



# **SHIRLEY**

**ISSUE NINETEEN:  
THE FLASH ISSUE  
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**TRAVIS D. ROBERSON**

**LUCIE BONVALET**

**FORTUNATO SALAZAR**

**IVY GRIMES**

**EMILY BEHNKE**

**MICHAEL CHIN**



# FERTILE

# BY TRAVIS D. ROBERSON

Agnes and Zinger sit at the kitchen table. Agnes thinks of baby names and Zinger can't focus. The music outside is so loud it carries all the way up to their 7th floor apartment, filling his skull and keeping the thoughts out. Zinger stares out the window, down on the park below where people dance in leotards and tight clothing.

“Do you smell fire?”

“Focus,” Agnes says. She taps the pregnancy test on the table, a urine-conjured smiley face beaming up at them.

“I'm trying. But I smell fire. You don't smell it?”

“Kathy,” Agnes says. “I think we'll name the baby Kathy.”

The music grows louder. The dancers down below cheer as they transition into a new routine. Agnes stands and looks out the window. First she lifts a leg, then an arm, and soon she's in full motion, moving with the music.

“How can you dance?” Zinger asks her. “The building might be burning.”

Agnes cannot hear him. The music is too loud.

#

At work Agnes sweeps the loading dock. Her boss comes out with a cigar clamped in his teeth and scowls while she pushes the corpses of locusts into her dustpan.

Every night Agnes sweeps the dock.

Every night the trash can fills with locusts, their stiffened bodies crinkling like candy wrappers. Some of them explode beneath her heels, leaving behind streaks of yellow guts.

Her boss plucks the cigar from his mouth and says, “Where do you think such terrible creatures come from?”

#

The music keeps Zinger awake. Before bed he jams wads of toilet paper in his ears to block out the noise, but sleep still eludes him. He rises and pulls back the curtains.

“They're still dancing.”

Agnes shifts in bed and rubs her eyes. “Hm?”

“I think they've been dancing for days.”

“How does Matteo sound?”

Zinger turns and stares at Agnes. “What?”

“A name,” she says, running her hand down her belly, “for the baby.”

Zinger tilts his nose to the air and sniffs. “I'm telling you—the building is on fire.”

#

At the loading dock Agnes holds off on sweeping away the last locust of the night. She picks the bug up with her fingers, turning it in her hand before she plucks off one of the creature's wings.

The wing is translucent, webbed with black lines. Agnes presses the wing to her eye and examines the loading dock through it, turning it on her boss like a spyglass.

“Filthy,” he says, waving away a cloud of cigar smoke. “Disgusting.”

The bug's leg twitches against her palm. Agnes shudders, watching as the locust slowly rises, its remaining wing fluttering wildly. The creature lifts from her palm, tilted to one side, and buzzes around her head like an angry halo.

“My god,” her boss coughs. “This is sick.”

Agnes grips her belly and squirms against a sharp pain igniting in her navel. “Oh,” she gasps. “I think its time.”

#

Zinger bursts from the apartment and disregards the elevator, taking the stairs down to each floor—sniffing as he goes. The building's other residents open their doors and eye him strangely as he stomps past.

“There's a fire,” he tells them. “I smell it.”

He tracks the scent out of the building, to the park where the dancers continue to move to the music that travels all the way up to the 7th floor. One of the dancers spins on her toes and looks at Zinger.

“Would you like to join us—” still moving as she speaks— “everyone is welcome.”

“Do you smell a fire?” Zinger says.

While lifting her leg above her head the dancer reaches out and touches Zinger's chin. The moment he feels her graceful fingers Zinger knows he loves the dancer. Gently she turns his head, to the building burning behind him. Hot orange flames climb all the way up to his and Agnes's apartment, devouring the place they call home.

“How long has it been burning?” he says.

The dancer turns his face from the building and shrugs while twisting her hips. She slides toward Zinger and reaches for his ear, pulling out a wad of toilet paper he forgot was stuffed there. The music is clearer now, louder than its ever been.

“Come on,” the dancer says. “Join us.”

#

Agnes screams in the back of the ambulance while the siren wails.

“I see the head,” the paramedic says.

Another paramedic holds Agnes's hand.

“One more push.”

Agnes does as she's instructed. A massive weight rushes out of her body. She gasps and eases her head back. “Is it a boy or a girl?” she asks, thinking again of names.

“Take a look,” the paramedic says, passing her a bundle of blankets.

Agnes peels back the layers of fabric and shrieks when she sees the locust's head.

#

The music is too loud for Zinger to hear the ambulance when it screeches past. He moves in perfect rhythm with the rest of the dancers, mimicking their steps. He smiles, no longer able to smell fire. He doesn't notice the locust that lands at his feet, nor does he feel the bug's minuscule body explode beneath his shoe. All he knows is the song booming in his ears, commanding him to dance.

*Travis D. Roberson grew up in Central Florida, where he spent most of his youth throwing rocks at snakes and reading comic books. He spent his late teens entrenched in Orlando's local punk scene before leaving the sunshine state to bounce around the world as a flight attendant at a major airline. Now settled in Queens, NY, he lives with his wife and his dog, who wakes him up for a walk far too early every morning. His work has appeared in a number of places, including *Hypnos*, *The Arcanist*, and *Coffin Bell*. You can read more at [www.travisdroberson.com](http://www.travisdroberson.com)*



# ALAS, ADA

## BY LUCIE BONVALET

Ava and Ada sang *Back at L'Alhambra*, *Hard as Glass* and *La Barraca* at a Manhattan gala. A brass band, a bass and a harp. Black hats, amaranth and tan bras, gazar slacks, small brass clasps, damp arms and palms, strass, mascara. Tall dark plants, small brass lamps, black and small walls, bad art, haggard masks, warm Pall Mall ash.

Ada has what Ava lacks: a dark charm, a spark, lava. Ava has class and claws. Ada's charm thwarts Ava. Ava masks a harsh past, a fatal scandal (an attack, a small blast) at a ward. Ava's scars mark Ada. A pact acts as a wall.

Stan, a sad, tall, awkward man, saw Ada at a small bar. Ada's black back and small hands. Ada's Afghan hat. Ada's calm and warmth and scars. Ada sat, drank a Panama and sang a waltz. Stan saw Ada as Radha's avatar. And drank. And sank. Stan has bad karma.

At last, Ada ran far: Rabat, Harar and all that Sahara. Ada wants vast blank lands, sands.

March, Salamanca, a park. Tall grass, an ash, a stark branch, black gnarls, mad cats and small bats. Afar, stars. Ava gawks at Stan. Stan, calm, grasps a cachaça glass and chats.

"Ava, asks Stan, what can Ada want? Warm banana tarts? Gambas? Black quartz? Armagnac? A chakra balm? Lhasa's salt? A small panda? An aardvark and ants? Psalms?"

Ava starts. What a hard fall. Stan attracts and alarms Ava. Ava halts, scans Stan's hands, darts and attacks. All claws and a small sharp katara. Ava acts fast. Stan grasps an ash's branch, sags, falls. A clash. A smash. A last spasm. A blank. Glass shards, tar, a black mass.

At dawn, aghast, Ava calls Ada.

*What? ...What park?... What man? ...What small katara?*

*Ava, sharp and mad, talks and talks: All stars and cats and paths shrank, Ava saw, Stan saw, Ada was far and abstract, Ava sang a small chasm, a bark's larva, rats, bats, warm sap and sad lava. Ava asks that all cataracts swash backwards, that all sands wash Stan's tracks. Alas, Ada...*

*Lucie Bonvalet is a writer, a visual artist and a teacher. Her writing (fiction and nonfiction) can be found in Catapult, Puerto del Sol, 3AM, Hobart, Michigan Quarterly Review, Entropy and elsewhere. Her drawings and paintings can be found in Old Pal magazine and on instagram.*



MA

BY FORTUNATO SALAZAR

the boy sent in to feed. caddie. they sent they provided. they stocked the pantry, a facility, one vat nurtured an oracle, the oracle ate, shat, so did caddie. cinnamon cereal. the boy too breakfasted cinnamon cereal not tasting cinnamon, didn't have the knack, tasting while resenting, yet. the boy way ahead of schedule about to make a breakthrough any day now and it. bit like a hornet, the obligation to feed caddie, caddie on the schedule, caddie so predictable, caddie winnowed down to this, that. tuna. English muffin. caddie stink. cinnamon said caddie. chattering away the boy kept his breath shut mouthed shallowly entering the vault, once caddie too had looked into the future, foretold, was built into caddie, way back when, didn't see it coming, tuna, cinnamon cereal, tuna, cinnamon cereal. mac and cheese. the boy fond of mac and cheese days on account of the perfume. mac and cheese and tuna. microwaves. tiny tiny waves. caddie's weight up and down but mostly, now, up and up, there was puffiness now, a bloating, the boy shut his eyes too but seeing into the space beyond his eyes, shut. couldn't turn it on or off it just carried it. muffin, tuna. milk. the milk, they organized. the pour. to do the pour the only way imagine it was water. water, pour, took forever. to master. the boy ahead of schedule. they ran out the milk was off-white





NJ

## BY FORTUNATO SALAZAR

the boy, good grief, their body, such as it was, a thing not unlike a corporeal form, rounded, shell discoloration, not unlike freckles, other discoloration not entirely unlike human, anyway within the realm, this boy or anyway not an oblate spheroid, awkward, attended, christened by ingenieur, those in the know, of upper echelon, award winnerer, they held a stake, ingenieur, already saved one planet, you can see it from the turnpike, this boy, along with the attendant, the attendant had a green thumb, everyone benefited from the thumb, raw, red, also there were ferments, off the charts were the attendant's, this boy, good grief, out of their mouth came sounds, struth, struth, struth, other ordinary words as well as would be expected given the modeling, happy sad words, amused words, the whole gamut of exhaled gasses shaped into goods and griefs, such had been the blueprint, the expectation, the reaping, all went by the book, other such boys turned loose had matured into miscellaneous successes, seed geneticists, hardy nanoneurointegration, the boy took off, as a solving vine takes off, the boy too took to play, afoot, ingenieur, also loosing, sowing, reaping, laughter not of the ear variety, not to human ear, but laughter, plainly, the body shook, the Earth itself shook, not Earth field but quantifiable, visualizable, not dissimilar to storm surf, struth struth, the body cycled through an episode of, if it wasn't laughter, what, good grief, the body made tea, green, white

*Fortunato Salazar's recent fiction is at Ploughshares, Conjunctions, Washington Square Review, The Southampton Review, and elsewhere.*



# UNCERTAIN PLUMS

BY IVY GRIMES

I don't know who left the bag of plums on our doorstep, but it couldn't have come at a worse time.

That morning, I'd called my brother-in-law and told him I was pulling out of the family business. I'm the only man in our family who doesn't make enough money to hide it in distant enterprises for decades. I need it to live.

He berated me, of course. "You've always been lazy and selfish, Peter! And your sister says you've been that way since birth."

I hung up on him. Is it selfish that I used my trust fund for endless schooling instead of business speculations? Maybe. But I'm not going to lose my hat just so people think I'm generous.

And then an hour or so later—plums. On our doorstep. No note. Perhaps they were a gift from my scheming family?

"Plums can be poisoned, you know!" I shouted to my wife as she boiled them for jars of jelly.

I loved her wild look, bright eyes and bloody fruit stains all over her apron. “We’ll send each of your siblings a jar, and we won’t eat ours until they eat theirs!”

My wife is a genius.

I have four siblings, so out went four jars of jelly. Each hand-delivered jar had a little note strung around its neck: Sorry about leaving the business! Love, Peter.

Then we waited. We had to wait. Some people love homemade jelly so much, they’ll open the jar right then, savor the pop of the lid, grab a spoon. My family isn’t as invested in simple pleasures, but they are cheap, and they hate waste. I knew they’d use the food eventually.

A week later, we heard that my sister Gloria died. The doctors attributed her death to emphysema. I was gutted, surprised by the fond feelings I had for my sister once she was gone. She used to buy me candy when she was home for college. Had I been selfish then? Maybe. But what child wouldn’t eat all the candy he could?

After the funeral, I tried to find out if the plums could have been responsible. I worked the jar of jelly into conversation with my brother-in-law, and he looked at me with disgust.

“Who cares about homemade jelly at a time like this, Peter? Your sister always said you were an idiot.”

After that, I didn’t feel quite as bad for Gloria. I left the rest of the jars in place.

Within two months, two more of my siblings died. Tim died in a car accident, and a month later, Jane died while scuba diving.

“Certainly, then, it wasn’t the jelly,” I told my wife after Jane’s funeral. My conscience was sore.

“Maybe the plums were bad luck,” she whispered, her face bright and rosy. She looked hungry as she said it, like she wanted to take all the jars in our pantry and spoon the jelly straight into her mouth.

“But we have more jars than anyone! We have five of them. Each of my siblings just got one. Does the bad luck only kick in when you eat the jelly?”

She was so elegant in her black mourning dress. She shrugged, held her empty hands out. But her eyes sparkled so.

A month later, my brother Ian died after a hunger strike. He had told his wife and kids he wouldn't eat until the world started treating him with the respect he deserved. Such a shame, such a waste. Now the family business was owned entirely by in-laws.

After the last funeral, I asked all my nephews and nieces about whether their departed parents ate any of my gifted plum jelly. I said I wanted to think they enjoyed my last gift before they died. My nieces and nephews have heard stories about me from their parents. Tim's and Ian's children seemed to be laughing at me behind their hands, and they said they had never seen or heard about the jelly.

Jane's son Danny told me his mother never ate anything with sugar. He said he was very sorry, but it was impossible she had tasted the jelly. He said he had eaten some, though, and that the jelly was very nice. I knew he was wrong about Jane—she enjoyed her vices in secret. She quite likely snuck a spoonful of our jelly.

"I understand," I said. "But my wife will be disappointed since she worked so hard to make the jelly."

Danny gave me a scolding look, the sort of look a mother would give a sassy child. "Uncle Peter, you know you aren't married," he said, lowering his voice so the others wouldn't hear. "You should go home and take a nap. Your grief is making you delirious."

I listened to his advice, and I walked home with my wife.

"Why would he say I don't have a wife?" I asked her when we were back in the privacy of our kitchen. "Does he hate me? Is he trying to get revenge?"

"Maybe the jelly doesn't kill you. Maybe it makes you forget." She looked so proud to have figured it out.

"That's it! It made Gloria forget how to breathe, and Tim forget how to drive a car, and Jane forget how to scuba dive, and Ian forget how to eat. And it made Danny forget I had a wife."

She nodded. "But we couldn't have known it would do that. It was just an experiment."

We laughed with relief, and I put my arms around her.

"We'll throw away our jars right now," she said. "We'll never eat a bite!"

*Ivy Grimes lives in Virginia, and her writing has appeared in Potomac Review, Pithead Chapel, Daily Science Fiction, Vastarien, South Dakota Review, Broadkill Review, DIAGRAM, and elsewhere. If you want to send her suspicious plums or talk with her about weird stories, you can start by following her on Twitter @IvyGri.*



BENEATH

BY EMILY BEHNKE

She found me lodged beneath the stones.

I'd been there so long I didn't know if I really wanted her to or not. For nights, I heard her wander. She was the first in a while. She stepped carefully through the dark field, turning up stones and tossing them on cairns with a rhythmic crashing, crashing, crashing. I imagined the stacks. How high they must get.

Imagined stacking for the sake of it. Imagined not knowing you should be searching for something at all.

What I did not imagine was what lay beneath them. And I bet she didn't, either. Actually, I knew she didn't because she was always muttering to herself. She wondered about the glow in the distance, about a woman dressed head to toe in pink like royalty, wading through the field as if it were mud up to her hips. She thought about the echoes, which were really the voices of the others, but of course she didn't know. Who would she ask? Who? She thought about the spirits that hid in trees, and the women that came before her, stacking and stacking stones. She thought about the land, what would spring from it. She thought by the time she was done, the world would be different. Whole again.

But she didn't think of what she couldn't see. The world underneath.

I heard her paw at the stone above me before I felt it rise—before I felt my body rise with breath, with wanting. She was younger than I thought, dressed in a threadbare cloth dress and flimsy shoes. Her fingers were chapped, pink around the tips, and her nails were ground to nothing. When she saw me, she didn't even flinch.

Instead, she muttered to herself. “You never know what comes out at night—but I suppose you also do. How many times have I talked about the ghosts?”

“I am not a ghost,” I said. My voice came out chiseled. Broken. Of course I was a ghost, but that wasn't all I was. I just needed to tell her—tell someone.

The woman didn't look surprised or even concerned. “Oh, there's fairies. Demons out here, too. Anyway, I knew this was coming. Out here at night is the worst time to start clearing, you're just asking for it. For this.”

She turned then, took my stone over to one of the cairns and set it down with a crack. They were shorter than I imagined. But still—the weight of them. When it crashed into the other stones, I fought the urge to collapse into the soil.

“Wait,” I called. I sounded like a kick through gravel. The woman didn't wait. She scoured the ground, looking for another stone. “You survived. You survived it.” *And I didn't.*

She didn't turn around.

“Don't you want to know about me?”

“Not particularly.”

“But you're talking—documenting, right? You're copying everything that happens out here down.”

“Yes,” she said, sounding vaguely interested now. I couldn't see her through the thick of the night. “I'm writing a book.”

“Well—” I could've gone away. But where did I have to go? Would anyone else listen? “I can help. I can tell you about myself. People—people will want to know. About what happened before.”

“Before what?”

“Before these rocks got here.”

The woman paused for a minute. I thought she was considering my offer, but then I heard her heave something massive from the ground. Then, she tossed it down. This happened three more times before I cleared my throat.

It startled her.

“Oh,” she said, louder than before. “Right. No thank you. The book is about myself. Out here.”

I couldn’t contain my excitement. He’d gotten it wrong—the one who crushed me—I was something. I could do this. “But aren’t I part of that?”

“Only my thoughts about you are. Oh, don’t feel bad about it.”

“I want to tell you about myself.” I started after her, hovering just above the ground. The more jagged stones scraped against me. “I was trapped here by—”

“No, no, no. That’s not for me to know. I’m out here to do one thing.”

“What if I needed help?”

“You’re only a story,” she said, stopping suddenly. I nearly slid through her. At her feet, I couldn’t tell you how tall she was. All I knew was she towered. She bent to get another stone. I waited for it to drop. “Another story. Not mine. I’m not interested.”

“Why not?”

“Because I want to continue on.”

With that, I thought it was all over. I’d be trapped beneath a stone again. But she brought it over to her cairn and didn’t speak to me again. Stacked and stacked and stacked. Then left the way she came. And I watched, continuing on alone. As I’d always been. That’s all there was to do.

*Emily Behnke is a graduate of The New School's MFA in Creative Writing Program, an attendee of the 2021 Tin House YA Workshop, and content creator at the American Booksellers Association. Her work can be found in Typehouse Literary Magazine.*



# THRALL

BY MICHAEL CHIN

Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1992): Older men select a young woman to fight vampires. So, she fights vampires.

1

When Ingrid learned she was a vampire slayer, there was comfort in learning Big Todd, her manager at the Reel to Reel video store, was her watcher—her mentor, her guide. Amidst her new awareness that vampires were real and out to get her, there was a comfort in anything at all familiar.

She staked her first vampire behind the McDonald's on Garrett Street—the McDonald's known for homeless folks eating out of its dumpster at night, and she could have sworn she'd heard them cheering her as she grappled this toothy monster to the ground, and stabbed his heart. But when it was over, they seemed content to mind their business, three men divvying up a Big Mac that was still almost entirely intact, a woman dipping what was left of a Filet o' Fish in the final dregs of a two ounce tub of sweet n sour sauce.

Ingrid thought Big Todd had been watching at the least, prepared to save her if the vampire got the upper hand.

He was nowhere to be seen.

Ingrid knelt by the vampire, trying to determine how she could tell if he were really dead. Big Todd had made clear to her the undead had no breath, no pulse to check for.



A car horn. The homeless crowd paused their crinkling off sandwich wrappers. All that noise, then silence, headlights momentarily blinding Ingrid.

Big Todd leaned out the window of his Cutlass Sierra. “Well? Get in.”

He’d gone through the drive thru for a quarter pounder, fries, and a Coke.

He asked her how it went between bites from his burger. The meat looked pink, rare, in the dashboard light. He steered with his knees.

Ingrid was scheduled for both morning and afternoon shifts the next day, weaving time at Reel to Reel in between her two classes at the community college. After the shifts and the classes, she reported for slayer training with Big Todd, exhausted, after nightfall at the high school gym.

“I know you need the money,” he said of her scheduling. “And I can’t exactly put you on night shifts anymore.”

Of course, she hadn’t seen Big Todd during either of her day shifts. She didn’t call him on it, knowing he’d talk about his managerial duties and doing clerical work from home, besides pointing out he was no spring chicken anymore and couldn’t both volunteer his nights training her to fight the undead masses and keep up his regular work hours.

She didn’t bring it up, so he instead lectured about vampires while she ran laps around the basketball court, then climbed a rope, then practiced throwing stakes at a mannequin’s chest.

He told her tell-tale signs of the vampire while he ate baby back ribs at the scorer’s table. He told her anyone unusually pale or whom people never saw during daylight hours was suspect.

It wasn’t until she was in bed that night, ready to drift into nightmares of vampire brawls that it occurred to her how pale Big Todd had looked lately. How the barbecue sauce on his chin from the ribs might’ve passed for blood.

2

Big Todd warned Ingrid about how seductive vampires could be. He warned her about their thrall.

The warnings didn’t protect her from Visa.

“Visa like credit?” Ingrid asked.

“Visa like permission to visit a foreign land,” Visa explained, straddling Ingrid after wrestling the slayer’s stake away, after getting the better of their tussle. Visa explained it from her perch, straddled over Ingrid’s pelvis so as to pin down her wrists beneath Visa’s thighs and so that her center of gravity was planted just low enough to render Ingrid’s legs useless to resist.

She could have bitten her. Turned her into a vampire herself.

Ingrid thought she would.

“Not without your consent,” Visa said. “I can’t tell you what to be.”

Big Todd had told Ingrid she was a slayer.

Maybe it was Visa’s novel response or the way her red lipstick invoked something like a valentine against her snow white skin, or how inhumanly tight she wore her choker for lack of a need for air, or that she was a very good kisser. Maybe it was her thrall. Whatever the reasons, Ingrid started seeing a lot more of Visa.

Ingrid told Visa what she’d observed of Big Todd dodging daylight. How he’d recoiled when Ingrid set down her crucifix necklace next to him.

“Of course he’s a vampire,” Visa said.

3

One night, when Ingrid skipped her patrol duties for a date, Visa stood her up.

The next day, Big Todd came in late for his opening shift with Ingrid (wearing a sweatshirt, hood up) and put Visa’s choker on the counter.

He backed Ingrid up against a wall, and it was impossible to tell in that moment if he were her manager, her watcher, or a predator cornering prey. In that moment, she only knew for sure that he was larger than he’d ever been and that she’d never been smaller nor less certain she had any powers at all. Her throat ran dry. It was difficult to swallow.

She watched his neck for the throb of a pulse. She stared. Until she couldn’t hear him. Until all she could hear was her own pulse, it’s rhythm picking up, its rhythm hypnotizing until she didn’t know where she was at all, only the beating of her pulse, the stillness of Big Todd’s neck, and that there was no escape, no hope of reaching the holy water in her purse, no choice but to take what he gave her.



*Minority Report (2002): Three people are gifted with psychic abilities that empower a pre-crime police unit to dispense justice before laws get broken.*

There was a sense of importance and vigilante justice upon Ingrid, Big Todd, and Gabby's shared discovery they were not only having the same dreams, but those dreams were coming true.

Muggings.

Home invasions.

A murder.

Big Todd put the pieces together that they were seeing the future of crime in Shermantown, New York, and put together that what they saw wasn't always the same, but rather different moments and different angles to piece together.

Big Todd lived up to his name. He may not have been fast or athletic or particularly tough, but at six-foot-four and two hundred-fifty pounds with a high school linebacker's frame and a middle-aged man's paunch, if he got the drop on the average, unsuspecting criminal, he could subdue them.

Gabby drove. Big Todd fought. Ingrid, who tended to see more details than the others, and occasionally saw whole crimes the other two missed, reviewed what she knew on those drives, equipping Big Todd with as much information as she could before he

stopped the traveling salesman from shoving his cheating wife down the stairs, clotheslined the ten-year-old bully who meant to spike the kid with asthma's head into the gravel at the playground, or snagged a shoplifting teen on her way out of CVS with a purse full of lipstick. They timed things just right to pass cars when the litter bugs tossed a brown paper sack of fast food refuse, such that Big Todd caught the bag and threw the garbage back in the window, all over the driver and his front seat passenger—Gabby got their car gone before the would-be criminals knew what hit them.

Ingrid raises the question if each crime were worth stopping. Gabby nodded along while she spoke, but when Big Todd said of course it was—when he called it their responsibility—Gabby didn't argue.

Then Ingrid saw Big Todd in her dream. And she saw herself.

He shot her.

She came to work rattled. If Gabby had had the same vision, she didn't offer any indication of it. Big Todd didn't volunteer any insights either, but seemed to notice Ingrid was on edge.

The next night, she dreamed he suffocated her with a plastic bag. Then that he hit her with Gabby's car. Then that he poisoned her soda with arsenic—she didn't know how she knew it was arsenic, but when she researched afterward, she confirmed the vomiting and convulsions she saw herself go through in the dream were consistent with arsenic poisoning.

Then she saw Big Todd push her off the roof of the old glove factory.

It wasn't her only dream that night. She had a matching dream to Big Todd and Gabby's of a man and his rope-bound, closeted gay lover on the roof of the glove factory. One last argument, then the man rolled the victim off the roof. The victim's skull fractured on impact.

They'd have to stop this one. Perhaps the most important crime they'd ever stop.

But couldn't they tip off the police, Ingrid asked. For such a violent crime, for such undeniable stakes, wasn't this an ideal opportunity to strike up a partnership?

"How will they think we knew there was a guy tied up on the roof set to be murdered?" Big Todd asked. "How do we not end up implicated?"

Ingrid found herself on the roof, Big Todd's back up—someone to call the police if things went sideways.

Big Todd punched out the would-be murderer. Untied the would-be victim and used the ropes to subdue the bad guy. Only then, with the victim's blessing, did Big Todd call the police.

The victim kept an eye on his assailant. Big Todd had a word with Ingrid apart from them. "You didn't want to come up here," he said. "I think I know why."

It occurred to Ingrid she'd put herself directly in harm's way. The first time she dreamed Big Todd would kill her, she should have distanced herself, should have left town without a trace. Here, forty feet above town, above the pavement, there was every opportunity for a fall to look like an accident.

"I've had the dreams, too." It was the shared element of the dreams—perhaps even more than them coming true—that had convinced them all these weren't mere dreams at all, but rather futures they were responsible to.

But for each dream they stopped from coming to fruition, there came, too, the question of how inevitable the dreams were. Did they denote outcomes or likelihoods? How far did they have to go to actually stop a crime? Maybe letting a perpetrator know they knew would've been enough, void of any physical intervention at all?

And why would Big Todd want her dead?

Because she saw things he didn't?

Because she saw what he was capable of?

Big Todd stood very close, very tall. Close enough she could feel the warmth of his body from climbing stairs, from the fisticuffs, from handling the ropes. Close enough to smell his sweat. Close enough for intimacy. Wasn't everything they saw an intimacy? To see someone not as the world did, but what they'd become—what fate would befall them—at their worst moment? To reach out to them. To stop the fall.

Ingrid had understood the dreams to reveal criminals. But what if they revealed victims instead? Was there a difference?

And when Ingrid stepped back from him, teetering on the verge of her own fatal fall and Big Todd caught her upper arm in his big, strong hand, might he have saved her?

Or was he letting her know he could have let her go?



# GIFT

BY MICHAEL CHIN

*It's a Wonderful Life (1946): After a long, miserable life, a man encounters an angel who shows him what the world might have been without him.*

“You’ve been given a great gift,” the angel said. “A chance to see what the world would be like without you.”

The angel said this as if the world were so different. But at the Reel to Reel video store, it all looked the same. The same center display of Holiday Favorites with *Die Hard* moved over from Action; *The Muppets’ Christmas Carol* from Family; *The Family Stone* from Drama; *Home Alone* and *Scrooged* displaced from the Comedy section.

Gabby still wore the elf ears and red and green striped hat Big Todd the manager didn’t like. Little Todd still looked high, languidly vacuuming the same patch of carpet over and over.

“You’ve been given a great gift.”

There was a girl Ingrid didn’t recognize, whose name tag identified her as Cecelia.

Big Todd stood near, leaning over her when he could justify it, to point at where he envisioned the New Year’s display with sparkling cider and *When Harry Met Sally* and *200 Cigarettes* would go up for that week after Christmas, when folks were sick of Christmas movies and Christmas decorations and Christmas songs.

Big Todd smelled Cecelia's hair. When no one else was in the back of the store, he took her sunflower butter and blackberry jelly sandwich from its Tupperware, peeled back the top piece of bread and put his tongue there. Later, he watched her eat her lunch in the break room, the only one aware of the quiet intimacy the two of them shared. He left a slight thumbprint in one piece of bread, perhaps telling himself this was enough for her to know he'd been there, too, and offer her tacit approval when she said nothing about it.

"You've been given a great gift."

Big Todd took a break shortly after Cecelia's shift ended. She hummed along to "Jingle Bell Rock," steering through a windshield barely defrosted enough to see through. The car smelled sweet like cinnamon.

Somehow, Ingrid was in Big Todd's car, too, which smelled of bologna and farts. He blasted his defroster hot in his eyes and kept his headlights off despite the fading daylight as he followed Cecelia home.

"Is it a gift?" Ingrid asked the angel. "To know the world would be the same, only another girl in my place."

"You've been given a great gift," he repeated. Ingrid understood him to be broken. Maybe broken by this circumstance an angel wasn't equipped to process. Maybe an old model of angel, expiring.

Cecelia didn't return to her parents' house like Ingrid would have. She drove to a dodgier part of town where she shared a studio apartment furnished with a futon and a card table, lit yellow by a desk lamp, where her live-in boyfriend had made scrambled eggs and white bread toast for the two of them to dine on. He was taller than her, skinnier than her, with a tattoo that read *you're breaking my heart* down his forearm.

Big Todd watched them, car expertly parked behind a tree that kept him out of sight, a set of old school, almost comically oversized binoculars trained on their window. He'd watch for a long time, Ingrid understood.

The angel started to tell her she'd been given a great gift, but she cut him off, understanding it was time for her to tell him she wanted to live again and to run down the street in corporeal form celebrating a return to the world she knew, incontrovertibly influenced for her presence in it. That's how the story goes, even if her desire to live again was limited to keeping someone else from having to suffer the same consequences of a close working relationship with Big Todd.

But the angel was still stuck on telling her she'd been given a great gift.

She saw through Big Todd's binoculars. Cecelia kissed her boyfriend and fetched fast food ketchup packets for the eggs.

It was warm in the car.

Ingrid couldn't get out of the car.

The angel was gone. She was stuck with Big Todd as he fetched a bag of Cool Ranch Doritos from his glove compartment and ate what was left, and tilted the bag to pour the crumbs down his gullet when he was done. Ingrid could taste the salty ranch flavor and the speckles of it tickled Ingrid's throat just as they did his so they coughed in unison until a wads of Dorito-dust phlegm made it out of their mouths and splattered the steering wheel, where they shimmered in the light from a lamp post, refracted by the frost on his windshield.

Big Todd started the car. He had, apparently, seen enough for that night. Ingrid stole one more look at Cecelia, oblivious, touching her finger to silver bell in her foot-tall fiber optic tree by the window.

Ingrid was stuck to Big Todd. The roads were slick that night, and he slid a few inches past the line at a red light, and turned on the radio while he waited for it to turn. He sang along to an old-times version of "I'll Be Home for Christmas."

The light flashed from red to green, Christmas colors, faster than it seemed like it should have, a bit of holiday magic. Big Todd drove back to the store. Reel to Reel stayed open until deep into the night.

*Michael Chin was born and raised in Utica, New York and currently lives in Las Vegas with his wife and son. He is the author of three full-length short story collections, and his debut novel, My Grandfather's an Immigrant and So is Yours is forthcoming from Cowboy Jamboree Press. Find him online at [miketchin.com](http://miketchin.com) and follow him on Twitter @miketchin.*