

SPRING 2022 | ISSUE #1

# LAST RESORT

Literary Review

Editor-in-Chief: KYLEE WEBB

ALL ARTISTS RETAIN ALL RIGHTS TO THE WORKS FOUND WITHIN

# CONTENTS



HUMAN	<i>Katharine Bost</i>	p. 4
BLOOD SISTERS	<i>Sunshine Barbito</i>	p. 10
STEVIE	<i>Olivia Loccisano</i>	p. 20
HAZARDS OF THE TRADE	<i>Aimee Griffin</i>	p. 24
MY ONLY FRIEND	<i>Kayla Chang</i>	p. 36
HOW TO FUCK FLORIDA WOMAN	<i>Marlee Abbott</i>	p. 44
LAKESIDE PARK: JUNETEENTH 2021	<i>Collin Edmonds</i>	p. 46
AFTER GETTING BLACKOUT DRUNK AT A CAMPFIRE	<i>Frances Klein</i>	p. 50
THE TURKEY BARN'S SMELL	<i>Katie Bowers</i>	p. 52
STARGAZER LILIES	<i>Benjamin Rose</i>	p. 54
PLAN B	<i>Cassandra Caverhill</i>	p. 58
1993	<i>Ian Lax</i>	p. 62

# .... - - . - -. (HUMAN)

BY KATHARINE BOST

Everyone knows that May is the best month for a cookout. The weather is warm, but not too warm. It's sunny, having passed the month of April showers. People are in their best moods because it's almost summer vacation, though that means less when you aren't in school to enjoy a break.

While the end of May has the potential to be a little too toasty, mid-May is ideal to avoid that. Crisp winds float in from April, but the sweltering heat of June has not yet arrived.

Jay mans the grill because he is, in his words, "the man of the grill." His apron is ratty: torn, off-white that has been stained from many a barbecue. Reddish brown splotches pepper the pockets, and one of the straps is beginning to rip, threads popping at the seams. He used to be able to fasten the tie around his front, but his stomach has grown over the years. Now he can barely tie it around his bare back.

Emblazoned on the middle of the apron is the phrase, "I'll rub your butt for free." It was a gift from one of his previous girlfriends, a girl who appreciated his insistence on grilling shirtless and never mistook him for the potbelly pig on

the roasting spit. A girl who no one has spoken to in several years, but who Jay and I credit with making us closer than ever before.

He flips one of the burgers and presses down on the meat with his metal spatula. Juice oozes from the patty, and I sip from my drink to keep from reprimanding him. It's all well and fine if he wants to turn our beef burgers into hockey pucks on any other day, but not for this cookout. The meat was too expensive for him to ruin.

At the grill, Jay finishes another PBR. He crushes the can against his flat forehead and laughs with his buddies about something, likely the pitiful season the Bears had this past year. Even though the entire state of Wisconsin is between our home and Chicago, Jay believes himself a Chicagoan. He roots for the Bears, the Bulls, and the White Sox. He can't stand the Cubs, though he doesn't have any reason for his dislike. If he wasn't shirtless, he'd likely be wearing the Bulls jersey with our last name monogrammed on the back. I gave it to him for his birthday the same year his previous girlfriend gave him the apron. It doesn't bother me that he's wearing the apron and not the shirt.

I like the sight of his swollen belly pressing against the filthy fabric of the apron. I wouldn't be able to see the pink, newly sunburnt skin and droplets of sweat if he were to wear his jersey. His head is bald, also red and sweating, and I assume he will soon ask me to get him the tattered CAT trucker hat he wears whenever we have sex.

These things remind me that he is mine, and that I am his. Our minds are the same, so he notices me staring. His laugh is overbearing, and he raises a beer in my direction.

Sometimes Jay reminds me of my dad. Dad worked in the forestry industry up until a year ago, when an accident left him in a wheelchair. During summer breaks, he would take me and Ma out to this remote cabin in the woods where we would fell trees to use as firewood for bonfires. He was the one who taught me how to use a saw while Ma sat in a ripped yellow lawn chair and sipped lemonade with red food dye.

"A chainsaw is too fast for a little girl like you," he'd tell me as the saw's flimsy teeth bit into the wood. "It can be hard to control, so it's best to let a man handle it."

But I didn't want to let a man handle it, so after we shot and killed the game for today's cookout, I showed Jay how to use a saw. How to bleed the creatures above the tub so dismemberment isn't as messy.

Referring to animals we hunt as "game" is entirely appropriate, isn't it?

"Callie." Shelly Townsend is beside me. Sometimes people approach me, and I don't notice until they're speaking. "Callie, Liam wants to know if he can swim in the pool."

Liam is her son, and she's pregnant with a little girl. She and her husband are this neighborhood's representation of the nuclear family. Possibly the town's representation. Unlike Jay and I's home, the Townsend's have a cement driveway. A professional lawn care technician. Their pool is in-ground, so I'm not sure why Liam, who is used to more luxurious water, would be interested in our above-ground pool.

Shelly has a burger on her paper plate. Ketchup bloodies the crisp lettuce, and mustard drips onto her palm when she bites into the glistening meat. The rendered fat soaks into the bread, and I hope she enjoys the meal as much as I enjoy watching her consume it.

Whenever I smile, my right eyebrow arches. It's like the muscles in my mouth are attached by a string to the muscles in my forehead, and any slight movement causes them both to rise at the same time.

"Of course you can, Liam," I say, my smile widening. "That's what it's here for. For everyone to enjoy and have a great time."

Liam scampers to the other neighborhood kids. He rips his shirt off and climbs the ladder to the pool. A child I don't know hoists himself up onto the ledge and does a backflip into the water. Pool water sprays all over the dead grass.

"I was surprised to hear from you," Shelly says. She takes another bite of the burger and swallows it before speaking again. "But not in a bad way. You and Jay have been a little off the grid recently."

"Busy with work." I watch Jay scoop a patty onto a friend's plate. "You know how that is."

"Definitely," she says, but we both know she doesn't. She only worked at the factory for a few months before she quit to be a fulltime stay-at-home mom. "I miss our lunch breaks,

though. No one wants to listen to me complain about morning sickness." She rubs her stomach tenderly, then gestures to it, like I should feel the baby's resting spot, too. Like I should slowly caress her skin again.

Shelly was lucky. Jay never found out about my nights at the motel with her.

"I'm always around if you want to give me a ring," I say, though part of me hopes she doesn't.

That makes her smile. Her eyebrows don't move when she smiles, but she does look younger.

"I heard Jay say that you were almost out of burgers," she says. "I'm glad I got mine before the crowd."

"Me, too." I love sharing, even if Jay doesn't.

"What seasoning did you use? I've never tasted anything this juicy," she says. Then she leans forward and whispers, like it's a conspiracy, "And that's with Jay trying to squeeze the life out of every patty."

We used to get trashed together and trash our husbands. When she discovered she was pregnant, that's when we stopped. Everything. And she quit the factory.

But if she hadn't quit the factory, I wouldn't have met—

Sometimes people say I space out.

"Salt and pepper for seasoning," I say. "A little Worcestershire sauce to keep the meat moist, but we didn't want to impact the flavor." It's my turn to whisper as I say, "The rest is, of course, a family secret."

"One of these days, you're going to tell me all your secrets," she says, biting her lip.

But I never will. Shelly is different from me. From Jay. Even if I strayed with her, and I strayed with the factory man, and maybe a few other friends spread around the states, these people don't understand me the way Jay does.

Jay and I are made for each other. Nothing could ever get in our way. No one. We made a pact to ensure it.

He closes the grill, looks back at me, and shrugs.

We didn't have enough meat to feed everyone, which is a shame. I would've loved to share my love with every person present. When Shelly's husband offers to drive to the store to get more hamburgers and hot dogs, Jay goes with him.

I watch the kids splash in the pool. I watch the parents eat their burgers and throw out their plates. The plates greasy with blood and Worcestershire sauce. They don't question the blood. All meat has blood. It all comes from a living creature.

It happened too fast. Bullets are fast, and surprise shots offer no fear. I think I would have liked to hear the way he screamed.

**KATHARINE BOST** holds an MFA in creative writing from Miami University, and her work has appeared in *Memoir Magazine*, *The Doctor T. J. Eckleburg Review*, *The Nasiona*, *Tangled Locks Journal*, and *Mikrokosmos*.

# BLOOD SISTERS

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BY SUNSHINE BARBITO

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Ali hands me her tweezers then pulls her finger back to her lips. Her hands are always bleeding from too much sanitizer. Stuck at the sharp, flat tips of the tweezers there's this dry stuff. Brown like old blood and maybe skin. I kneel down and grab the edge of Ali's rug with the tweezers and pull. The dried stuff flakes off onto the hardwood floor.

Ali loves sharp objects.

I click open my birth control wheel and dig my fingernails under the plastic. A few of the pink pills are left and under those, there's what's left of the sheet of acid that my boyfriend gave me. Megan scrapes a stick of chalk against Ali's wall while I tweeze up the tabs.

She didn't even get to finals before Ali's mom had to put her in the hospital. Megan told me that she came by the house to see how Ali was doing, right after. She said men in spacesuits were hauling trash pile after trash pile out of Ali's room.

Ali's phone starts to buzz. She answers it and puts the call on speaker. I put the little sheet of acid on the floor and pinch the tweezers together, pressing the sharp tip into the edges of the tabs to break them apart. The acid squares come

loose, and I tell Megan to come here.

On the speaker, Ali's mom says, "You girls need to get to bed soon."

Her mom's room is downstairs because she can't get up them. Ali doesn't like us to see her mom. Her mom, who can't get in and out of the shower without help. Her mom, who had to drop us at the bottom of the hill outside of my house one time, because she was too heavy, and the car wouldn't go. We stopped going to my house.

It's like Ali thinks that if we can't see her mom's body, then we can't see hers.

When it's all over, all the weight comes off, and Ali's mom forgets how to eat, and she's left with skin that hangs off her skeleton. Enough for two of her.

Ali says okay, okay, and hangs up. She gets up from the bed and goes to her desk, and pumps a handful of sanitizer into her palm from the green bottle.

Megan sits by me on the floor and holds out her hand with the piece of chalk in it. Ali sits at the edge of her bed and pulls her sleeves over her hands. Megan and Ali, they're so junior high.

Mostly I still hang out with them because my boyfriend is busy at college, busy with his band. These girls, they still want to prank call boys and give each other makeovers.

I hold a tab of acid at the end of the tweezers and turn to Megan. "On your tongue," I say, "It'll rub off on your hand."

Megan sticks her tongue out and looks up to the ceiling. Black eyeliner goops in the corner of her eyes and on her lids. She always sweats. The tweezers hit her tongue and I unsqueeze them. Megan closes her lips and makes a gross face.

"It's salty," she says, and she pulls two handfuls of her blonde ponytail apart to tighten it.

Ali reaches her sleeve-hand out and I stick my tongue out at her. She looks at the tweezers and tells me to hold on, then goes into her closet.

It's better than before, but Ali's room won't stay clean.

Her mom calls it an accident so that you will, too. After it landed Ali in the hospital, Ali's mom had the old carpet in her room pulled up and hardwood put in. She got her a new mattress and a new desk with paints and brushes, so she can make her feelings art. Her mom had a wall in her room painted chalkboard so you can draw on it, but it doesn't erase easy. Ali's mom had the painters write happy things on the wall for her. Ali erased them, so that Megan

and I wouldn't see.

If you squint, they're still there.

One corner of the chalk wall used to say, No one is perfect! All pencils have erasers.

All over the new hardwood you find ripped socks, used Band-Aids stuck sticky-side-down, old pages of homework and yellow Q-Tips. Ali's room always smells like fast food, even after the spacemen cleaned it. She can't spend the night at my house or Megan's after last time, when she stole a whole new pack of pencil sharpeners from Megan's room.

After the accident, she's not even allowed to shave her legs anymore. Her leg hair scratches me at night, when I sleep over, in her bed.

When it happened, Ali's under arms looked like hamburger meat.

She backs out of her closet and Ali turns around watching the glass in her hand, careful not to spill. She sits down on the floor by me and Megan and holds the glass out to us. The smell burns my nose and makes me cough. Megan sneaks wide, goopy eyes at me.

The cabinets in Ali's kitchen started disappearing cups and drawers disappeared utensils. Her mom figured she had a lazy teenager who didn't want to put her dishes in the sink. The men in white suits and helmets found glasses upon glasses filled with rubbing alcohol, with paperclips, razor blades and sewing needles, earrings, butter knives, and soda tabs in them. Megan told everyone at school about the spacemen, too.

Now kids call Ali the Alien behind her back.

Ali's mom just wanted to make the new bedroom pretty.

"Just to make sure," Ali says, and she sets the cup down in front of me.

The rubbing alcohol looks almost pink. I dip the tweezers into the glass and then Ali holds out her sleeve for me to pat them dry. I tweeze a tab of acid into Ali's mouth and then pick up two more with my fingertips and drop them onto my tongue.

"I'm used to it," I say.

Megan stands up and gets back to her drawing on the wall. The acid tastes like nail polish remover on my tongue. I swallow big, stinging swallows. Ali goes to the sanitizer at her desk and pumps another palm full, then sets the glass down on the desk. She rubs the green goo over her hands over and over again and asks me when she'll start to feel it.

Before the tabs go away, I stick my tongue out and try to comb my bangs down across my forehead, to take a picture with my phone. Pieces of dead hair break off and fall onto the

hardwood. My boyfriend likes girls with colorful hair, so he bleaches mine sometimes, dyes it blue or pink or green, like now, or whatever he wants to see me in.

My hair won't grow anymore, so I try and make my chin-length-green look okay. I angle the picture so it's only tongue, then text it to my boyfriend and write, So long. I tweeze the rest of the acid back into my birth control wheel.

When the spacemen came, there were bowls of cereal hidden under Ali's bed with milk hardened into the bottoms of them, from the head of the bedframe to the feet of it. Spoons stuck out of the crusted milk that had turned to this puke shade of green.

Megan scrapes the chalk against the wall and starts to laugh to herself. She says, "It's almost ready." She makes a yuck sound and asks me if she can just swallow the tab.

"Kinda chew it with your front teeth," I say, not looking yet, at the chalk wall.

Megan says it's ready. Ali gasps when she sees it.

A text from my boyfriend dings my phone screen on. It says, What are you wearing?

Megan looks at us with her lips open and her teeth bouncing on the paper. In chalk, floating heads take up the middle of Ali's wall.

The me-head has crooked bangs that stick up and her hair's drawn in jagged, fried lines around her face. The Ali-head is a big circle face and two chins with dimples like moon craters.

The Megan-head is all nose and ponytail and little Us on her face like beads of sweat.

"What's wrong with you," Ali says.

"It's funny," Megan says, "it's cartoons."

Under all of us, in half-erased chalk, the wall says, People come and go, but the right one's always stay.

Ali kicks some socks and notebook paper out of the way and walks up to the drawings. She covers her mouth with her sleeve pulled over her hand. Ali says, "Erase it."

I click my camera app open and tell Megan to come here. She sits down next to me on the floor, and we pose with our chests puffed up and our stomachs sucked in. Ali just stares at the cartoon-her. I angle it so you can't see my hair and snap the picture of Megan and me.

Megan leans over my shoulder and sees the text from my boyfriend. She screams, "EW!" she says, "Don't send that."

"He wants to know what we're wearing," I tell her, and hit send.

Megan smacks my arms and says to leave her out of it. She says, "He always wants to

know what we're wearing."

Ali pulls her sleeve back and blood gushes from her finger all over her hand and soaks into the sleeve. She puts her finger in her mouth again, my cheeks puff out like I'm gonna throw up.

Megan screams yuck and tells Ali to go wash her hands. Ali swings the door open and heads for the bathroom.

The night I lost my virginity was back when Ali could still go to parties, and we threw them at Megan's house. My boyfriend bought us a handle of vodka. I remember some of it and some of it is black. But Ali said that my boyfriend took me to a bedroom. She told me that she tried to open the door but there was a sock on the doorknob, and she couldn't bring herself to touch it. When it's all over, in the end, I don't get to tell her it's okay.

Megan looks at her drawings then back at me. She says, "I could've added antenna."

I stand up from the floor and bounce onto Ali's bed. A dusty smell comes off the blue covers. "And a spaceship," I laugh, "that'd kill her."

My phone dings in my lap, makes my stomach drop. A text from my boyfriend glows on the screen. It says, That's all I get?

Ali rushes back into the room with a Band-Aid around her finger. She pumps sanitizer into her palm and rubs it up and down her arms. I get up on my knees on Ali's bed, push my boobs together with my elbows, and take a picture of my chest, leave my head out of it.

Megan goes oh my god, and she starts to laugh. We stare at her while she looks up and down her arms, hugs herself, until the shivers creep over Ali and me, too. I click on the camera app and look at my eyes in my phone screen, gone all black. All goosebumps and wild eyes, I hit send on the boobie picture.

It's like she's choking on her laugh. Megan curls up like a baby in a cradle on the new carpet floor. The hair sweating hair around her face sticks to her skin. My jaw won't unclench, like when you can feel the puke piling up in your throat. The inside of my mouth tastes like the dentist, tooth dust from grinding them down, shaving and shattering them.

Ali can't get off her bed.

She reaches her arms under the covers, rocks back and forth against her pillow.

Her cell starts to sing. Ali answers and asks, "What? Hello?" She tells us that her mom wants us to be quiet, and that sends Megan cackling.

I step off the bed spinning, stupid, sweating. The blue blanket bed looks floating free, zero gravity. Ali hangs up on her mom. If I press my hand into the black wall, I will fall through it through to another side somewhere else. Tap my phone screen. Nothing. Tap again.

Megan gets to her knees. She finds the piece of glowing green chalk chip and starts to scrape it against the black burnt board. Megan carves shooting stars into space.

"Still nothing," I say, and hold my phone up so they can see the boobie picture.

She goes, "Your boyfriend," in slow motion, and Megan finds her feet. She starts to sew a new funny face next to ours in outer space. She says, "Maybe I should freak out," she says, "then I'll get all new art stuff."

"I didn't freak out," Ali says.

My ankles tickle and tingle and I try to tell Ali to stop tossing and turning, but my words won't work. Gooey green worms wiggle around my feet like vines of veins. I smack at them with my cell-hand to get them gone, but more fall from sky to skin.

Megan says, "A new room." She keeps at her cartoon and her shirt goes grey with sweat.

Ali says, "Stop it."

Ali bounces across her bed and she pulls my hand away from my feet and my other hand away from head. She says to stop scratching, I'm making all my hair fall out. Ali's fingers blush and bleed, drip down and sizzle on me; an egg on a summer sidewalk.

Before I can look at the message making my phone glow, Megan laughs herself back to the floor and she falls into Ali's drawing desk. The glass of pink rubbing alcohol spills and splashes onto the hardwood. The smell burns like when my boyfriend bleaches me.

From the floor Megan says what the fuck. Ali yells for Megan to get up. I get down on the floor and look under Ali's bed. Brown bag after brown bag soaked in grease and grime are all shoved on top of each other. Under the bed starts to spin and smell and I shiver. The bags say, Taco Temple, and Best Burger.

Up from the floor the new floating head on the new space wall by Megan catches my eyes and everything starts spinning. He looks old with big, bad bags under his eyes and monster, murder-teeth. The eyes start to follow me, all evil and eerie. Ali says over and over again that she's going to throw the food away, she just hasn't yet.

Megan calls at her cartoon from the floor and says, "Your boyfriend."

I step over where either the floor is ruined into rubbing alcohol, or the alcohol has folded into floor. Wiggling, blue worms swim around the puddle, alcohol pond.

A buzz of boyfriend text on my phone. The text says, Show me something real.

Ali's blood starts to brown on my wrists. Megan pulls a Band-Aid from the back of her pants and picks at the sticky stuck to her pants.

She says Ew, and Ali tells her to keep it on the carpet.

"How come you can't even come to my house, but your room is disgusting," Megan says, sticking the Band-Aid back onto the floor.

"If it's all there," Ali says, and she pulls the covers from her bed down to the alcohol puddle and presses it down, dries what she can. She says, "Then it's not on me."

My cartoon-boyfriend-head stares at me from the stars.

I say, "Let's be blood brothers," I say, "sisters."

Al steps onto the covers and the blue blanket gets dark blue with the wet.

Megan laughs like it's just a joke. On the bed where Ali was sitting, spots of blood bleed into the sheets. There are the tweezers, and Ali tells us to wait. Her phone buzzes on the bed. She tucks the phone under her chin and gushes green sanitizer into her hands.

Ali says, "What, Mom," then disappears into the dark.

Megan tells me to watch, and she takes the chalk to the space wall and starts shooting star marks crossing the cartoon Al. Ali's Mom's voice yells phone-fuzzy from the closet that we were supposed to be in bed hours ago. I shiver and little green hairs fall onto my feet. Megan makes antenna on the Ali-head and a UFO.

Below my boyfriend-head, if you squeeze your eyes squinted, the wall says, Even the darkest night will end, and the sun will rise!

Megan adds big, bulging alien-eyes to the Ali-head.

He won't stop looking at me, licking his cartoon lips, his blood-dripping mouth. I scratch my scalp and give the green hair worms their freedom from me, wish I was free, and the little greens itch their way down my body, and the shivers won't stop, the walls turn into the star-filled walls of space, and Al's not finished fishing around in her closet, so I pull her out of there, take her cell from her chin and chuck it onto the blue bed.

Megan throws the chalk down and wipes her wet palm across the wall to try and wipe away the wild alien she made of Ali. I tell her to come here. Ali holds a new glass of rubbing

alcohol in her hand and the rubber handle of a steak knife sticks out of it.

She says, "I've been saving this."

I pull the knife out of the alcohol and the smell stings like when he took my virginity, the vodka-night, behind a closed bedroom door, when Ali did nothing, didn't even knock. Nobody told me the pushing in would sting like alcohol on an open wound. My phone dings with a text from my boyfriend, bright blue screen, and it says, I'm waiting.

I throw my phone on Ali's bed.

"Here," I say to Megan and I hold my hand out, waiting for her to give me her wrist.

"You're crazy," Megan says. She says, "No way."

I tell her to come on, Megan, we all want to do it. She crosses her arms over her chest. My fingers curl around her arms, try and pry pink skin free, force her to fix me, but she pulls harder, and my fingers slip away, she falls backward onto Ali's covers.

"We need to match," I yell, and Al's phone says, Girls?

Ali rocks back and forth with her finger in her mouth. She squints at the space wall. Megan scoots, crab crawls away from me on the hardwood and says she won't do it. Sweat drips from her forehead.

When it's all over, Megan and me, we don't stay friends.

The sound of phone-fuzz over voice says, Girls, again, and then Ali screams.

She points and panics at the Ali-alien-head and covers her mouth.

Megan says, "It's just a joke, Alien," and she laughs.

Ali pushes up her sleeve and unfolds her forearm arm across my chest. Her skin is all glossed over with soft, shiny pink worms, striping her skin, red burn bubbles polka-dotting her skin, and she tells me to do it.

I drag the steak knife down and deep from Ali's elbow crease till it splits open her hand.

Ali's phone beep, beeps like to end a call. Megan curls and covers herself.

Ali's knees thud against the floor and she gasps, gulps for breath.

She starts to crawl out of her bedroom.

I walk out behind her, squeezing the knife in my palm. Ali gets to the top of the stairs. She cries and calls for help, anyone, and her elbows wobble soft, they give out.

She lies there on the hardwood. Al reaches over the first stair and slides down it a little, on her stomach. She lies with her legs facing me, her head pointing down the staircase. There

are footsteps, then a violent voice from the bottom of the billions of steep stairs.

Her mom yells, "Ali," and then help her upon help her.

My birth-control alarm goes off, blue light glows, ding, ding, ding. Back in the bedroom, a pink pill pops out of the plastic into my palm. When it's all over, Megan and I can't remember if it took forever for someone to save our friend or no time at all.

Men in uniforms rush up the stairs because Ali's mom tries to, and only gets halfway to the second story.

She only makes it to the stair where the worming, thin stream of Ali's blood lands, and finally stops dripping.

If you squint, next to the floating heads in outer space, it reads, Push yourself, because no one else is going to do it for you.

I swallow the little pink pill and open the camera app on my phone. While they wrap and wrap Ali's bleeding arm, I see myself in the screen; the dead, green mop from my college boyfriend bleaching and fixing my hair, me, all the time. I sit down on Ali's bed and drag the tiny tweezers toward me. My phone mirrors me. Me, pinching a group of green locks together with the tip of the tweezers, then pulling them up and out of my scratchy scalp.

When it's all over, my hair takes years to grow back.

Megan sweats at the edge of the bed, burying bloody things, razors and knives and anything sharp, in the blue blankets. Evidence. She asks me what we should do. In my phone screen I look like a cartoon. I yank strand after strand out of my head and let the dead hairs drop from my dead head, and fall all over Ali's pretty, perfect new bedroom.

**SUNSHINE BARBITO** is a fiction writer. She currently lives in New York City. Her short stories have been showcased in many literary magazines, the most recent being: "Glory of Love," which won first place in *Ember Chasm Review's* Fiction and Poetry Summer 2020 contest and was published in their third issue, "Baby," published by *Sad Girl Lit*, "Sleepover," published by *Fecund Magazine*, and "Jump for Heart," published by *Prometheus Dreaming*. Sunshine has worked as a freelance editor, collaborating on projects with Dark Horse Comics, including *The Umbrella Academy* and *Fight Club 3*. She spoke at a panel about crime stories in comics at the 2019 Portland Comic-Con, to promote her first series as sole writer, *Mafiosa*, which will be released in October 2021. Sunshine works as an editorial intern with DZANC Books. To Sunshine, fiction is everything.

# STEVIE

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BY OLIVIA LOCCISANO

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A few years ago, I was camping with some friends in Ontario's North. We were all sitting around a bonfire on our towels, and someone asked:

"What's the scariest thing that's ever happened to you?"

Each person went around the circle telling stories about seeing a dead body or almost drowning.

I kept counting down how many people were in the circle until I had to share. I was so afraid for them to call on me; not because I did not know what the scariest thing in my life was, but because I had to relive it.

When I was eleven, I took ballet class. Nikita and I stood in the locker room giggling as we watched little Stevie hide boxes of cookies and one frozen lasagna inside her locker. She had been hoarding and eating food throughout class and everyone knew it.

All the other girls in the class would give her condescending glances because she was the biggest among all of the girls. All of the other girls were thin and this was a sign of beauty among us, and these beauty standards

excluded Stevie. The dress rehearsal of our Winter concert was in two weeks, and we were all dreaming of sugarplums dancing in our heads.

Everyone knew that Stevie loved Akari. She was the most beautiful girl in our class and was the only girl who was kind to Stevie. Whenever we would laugh at Stevie, Akari would turn and hush us. She would never join in with the laughter. Stevie's love for Akari was obvious. During dance practice, Stevie would stare at Akari with a dreamy, almost stunned, smile. Her infatuation with Akari was so serious that our teacher, Ms. Caroline constantly had to tell Stevie to pay attention every time she missed a pirouette or stance because she was held in enchantment.

At the end of one class, I heard screams coming from the locker room. I walked in to see the girls running to the benches, tucking their long legs into their chests. Ms. Caroline, walked up to where the girls' eyes were locked: a boil infested rat scraping its claws at Stevie's locker. I immediately joined them in screaming. Ms. Caroline busted the locker open to which frozen lasagna and two boxes of cookies fell out.

"Girls! What did I tell you about leaving food in your locker!" she wailed as the rat grabbed a cookie in its teeth and ran away.

Our screams turned into loud guffaws as the threat of the rat was now obsolete. We pointed to Stevie, laughing, and howling words of disgust. Akari immediately shushed us.

At the end of class that night, Akari was coming for a sleepover and we were waiting for my mom to pick us up. We were the last ones waiting outside along with Stevie. It was snowing and we were silent. Then Akari said:

"Rats are kind of cute."

"Yeah?" Stevie replied.

"Yeah," Akari continued, "I love their cute little whiskers." She made a tong with her index finger and thumb and repeatedly clamped. Then, to our dismay Akari said:

"You should come over Friday before dress rehearsal. We are doing a gift exchange."

Stevie looked as though she was trying to conceal an uncontrollable and wild joy. She agreed with that huge smile spread across her face. Then my mom came to pick us up and we jumped in the car before Akari could say anything back.

During the next ballet class, I watched Akari walk up to Stevie with a winter toque.

"Reach inside. Pick a piece of paper. That's your Secret Santa."

All the other girls, including me, looked at this in revulsion. We never wanted Stevie involved in our lives more than she had to be.

I can still remember the cold tactile experience that was the marble floor beneath my legs on the night of the dress rehearsal. All the girls were sitting on the floor of the locker room with our make up in little polar white powdered faces. Then Stevie walked in, and we immediately started chatting with each other, giggling about her. Akari jumped up from the floor, her legs twisting deer-like in the air and hugged her.

We all opened our Secret Santa gifts. Stevie had brought Martha a pair of earmuffs, and Martha did not do a good job at hiding her apathetic emotion, if she even was trying. Tissue paper riddled the floor, and Stevie was the only girl without a gift. Then Akari handed her a tiny box.

"I was your Secret Santa!" she cried out.

Stevie carefully opened the box. We all waited in anticipation. As Stevie's chubby fingers lifted the lid, she was greeted by a long-pointed nose with whiskers and little claws prying their way out.

She threw the box across the floor while we all screamed and laughed.

She then turned to Akari who was laughing among us. Stevie sat there, tears welling so obviously in her eyes. Her body stiffened and she glared at Akari who stared back at her, laughing. Stevie remained silent. The rat scurried to her locker and began to nibble a cookie crumb on the floor near it. The girls and I then howled in a gut laugh that roared and echoed the locker room walls.

Stevie, tears and redness welled within her eyes, walked towards the rat. She knelt close to the nibbling grey creature and stared at it. She looked at us as we continued to laugh at her expense. Akari continued grinning and giggling as we all marinated in awe at the punch line she had created. Stevie picked up the rat. While looking directly at Akari, she dug her teeth deep into the rodent's skin. Stevie ripped off the flesh with her teeth and began eating it. She was staring at us girls right in the eyes while she was doing it. Blood spread over her cheeks, chin and chest.

Our laughter turned into screams of horror. We all began to cry and yell for Ms. Caroline to come in and help us. We ran to the walls of the locker room terrified but forced to stare in awe as Stevie continued gnawing and chewing as the rat squealed and screamed

louder and louder.

There was nothing we could do as she devoured that animal right in front of us.

Ballet class was shut down, and I have no idea what became of Stevie. Never again have I ever danced without smelling the rat's blood or seeing the look of betrayal in Stevie's eyes as she munched its skin.

Almost a decade after the incident, I recognized Akari at my university library.

We did not greet one another. Our eyes met, and we clearly recognized one another. It was a paradoxical look of sickly panic and understanding: a look that stabbed me with the reminiscent fear that we were part of a cruel and unspeakable joke. The look was much like the feeling one gets from stepping up the stairs and thinking there is one more stair than there actually is. She turned her eyes away from mine and back down at her books.

I did not mention my story at the bonfire. Instead, I made up a story about a non-existent monster I had seen as a child. I was dreading that something about me recounting the story about Stevie would mean that a part of it would be brought back to life and unmask the monster that lives inside me. Of all the things that happened in those years of my childhood, that is all I can remember.

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# HAZARDS OF THE TRADE

BY AIMEE GRIFFIN

"Someone close to you is about to undergo some health trials. I'm getting an 'S'...Sophia?"

"My sister! Should I be worried?"

"I guess that depends on how you feel about your sister."

Justine cringed as she listened from beyond the purple velvet curtains Tabitha cordoned off her reading area with. She could see the way Tabs would be lifting one shoulder indifferently as she spoke that last flippant statement, immune to her own lack of tact. The curtains smelled strongly of weed, even though Tabitha did not partake. She had bought the curtains off of Facebook marketplace and the smell would not abate no matter how much Febreeze she assaulted them with. Justine was fairly certain that Tabs couldn't smell it anymore, too long spent in the monkey enclosure and all that.

After the customer had fled the shop, tears standing in her eyes, Tabs emerged from the weed curtained enclosure. She stood behind a little counter that had once held an ancient cash register, but which now simply served as a place for her to perch and watch the passerby, twisting heavy costume rings off

her fingers and plopping them into a dish she kept on the counter. They pinged against the ceramic, and Tabitha seemed to relax as she shed them, each one a representation of the façade she assumed for her customers.

"Isn't family stuff kind of beyond the remit of your standard palm reading?"

Justine was trying to lounge on one of the stiff, high-backed chairs that Tabitha had gotten for free from a pizza joint that went out of business. The pizza people had certainly gotten them from some kind of event hall, Knights of Columbus, church-basement-type-shit. Tabitha rolled her eyes.

"Her life was so..." She waved her hands in a circular motion at shoulder level and stuck her tongue out while rolling her eyes to the ceiling. Justine took this to indicate 'lame.'

"They don't pay you to give your opinion on their lives."

"Well, they kind of do. The reading is through my awareness and perception so, it's never really going to be objective." She untied a sparkling, fringed scarf that she'd thrown around her body as a drapey, pseudo-dress, concealing rather sensible mid-rise denim shorts and a cotton tank top. That too was tucked under the counter.

Justine heard the rasp of foam against the thin, shitty carpet as Tabs scuffed on her flip-flops. Being barefoot was the one aspect of the reading that was part of Tabitha's actual process, though Justine didn't think it actually affected her abilities. She just preferred to read barefoot.

Justine had not believed in mediums or psychics before she met Tabitha, and she still believed that anyone other than Tabitha claiming to have abilities was likely bullshitting her. Tabitha's talents were solidified for Justine in that she sought to live off them, but not thrive off of them. She could do better than a shitty shop just off a Jersey Shore boardwalk, but she didn't have the desire. Tabitha was also comfortably aware that she was unlikeable at best, and rude at worst, which is not what anyone seeking a celebrity medium (or really, any medium) was hoping for. People wanted a soothing bedside manner in the person who was delivering information about their future. Tabitha did not care to cultivate amiability.

The cluster of dollar store Christmas bells that hung over the shop's threshold jangled as the two women stepped out. Tabitha dug in the back pocket of her shorts for her key and quickly twisted it in the lock, eschewing as always the final door pull of a cautious person. Sometimes Justine wondered if Tabs would care if the shop were broken into or vandalized, or

if she'd just shrug it off. There was nothing worth stealing in there, Tabs did not take cash.

They strolled down the cracked sidewalk, Tabitha's drugstore flip flops scraping and sighing. Justine imagined the little rolls of foam being exfoliated off of their bottoms by the unkempt concrete. Justine was wearing new, bright white sneakers that reflected the glaring midday sun. They were part of her uniform at her new job, which also included the forest green polo shirt with the name of the day-spa chain embroidered over her left breast in white, and the tiny little khaki shorts that kept trying to crawl up her ass.

"I kind of expected them to dress you more 'zen'."

"Well I'm not a masseuse or a facialist or anything. They wear white uniforms. I'm just the receptionist."

"Masseuse," Tabitha repeated, drawing out the hissing "s" sounds in the word, testing it out as if she'd never heard it before. "Don't they call them massage therapists these days?"

"I don't get the impression masseuse is diminutive or anything. It's not like 'stewardess' vs. 'flight attendant.'" Tabitha nodded seriously as she yanked open the door to the deli, hitting them with a frozen food aisle caliber cold front. Tabitha never wore a bra and her nipples hardened to sharp points under her tank top, causing the shiny-faced adolescent behind the counter to shift uncomfortably. Justine resisted the urge to dig her shorts out of her butt crack. Tabs ordered their usual, an Italian sub with mayo on one half, oil and vinegar on the other, while Justine grabbed two cans of Diet Coke out of the humming beverage fridges lining one wall. They brought their lunch out to the boardwalk and Tabitha delicately unrolled the sandwich from its paper wrapping while Justine cracked the cans and divided their stack of napkins in half.

Tabitha handed Justine the oil and vinegar half of the sandwich, frowning.

"That kid goes really heavy on the ham. There's like a core of ham."

"He was too busy thinking about your tits." Tabitha took a big bite out of her sandwich half and spoke around the food in her mouth.

"He came in for a reading the other day."

"No shit! He must've tracked you down, he's been wilting in your presence all summer."

"He had like, half a hard on the whole time."

"Oh, gross. Why didn't you tell him to get the fuck out?" Tabitha held her hands up and lettuce bits rained from her sandwich.

"He's what, fifteen? Do they even know how to control that shit at that age?"

"He should know enough to fucking hide it. That's disgusting."

"His reading was more interesting than most, at least."

"Did you see if he'd learn to control himself in public?" Tabitha set her sandwich back down on the paper in her lap and took a swig of her Diet Coke. She turned toward Justine and gave her a look that made her stop with her sandwich halfway to her mouth.

"We're not going to see him at the deli again."

"Is he going to get fired for being a little creep?"

"No. He's going to die." Justine fumbled her half of the hero and cursed as a tomato slid out and hit the boardwalk with a slap.

"That's fucked up Tabs."

"It's not the whole story, either."

"I mean, in your own time I guess."

"We're going to be involved."

"In killing him!?"

"In the circumstances surrounding it."

"Jesus, Tabs." Tabitha inhaled the rest of her sandwich half and then looked over at Justine's, which she was holding in her lap, barely nibbled. She handed it over to the psychic who tore into it.

"I don't know how you can eat, thinking about shit like that."

"It's not the first time I've seen that people were going to die."

"Yeah but it's not like you ever ended up involved in those deaths, right?" Tabitha licked oil from her bottom lip and didn't answer. The sun had shifted slightly so it was beating against Justine's bare neck and baking her back in the dark, thick polo. Sweat began to form between her breasts and under the band of her bra.

"So, we just avoid whatever...whatever you saw, right? We just stay away from it?"

"That's not how it works."

"Then please enlighten me because I'm freaking the fuck out and it's fucking with me how calm you are about the whole thing."

A police siren sounded somewhere nearby, and a toddler lounging in a stroller being pushed by a sleek woman in all black workout gear tried to imitate it, his high pitched whine

startling some of the people on the boardwalk. The woman did not tell him to stop. Justine tried again.

"Did you see when this is going to happen?"

"No."

"But you know we won't see that kid again so, it has to be soon right? We go to the deli almost every day." Tabitha did her single shoulder shrug as she polished off the rest of the sandwich. Justine wanted to ask how Tabitha could be so calm about this, but she already knew the answer. Tabitha had foreseen every bad thing that had ever happened in her life, and lots of the lives around her. Eventually she had become immune to shock or horror, or at least she appeared to be. She had always been this way, since Justine had known her. She'd just never been involved in one of Tabs's predictions before. She would not read Justine, no matter how many times she'd asked.

Tabitha balled up the paper the sandwich had been wrapped in and lifted it, cocking her elbow back and looking toward the nearby metal barrel that served as a garbage can. She then lowered her elbow and got up, walking the few steps to the barrel instead and dropping the paper ball in, along with her empty soda can. Justine wondered if she had seen herself failing to make the shot. She got up and met Tabs at the barrel.

"So what do we do?"

"About what?"

"About the deli kid, Tabs!"

"Oh, yeah. Nothing. There's nothing to be done. Just keep living. I can't really know exactly how things will flow."

"You could be wrong?"

"No." Tabitha turned and walked down the boardwalk, back in the direction of the little alley where her shop was. Justine checked her phone, she only had fifteen minutes of her break left, and she need to drive back to the spa. She made a solid \$3 more an hour than she had at her last gig, and she didn't want to fuck it up. She felt the seconds of the few remaining minutes rushing by as she stood fuming on the boardwalk, watching Tabitha get farther away, her long dark hair swishing back and forth across her lower back as she walked.

Throughout the rest of her workday, Justine wrote out and erased text messages to Tabitha, and tried to convince herself that her friend was wrong, despite her gut awareness

that this was a lie. Justine had met Tabitha one alcohol soaked night a few years ago when her ex dragged her into the shabby shop to get their palms read. Justine refused, calling it all horseshit, but sat next to the ex while Tabs read his palm, though she seemed to always be making eye contact with Justine.

"You're a person who has trouble with the rules. You don't do well with authority."

Tabitha drawled, her fingertips hovering over the ex's sweaty hand, her half-lidded eyes studying Justine's reaction.

"See Jus, she knows. I'm no follower."

"You've left a lot of heartbreak in your wake. You are not yet in the place in life where you will find your soulmate." The ex snorted, a self-satisfied smirk pulling at his lips. Justine already knew he was cheating on her, and she wasn't surprised that he looked like the type to do it. She rolled her eyes. Tabitha's eyes snapped up to the ex's face.

"You're luck is going to run out soon." Justine could swear the woman was trying hard not to smile, like she was thinking of some private joke. "Those who you think are loyal to you are not. You may regret things you have done to them in the past." The ex was losing interest, and deciding this was a waste of ten bucks. He pulled his hand away from hers.

"You got a bathroom?" She swept her hand to the right, and he bumbled through the curtains to the back of the shop. They could hear him pissing through the door. Justine folded her hands on the table and addressed Justine.

"The deal he's planning, it's going to go bad. Whoever he thinks he's fucking over, that person is going to flip on him, or already has. He's going to go to jail, and it's not going to be for a misdemeanor this time. I think it kind of goes without saying but, you could do better."

The ex was a small-time weed dealer who wanted more, but didn't have a fucking clue. The week after the reading, he did indeed get arrested. He'd been arranging a bogus deal that he thought would make him a lot of money and fuck over a lot of other people, but he'd made the deal with an undercover cop and his best friend who had recently turned informant. The ex had apparently fucked every girlfriend said best friend had ever had.

She'd gone back to Tabitha's shop after that, saying she had come for her own reading. It was the early afternoon on a winter Wednesday, and no one else was there. Tabs had led her into the curtained area, but hadn't asked her to pay first, like she had with the ex. They sat opposite one another and Justine squirmed in her seat, waiting for the psychic to prompt her,

but she was cool and quiet. She laid her hand on the table, stretching out her fingers.

"I'm not going to read you." Justine drew back her hand like she'd been burned.

"What?"

"You can ask me whatever you want, though."

"How did you know what was going to happen to my boyfriend? Do you know someone who was part of that?"

"No." Justine waited for further explanation. Tabitha smiled a surprisingly warm smile full of crooked teeth. "I'm a psychic. I saw it."

Justine had expected the woman to tell her how she knew the informant or the cop or any of the many other people who had apparently known he was about to get busted. She had not expected her to double down on the medium shit. She shoved her seat back from the table.

"This isn't a fucking joke to me." Tabitha gave Justine her first taste of the one shoulder shrug.

"I can't prove it to you, and you certainly don't have to believe me. I told you specifics about what I saw because your relationship with him doesn't serve you, and I thought you deserved to know."

"So why don't you read me now, tell me about what's going to happen to me and then I can see if you're right."

"I don't read people I like."

Justine had left in a daze. The ex-boyfriend got the book thrown at him by a judge who'd he'd annoyed one too many times before, and they broke up. Justine started holding down a steady job as a waitress at a place that stayed open all year for the locals instead of sending her life into orbit around another man, but she felt a pull coming from the direction of Tabitha's shabby little shop. The psychic was not surprised that she kept coming back, nor did she ever ask Justine why. While Justine could pinpoint the start of their relationship, she couldn't remember the moment when it crystallized into a friendship. They did not have much in common rather than their love of deli sandwiches and Diet Coke and their twin reluctance to move away from the shore. If pressed, Justine would likely tell you that Tabitha was honest with her, and that one statement would tell you exactly what all of her previous relationships, familial, friendly, and romantic, had lacked.

In the few years since they'd met and her toxic ex-boyfriend went away, Justine had managed to only change jobs when she found a better one, move out of her grandmother's apartment, and quit drinking. She didn't chase guys. She thought more and more seriously about going back to school. She'd also seen enough proof of Tabitha's abilities to know that her friend meant what she'd said on the boardwalk bench about the boy in the deli.

Justine shivered in the frigid, air-conditioned store front of the spa, pulling on the approved, company-branded sweatshirt. It was early Fall and no longer hot enough for such an aggressively low temperature. Her thighs jiggled gently as she bounced her knees to the mind numbing "soothing" music pumped into the space. The tourist traffic had petered out and they only got a few locals and the occasional creep trying to subtly ask if they provided secret off-menu items, or asking if they could specifically request her services. She enjoyed informing them that it was not that kind of outfit and that she was not a licensed massage therapist, just a receptionist. Today, no one approached, and the appointment calendar was sparse. Justine's boss, the owner of the franchise and a thick, imposing woman who looked like she could snap a person's spine with a flick of her wrist, emerged from the back with a regular whose muscles she had just pummeled into submission. Justine set up the woman's next appointment and watched her skip out to the parking lot, the sheen of absorbing oil still glistening on the back of her neck and arms.

"How many left today?"

"Just Ada's 5PM acne facial."

"And the new stock?"

"I unpacked it and organized it this morning. There wasn't much to fill on the floor." Her boss nodded, taking in the shelves of skincare products, untouched by any of the day's customers.

"You can take off, no point in you waiting around for the last one," when Justine did not immediately respond positively, she added, "I'll pay you for the day, don't worry about it."

"You sure?"

"Get out of here before I change my mind."

She sat in her car for an abnormal handful of moments, one hand on the wheel and the other holding her car key in her lap. She was assaulted by two simultaneous thoughts: that she should drive over to Tabs's shop and check on her, and also that she had made plans to

work on her college applications that night. Tabitha knew she was doing apps and that they weren't meeting up. What she had told Justine over lunch floated to the forefront of her mind.

Just keep living.

She started the car and backed out of her parking spot. At the exit of the lot, she turned right when the traffic opened up, toward her apartment, instead of left, toward the shop.

Justine had an extra bounce in her step the next morning. She woke up an hour before her alarm, completely refreshed. She was having a great hair day. Her work polo felt a little looser than it had felt a week or two before; making her own healthy dinners seemed to be paying off. The sky was clear blue, not a cloud for miles. She had electronically sent off a few applications the night before, and she was feeling hopeful, and maybe just a little smidge proud of herself. She treated herself to a sugary coffee drink on the drive to work and wondered if she could convince Tabitha to try a different kind of sandwich at lunch later. She'd heard the deli's chicken salad was good.

It wasn't until she was rounding the corner into the sad little side street where Tabitha's shop lived during her lunch hour that Justine felt anything shift. She wondered for a long time after why she hadn't woken up knowing, why she hadn't had any indication of disaster. The only explanation that she could come up with was that Tabitha hadn't wanted her to know until it was too late, when all she could do was accept it.

The glorified alley was jammed with vehicles. Police cars sat with lights quietly flashing. Caution tape cordoned off most of the block. The owners of nearby businesses, with nothing else to do in the off season, gathered around, chattering. The owner of the deli stood off to the side, smoking a cigarette with tears on his face. He saw her and dropped the cigarette, crushing it underneath his sneaker before scurrying away. Cops were coming in and out of Tabitha's shop. Someone in a white disposable jumpsuit and blue latex gloves examined the door jam. Panic began to rise in Justine's throat. She shoved aside the people hovering just inches from the caution tape and tried to scramble under it, into the roped off scene. A uniformed officer caught her by the shoulders as she stood up.

"Miss, no one is allowed past here. This is a crime scene."

"That's my friend's shop! What happened? Is she okay?" Justine was screaming at him, trembling underneath his hands. A tiny crease appeared between his unkempt, salt and

pepper eyebrows.

"What's your name?"

"Justine West." His eyes widened and he called over another officer to watch her. He consulted other people, and a woman with dark hair and matching dark eyes looked over at her, her mouth tucking itself into a grim line. Justine felt her scope of awareness narrowing in, focusing only on this woman as she strode over, never ceasing eye contact.

"Detective Alvarez," she said, by way of introduction. She held out a sheet of ordinary yellow lined paper, torn from a legal pad and folded once in half. Her full name was scrawled on it in Tabitha's pointy, aggressively right sloping handwriting. "Does this mean anything to you?"

Justine took the paper and opened the fold. Across the fold were written two short sentences.

I changed the flow for you. Be good.

Justine shook her head. It wasn't entirely a lie.

Later, after they questioned her and everyone else, she found out that her ex, out on parole, had gone to Tabitha's shop looking to find out where Justine was, and to exact revenge. He was convinced the two women had something to do with the bust that had caught him. He'd shot Tabitha multiple times, but not before she'd fought him hard and managed to stab him with a knife she kept in the little counter. The boy from the deli had been walking down the sidewalk, hoping to catch a glimpse of Tabs idling away in the shop, when he saw the struggle. Turns out he hadn't been a creep after all, at least not all the way. He'd dashed inside and the ex shot him until he dropped, and then rushed out the door. He, the ex, hadn't gotten far from the scene before he collapsed. He died in the hospital.

The cops didn't let Justine have the note, but she didn't need it. She held the message always close to her, though she decided not to mess with any more psychics. She understood, finally, why Tabs wouldn't read her friends.

**AIMEE** is a graduate of Gettysburg College with a BA in English and Philosophy. Her work has appeared in *Epiphany Magazine's* 'What We're Reading Now' web series, *Delay Fiction*, and *Litbreak Magazine*. She lives in Brooklyn, where she works as a marketer for an academic publishing company and is writing her first novel.

# MY ONLY FRIEND

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BY KAYLA CHANG

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When I was a baby, my only friend was a cheese grater.

I met him while he was at work one afternoon in Mom's kitchen. I thought he was very effective at his job. I thought maybe he could teach to be more effective at *my* job, which was to be a baby.

Overall, I was pretty okay at being a baby. I had a pretty standard set of baby skills. The only thing I had any talent for was crying, but the cheese grater told me I'd need a new gimmick if I wanted to stand out, because *every* baby was good at crying. Maybe I could spruce up my appearance a little, he suggested. The cheese grater himself was very handsome: shiny chrome, sharp blades, rubber handle and base. *No-slip grip*, he called it. He explained that it was a marketing term, and that *I* would need to get one, too.

The baby market as a whole is an oversaturated market. There are periods of predictable spikes in value — first words, first crawls, first steps, etcetera — but for the most part, babies have come to rely on one sole consumer: the mother. I'd always assumed the mother was a relatively reliable

consumer, but the cheese grater told me that nothing stable is ever built on one leg. The key to stability is diversification, he explained — diversifying your product, and diversifying your customer base.

Suckling from Mom's breast later that evening, I detected a bitterness in her milk I'd never noticed before.

The cheese grater had given me a lot to think about.

\*

Even though I agreed with a lot of the cheese grater's points, I had a hard time believing Mom would ever cast me aside for another baby. I don't know why I doubted this — call it dumb animal instinct. But when I confessed my doubts to the cheese grater, he said it happened all the time — that mothers routinely left their babies in dumpsters, or on the doorsteps of a fire station, or killed the babies themselves.

I told him that seemed extreme. He agreed. I admired his sensible nature.

What's more likely to happen, he qualified, is that Mom would trade me in for another baby, or have *more* babies and dilute the stock. *Have you seen the babies out there recently?* he asked. *How could anyone compete?*

So when Mom took me on our usual Sunday stroll through the park that morning — her strolling, me being strolled — I paid close attention to the other babies in the park. And it turned out the cheese grater was right: these babies were born to be *stars*. So perfectly pudgy, so melt-in-your-hands soft. Dressed to the nines and dripping with charisma. Mom even stopped to coo all over one of them, so I cried as loud as I could until she apologized to the other mom and rushed us back home.

I told the cheese grater about the babies right away. He was right, I said. One hundred percent right. Mom was just like the rest of them, forever lusting over the newest, shiniest thing. I needed to regroup, restrategeize, rebrand.

*How do you do it?* I asked the cheese grater. *How do you stay so shiny and new?*

He said, *I have a wide variety of grater/zester/slicer options, a heavy-duty stainless steel construction, and I come at a great price.*

I was sold. Mom would never give him up.

\*

I noticed some changes in mom over the next few days. During nap times, she'd set me

down in the crib instead of rocking me to sleep. During breast feedings, she'd stare blankly at the TV instead of down at my face. She stopped sniffing the crown of my head, tickling my tummy, nibbling on my toes. I cried more and more to get her attention, but the more I cried, the less she cared.

The cheese grater and I had had a rebranding plan in the works, but market factors were changing faster even than the cheese grater had anticipated. He assured me that our plan would still work, that the only thing we'd have to adjust was the timeline. We reviewed the plan again:

First, I needed to remake my physical appearance. This would require changes in diet and exercise, a change in wardrobe, and possibly some light plastic surgery. Second, I needed to decide what my new image would *represent*. Cherubic purity? The elemental chaos of childhood? A second chance at life? An empty placeholder for purposeless purpose-seekers? Then, finally, an aggressive ad campaign to sell my rebranded self on the open market — whether Mom wants to buy me or not.

It felt a bit at times like betrayal — historically speaking, Mom had taken good care of me — but the cheese grater reminded me that this was a matter of life or death. As the product, I was always in danger of becoming obsolete. And what would become of me then?

I appreciated the cheese grater's counsel and support during this trying time, which he generously continued to offer even as Mom put him to work, grating one block of parmesan after another.

In fact, Mom had started using the cheese grater more than ever. Ever the professional, the cheese grater didn't complain once. But I could tell his energy was flagging — he'd become distracted during conversation, pause to find his place again. Once, I even noticed his "no-slip grip" rubber bottom slip just a little, but pretended not to notice.

I was worried, of course, but whenever I asked him if he was okay, if he needed a break, he just said, *I am made to easily zest mountains and mountains of parmesan cheese.* I didn't understand why Mom would ever need mountains and mountains of parmesan cheese, but I supposed it had something to do with what the cheese grater had taught me: that need was only desire in disguise.

So Mom kept zesting mountains and mountains of parmesan cheese. And the cheese grater grew so tired that he stopped talking entirely. Then one day, the two were so busy with

each other that I missed my naptime and my feeding time. I cried and cried but nobody cared. Grating cheese was all the rage. Everybody was doing it. Why calm a crying baby when you could grate some cheese instead?

Mom fed me three hours later than usual that night. I swallowed some milk then bit down hard on her nipple. But she was already asleep.

\*

I believed that, as a friend, I owed the cheese grater the truth about how I'd been feeling. It'd be difficult, but I couldn't see any other way. So while Mom took a break from grating cheese to use the bathroom, I told the cheese grater we needed to have a serious talk.

*I think Mom might be replacing me with you,* I said.

The cheese grater, exhausted, took a minute to respond.

*I'm not replacing you,* he said. *I think your mom just needs me more right now than she needs you.*

I couldn't believe what I was hearing —*need?* He was the one who'd taught me all about *need.* *Need* was a marketing ploy used to sell products, *not* to lie to our friends.

I was too angry to speak with the cheese grater after that. Mom continued grating like something real depended on it, ignoring my cries for food and diaper changes. But how could I compete? The only friend who could've helped me — my only friend — was too new and shiny for me now. And I couldn't even blame him. Because this, evidently, was just the way of the world.

I lay awake in my crib one night, feeling hopeless about my future prospects. It was only a matter of time before Mom threw me away. Or worse — the grumbling in my stomach reminded me — let me starve to death. As I cried myself to sleep, I heard the sounds of grating stop. I heard footsteps, the flick of a light switch, more footsteps. Mom walked past my room and into hers, closing the door behind her. I used to hate that sound more than anything, the sound of her going away. Now it didn't feel so bad.

I snuck out of my crib and into the kitchen. The cheese grater was sitting on the countertop, still dirtied with cheese. He seemed less impressive than I remembered.

The cheese grater spoke first: *Don't come any closer.*

I stopped. *Why not?*

*I'm ashamed.*

*You look great, I lied.*

*Friends don't lie.*

Looking at him then, I realized that neither of us had won — that neither of us *could* win, in a way. We were just two used-up once-loveds, standing there in the same pale moonlight.

*Let me clean you, I said.*

The cheese grater didn't respond.

I grabbed a towel and a bottle of bleach from beneath the kitchen sink and climbed up on the countertop. The cheese grater was crying softly. It was the saddest sound I'd ever heard. I dampened the towel with bleach and wiped down his blades one by one.

*You'll be good as new, I told him.*

*And so will you.*

His words made me cry, then. And we cried together throughout the night, but also alone.

\*

I woke to the familiar smell of Mom's skin, which I held like a blanket over my face. I thought it was a dream, but when I opened my eyes, she was there.

But she wasn't look at me.

She was looking at the cheese grater.

I felt a brief stir of jealousy. Then I saw what she saw: faint, orange-brown stains spotting the cheese grater's blades like measles.

*It's over, the cheese grater said. The resignation in his voice pained me.*

*But, what about your heavy-duty stainless steel construction?*

*I guess I oversold myself, he said.*

I shook my head no. No, no, no. He just needed to spruce himself up a bit, change directions, rebrand. I told myself this until I could almost bring myself to tell it to him.

But I wasn't buying it anymore.

I cried as loud as I could, but mom had stopped hearing me long ago. She shook her head and picked up the cheese grater. I knew what was coming. The cheese grater said goodbye.

I jumped.

The cheese grater screamed.

Mom screamed.

I held on.

Mom screamed and rattled the cheese grater back and forth, as though I were only water droplets to be shaken off. The blades of the cheese grater hooked deep into my flesh.

*Do you see me now? I asked.*

*I do, I do, I do, the cheese grater cried, his voice so close it could've been mine.*

Mom kept shaking the cheese grater.

She wasn't screaming anymore.

The weight of my body dragged down against the blades. As I sank lower, my skin curled around me in long ribbons.

*You did it, the cheese grater whispered. There you are.*

Mom held the cheese grater up and looked into my eyes. She reached out and dragged her fingers gently across my cheek, wetting her fingers with new blood.

Then the last of my flesh gave away.

And I was reborn.

**KAYLA CHANG** is a Korean-American writer from Southern California. She has a BA in Literature/Writing from the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) and is currently working on her MFA Fiction thesis at Chapman University.



# HOW TO F\*\*K FLORIDA WOMAN

BY MARLEE ABBOTT

**MARLEE ABBOTT** (they/she) is a woman-shaped entity usually spotted in their native Florida habitat. They received their BA in Creative Writing from the University of Miami and will receive their MA (in Creative Writing!) from the University of West Florida in 2022. An Academy of American Poets prizewinner and Pushcart nominee, their poetry and creative nonfiction work has been published both online and in print by *Prometheus Dreaming*, *The Write Launch*, *Gravitas*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *Beyond Words*, and more. Marlee is a Nice Jewish Queer living with chronic illness—like the mighty koala they sleep most of the time, waking only to eat and engage in nonmonogamy. They believe in you.

My pussy tastes like orange juice.

Even better than that good organic  
Publix shit, straight from the citrus

tree, peeled with such fervor  
you find yourself with sweet slivers  
of rind wedged under your fingernails.

I want you to do to me what my windshield does  
in love bug season to countless insect bodies:  
just fucking wreck me.

There is a roaring in my ears  
like the pounding relentless sideways rain

of an Alligator Alley midnight.  
Let my hurricane waves crash  
upon your shores, outer bands whipping  
into a dizzyfrenzied rhythm,  
with all the intensity of Michael, Andrew, and Irma—  
straining my bedroom windows,

punishing the glass  
so gorgeously close  
to its shattering point.

# LAKESIDE PARK: JUNETEENTH 2021

BY COLLIN EDMONDS

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**COLLIN EDMONDS** is a writer, educator, organizer, and father from Richmond, California. He is the Co-Founder of RichOak Events, one of the largest producers of poetry events in the San Francisco Bay Area. His work speaks on racism, grief, triumph through struggle and perseverance.

I.

Somethin 'bout the summer heat  
makes the liquor boil  
in your belly.  
With each bead of sweat  
patience leaves  
your body. It's wet t-shirt weather—  
It's summer and niggas  
are dying again.  
There's something about the heat  
that makes niggas reach for it.

II.

The Sun stretches out  
its arms and calls  
a few more of us back  
home. All this heat  
and we are still wearing black  
It took two hours to bury that man  
The ground don't crack  
open easy these days.  
Metal bounces off the earth  
like it's bulletproof.  
Even the act of dying  
is harder this time of year.

III.

The City  
The block is always hot  
I been thirsty. Calling  
out for water  
And got:  
blood,  
A bullet,

A body soaked  
in its own family's tears.  
You dig into my flesh,  
fill me with your dead  
and call me a living thing?

## IV.

## The Lake

When the earth is full  
It sends me  
the bodies it can't swallow.  
Look how you flock  
to me like I aint been swallowing niggas  
like you for generations.  
Everybody in this city knows  
someone with an epitaph in my depths.  
The whole hood crowds  
my banks each summer.  
I tempt more and more  
into my gullet with each passing  
year. Last week, niggas celebrated  
their freedom. I reminded them  
I still hold chained bodies in my stomach.  
I devoured a few more  
to remind them I am still hungry.  
Bullet holes make a body sink quicker

## V.

It makes me physically sick being surrounded by death and sweltering heat. I wake up with a headache and an obituary for a familiar face. The weatherman says it's only going to get hotter, which means niggas gonna keep shooting, and keep dying, and the ground will swallow as many bodies as it can carry.

The lake will claim the rest. Niggas will still chill by the water. Last week's deaths are washed away by this week's tides. The weekend fills Oakland with new life. A procession of dirt bikes, four wheelers, and lowriders cruise down Grand Ave in a way that makes it seem like nobody just died here. Nobody could die here. Bullets have no plate at the cookout.

Don't you smell all this food? Don't you hear all this music? All this laughter? All this joy?

This is how we mourn. We turn vigils to celebrations: A home going for every body that drops here. We throw a couple more burgers on the grill, and take a few more sips of Cognac. The DJ plays another track, and we all sing "Tell me when to go, tell me when to go." Instead of going dumb, we go home before a bullet makes a house of our bones.

The only homegoing is an evening commute down the interstate. The lake littered with empty bottles, trash and an overwhelming feeling of joy.

This moment filled with music, and dance, and laughter, and a hope for a better tomorrow.

This is something not even Death can take from us.

# AFTER GETTING BLACKOUT DRUNK AT A CAMPFIRE

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BY FRANCES KLEIN

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**FRANCES KLEIN** is a high school English teacher. She was born and raised in Southeast Alaska, and taught in Bolivia and California before settling in Indianapolis with her husband and son. She has been published in *So it Goes: The Literary Journal of the Vonnegut Memorial Library* and *Tupelo Press*, among others. Readers can find more of her work at <https://kleinpoetryblog.wordpress.com/>.

There is a bug-bite on my inner thigh,  
and did I fuck a mosquito?  
Right now I can't say no,  
since the coolers were full  
of Raineer and ice and lime beer-garitas,  
and the mosquito was being particularly funny,  
was making everyone laugh with his stories about work.  
The mosquito looked so cool  
with that ironic baseball cap  
and an American Spirit perpetually smoldering  
beneath his proboscis.  
Clearly the alpha of the evening, hovering  
just enough above it all  
to make me feel chosen when he smiled  
at my joke, listened to my story, pulled  
his camp chair next to mine in the circle,  
one tattoo latticed wing  
brushing the back of my arm,  
making me shiver—and the rest  
is a blurred montage  
straight out of first year film school—soft focus of hands  
on thorax, intercut with legs on legs  
on legs.  
And did I drink  
was I drunk from?  
did I fly?

# THE TURKEY BARNS' SMELL

BY KATIE BOWERS

**KATIE BOWERS** is a poet and educator living in the rural Southeast with her husband and daughter. Her work has been published in *Kakalak*, *Broad River Review*, and *Levee Magazine*.

I.

The smell of the turkey barns around here,  
the meat and the manure,  
reminds me of when,  
at eighteen, I told my mama that  
the only way I could be pregnant  
was through an immaculate conception.

Less than a month later, I  
threw my first child into  
a meat grinder.

II.

The seeds in the garden, that my  
husband tends to, have  
sprung up and spread-  
covering.

Little, pale-white flowers are a  
promise to fruits and vegetables, ripe and plump,  
from water, and soil, and fertilizer.

III.

And the turkey barns' smell,  
the meat and the manure,  
reminds me of how all things must be  
dug up, and buried, and tended to  
before anything can begin to be harvested.

# STARGAZER LILIES

BY BENJAMIN ROSE

**BENJAMIN ROSE** is a poet based in Washington D.C. He attends The Catholic University Of America, and his work has appeared in *The Dillydoun Review*, *The Button Eye Review*, and *Beyond Words Literary Magazine*.

The stage is set with stargazer lilies,  
Garbed with candles in semblance of a wake.  
I have renounced the fury of Reading  
And skinned the sun of my wearied desires.  
I have exchanged the warmth for a darkness  
Void of sensation, pockmarked and cold,  
To best my bane: the abdominal malady  
Stricken and striving through my burning bowels  
Like Jupiter's raptor high on the crag  
Of the Caucuses making a feast of Forethought.  
The poet's speech is alien to me;  
My raging passion snarls ineffable.  
All hordes anoint me their prophet and king  
Unasked for. I scorn the pissings of men  
Each on his bloodspattered plot of terrain  
Raving with rape and the thrill of abuse.  
Plankton and thugs parroting my cadence  
Drip with misogyny, voyeurs to crime;  
Fools who condemn themselves by my anthems,  
Insects and incels, fascistic vermin.  
With screams I delve the deepening abyss,  
Rallying the wretched young men served in bleach:  
Renounce your privilege. Sons of the Axe,  
Suffer your trial by anarchy and fire.  
The strings are sharp against my thin fingers;  
The air is mellow with solace and dread.  
And all my formulated infinities  
Gleam in the light of the pale chandelier.  
In husks of the sun I seek my serenity  
Lone with the living and laureate dead.  
Fate coils around my neck a lariat  
Cold as the churn of the carceral year.

Each fading day is a new diminution.  
Each revolution awakened to shame,  
There is no refuge nor substitution;  
Mend the heart ruined and lonely with pain.  
Mend the heart ruined and loaded with loathing  
Deep in the shivering fathoms of fear.  
Deep in the shivering paths of the pines  
Lend me the silence and sight of the seer.

# PLAN B

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BY CASSANDRA CAVERHILL

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**CASSANDRA CAVERHILL** is a Canadian-American poet and editor. She is the author of the chapbook *Mayflies* (Finishing Line Press) and a winner of the 2021 AWP Intro Journals Award. Her work has appeared in *Reed Magazine*, *Into the Void*, *The Windsor Review* and others. She lives in Ann Arbor, MI. More at [www.cassandracaverhill.com](http://www.cassandracaverhill.com).

This wasn't supposed to happen.  
 You came inside me, accidentally,  
 as we fucked on the springy single bed  
 in your co-op dormitory. Your eyes flickered  
 disbelief at first, then lidded heavy with  
 acceptance. We spoke calmly, carefully,  
 three weeks of togetherness tender between us;  
 I was still very much married at the time—  
 though only in the legal sense of the word—  
 yet somehow, I felt strangely serene,  
 certain of a love so seismic with you.  
 Nimbly dressing, our priorities shifted  
 from post-coital curling to procuring Plan B.  
 And when we reached my rusted Stratus, found  
 that the passenger side was beside a hedge—  
 the space between too narrow for you  
 to wedge into—so I suggested pulling out,  
 and laughter loosened the taut red cord  
 that ran between us, the same cord  
 that appeared to me in a vision  
 when we played music together.  
 This wasn't supposed to happen:  
 Meeting on Craigslist of all places,  
 answering your ad for someone to play covers  
 of The xx with when I was a shitty drummer;  
 emailing you every night to pierce the absence  
 between our meetings because I lived to make  
 you laugh; sending you my lyrics so naked  
 in their intention I'd blush in your presence.  
 As we drove through the arterial streets  
 the critical turned casual; we talked of a life  
 together with art ballooning brightly

at its center—equal parts you, equal parts me.

You held my hand as we drugstore hopped,  
when we faced another barren shelf,  
as we spoke in hushed tones to white coats  
and rolled our eyes behind their backs  
for their knowing, strained politeness.

This wasn't supposed to happen. But I saw  
the path ahead unravel like a scarlet spool,  
and my belly birthed butterflies when I swallowed  
the pill that solved just one of our problems.

1993

BY IAN LAX

**IAN LAX** is an emerging author previously published in Beyond Queer Words, and forthcoming in September's issue of Beyond Words. He currently resides in Ohio with his boyfriend, Michael Bleich, and their dog, Poncho. He has been recognized from a young age at a local level. As a queer schizophrenic, he strives to write from his unique perspective.

Drawn from a wound in July  
like a snake's bite  
I was anti-venom  
You sagged on your mother  
heavying fruit on a bush  
till September  
August came between  
with perpetual night  
seeking recompense  
for the month of void existence  
as I waited in the dark  
near sundials that would not  
divulge the shadows of time  
I left lovers  
with airless breathiness  
under covers undercover  
as you bloomed  
like baby's breath  
sucking in air  
letting out a cry  
waiting for the bite  
waiting for me



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