's three. Bryson ate two and said it would've been better if he hadn't eaten any, because now he wanted two more, so Bryson ate two more. That's seven right there. There are only eight in a box. The last spinwheel was supposed to be for me.

No one considers that the CEO of the world's largest marketplace is going to enter your breakroom. CEOs are like monarchs: you hear about them or read about them. You don't see them, and if you do see them it's from the middle of a crowd of thousands. But, like a monarch on a secret day out as a civilian, in walked Jeff. The box of Little Debbies was right next to the microwave. According to Caitlyn, Mr. Bezos studied the food object for a while, the way one

revisits a favorite Christmas ornament that's been packed away for eleven-and-a-half months. He turned it in his hand — it was like he'd never seen a pecan spinwheel Caitlyn said.

I don't mind sharing. But when I was in the bathroom washing my hands, I was thinking about that spinwheel. I was thinking about the French Roast coffee I'd brewed to go with it. These kind of thoughts — “personal healers” I call them — are what make The Big Picture bearable. They're little picture incentives. In other words, that spinwheel was going to help me get through my morning.

Not many people know that Debbie McKee-Fowler was the inspiration for her grandparents' line of baked food items. Not many people know that for the 30th Annual Chattanooga Women of Distinction Awards Luncheon, Little Debbie was an honoree. The judges' panel stated:

What makes Ms. McKee-Fowler a woman of distinction is not the fact that her face has been on one of the country's favorite snack foods since the 1960's; it's the fact that she has not used this platform to promote herself or her family to any position of prominence or power, but instead has quietly worked to enrich her community.

I wondered if Jeff was aware of these credentials when he ate my Little Debbie. Was his act one of curious consumption, or something grander — part of his regret-minimization framework? If he didn't eat my Little Debbie just then, would he regret it the rest of his life? I'd read that Jeff once ate fried iguana. Perhaps this breakroom encounter was merely a venture into the pantry of the commoner.

I fidgeted in my cubicle. The French Roast steamed away next to the keyboard. Making its way to another floor, in another plane of existence, in another strata of portfolio security, there moved a finely coiled set of intestines, their resident enzymes already at work breaking down various monosaccharides into core units of energy and power.

Laton Carter's Leaving (University of Chicago) received the Oregon Book Award. Forthcoming fiction appears in Indiana Review. Carter works in a middle school with at-risk youth.



Peeling The Baby

BY JENESSA VANZUTPHEN

Each baby comes equipped with an outer shell, like a hard boiled egg, soft and yolky, yes, but a shell nonetheless holds and cracks and fingers along the pieces pulling and discarding. Celebratory affair on the patio all of the friendly goings deviled mixed with paprika the tittering of a collective bargaining around the eggs we are eating until they are gone leftovers in the fridge each day a portion of an egg I tire of but stuff down salt still ground, yolk still properly yolk still white and slimed with age at first emerging in a consumption we know to be the self craving.

Jenessa VanZutphen's work has appeared or is forthcoming



The Hotel By The Sea

BY VICTORIA MANIFOLD

We were all staying at the hotel by the sea. Lori was upset because a day or two before a boy had roughly kissed her as she had walked along the pier. Her mouth had bled and her bright anorak had been torn. “Never mind” the proprietor of the hotel by the sea had said, “at least it’s a bit of action for you. More than this lot’ll ever see.” And he gestured to Emmy and Raelene and me with one of his more obvious fingers. Lori smiled sadly then, wincing a little because her mouth was still sore.

I stayed quiet. I’d seen the kiss from my window, having paid more for a room with a sea view. It wasn’t really worth the extra cost though, bleak as it was at that time. The sky was grey and the sea was grey. There was some sand — which was grey — but the beach was mainly pebbles and stones and they were also grey.

I had seen the boy, his stiff taupe hair upset by the strong winds. He’d grabbed at Lori’s sleeves and rubbed his wet open mouth hard against hers. I turned away just then and when I looked back it was all over and Lori stood there in the wind, a coloured smear against the grey, bleeding.

Later, a policeman came to the hotel by the sea. He asked Lori about what had happened on the pier, but in such a way it seemed like a joke that he’d orchestrated. The policeman himself had been bleeding, from a fleshy ridge of his forehead. A small but steady stream drip drip dripping into his eye but he just blinked it away and carried on with the questioning and smirking and

sneering. The proprietor gave him a flask of milky tea and a wet fish wrapped in newspaper when he left, winking and saying “We’ll see you again John.” The policeman nodded yes.

The proprietor was a horribly thin man with long, brown-slacked legs who kept his infirm wife behind closed doors. We could hear her sometimes when we passed their room — the rattle of a phlegmy cough, the rustle of the eiderdown, an errant fingernail hitting the floorboards. He would lurch out of the room when we were near, quickly closing the door. “Now now girls” he would say “no peeking in there. You’ll see all my secrets!”

But I was not interested in his secrets. I had my own small secrets to keep. Some weeks before I had left my father’s house and taken the train to the hotel by the sea, leaving behind the small and industrial town where I’d been raised. A town edged with liquorice fields and lit only by the candles from the rhubarb sheds, where my father’s dark house stood solid against a sky of silent factory chimneys. I’d watched from the window of the train as the landscape changed from black to grey, licking the acid taste of forced rhubarb from my gums and patting down discs of Pontefract cake into the smooth palm of my hand.

Disembarking the train I’d boarded a slow moving bus with an irregular timetable. The driver, his face reflecting green from his low visored cap, stared in the mirror as I made my way to my seat. I looked ahead to see the straight expanse of the sea stretching out in front and a giddiness fluttered in my gut. Of course, I had seen the sea before but it had been years ago, when I was a tiny child. My mother and her sisters had taken me on a trip and we’d stayed in a bright boarding house scrubbed clean and run by a gregarious large busted widow. I’d been delighted by the bright lipstick she wore which bled outward in thin lines over the edge of her mouth and by the synthetic floral smell that barely masked the real scent of her skin — like fish or blood or bleeding.

So, I was disappointed when I arrived at the hotel by the sea and saw the long brown limbs of the proprietor filling the doorframe, his face ashen and his lips wet. “Come through” he said and he took me to a sitting room where a number of other men were gathered around an ashtray. I saw their faces drift out from between the yellow plumes, their hands gripping parcels wrapped in brown paper.

The reason these men gave for staying at the hotel by the sea were opaque, impenetrable. They vaguely talked of business, of important deals that we wouldn’t understand. They confused us with the tone of their voices and the technical language they used. Only Mr Marsh, a small and jaundiced looking fellow without a profession, explained that his stay by the sea had been prescribed by a doctor and he listed a litany of medical complaints that could only be cured with sea air. As we cooed over the breadth of his suffering he sat back and luxuriated in our sympathies.

But the other men hated Mr Marsh’s weaknesses. They would not tolerate his vegetarianism or his haircut, his hypochondria or his plimsolls. He simply had to learn to eat meat and to cut his hair. He simply had to squeeze his feet into sturdier shoes and forget the things that ailed him. At breakfast he choked down the bacon, stared queasy at the black pudding. He closed his eyes as he

skewered sausages onto his fork and shoved them into his mouth. But he got used to it. We all did, in our own ways, in the end. It didn't take long for the beige of his cheeks to shift to a ruddy ham colour, for his eyes to remain wide open when presented with the blood pudding, for his hair to take on an old familiar shape, for him to discard his canvas shoes and forget his ill health.

"There's some lovely cornflakes over there for you ladies" the proprietor told us, "nice and refreshing and it'll keep you trim." He gestured with a nod to the sideboard where a box of stale cornflakes and a jug of skimmed milk sat perspiring. "I know you girls like to watch your figures... well I know I like to watch them eh, eh!" The men laughed and congratulated the proprietor on his wordplay and Lori and Emmy and Raelene and I poured the aged cereal into small china bowls.

The men let it be known in subtle ways that we could not leave the breakfast table until they had finished eating. All of the men — Mr Christopher, John Quinn, John Allen, Mr Marsh, Jackson Thomas, Andy-Boy and, of course, the proprietor himself — piled their plates with the greased morsels, food that seemed to appear as if from nowhere. The proprietor did not cook it and his sadly bedridden wife couldn't. And yet there it was — mounds of food glistening in its fat. Dripping victuals prepared by no one just for these men to welcome in the morning.

We quickly became accustomed to this routine, our stomachs no longer crying out for a smear of marmalade or a digestive crumb. We waited patiently for one of them to swallow the last sausage, waited for them to set aside their knives and forks and for the proprietor to say "Go on now girls, go and enjoy your day." Then we could zip up our anoraks and lace up our brogues and plod out into the weather.

It was the same every morning and when we walked out we saw the same men down by the sea or along the pier. Some were from the hotel by the sea and others from the town. They came down to the edge of sea from a distant cluster of grey houses to walk their dogs and smoke their ornate pipes. One blushed with embarrassment at the fancy poodle on the end of the leash he held, its coiffed haunches smeared with damp grey sand. Those from the hotel shouted our names and gestured obscenely, of course. They kicked at the sea with their heavy boots. They screamed at the sky with their faces and laughed towards the oncoming mizzle. They were having a good time, so far away from home.

We took a light lunch of consommé and occasionally tinned peaches for afters, a small treat from the proprietor if we deserved it. Every afternoon I tried to send a postcard home but there were never any stamps and every time we set off toward the post office we never quite made it. And so we passed our mornings by walking on the sand, steering a path away from the men. And we ate our small meals and we passed our afternoons by somehow always failing to get to the post office. Raelene never joined. She told us she was too fragile, that she could not take whatever harsh thing was outdoors. She wrapped herself in a thick tartan blanket and sat by the gas fire or else she filled a china cup with hot water and took it, rattling in its saucer, to her room.

I had paid a fortnight in advance to stay at the hotel by the sea but many weeks had passed and I had not paid more. The proprietor did, at first, act with some discretion but small punishments

began to be doled out against me. I was presented with an empty bowl in place of the consommé and there were no more tinned peaches. My tooth cracked in half on the broken glass he put in the cornflakes and I found, beside my bed, that the lenses of my spectacles had been shattered precisely.

We trudged through the shapeless days that thickened around our bodies like curdling milk. The old television shows came through in shades of brown and the cold grey walks left us lethargic. The yellowing net curtains muffled the shrieks of the red-eyed gulls so that all that was left around us was a constant low hum. We sat in the parlour inhaling and exhaling the stale air, sometimes looking in Raelene's direction to see her crying quietly into the folds of the armchair. Our idle hands crafted small straw effigies that ultimately proved useless to us. Somehow the time passed. Canned laughter echoed hollow in the airless rooms. Somehow we were all still there.

At dusk Lori and Emmy and Raelene and I shrunk among the dark wooden furniture, pressed together our lips and wriggled in our seats. The men took out their boxes of dominoes, their packs of playing cards and checkers. They spread them across the low tables by the gas fire and we averted our eyes. Moths suffered at the windows all night, flapping their wings with soft punches against the glass and, lit by the faintest curl of the moon, I saw Raelene's blackened eyes and swollen lips.

Every morning the proprietor summoned us to the breakfast table, his tongue vibrating against his teeth until we shewed our faces. From beneath her purpled lips and bruised eyelids Raelene refused the cornflakes and boldly requested only ice water and a straw. But the glass that appeared was tepid and the straw was missing. She drank it with some difficulty and John Allen smirked at her discomfort. He was cradling a poultice to his jaw and his face was lined with the pointless marks Raelene's fingernails had left the night before. "You're looking a bit peaky there Raelene love" he said to her "finish your water and then go and have a lie down." The men stared at her until, painfully, she drained the last drop.

The policeman was there again that afternoon, sharing a cup of tea with the proprietor. They sat in the kitchen among the vegetable smell, wiping their hands back and forth over the greased surfaces. The policeman patted his lap when he was Lori and, doing what was expected of her, she sat down on his knee. He brushed her hair from her neck so she could feel his breath there.

Sometimes, if our strength allowed, we walked as far as the empty waxworks — one of the abandoned attractions just beyond the pier. But we never made it any further. Something always held us back, a gantelope that we could not endure, a pulsing under the thinning shell of our skulls. We would peer at the dusty figures through the windows, uncanny of course. Emmy would pretend to be scared of some mute manikin, its face almost familiar, its silent mouth permanently poised on the edge of a canticle.

And then exhausted we would go back to the hotel by the sea for the afternoons that stretched hot and long in front of the gas fire. Listening to the rustle of cellophane wrappers as the men sucked their boiled sweets. The aerial had blown off the roof by then and all we could get on the downstairs telly were old cowboy films. Whole days like yawns then. Suffocating on the close air,

tired and damp and so much grey, so many faded yellows. Too hot and too cold, clutching hot water bottles wrapped in tea towels but cracking the window an inch to let the cold air whistle through.

In the kitchen two more policemen, three more, four. They wore their tall hats and their rough woolen tunics, their brutally shined boots reflecting their great puce faces. They all sat in a row, bleeding in secret. They drank cup after cup of weak tea and talked in whispers to the proprietor. They picked maggots from the loaf and dropped them squirming to the floor. Bread well past its best. Their eyes shifted towards us. To Lori and Emmy and me. But no one had seen Raelene that day. Nor the next day either.

At breakfast the following morning her seat was empty and we quietly ate our cornflakes without commenting on her absence. It continued for some time as the men made a mess of their egg yolks, dribbling thick sticky yellow from their tongues to their plates. Mr Marsh demanded a second helping of sausage and we tried not to look at the unfilled chair until, unprovoked and seemingly involuntarily, the proprietor spat out "That Raelene did a flit in the night. Owes me a week's worth too. Bloody little bitch." His arm jerked and a knife hit the side of a teapot. The other men mumbled an agreement and we grew small on our heavy mahogany seats.

And after that a conveyor belt of policemen every day. Falling one on top of the other. Piling higher and higher in the downstairs lavatory, bleeding from hidden parts of themselves. And all of the men — Mr Christopher, John Quinn, John Allen, Mr Marsh, Jackson Thomas, Andy-Boy, and, of course, the proprietor himself — increased in vigour. Every night they ate a buffet of offal for their dinner, fortifying themselves for the night ahead. They missed Raelene, at first. But at least they had us.

Us. The mardy women who did not love Alan Ladd. We began to steal spilled salt from the table to sprinkle in lines at our doors. They allowed us a calmative for our nerves, a ghastly draught that we gulped before bed and like good girls we did not waste a drop. The stairs creaked, dark. I missed the step once, twice. We pinned our hopes on our well-seasoned thresholds but our heads still sunk into thin pillows, our gums still bled from lack. We still woke from fitful sleeps to meagre breakfasts and every morning there was a thin ribbon of red in Lori's piss and an ache in her back that didn't fade until afternoon.

In the parlour we tried to focus our eyes on the opaque parcels they passed back and forth between themselves, three words written on them in thick black marker. They gave and received these same parcels over and over, still maintaining their civilised demeanor. During the day they wore their trousers and ties, their pullovers and the policemen their long hats. But at night they were undressed, drawing rings in stolen lipsticks all over their torsos. They put on their carved masks and we saw them above us as the calmative took effect.

It is morning, afternoon, night. It is dark, less dark, barely dark at all.

The glass panes rattle in swollen frames. I am staring out through broken spectacles at the frozen rain falling in straight lines into the sea. Lori and Emmy have formed a useless barricade from

their brown furniture. I can hear them in the room above me, coughing at the dust they have upset. In my mouth a taste like old pennies held too long in warm fists. From my sea-view window I can see the proprietor walk the length of the pier and throw the last of Raelene's brittle remains from the end. The grey sea laps the grey stones, their colours are the same but the texture is different.

Victoria Manifold is a writer from County Durham. She has been published by The White Review, Hotel, The Lifted Brow, Synchronise Witches Press and Splice, among others. She was shortlisted for The White Review Short Story Prize in 2016 and 2018. In 2019 she was a runner-up in the Berlin Writing Prize. Find her on Twitter @vmanifold and on Instagram @victoria_manifold.

A whole roasted duck is presented on a white ceramic plate with a decorative green floral border. The duck is cooked to a deep golden-brown color, with a glossy, slightly charred skin. It is positioned horizontally on the plate, with its head to the left and tail to the right. The background is a dark wooden surface.

Cut

BY SCOTT DAUGHTRIDGE DEMER

I spatula three sausages onto the plate and dribble the grease over them the way Sister likes, then spoon the mac and cheese into the blue bowl. Sister would be fine eating from pan and pot, but the real chefs on TV use clean plates, and I want to do the same.

The microwave dings and I grab the plate of steaming Hot Pockets by the edge and place it on the table. On the stove the kidney beans bubble.

I stack the last three slices of bread on the chipped plate. I think maybe I should toast them, but we don't have butter; I wedge the plate next to the sausages.

Ketchup, hot sauce, a saltshaker, a bag of potato chips, and a two liter of root beer barely squeeze onto the table, but they do, and it's all ready.

Cops is on TV. Two cops kneel on a guy's neck, cuff him, yelling all the while. The camera spots a little kid standing on the porch of the guy's trailer. "It's all right, baby, it's all right," the guy yells out.

Sister comes through the door, dry blood blacked around a gash on her cheek. I sit up straight on the sofa, ask if she's hurt. She bends to untie her scuffed and scratched boots, but her shaking fingers can't unknit the laces.

I ask if she won. She gives up on the boots, tosses her red University of Georgia hat on the sofa. She wears that hat because she got accepted to go there on scholarship, but after Mama died, she dropped it to take care of me.

"Food's ready," I say.

She collapses on the sofa and I see the bald spot from where the other fighter must've pulled her hair out.

Sister played basketball and softball at Woodland High School and wrestled on the boys' team even though they wouldn't let her at first. She had to slam one of their best to prove herself. The school hung a plaque with Sister's picture in the gym because she was the shotput state champion three years straight and still holds the region record. There are no plaques from the brawling she does now, just money and scars.

Real slow, I kneel down and loosen her boot laces with my long fingernails. One of the favorite things for Blake and the other boys at school to tease me about. Not just my long nails, but long hair, tight clothes, twig-bone body like my daddy, that disappeared man.

Sister's all bulky muscles like her daddy, another disappeared man. The both us, Sister and me, have summer-leaf green eyes and freckles like our Mama.

"Smells good," Sister says.

I slide one of Sister's boots off, then the other, rub circles with my thumbs into her meaty foot.

Sister started fighting in the backyard league after quitting her job at the lumber warehouse. There was a guy there, Darryl, who wouldn't stop messing with her. He parked outside the house one night, his cigarette flaring every few seconds. I begged her not to, but Sister went out there and scared him off. For weeks I swore every creak and pop was Darryl breaking in.

She won five-hundred dollars from her first fight and has been the sure-bet every weekend since. All the fighting has shaped her into a kind of stone, her skin pulls tight over her muscles and veins, the scars on her forehead shine when she turns her head just so, like she's doing now, leaning on the cushion, breathing.

"You should eat," I say.

"Thank you, Bo Baby," she says with a smile, her teeth pink with blood.

Sister shuffles into the kitchen, clicks on the radio and taps out a real slow Texas two-step to the sad country song.

“Where’s your plate?” she asks.

“I ate earlier, Sister. This is all for you, all yours.”

Sister eats and eats. Grease in the corner of her mouth mixes with blood from her tooth. She creates a rhythm of movement, a strategy of devouring. Mac and cheese first, then sausage and beans, a bite of Hot Pocket, and bread to sop the bottoms of the bowls.

“You should eat,” Sister says through a mouthful.

Hunger pains ring through me, but I breath them away, tell my body it’s fine. Watching Sister rebuild her strength is enough.

“How much did you win tonight, Sister?”

She sucks cheese from her finger. “Enough,” she says.

“Was the other fighter hurt?”

“She’ll be all right. She’s tough.” I pour root beer into her glass. “Maybe tomorrow I’ll teach you a couple new things, Bo Baby. How to punch, how to duck. You’re getting to be about that age.”

“Yeah, Sister. Yeah, you’re right.”

Sister has the same hands as Mama — calloused and veiny, bony fingers and strong palms. Once Mama got a hold of an arm or shirt collar, she wouldn’t let go, and when she swung at my backside, I knew to not disobey. But when she was in the hospital her hands went waxy and cold. She could barely hold a spoon, much less swing a fist. I could have said every curse word ever known, said her cooking made me sick, said all the bad things about God and church, and she couldn’t have done anything about it. I didn’t say any of that, though. I just rested my hand on hers, hummed songs, and watched liquids drip from the bags down into her blood. When nobody was around, I clipped a pinch of her shining hair.

Before the hospital, before her insides mashed, Mama taught Sister to use a saw, fix a car engine, mend a shirt, throw a punch. Mama taught me to start the stove, set the table, wash the dishes. We don’t have much, but I let Sister have it because Sister needs to keep herself strong, so she can go out and fight. That’s my contribution.

Sister lays on the sofa. I wash the dishes with hot water and soap.

When she tuckers out, I lift her legs and stretch her out across the cushions, and when she starts snoring, I get the scissors. I lift a few choice hairs and cut where they meet her scalp.

In my room I eke out twenty push-ups, flex my weak arms, check my height against the notch on the wall. Same bird body, same height. Then I shadow box, keep my arms up like Sister taught me, imagine Blake in front of me, throw my hands and bounce on my toes until my lungs burn, until my tongue goes dry. My stomach, filled with hunger, bites at me, but I ignore it.

Deep in my pillowcase is where I hide my rope of Mama and Sister's hair. I nibble off a bit, work it between my teeth and tongue, then swallow. I wrap the new strands around the collection, rub it over my eyes and lips and whisper, "Your strength becomes my strength, your strength becomes my strength." The bitter tang of Sister's sweat absorbs into my tongue. I hold the hairs tight and bring them to my nose, breathe and breathe.

Mama wasn't afraid of dying. Sister isn't afraid either. I don't know what happened with me. Maybe I refused Mama's strength when I was swimming in her belly or maybe she'd already given it all to Sister, but I know I'll need it. I go back to the living room, press my back into Sister's chest and feel her heart beating through me. I breathe deep. "My strength becomes your strength," I say, "your strength becomes my strength," over and over until I fall asleep.

Scott Daughtridge DeMer is a fiction writer from Atlanta, Georgia. Most recently, his work has appeared in Gone Lawn, CHEAP POP, Midwestern Gothic, and other places. He currently studies fiction at Arizona State University.



The Problem With Ponds

BY CHERRI BUI JK

They had done well to book the vacation rental six months in advance, just as her husband had read in a holiday travel advice forum. Luke made a big show of this research on the flight down. *Buy your husband some Chardonnay*, Luke teased, *for his Reddit skills*. It was true that Naples was not an easy market to crack in the height of the season, or so she admitted as the doors floated open to their Mangrove Mini-Mansion, as it was named in the ad, the automatic doors noiseless as they swung of their own volition with a six-digit passcode.

This was not her childhood holiday rental. Nowhere here the hunched cabin of Northern Michigan, her grandfather dragging death through clean snow. Gone now, the grandfather who said, *Help me hang it*, and who left her to watch the lightly swinging fur, the old man stepping out of the garage into the cold, the freeze, smoking and watching the clouds form over the bare brown woods. The taste of eating venison — as her child self had imagined when a season's worth of the blue-eyed animal was served and served, served smoked and stewed, served thick with former muscle — was what it would taste like to eat your own heart.

All that was gone, its flavors and its clouds — this was her own life now. She got to decide what was beautiful and what was not. *Let there be beauty*, she would say, and now with a keystroke would appear hedges taller than her own head, bougainvillea dangling over miniature fountains with real goldfish swimming in its pale white marble belly. To be an adult, to have power — sometimes it felt like it all wasn't real. Like someday that old grandfather would come back to haunt her, shut off the power of her nut butter grinder, tell her to go outside and shoot like a man.

In the morning after they arrived, while everyone was still asleep, she moved through the house touching every gleaming surface of the kitchen, bed, and bath, taking inventory of all appliances

and amenities available at the Mangrove Mini-Mansion, making an exhaustive mental list of its beauty. A juicer that looked as sleek and outfitted as an SUV, triumphant with its ready-loaded basket of oranges. An espresso machine with a separate milk warmer and frother.

And there was the view. From behind the floor-to-ceiling glass window of the breakfast nook where she sipped a cappuccino thick with froth pecking her lips, she watched as she saw that her daughter Mel was already awake, was out discovering the acreage of yard, the pale light of subtropical morning rendering her face as pink as a flamingo's. The girl looked like a bird there, her feet in the shallow water of a pond that backed up to the house property. There was some reason they had been told to keep away from pond's edges in Florida; this she could not recall now amidst all the flurry of bookings, itineraries, must-see advice.

She chewed and watched, her hands unsure of what to feed herself first — fresh-squeezed orange juice, baguette with a slice of lox. Her mouth, she realized, so cavernous and bare without them. She liked to eat only when she was eating privately, and god knew it would not be long that she had to eat like this, privately. The conference — only two workdays to check off before her vacation began in earnest — was starting in just one hour; she had five minutes to get into that rental sedan and get out on the highway. She checked her wrist; the time shone with its numbers in the black.

A flying thing outside the glass threw a shadow in her eyes, and she looked again towards her daughter and the pond, and in the seconds that followed, as she double and triple checked that the wristwatch matched the time on her phone, she saw the shudder of an enlarging shadow moving across the water. Her foot burned, suggesting that she stand, but she did not.

Looking back at the shape of her daughter, she saw her just a few feet away from what must have been an otter, bursting out of the chrome polished top of the water. Its bright and small body ran in a mad dash towards a blue heron, the bird flapping successfully up into the air, its mouth filled with a flash of wriggling body no longer than a hand. As the heron flew higher and higher off across the pond, the otter swam in a pathetic slowness, trying to follow the wriggling thing that the heron had stolen. She realized that this must have been the otter's baby.

She rose automatically, ran a hand down the front of her blouse, an instinctual gesture of cleaning. She saw how the little girl watched, frozen. Could only see the backside of her, the brown hair in the wind, the soft sweater, the hyper-expanded elbows from the hundreds of bends her arms executed each day. She hesitated, watching the next part of this cruel drama play as a hawk, an even wilder looking actor, swooped into the scene, challenged the heron for the contents of its mouth. Stole away the wriggling, jiggling thing the size of a hand and flew off, this time, for good.

The mother pushed open the patio door, but only let half of herself out. She kept one polished-shoed foot in the doorway, on the tiled floor of the breakfast nook, where her plate still promised one more bite of baguette, one fresh sip of juice more —

Her husband, sleepy, a bathrobe wrapped around his clean body, had been watching from behind her as the bird had flapped, as the mother otter searched. *That's the problem with ponds*, he heard Luke say, yawning, opening the refrigerator, thinking through combinations of color, of liquid, of nutrient, very likely thinking of how best to assemble them — smoothie or smear, bake or blend. *Something's always eating*, he finished, and then they said nothing more.

As they too went on eating, she saw the girls' shoulders still fixed in place, motionless as she stood by the rippling surface of the water, where the lingering energy of the action would live on for a few minutes longer. When the ponds' shuddering came nearly to an end, her alarm pinged. She found her keys, her bag, and went for the door. They would talk to the girl later, maybe, or maybe there would be no need.

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Doll's House

BY ELAINE VILAR MADRUGA
TRANSLATED BY TOSHIYA KAMEI

Children's toys don't last long. A cycle or two is too much already. They refuse to eat. The joints connecting the threads to the altarpiece break easily. Toys today aren't what they used to be. They barely move and aren't smart enough to make you smile. But children are always still children. They become attached to their old toys and refuse to throw them away.

Despite my protests, Zel and Lub retain a deteriorating puppet family. The female doll cried all the time while she tried to move her legs with the pathetic gestures of an overused toy. The two smaller ones learned to crawl through the box-shaped, diminished-gravity compartments where they're kept. As sellers point out, toys tend to be fragile when they are removed from the altarpiece. Once they are broken, there's no turning back. They won't ever feel like playing the tricks the two little ones learned and Zel and Lub like so much.

The first one to break was the old male doll. It stunk for a week inside the box before Zel and Lub bothered to take him out. They had forgotten to feed him and the famished toy ended up eating the flesh that covered the strings of its *sinti* in its hands and shoulders. Disgusting. The toy was defective. The female doll's screams were unbearable, so much so that I hung her over one of the holograms of the altarpiece to see if that would shut her up. But, in spite of everything, my efforts were useless. I hit her with the tip of my finger, and she yelled again ... and

again ... and again. I thought I'd broken her. The box's diminished gravity always makes me go haywire. Still, I couldn't have snapped more than a bone or two. I don't know.

That little woman and her cries made me despair. Damn defective toys.

I thought of Shu, the kids' puppy, always hungry for meat, no matter how small the snack. The little woman would be fine for him. Then I would tell the children that an accident had occurred in the altarpiece. Shu misbehaved all the time in order to binge. He, of course, didn't have to think about the fact that those toys cost more than a simple warg pup, which had been raised by one of many packs that roam the forests of Pranni.

If Shu didn't pay for her sins, I'd tell the kids whatever came to mind: the altarpiece breaking, the toys disappearing, or the dolls falling prey to one of those epidemics to which they are so prone if they spend more than two cycles in the closed environment of the compartments. It happened often. After all, neither Zel nor Lub was so careful with their dolls. They mistreated them a lot. More than once, they had taken one of them out of the altarpiece just to test whether Pranni's gravity really would crush them like the sellers claimed. On at least two occasions, I had to pick up red pulp. The old man himself had died of hunger because they had forgotten him. Zel and Lub would have to settle for two fewer toys.

As the little woman's screams grew louder and louder, I called the warg. "Shu, Shu, Shu." Then the puppy came forward, brandishing his three heads as joyfully as a baby of any species. "Who wants his meal? Who is the cutest warg of all? Who is Shu?" I asked as he stroked the iron suckers between his legs. The puppy rolled himself into a playful ball as a warg does when it copulates or hears its owner's call.

For a moment, I thought about throwing the doll, strings and all, to erase all traces of suspicion. But the *sint* would be too upsetting to a puppy's stomach. I would have to hide the threads so that Zel and Lub would believe my version of the story. Damn defective toys. Children could still worship them over the hunts in the woods or the panoramic views of destinations in the New World, but I hated them.

The little woman just wouldn't stop screaming. I pushed her away to see if she would finally go silent and would let me think. It got worse. I heard the cracking of a broken object. Right away, red liquid oozed out through each of the holes in her wrist. Damn defective toys. I didn't think about it anymore and ripped the threads off. Actually, I had wanted to think about it a while longer. But at that time of the day—I had just run icco wheels—the pain in my scales was so deep that I was sure I couldn't touch my yhl if I wanted to.

First, I threw the old man's body at Shu—thanks to Amh, he's not too fussy about food. I immediately hid the strings of his *sint* between my scales. That thing shedding water from its eyes and getting it everywhere kept screaming and Shu demanded more food, so I fed him.

We mothers sometimes keep secrets. Zel and Lub will understand when they have to take care of the nest and litter themselves and, besides that, take care of the pets and the damn toys.

In the boxes of the altarpiece, the two smallest dolls still remained. Thanks to Amh, they held absolute silence. If not, Shu had already eaten twice and I would have had to invent a more credible lie. I cleaned all the trash away from the altarpiece's boxes and threw some sweets to them. The dolls devoured it all right away. Zel and Lub hadn't even given them that, although they had sworn on each Amh egg that if I bought them those toys, they would take care of them, feed them, and keep the altarpiece clean.

The two surviving dolls lifted their strings as if asking for more. I let them drop something, poor things, and then also some water in solid squares that the toys immediately began to melt with their body heat. Among my scales, Shu growled his hunger insistently, but those little dolls were not too annoying, so I closed the altarpiece and pushed Shu away. "You bad warg. Outside."

Zel and Lub cried their eyes out when I gave them the news. I swear by Amh I felt remorse between the scales every time I touched the strings and the red thing the doll had left stuck on the *sint*. Shu moaned his guilt and Zel and Lub believed my words, of course. "Bad warg, Shu. Outside." Then they went to the altarpiece to play for a while with the two dolls they had left. I heard Lub's snorts of joy and knew they had already forgotten the loss. I looked for a moment and saw the dolls hanging from their threads as always, and Zel said, "I'll be Mug, the conqueror. You'll be Henna, queen of Pranni."

The children, thanks to Amh, forget easily.

I caressed Shu with complicity. Good warg, sweetie.

It's not the first time something like this happened to the toys. But always, sooner or later, Zel and Lub end up convincing me to buy a new family of dolls, already assembled on their cords and sheltered within the diminished gravity of the altarpiece's boxes. Damn defective toys cost so much at the New World market and only arrive here after long days of travel from some horrendous planet of miniatures.

What can be done? That's how children are. They play, raise warg pups, and collect those damn defective dolls their mother then takes care of, forgets, and loses.

This story was originally published at El Último Puente.

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The Charlie Brown Christmas Tree Syndrome

BY LATON CARTER

Bananas. Celery. Down two aisles, three shelves up on the left: peanut butter. Breathe in. Two more aisles. Breathe out. Don't listen to Phil. Breathe in. Split-pea soup.

You have to eat. A person does. But it would be better if everything were puréed and poured into pouches. Space food. That'd be my choice. Give me a straw. No, I'll drink it from the pouch. What is this? Doesn't matter. It's a meal smoothie. All mixed in one. Tomato, potato, onion, cow tongue. Put it in a smoothie, consume and forget. Repeat as needed.

I don't know when I started having panic attacks at the grocery store.

That's a lie — I do know. Not down to a specific date or time, but it was when it dawned on me how invasive grocery stores are. Invasive probably isn't the right word. But it's data harvesting. When we put things on the conveyor belt, they tell a story. That's what's going into our bodies. Advertisers want to know that. They want to use that data and then advertise other things to send down our throat. So maybe it is invasive.

I pace my breathing. Plan my aisle route ahead of time. Make a short list, get what I know, and don't experiment with unfamiliar brands. There's no time for culinary adventure. I have to get out. Where I shop, however — I guess it's called a superstore — getting out means pushing my cart to the home improvement section. There, I'm out. No food on a belt. I can breathe. Except for the omnipresence of Phil Collins songs (that's another kind of harvesting), I feel calmer. My favorite section is on the far end of the store, the corner that sells succulents. All those green martian-looking things under grow lights in plastic pots and pebbly soil. Why do they even have them? Nobody goes there. Nobody buys them.

That's because I buy them all. I call it The Charlie Brown Christmas Tree Syndrome. Something swells up in me, an overpowering emotion — pathos? ethos? I know it's one of the 'oses — and I'm compelled to take them home. They need a home. Succulents need direct light. They need a certain temperature. One sudden swoop down on the thermometer and they're mush.

When you're 6-foot 5, people look at you with this look: *There's a woman who's tall, REALLY tall. I have to tell someone!* The smile doesn't mean they're friendly, it means they're already formulating the story they'll share with their mother or boyfriend: *She must have been a basketball player. Maybe a volleyball player. She must never use a ladder.* When they look, you get the feeling they might ask for an autograph. *Her spirit animal must be a giraffe!*

There are thousands of people 6' 5" and taller, but the only person I've ever known this tall was Mr. Desmond. He moved years ago, but when he was here, when he was at school, I felt sorry for him. Not because of his height, and not because he was pretty much the only black man in pretty much an all-white community, but because of the way people looked at him. When he was hired, parents didn't know what for, they just saw him in the front office and thought he was the new coach. *Excellent! Now our kids can really learn how to play.* They were positive. They were welcoming. They wanted him there. They just didn't know they were profiling. Mr. Desmond, like me, had only played basketball in middle school. You could tell he'd told the story before, it was something rehearsed — *I did play, but I was a terrible shot* — to roll out on the first day of school. He was our band teacher. But he didn't call it band. He called it *orchestra*. He played the bassoon and loved Mozart and Vivaldi. I wanted to be like him. I wanted to *be* him. That's probably why in class I hardly ever talked. There was an awkwardness, and I played trumpet. One day he said *Nice sound, Jessica*. I will never forget that.

So, bananas for quick energy. Celery for fiber. Peanut butter for protein. Grab the can of soup and go. Head to my section. What was she doing there? I stopped the cart just outside the perimeter of blueish-purple light. She was holding one in her hand, examining it. *Be careful. That one's limbs break off all the time, even the slightest bump.* Here was a woman — a diminutive woman with stretch pants and over-styled thinning hair, the kind of hair that resembles a porcupine — and she turned her head. She was looking at me. She knew I was there and she looked and the look was different. She saw me. I thought — should I start my conscious breathing? — and she smiled and the smile was different. It came from somewhere else, a holiday special on television, a thick crinkled black line of a smile saying I understand, you'll be okay, you are me, I am you.

Laton Carter's Leaving (University of Chicago) received the Oregon Book Award. Forthcoming fiction appears in Indiana Review. Carter works in a middle school with at-risk youth.