

Pitch black prison cage, metal bars made of rage. Dank, dim, disturb the peace, screaming out and scared within. Scarred within. Seraphim, save me from the man I've been. The man I'll be that may not be, when this place is done with me.

Recall a reason for the fall...

Static hiss, signal gone. Boxed in and locked without, drowning in a sea of dark.

The shark he knows I'm bleeding out, grinning while I kick and scream. Every tooth a jagged sin -

grind 'em in with righteous glee.

## Confusion

Rosie Robertson's brother, Duke, was not happy with her. He was almost never happy with her. In fact the last time he'd been really happy with her was last August when the ice cream fell off her cone and old Mrs. Huston's bull dog Buster ate it.

"I told you I'd give you a good one if you ever called me that again." He gave her the face he had perfected by looking in the bathroom mirror then checking his reflection against the cover of the last Avenger comic.

"Well it *is* your name. It says so on your report card, Edger Evander Robertson."

Glancing past his sister's smug face he saw Pounder Fielding and Hammer Barsto heading straight for him. He had to end this conversation about embarrassing names right now so he gave her a good shove sending Rosie through the gap in the Purlow's high hedge.

Mrs. Montgomery Purlow saw the Rosie's red hair followed by her leaf festooned body bounce once before it rolled into her bed of prize dahlias.

The girl sat up and with a sinking feeling she realized she was in the killing zone of the dreaded Purlow yard. She had one minute to take in the sight of a garden groomed to within an inch of its stifled little green life before its owner threw open the door and screamed, "Little girl, little girl, get out of there this minute! What do you think you are doing? Those are prize winning flowers you're sitting on. You scruffy little ragamuffin!"

Rosie schooched off the flowers as she picked a stem from the muddy color of her dress. "Sorry, Mrs. Purlow. My Bro..."

The angry woman stormed down the porch steps shouting, "Did you hear me? I said get out of my yard."

Rosie beat a hasty retreat crawling on her hands and knees back through the hedge emerging on the sidewalk once again scratched, scraped and fuming.

Mrs. Montgomery Purlow's next door neighbor had been picking apples from the tree in her side yard. "Oh, Rosie dear!" Said Lucy Hopgood, bending down to take a few purple and white petals from the little girls disintegrating pigtails. "Are you all right? Oh my goodness you're bleeding." She pulled a snowy handkerchief from her apron pocket and patted the child's skinny little knee. "Come on, lovie," she said taking Rosie's hand. "I just took a nice batch of apple fritters from the oven. How would you like one while I clean you up a bit?"

Lucy Hopgood was built like one of her apples, round and sweet, and had been in feud with her dahlia growing neighbor for 30 year. "Any woman who has no apparent name

of her own has mental problems. Don't let that sour old bitty bother you dearie." And she went on to tell Rosie all about the Nasty neighbor problem.

Everyone in town knew that Mrs. Montgomery Purlow had spirited Lucy's maltase dog, Dexter, off to the pound for pooping in her yard two weeks after she and her husband moved in to their house. Someone recognized the dog and called Lucy just hours before Dexter was due to be euthanized. To prevent any further problems Lucy fenced her back yard and ran the fence all the way to the front sidewalk, but the damage was done and the two women had been at odds ever since, competing in every gardening and baking competition the county fair, church bazaar and various charities had to offer. Mrs. Montgomery Purlow usually took the dahlia prize. Lucy's irises couldn't be beaten and the apple pie contest went back and forth. This was something Lucy simply could not understand, Mrs. Montgomery Purlow bought her apples from the local Shop and Save, while Lucy tended her apple tree with the greatest loving care. But she had tasted the pie and it was really exceptional.

Rosie licked the crumbs of her second fritter from her fingers and said, "Thank you Mrs. Hopgood."

She headed home for a dinner she would be hard put to fit in along with the fritters but first she has to check out one little thing.

Rosie's mother had some things to say about the sorry state of her daughter's clothing. Edgar, AKA Duke knew his sister would never snitch on him. It was part of the time honored code of childhood, YOU DO NOT SNITCH. He also knew his sister would even things up sooner or later. She always did, girls are sneaky that way.

That night when Rosie went to bed she took out her favorite note pad and wrote down the facts of the day. The situation presented an interesting problem. After turning it over in her mind for some time she came to a decision and decided she'd just have to accept the consequences for stealing before drifting off to a contented sleep.

When she came home the next day she went to her mother and showed her the forbidden fruit. "Where did you get those lovely apples honey? Her mother asked.

"I stole them," Rosie said with no trace of guilt.

Her mother searched her daughter's face knowing something was going on. "But why, we have apples in the kitchen? Who did you steal them from?"

The grin that bloomed on her daughter's face sent her mother into total bewilderment. "You don't know who you took them from?"

Rosie shook her head. "Well, you know about the feud between Mrs. Montgomery Purlow and Mrs. Hopgood?"

"Everyone in town knows about that, but what does that have with you stealing apples?"

"I happened to be in Mrs. Montgomery Purlow yard. By accident." She added hastily as her mother's eyebrows went up. "And just happened to noticed one of branches of Mrs. Hopgood's apple tree had squeezed through the fence somehow. There was a little cut in the wood it looked like the cut was really old. I picked two apples, and I am sorry and know I should give them back but I am confused about whose apples they really are. They were in the Purlow yard but the tree is Mrs. Hopgood's. She told me all about how she takes care of that tree so I knew how good they must be and I want to give them back to their real owner. So who do I give them back to."

Her mother smiled at her very clever daughter. "Don't worry honey I'll give one to each of them and explain the predicament of your tender conscience.

## Confusion

*Walking up the stairs, I know I'm just going to have to walk right back down them again. Futile. That's the word that best describes it all. Like trying to swim against the current. No, worse, it's like trying to push water up hill. I walk up the stairs. I walk down the stairs. Up the stairs, and back down again. Why bother expending the energy? It is just going to come undone. Gives me a headache.*

*Like the damn bridge: its jam packed with cars every morning, half of them rushing to go north, and the other half rushing to go south. Eight hours later they switch lanes, just to get back to where they started. They'd be better off trading half of their lives with someone from the other side. Maybe we should just tear the bridge down.*

*I feel bloated... haven't taken a dump yet today.*

*It's worse than futile; it's sinister. Bottles of Perrier are flown from France every day to the US, passing planes from the US carrying Schweppes going to Europe. It's JUST WATER for crying out loud! It can be functionally identical, but they're still going to want the imported version, no matter what it costs.*

Take a deep breath.

*Humanity, what a misnomer. We always want what's worst for us, and we bitch like hell if we don't get it. It's like "It's my god given right to smoke my self to lung cancer", and no amount of common sense and public service announcements are going to count for shit if the tobacco industry's billion dollar advertising budget can convince kids that dorks don't smoke, so to be cool, all you have to do is smoke. Is it so wrong to take their money?*

*Justice, no there is another joke. Monopolistic agricultural policies force everyone to eat corn... Corn sweetener in sodas, corn flower, and corn fed beef glistening with fat from grotesque, feces polluted concentrated animal feed lots. It's ruining our health, the environment and McD's has us hollering for more. Who am I to speak! I had corn flakes for breakfast, and I'll probably have beef with dinner.*

*I guess it's all based on unbridled greed. Capitalism is the pursuit of profit at the expense of everything else. Development and infinite growth with no limits. High mass consumption and derivatives trading. It's all gotta come crashing down. House of fucking cards.*

*Why didn't we raise taxes on fuel and cars till we didn't need middle eastern oil, or wars? Why haven't we invested it in clean, efficient trains? Cause it wasn't what we wanted at the moment. Short fucking sighted.*

*Its like there is no such thing as enough. I mean I've never refused more money if it was handed to me.*

He sinks his head, noticing his paunch.

*I need to lose a few pounds.*

Grabbing his spare tire: *Yah, like 30.*

Raising his head again.

*Are we just greasing the rails to hell? I think I'm gonna be sick.*

A screen in front of him opens up to reveal the side of a well lit stage. An announcer calls out: "And now I give you the next President of The United States of America!"

He forces his mouth into a smile, lofting one hand, and stifling the gag reflex, walks purposefully into the spot light.

The crowd roars.

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**To go or not to go.**

“Come on, get in! What are you waiting for?”

“I am scared!”

“Nothing to be scared of, Peter. Trust me, these people are like you and me!”

“They look strange. I think they are aliens! I am not getting into that spaceship.”

George took a deep breath.

“You said you wanted to fly with a spaceship, that was your dream.

Remember, Peter, when we were young kids? That’s what you had said!”

“I did not mean an alien spaceship for God’s shake!” shouted Peter.

“They are not aliens! There are no aliens like you think!”

“Oh, yeah? How do I think?”

“Like humans. There are no aliens like human beings. These are people, Peter. Now, get into the freaking ship before they change their minds and take off.”

Peter sighed. “Do you know these people?” he asked.

“I know them.”

“You trust them?”

“I do.”

“Where will they take us?”

“Around the Earth.”

“Around the Earth? Are you kidding me? How long will that take?”

“If we go non-stop, about two minutes,” said George, with a serious look in his face.

“You are nuts. This is not possible!” laughed Peter nervously.

“I have done it, Peter.”

“You have done it! Around the Globe in two minutes! I am leaving!”

“Wait, Peter. I am not done. After we circle the Earth, we will fly to the dark side of the moon. You are for a big surprise there!”

“You know what, George? I think you are all smoking something. I don’t know what it is but it’s damned strong, I can tell you that!”

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“So, you are not curious to see the dark side of the moon?”

“What’s there to see, George? Strawberry fields? Or should I say, poppy fields?”

“Well, there is plenty of vegetation, that’s for sure!”

There was a moment of silence. Peter was contemplating. His face became pale, drops of sweat appearing on his forehead.

“It is now or never, Peter,” said George commandingly.

“I... I can’t, George.”

“Your loss, my brother.”

A sliding door opened at the hulk of the cigar-like spaceship that had landed on the cornfield, next to the farmhouse of the two brothers.

An eerie light emanated from the inside of the ship. The whole field was illuminated electric blue against the dark night sky. A man’s shadow appeared at the door. Peter became even paler.

“Wait, George. Wait, damn it! Don’t leave me here all alone.”

“So, you are coming?”

“I am coming. But I want to know who these people are. Are they from the government?”

“They are scientists, Peter.”

“Yes, but, who are they working for? I mean, who has such technology, if not the government? Tell me, are they from the military?”

George laughed. “No, my brother, they are not from the military. They don’t work for the government.”

“So, what then?”

“Look, it is a secret and you would not believe me even if I told you!”

“Try me.”

“Peter, let’s go! I am starting to freeze here.”

“CIA? NSA?”

“Peter, it is nothing like this!”

“They are foreigners! Russians?”

“...”

“I knew it! Shit! I didn’t know they had such technology!”



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"They don't! Peter, they are not Russians. They are not Chinese. Stop asking questions and let's go!"

"You don't trust your own brother!"

"OK, Peter, you win. They are from Iran."

Peter's face froze. He looked at George, who was trying to restrain his laughter.

"You devil! You are joking me!"

"Of course I am, bro. Sorry, I could not help it. Okay, I will tell you. These people belong to a team of super-genius scientists. They work to keep peace in the world. They will intervene with their technology when time comes."

"How did they get this technology?" asked Peter.

"Remember when we were kids and we were reading that book about Atlantis?"

"Yeah..."

"And that they had some super advanced technology, including flying machines that could fly in outer space and dive into the ocean?"

"I do remember, yes. Wait a minute... are you suggesting... are you saying that..."

"Am I saying that these people are Atlanteans?" interrupted George. "I am not saying anything, Peter. I am just telling you that this technology is ancient but I am not going to tell you who these people are."

"That does not make sense, George. This technology could not have stayed secret for that long! Impossible."

"Possible. It stayed secret for thousands of years."

"Bullshit! I don't believe you. I think this machine is no super technology, I think the military has such flight machines, even better I would say."

George looked at Peter sympathetically.

"Take care, my brother. I need to go."

"Go, George. Let me see you fly in this thing. Go on!"

George entered the ship through the opening and the door slid closed behind him. Purple lights lit the top of the ship and that hovered a few meters above the ground.

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Peter was trying hard to hear the noise of an engine. Nothing could be heard. There was total stillness. The lights turned blue and the ship disappeared into the night sky with an unfathomable speed.

Peter grew pale. He lowered his gaze and looked at the ground where the spaceship stood a few seconds ago. He was depressed. He wished he could turn time back and board the ship with his brother. He spat on the ground. "Coward!" he murmured to himself.

#

## Confusion

I am now confused  
The friend i know well  
I call by numerous names  
Though  
I  
NEVER  
really  
forget  
Who he is

I may call him LOVE  
I may call her Compassion  
or  
perhaps I may call him The Almighty

Where am i calling my friend ?  
Everywhere  
In a place of worship  
In the realms of nature  
In times of trouble  
I may kneel  
Shout  
Cry  
Repent  
Wish to hug  
or perhaps  
God forbid  
Hit or scream at my friend

Now i am confused.. as my friend is trying to speak my language  
Yet i cannot hear him ..she is being silenced  
In the name of ...  
In the name of ..  
In the name of ..  
Oh my God ..i am confused  
Not by you , or it , or him , or her..or how ever i address you  
I am confused  
by others  
by their insecurity  
Of the reality  
Of your presence .

He says, "I want to live. But I don't want to kill you either."

You give it a thought for a moment with an objective to produce an answer, just to realise later that your mind is helter skelter.

I say, "If you refuse help, you're committing suicide!"

He says, "It's not suicide when you're already dying..." with his back towards me.

And those words... those words.. They are ringing in my ears. Consciously vivid.

And I thought, "He knows what he wants."

The ground I'm stepping on is paper thin. I probably looked unsystematic but I am less concerned about approval of others.

"You're one of us now.", whispers I hear.

I mouthed, "Who is 'us'?"

I let my eyes wander and in an instant, I knew...

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## **An intolerable state of confusion**

As he looked out over the ocean, the Buaya's jaw tensed and his muscular brown body seemed to knot into even meaner ropes of muscle. His sailors waited patiently, avoiding eye contact, charged with adrenalin and the threat of immanent attack.

The attacker, however, did not seem a likely threat. He was close enough to the *Transformasi Berjaya* that the Buaya could see that the attacker wore the clothes and rings of a rich man and his vessel, an expensive private motor boat, could hide no more than two small men. He swayed as he stood in the small boat, looking soft, puffy and sunburnt. The attacker didn't act like an attacker, he was smiling waving and calling out something in a friendly voice.

All the men on the larger boat stayed vigilant, constantly scanning the water, the approaching man and his vessel looking for hidden signs of a greater force.

"Hallooo!" Called out the man, "Do you have Leonard Oskar on board? I have a delivery for him! Yoo hooo! Could somebody answer me, please?"

Shock rippled through the men when the captive's name was called out. If this puny little man knew that they had kidnapped Leonard Oskar, he was surely from the Indian Coast Guard and trying to trick them into relaxing their vigilance for the larger attack.

When the man was close enough that the sailors could secure his boat, the Buaya called out, "What is your name and what is the nature of your business?"

"Oh, right," replied the man congenially, "My name is Sake George. And I am seeking Leonard Oskar. I have a few things for him. Is he on board?"

"You had better go back to your hotel. These waters are not safe for you," replied the Buaya.

"Yes, yes. Well, I assure you that I am aware of the present dangers. I am aware that I am addressing dangerous outlaws in the pirate infested waters of the South China Sea and that I only have bottles of wine to defend myself," he smiled broadly, as if amused by a joke.

The Buaya was taken aback but gave no outward sign. He slowed his breathing and tried to think of how he could trick the man out to reveal his true mission.

"By the way," Sake continued, "Mr. Oskar is diabetic and will go into a diabetic coma in the next four hours if I don't administer his medication right away." Sweating in the unrelenting heat of the sun and a bit miffed that the pirates did not seem to be responding quickly enough, he added, "Look, I know you all kidnapped him from the beach of his little rental bungalow on Pom Pom and that all he has with him was his

shoulder bag. I dare say, if he dies, you won't be able to get much ransom for him, will you?" Still not getting a response, he flustered a bit, "Look, now. I demand you kidnap me, too. Alright?"

The Buaya wanted to kill the man. But he was patient. He could always kill the white man after they tortured him into revealing his mission. The Buaya ordered his men to bring the man on board, load the crates from the boat, and search the man, crates and boat thoroughly. Sake submitted willingly to the full body search, giggling as if the menacing sailors were flirting with him. The Buaya was beginning to think the man was a harmless idiot. But to be safe, he ordered the motor boat scuttled and along with the man's clothes. The contents of the crates – produce, various expensive imported foods, bottles of wine and not one single item that could be considered medicine – were taken to the hold to be inspected more carefully.

When Sake was given a sorang to cover himself, he thanked the sailors and politely asked to be brought to Mr. Oskar's cabin. The Buaya signaled that his two biggest sailors were to take the man to the captive and followed behind to observe how the new arrival would be accepted by the captive.

When the door opened, Oskar was lounging on the bed, reading a book. With an unrushed air, he looked up languidly, sighed, and, recognizing the white man, said "Oh, Sake, do come in. It has been terribly boring without anyone to talk to."

Sake ducked into the room, whispering to one of the soldiers that they should bring the supplies to the cabin in a few minutes. Then bent to kiss Oskar on each cheek, dragged over the single chair that could fit in the room and propped himself in it, with his feet on the bed. The two men began talking as if the pirates were not present.

As they were returning to the deck, the sailor asked the Buaya if they should bring the captives the groceries. The Buaya considered a moment. In all his years on the water, he had never encountered anything like this. He said, "Why not. If it is poison, let them eat it."

That night, the entire crew stayed on duty and alert. They maneuvered swiftly around several islands in a complicated course that put them far from the scuttled motor boat and hid them safely in the confusing maze of islands and shoals.

The Buaya turned the events over in his mind. He remembered how Oskar had behaved when they grabbed him. He was flustered at first. But he did not seem frightened. His only real reaction was to scold the sailors that there was no reason to behave so rudely. And he made no attempt to escape. As soon as they had secured him on board, he pulled out a book from the shoulder bag he had been carrying and started to read peacefully. He did not act like someone who had been kidnapped. The

Buaya considered that the whole thing might be a trap. Perhaps the Sabah police had set this up to catch them. But why were they taking so long? They were already south of Lahad Datu. How did the new orang pute find them so far away? He was puzzled, too, by the response of the Indian Coast Guard. There was no bulletins for the kidnapping and no watches called. And his collaborators who handled the negotiations from the mainland reported that there was no attempt to negotiate. The authorities responded consistently and simply by asking for the time and location where the exchange would take place.

Most significantly there was no further attack. This made the Buaya more nervous. He observed the captives, allowed them on deck to see how they would react. The two white men acted as if this was a pleasure cruise they had chartered to celebrate being rich.

It disturbed the Buaya that the second white man was still alive. Why hadn't he ordered his men to wrap up the pondan and feed him to the fish?

Deciding that the best strategy was to head back toward Kota Kinabalu. The authorities would expect him to sail as far away from the resort where they grabbed the first white man as quickly as possible. This would render the *Berjaya* invisible. The supplies and crew could last a full month on the open sea if necessary.

As they were rounding the northern tip at Kudat, a dingy with two more white men demanded to be kidnapped as well. They were carrying wine, food, books and a guitar. The Buaya's only choice was to take them on or kill them. Fearing more than ever that this was some elaborate trap, he chose the minor crime of kidnapping.

The Buaya's fear and confusion increased over the next few days as he watched the men reciting poetry and singing songs to the tuneful guitar. They were enjoying themselves. And, to the Buaya's deep embarrassment, his crew began to treat the captives as guests. None of these hardened criminals seemed to mind when they were dispatched to bring up yet another canvas to fix as a sun shade or bottle of wine. One evening, he had crept up to spy on a group that had gathered around a small fire they had build in an empty oil drum. He watched the sailors watching the white men and was shocked to see one of his sailors stand up and recite a poem with dewy eyes and self-effacing gestures of a beauty contestant.

What was happening? The Buaya had earned his name from his reputation for hiding still and silent like a crocodile only to swiftly and mercilessly strike, taking what he wanted and swallowing it whole. He could snap a man in half like a pencil. His temper and his judgment were razor sharp. He was feared and deferred to by the most terrifying pirates in the world. He realized now he was losing it and knew that aimlessly sailing in the shadows of tiny islands exposed his weakness. But his crew gave no

indication that they sensed his fear. They seemed as mesmerized with the captives as he was.

The breaking point came when the Buaya woke up to find a note taped on the door of his private cabin. It was on the inside of the locked door, indicating that someone either stole his key or had a duplicate. The note read "We'll be back after lunch."

Woefully, throbbing with anxiety, the Buaya searched below and above. He was the only one on board. His crew had deserted. And they had taken the captives with them. The ship was moored in the bay of a moderate sized island that was populated with a town that catered to the criminal seagoing. He knew he was not safe here. By the time he stepped on the deck, he was sure his crew and any number of islanders had had the chance to sail to the authorities to claim their reward for turning in the notorious Buaya.

Stewing in self-pity, his fear turned to helpless confusion as the morning wore on. No coast guard. No police boats. At about one in the afternoon, he saw a small group – the four white men and three of his crew – enter the beach and lounge in some beach chairs in the shade of the palms. Over the next forty minutes he watched the rest of his crew straggle onto the beach, arms flung around girls and staggering like sailors on shore leave.

He glared at them all silently as they boarded his ship. None of his men had anything to say... no explanation, no apology. They simply boarded wordlessly and prepared to sail. Only Sake said anything as explanation. "We had no women, you see. You can't have wine, women and song with no women, can you?" He hiccupped drunkenly and descended to quarters below. The Buaya dazedly watched the women on the beach bleakly waving farewell as the ship put to sea.

It was more than he could take. He sailed directly to the port at Kotabalu. When his men took his orders, he could see that they understood completely and that they had no desire to resist. As they approached the port, he was surprised to see that there were only a few police boats – no more than there would be on any average day. He realized dejectedly that this was not a trap. There had never been a trap. Still, he was going down. Police boats were coming.

As he stood on deck to watch the increasing flurry of activity, he noticed Sake standing silently by him. The Buaya was defeated now, there was no face to save, so he might as well ask.

"How did you know?"

"How did I know what?" Sake responded with a friendly voice that bordered on affectionate.



"How did you know where to find us? How did you find the *Transformasi Berjaya*?"

"Oh, that. Well, you see, Mr. Oskar is a very great poet. He has exceptionally great talent. And, correspondingly, he has to have an exceptionally poetic life. I knew that if I simply motored out, I was destined to find you. You must understand, my presence was necessary for Mr. Oskar to have an extraordinarily poetic adventure on a pirate ship. And so I knew absolutely that you would find me or I would find you."

The Buaya grunted involuntarily.

Once on the dock, he was surrounded by coast guard, city and state police. He stood handcuffed, watching a crowd of reporters gather around the released captives. A pretty UK reporter from the BBC rushed towards him speaking into a microphone "... notorious pirate of the Malacca Straits seems to have voluntarily released his captive, the world renown poet Leonard Oskar, unscathed and turned himself in." Sticking a microphone in his face, she asked "Why did you do it? What did you hope to gain?"

The Buaya stammered, "I don't know. I have no idea how this happened..."

A cheery looking man in a suit rushed up, shouting, "Margery, you gotta see this! He is going to recite!"

Without giving the Buaya a second glance, the reporter, cameraman and all her various attendants rushed to join the growing crowd. The Buaya scanned the mass of people and could just see the back of the poet's head above the others. They must have given him something to stand on. He sighed again and looked at the two officers who were supposed to be guarding him. They were staring open mouthed at the crowd, expressions of delighted anticipation on their faces.

Something snapped in the Buaya's mind. He spotted a black and white police car with the door open. With swift, strong strides, he hurled himself at the car, the two police officers jogging a step behind him. Ducking his head, he threw himself into the backseat of the cruiser, landing on the side of his face, and demanded the cops shut the door. Lying on his side, arms cuffed behind his back, sniffing the scent of the butts of countless suspects, he felt safe for the first time in weeks. *Prison*, he thought with relief, *will be a comfort after this*.

## **Sailing the accountant sea**

Dr. Frank Dusslig, CEO of Superior Small Electronics, Inc., looked into the large doe eyes of his secretary and momentarily forgot what he was about to say. He saw her red, full lips move and suddenly realized.

"Yes, right. The accounts from the auditor. I can sign them now," he was sure she had not noticed the pause and began clearing the things in front of him to make room for the papers on his desk.

She leaned forward, positioning the pages so that he could read them and reached over to point a red fingernail at a line marked with a small penciled X where he had to sign. Making a show of getting his favorite fountain pen, he gazed into her ample bosom which was just inches away as she hovered over the pages.

She is a fortunate girl, he thought, so many other men would try to take advantage of her, to use their power and superior intelligence to seduce her. Frank was an ethical man and would never manipulate her or harm her in any way. He had thought about it, fantasizing often about the seduction, but that had all taken place in the privacy of his own mind.

Having taken as long as he felt was plausible to ready his pen, he looked up at her angelic face and asked, "Are these the special papers for this unusual audit?"

"Yes, sir. These are the accounts that the DA requested. I went over them very carefully with the tax auditor. I am absolutely sure they are correct," her bottom lip trembled a bit, and Frank could see that she was afraid he was going to find fault with her work.

"Not to worry, Ms. Abaddon, I am sure you have done your best. We just want to assure the DA that everything is in order," he reassured her. He decided to have a good look at the papers so that, when he signed them, she could feel more confident.

"And this... this is the...?" he asked, allowing her to demonstrate her knowledge.

"That is the list of ledger entries, sir."

Flipping to another page, he asked, "And this?"

"That is all deposits made to nonsupplier accounts." Again, her voice trembled and Frank realized that she was distraught that he might criticize her work.

"And this?"

She leaned further forward and turned her head slightly to look at the random entry he had pointed to. She looked searchingly into his eyes and responded slowly, "That is a deposit you made to the caterer's account last June."

"Well, well, Ms. Abaddon," he looked sternly at her for effect, and then allowed a huge smile to stretch across his face, "It looks like excellent work! Congratulations on a job well done!"

The young woman looked visibly relieved. She demurely looked down and shy smile came to her full lips.

"Thank you, Dr. Dusslig. Thank you so much."

"Is that everything you need?"

"Yes, I believe so, sir."

"Very well, then, my dear," he permitted himself a small endearment to repair the distraught he had caused her, "I am sure everything will be fine. Once the DA sees what excellent order you keep the books in, it will all be over right away. I am sure all anomalies are clearly accounted for."

Smiling brightly now, she bowed her head slightly and responded, "I am sure it will be fine, too."

Signing with a flourish, Frank said, "Well, I will just put my John Hancock here and let you finish this off properly." She took the papers, smiled prettily and turned to go. He watched her comely bottom swaying as she left of his office. He smiled to himself and, now that he had a moment of privacy, indulged himself in congratulating himself on raising her spirits. She had defiantly entered the room nervous and yet left full of happy confidence in herself.

Of course, it had not always been so easy. He remembered what a disaster she had been in the beginning. When he had hired her, she took it on herself to completely rearrange the books and had made a mess of it. He couldn't find a thing anymore. He assured her he knew what he was doing and his system might not look like what she had learned in school, but it worked just fine. To be sure she got the hang of it, he spent several hours explaining the books to her. He was a bit disappointed that someone with an MBA from an ivy league school would have such difficulty with his rather straight forward system. But he acknowledged that book learning was no replacement for real experience. Because he pitied her financial distress (the daughter of Iranian immigrants fleeing political persecution, she had to take several demeaning jobs to work her way through her degree), he kept her on although clearly, she needed a lot of training to be useful.

Frank persevered and she eventually caught on. Her initial frustration had slowed her down, but when she finally could understand that his way was superior, she adjusted very quickly. When Mrs. Chowder left them unexpectedly, Ms. Abbadon was sure enough on her feet to take over the secretarial work as well. And with his encouragement and training, she was able to take on much of the work from the office manager when he had to leave in disgrace for using illegal drugs in the office. In fact, Ms. Abbadon had come to Frank tearfully, begging him to give the man a second chance. She said she wasn't sure she could manage the extra work, but Frank knew that she felt guilty because it was her actions that unintentionally exposed Mr. Azazel's vice. But Frank would not tolerate a junky in his company and assured her that together, they would be able to manage things quite well.

And he was right. Things had been going splendidly! No matter that it occasionally got a bit tight financially; they were selling electronics like champions!

He still felt quite protective of her and he knew this was justified in this feeling. He had taught her how to keep the company books but she still couldn't seem to manage her own finances. In fact quite recently, she had bought a new car that was clearly far beyond what she could afford (in shame she used to park it on another block so he would not discover her mistake). When he found out, he asked her to look at the accounts and see if they could afford to give her a small raise. He guided her through the process, educating her in frugality, cost cutting and patience. With his help and the modest raise, she was able to renegotiate the loan on the car and continue making payments. So he felt he must never let his vigil down and should watch over her to be sure she didn't make another foolish mistake.

Indeed, she was a lot of work for him. But he was proud of how he had helped her and proud of how she now contributed to the company. Feeling quite satisfied, he returned his attention to his desk to peruse catalogs of newly launched products and decide how best to guide the small company under his care to greater success.

## Lady Laddie

Oh a laddie dee and a laddie doo  
A laddie me and a laddie you!  
Oh a laddie dee and a laddie doo  
A laddie did what a lady do!

Aye Jim lad now haven't you heard?  
They shut down the mill and tore down the church  
and all the good lads are now out on the snow  
we can't get no soup and we can't get no work!

Aye Jim lad I'm sure that you know  
I cannae tell a lie, scout's honour you know!  
But a strangest thing did happen but one month ago  
and I'll tell you the secret but don't tell a soul!

You know that clinic now wayyy out of town?  
You know the one! For the mentally unsound!  
Well but a month ago they needed some help  
and your Old Uncle Roberts here offered a hand

They were only (too) happy to accept the offer  
T'was indeed no shortage of cash in their coffers  
They gave me some money and a crisp white shirt  
and then they told me to put on a skirt!

Oh a laddie dee and a laddie doo  
A laddie me and a laddie you!  
Oh a laddie dee and a laddie doo  
A laddie did what a lady do!

Aye a sadder tale was never told,  
for a man so strong and a man so bold!  
To put on a skirt and mop all the floors  
to sully his manhood with a woman's chores

Aye I see the disgust now in your eyes lad  
but pity on Uncle Roberts, the times be bad!  
They shut down the mill and tore down the church!  
And your poor Uncle Roberts cannae find no work!

Oh on my honour lad this next part be true  
I only dare breathe of it to a chosen few  
To me wife, to you and to your father,  
and to me best mate (who went mad with laughter)

I scrubbed and I cleaned and I sure did me best  
from noon to dusk, from east to west!  
And then I lay my head for but a little rest  
and awoke with a pair of massive round breasts.

## **I remember that day vividly.**

I remember that day vividly. Well I mean, who wouldn't? You go to sleep in your same old comfortable body and wake up to a strange new very personal identity. The first thing I thought was, wow is Harold going to be in trouble. This was not just one of his normal fits of temper. This time he must have done some real damage. This time I might be dying.

If you're thinking I was frightened by the prospect, let me tell you I was not. Though it had been a few years since the last time when I believed I had eaten some poison berries. I went to sit in the flower bed so I could pass away peacefully in beautiful setting. Instead of finding out if there really is a heaven, something that even the president of the United States didn't know I found out that the poison berries were unripe concord grapes. My punishment for trashing the garden was about equal to the damage I had done to the prize dahlias. I couldn't sit down anywhere for two days.

This time though I had proof positive that I was about to discover the secrets of the afterlife. There was internal bleeding. Harold would at the very least go to jail and that might be worth dying for. I didn't feel too bad considering so I took the sheet from my bed and wrapped them around my skinny hips the better to make a really dramatic display of gore to impress my mother with the fact that my brother was a murderer and made my feeble way to her bedroom. I tapped on her door and was told to go away she was having a sick headache again. So I sat down on the carpet knowing what a mess I would leave behind when they removed my cold dead body. Since I would be beyond all retaliation I thought it only seemed fair

## Hung Ovaries

*Ugh! What planet am I on?*

Looking around. *Oh good, at least I'm at my place.* Glancing over the rest of the bed. *And alone.*

*I'm getting too old for my life style; I feel like crap!*

Laying a hand on top of the sheets over his chest. *God Damn! I gotta lose some weight, I'm getting some serious man boobs here.* Pulling the covers off. *Hey! Where's all my fur gone!* Grabbing man boobs. *Why do my nipples tingle?*

Stumbling into the bathroom and looking into the mirror.

*I'm a... girl?! I'm an UGLY girl?! Oh Shit!*

Sitting down on the closed toilet.

*This sucks! Man boobs are one thing, but this really pisses me off. I feel... bloated and...*

sliding a hand down to his crotch, *I'm wet.* Pulling his hand out, with stick wet fingers.

*I'm bleeding from my crotch! Oh, come on! This... I have to do something about this.*

*Shave, shit and a shower.* He thinks getting up and looking in the mirror. *Ok, so skip the shave.*

Showering he can't bare to touch, or even look down at his disfigured body, so he really just rinsed off.

*Cloths? Shit! Let's see... Stuff a pair of sox in a jock strap for the blood. Damn! Seriously, how do women put up with a bleeding drain pipe between their legs?*

Trying to pull on some pants. *Can't get past these... oversized... hips!*

Peeling the pants back off. *Let's see, sweats, yah, they'll fit even the fattest ass in.*

*T-shirt, wind breaker and dark glasses to finish off the ensemble.*

Passing a mirror. *Oh, yah, I look just great!* Sinking his shoulders, he heads out the door.

He just stands on the street for a while.

*Where the hell do you go for a... for... for this!* He thinks looking down at him self.

A passer by stops, asking "Are you alright?"

"Hell no I'm not alright! I'm bloated, bleeding and if you don't back the fuck off I'm gonna stuff my vagina so far up you're ass you'll be tasting it for a week!" He says, index finger gabbing the would-be good Samaritan in the chest.

The man's expression of concern drains away, and he quickly hurries off, as though he's seen a ghost.

*What the hell happened? Let's see... Last night I went to bed a man... Last night... The bar. That bar... That's witch at the bar! She did this to me! I'll... I'll... I'm gonna find her.*

Walking purposefully back towards the bar he slowly becomes aware how people look at him differently. *Aw, just fucking deal with it!* He thinks at them in a menacing thought voice. He briskly pushed his way thought anyone impeding his progress, muttering "Pylon!" of other such descriptive observations.

Passing a construction site a few of the boys call out with wolf whistles. He stops, hands on hips, and glares at them through the sun glasses. This, not being quite satisfying

enough, he hunts around for a good sized rock, picks it up, and hurtles it straight at the groin of a Bob the Builder on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor of the scaffolding. Bob obligingly doubles over and comes crashing to the ground. The startled workers look from Bob to “her” and back again. “She” gives them the universal middle finger salute, and marches on “her” way.

Finally arriving at the bar, he sees to his great relief that someone is in, cleaning the floors. Sneaking in, he approaches the guy with the mop. “Where’s that... There was a woman here last night. Long black hair, kinda ‘not sure if it is hot or just scary’ makeup... was sitting over in the corner there with a crystal ball or something. You know where she is?”

“Sorry, can’t help you.” The guys says barley looking up from his mop.

“She” steps on the mop, and he looks at her. “Listen, I can’t help you. You wanna see her, come back again tonight.”

Kicking his legs out from under him, “She” grabs a chair, and parks it on his chest, sitting down on it, and traps him. “She” holds the mop menacingly.

“Listen, pal. I’m gonna jam this mop down your throat, then I’m gonna castrate you with my teeth if you don’t tell me where that bitch lives. I’m her... long lost... sister.”

The embarrassment of having his ass handed to him by a girl is more than he can bear, and it would be compounded if any came in and saw him in this position.

“Ok, ok! She’s got a flat over at Saints and Purgatory street, above the decrepit book store.”

“Ok, then, how about a name?” “She” says dangling the broom ever closer.

“You’re sister’s?” he asks disoriented.

“Half sister, separated at birth, now, what’s her fucking name!”

“Elvira!” he screams out.

*Figures.*

He had to change his crotch socks before heading over. *How can any one possibly put up with this! I feel like I’ve got a spare tone on my thighs, and I’ve got these ridiculous water balloons flopping around on my chest. Just walking down the street is like trying to compete in some own-body obstacle course with jello padding strapped all over my body.* Four minor altercations later he arrived at the “Battered Cover Book Store”. No one was in the flat, but passing back down the stairs, he saw her in a back corner of the book store. Busting in he finally had her cornered.

“Back so soon?” she asked without looking up from her book “Princes and Other Effluent.” before he could even get his rant on.

“So you *did* do this to me!” he said as accusatorially as possible.

“Very deductive, Sherlock.”, she said rolling her eyes, and closing the book.

“Well... Undo it. Being a girl sucks, but then I guess *you’d* already know about *that*.” He said, sitting down as huffily as possible without springing a leak.

“Well, well.” She mumbles, looking him over. “Big change from last night!” she says, paraphrasing “You wanna feel a real man!” on his voice.

“Well, yah! And you were all about it!”

“Excuse me, testosterone and alcohol translation: I said ‘Do you wanna feel like a real woman?’ and you said ‘Hell yah!’” she said simulating his voice again.

“No way! I just wanted to *feel* a real woman!” he said, tears starting to well up.  
“Well than grab you’re tits bitch, ‘cause you are one!” she said pulling his wind breaker open to get a better look at his boobs.  
He couldn’t take it any more. “It’s just not fare!” he said, hunching forward onto the table, and crying.  
“Oh, get over it sister! It’s just the 24 hour floozie!” she said, sitting back.  
“You mean,” he said raising his head and wiping away a snuffle “I’ll be my self again in the morning?”  
“Yah. Just don’t be such an asshole, ok?”  
“I promise” he lied to her.  
He promptly got up to go home and try masturbation for the last few hours of his womanhood.

Though he never lost his attraction to slightly scary bar witches, he did try to frisk them for any “magic balls” before taking them home.



Transformation A one minute story

Night before seemed as usual as any.  
Though my thoughts had turned to others .  
Was it a lie  
They are living ?  
Truth is far better !!  
Who knows what it is ?.

So i slept on it  
Did my mind switch off ?  
During these restless hours  
What took over me ?

I am the same  
On the outside  
I think ?  
Though the reflection says ...different !!

Roughly speaking ...  
That's who i was  
And  
Now  
All smooth  
Even my tongue ..like silk

So i walk in a Man's World  
Yet ..speak with compassion  
I can be as you are  
Not full of bravado

So will the night  
Challenge me ...again ?

Mark 13/12/13

\*yawnnn\*

"Good morning, Meeko!"

\*woof woof\* \*lick lick lick\*

"Go fetch me the newspaper, good boy."

Last night's date with Mr Hunk didn't went on as I planned. He was supposed to make me go "Ohhhh God! YESS!

Ohhh God YESS!". Instead, Mr Hunk is not much of a hunk in the southern region. Mr Tinkerbelle couldn't even get it up!

To make up for my yearning...

(slide open side table's drawer)

"Aha! There you are!" And I was greeted with a buzzing sound.

I still have my red lacy lingerie on. Picked it up from La Senza, mind you. Now where is that buckle... \*snap!\*

.....

\*wooooofff woooooffff wooooofff woooo\*

"Oh no! Oh no! Oh no!"

"Good morning, darling! I was wondering when you will get up. I figured I let you sleep a little longer. I

know you must be tired.. from all the hip action last night. \*giggles\* Not many men can get me to climaxed through penetration. But your technique.. Oooooohhhh it gives me shivers even just thinking about it!"

\*Faint\*

## **Rough morning**

I yawn, stretch, and before I open my eyes, I start to scratch my crotch but stop immediately as my fingers have encountered fleshy bits that were not there yesterday. Keeping my eyes closed and trying to keep my breath steady, I roll on my back, scratching my cheek as inconspicuously as possible as I do, just in case someone else is in the room. Sure enough. My fingers rasp across stubble. I pretend to fall back a sleep.

Shit shit shit shit. Not again.

I lay on my back a few minutes, pretending to sleep, allowing my breaths to lengthen. But I am alert and listening. I hear birds chirping and fluttering, a tiny bell ringing, a car or truck passing by. And people scraping metal together, talking in a language I don't recognize. This surprises me. I can recognize a lot of languages. Once I determine that it is unlikely anyone else is in the room, I crack open my eyes.

The tiny room is flooded with sun light. I look around, under the bed. No one. I sit up on the bed, my back in the corner so no one outside the window will see I am awake. I need time to adjust and take stock before I try to talk to anyone. First, I take a good look at the room. It seems to be a bedroom. I am sitting on a narrow bed – or rather a sort of slatted table with a thin mat on it. I wonder how I could sleep on anything so hard. The one window has bars on it. Preventing me from getting out? Or someone else getting in? A heavy low, table-like set of drawers next to the bed and shelves filled with folded cloth, probably clothes, is the only other furniture. Two full laundry baskets and a mat are the only other things on the floor. A red poster with Chinese characters is taped to the door.

Next, I check myself. Yep. Male. Probably Caucasian judging by the amount of hair on my body. There doesn't seem to be a mirror in the room, so I don't know what my face looks like. I poke around the things on the table. A lamp. A hand phone, the face showing it is about 10 am. Two sets of keys. Glasses. Books in English. That is a good sign. A fan. It is pretty hot, so I get up and turn on the fan and sit down again to make a plan.

I should probably go through everything in the room. Collect any money and identifying materials. The keys to see if I can get out. One looks like a car key. But my mind keeps coming back to the question of what I look like. Running my fingers over my face and hair doesn't help.

I realize I am disappointed. First, because I was having a lot of fun in the last body. I spent most of my time getting high with a bunch of fun hippy dippy friends in Goa. Secondly, because I really dislike being a man. On one hand, a lot of things are easier. Everyone just assumes you have the right to do what you want. The entitlement. But I seriously dislike being constantly flooded with testosterone and serotonin. And the incessant thoughts about sex. And the powerful urges. The need to assert myself all the time. The competition.

Guessing I probably have some time before I encounter anyone, judging by how quiet it is, I rummage through the drawers in the table next to the bed. I find a small mirror and am happy. I take a good look at myself in the quivering reflection and decide it is not too bad. I am not disfigured as far as I can see.

But I am not conspicuously handsome either. I undress and take a look at the rest of me. Everything seems to be in order. No distinguishing marks. Nothing missing. I dress and do a bit of stretching -- flexing and contracting. Everything checks out. Once I got a body that had a lame leg and didn't realize it until I started running from a irate porcupine. It is better to know your limitations before you try to sprint away from a mean, irritated animal.

Now I start to go through things systematically. Other than the books, I find a notebook which is about three fourths filled with handwritten notes with dates. Probably a journal. I should check this out later if I have time. Once I landed in a body that had obviously been abandoned by another jumper who considerately left a note taped to the wall with all relevant data – name, address, car license plate, occupation, daily schedule, names of neighbors and girl friend. I remember I'd been a man then, too.

I also find three DVDs of movies, one with Bruce Willis, and a portable DVD player. That might be fun later. I also find a letter. The addressee's name looks Chinese, but the address is pretty much comprehensible. So is the cancellation. But the stamp says "Malaysia," which explains why it is so damn hot in the middle of the morning.

Now I am finally ready to try the door. I slowly, soundlessly twist the knob. I don't want anyone who might be in the next room to notice. It seems unlocked. Good. I was a bit worried that the bars in the window were indicating that I am somehow imprisoned. I leave the door for a moment to look out the window. It seems to be an alley between what looks like row houses. There are potted plants. A mangy dog ambles by sniffing. I am guessing this is a residential area and not a prison.

I review what I know. It is likely I am in a residential area in Malaysia. I can read English and possibly speak Chinese, and I am male this time. I suddenly feel very tired. I am daunted by all the unknowns. Who am I? What do I do for money? What kinds of problems do I have? Who are my friends? My enemies?

I think, too, of all the many lives I have visited and had to start from the middle. Once a sheik in Saudi and then a child on the loosing side of the Bosnian war. Boys, girls. Men, women. You would think I'd have become more wise in all my traveling. More compassionate. But I just feel exhausted by all the confusion, trying to pick up where someone else left off. For a moment, I long desperately for my first and own life as a care-free grad student doing research and hanging out with my friends in Boulder. I know I might make friends here. I have made friends everywhere I have gone. I have often been astounded by the kindness of strangers and the bond of love between friends. Mine is strange life, but more often than not graced by the goodness of people's hearts.

And now I have to start over again. Find my friends. Learn out my duty and do it. Figure out how to get by. How to do more than just survive. I guess I was feeling a bit sorry for myself that I have to do this over and over. But, really, doesn't everyone have to do it over and over again every day anyway?

Now that my morning boner is long gone, I am feeling pressure in my bladder. I grab a hold of the door knob again, say a silent prayer, and, with the hope of quickly finding an appropriate place to pee, open it to whatever I might find on the other side.

## Good deed for the day

*This is the life, you think. Perfect weather. Three day weekend. And, best of all, everyone has to drive to me. I don't even have to get into a car today. This is paradise!* You breathe deeply, taking a moment to appreciate the view of your yard.

You are flipping burgers on the grill when a Smart-car-sized, silvery spheroid plummets into your yard, bounces twice and comes to a rest on the grass. You stare at it motionlessly, spatula raised mid-air. You hear a whir emanating from the object, then a click, and a round flap peels open on one side. A head pops out: it is blue-green, completely smooth and shaped like an upside-down pear. Because it is sticking out of the object at a downward angle of forty degrees, the top of the head nearly brushing the grass.

"Hi! Sorry! Do you know if this is the way to Jupiter?" a scratchy voice squeaks out of the tiny mouth, which is lined with what look like needle sharp teeth, and the large, banana-shaped eyes film over briefly with what you assume is an inner eyelid.

"No, you just missed it," you reply, spatula still raised. You can smell the burgers approaching well well-done. "You'll need to head back a bit."

The head is making apologizing bobbing motions, which disconcerts you as it is still pointing downwards. It looks like a disoriented helium balloon bouncing on the grass. The mouth is a tiny circle mouthing "Oh no!"

"Yeah," you continue, "This is Earth. We are the third from the sun. You want the..." You count on your fingers as you chant under your breath *Mercury Venus Earth Mars Jupiter* "...fifth. Gaseous planet. Big red storm on the side. You can't miss it."

The head is bending slightly up as if peering around the object into the blue of Earth's atmosphere at Jupiter.

"I can go inside and check out the current relative position to the sun if you like." You figure this should be pretty easy to google.

"Oh, that's OK. I think I can find it on my own. Thanks!" squeaks the head. "Thanks a lot for your help!"

"No problem! Good luck on your journey!" You wave the spatula in a friendly manner.

A spindly three-fingered hand appears next to the head and waves briefly before the hand, head and flap sink seamlessly into the object.

You consciously don't stare at the spheroid and nonchalantly flip a couple of burgers, noticing a bit of char on the edge of one. The spheroid hums, lifts off the grass and hovers. You give a proper wave with your non-spatula hand. And the silvery object zips with lightening speed into the sky.

*Well, well, well,* you think, congratulating yourself for handling the encounter with such cool.

You begin to arrange the burgers so they get an even char on them when Suzie comes out with a beer in her hand, the beads of condensation glistening in the afternoon sunlight. She puts a hand on your shoulder, glances approvingly at the burgers and asks, "Who were you talking to?"

"Tourist. Made a wrong turn and was asking for directions."

"A tourist! All the way out here?"

"Yeah, I know," you chuckle as you take the beer Susie is offering you. "Who in their right mind would come all the way out here to the ass end of the void?" You take a big swig and smack your lips in satisfaction, feeling like a hero.

## Bad Physics

A lone car rolled down the tree lined county road, beneath the growing gloom of an aged sunset. Its pilot, Rowen Kira, didn't notice the sunset crackling in the sky. He was totally unaware of the spectacular celestial display that had just passed overhead, or that the sky was turning a decidedly wrong shade of grey. This was not wholly unexpected for Rowen. He didn't have the convenient excuse of something pressing on his mind distracting him from the view, he was an accountant after all. As long as he had beans to count he was content enough to avoid questioning the grander scheme of things. He simply wasn't a very observant man. As his wife often noted he was not particularly sensitive or inventive either. Perhaps that's why she so frequently had unusually raunchy adulterous affairs with various pool boys, pizza delivery kids and even the odd shoe store clerk. At least that's what she told her self.

The sky continued to crackle as a small area of dark swirling clouds extended downwards towards the car, not totally unlike an incipient tornado. As the tip of the proboscis cloud drew nearer, there was a sudden burst of light which silently extruded down from the cloud funnel until it touched the car. The car's electrical system fried instantly, and it trundled unguided down the road, coming to rest with its nose unceremoniously wrapped around a pine tree. Inside, Rowen was no more.

In a different space-time Rowen was slowly regaining conscience. He couldn't tell where he was, and the space he was in seemed to have no form. He closed his eyes and tried to remember what had happened, but all he could recall was grainy television commercials from his youth like in a fever dream. He was awoken from this pointless pursuit by a feeling of pressure on his head. Opening his eyes he saw a man in a lab coat standing over him, placing some sort of helmet on his forehead.

"Where am I... What's happened?" Rowen asked.

"Hmm?" the man responded going about his work.

"What happened to me?"

"Oh, you've been abducted." The man answered mater-of-factly.

Rowen's mind tried to fit this on for size, but it seemed a bit too tight.

"Uh, I was abducted?" Rowen groped.

"No," chuckled the man, "you *are* abducted."

"You mean like by... aliens?" Rowen asked with a sinking feeling in his stomach.

"Yep." answered the man still fiddling with the helmet thing.

"You, you're an *alien*?" he asked still trying to squeeze his mind in to the new reality so rudely thrust upon him.

"Hah! No, I'm an engineer. I work for the aliens." he answered with just the slightest hint of pride

"You... you *work* for them?" Rowen asked eyes suspiciously scrutinizing the engineer.

"Yep."

"How can you do that?" he asked trying unsuccessfully to move his head around to face him more directly. "What do you do for them?"

"Oh, you know, whatever they need. Mostly I interface with the abductees. I think it is easier on them to be faced with a human. It's less..." he paused staring into the distance for the right word.

"Stressful?" offered Rowen.

"Yah, I mean an abduction is stress enough as it is, what with the lateral dislocation in space time and all."

"Uh..." he lied his head back down and closed his eyes. It was all too much. One minute he was minding his own pointless business, unbothered by the possibilities of intelligent life somewhere in the universe, and then 'boom!' he's having an expositional conversation with an engineer in the employ of aliens like a character in a book.

"It just doesn't make sense." he finally said in a more definitive voice as he opened his eyes.

"Hmm?" murmured the engineer who was preparing what Rowen hopped wasn't an anal probe.

"I mean, the aliens got you, right... so what do they need with me? Why the need to abduct any one at all? Couldn't they just invite me up to check out their space ship? I'm sure there's a lot of people who would love to have a ride in a real space ship."

The engineer paused for a moment. "Well, first of all it takes a lot of energy to levitate someone. I mean you've seen rocket launches with all the smoke and noise? That's a *lot* of energy just to lob a satellite into low earth orbit."

Rowen assented with his eyes.

"Some of the smaller satellites were only a few pounds back in the day."

Rowen's train of thought had gotten derailed by the cucumber shaped probe the engineer was casually waiving around as he spoke.

The engineer sighed, and shrugged his shoulders as if involuntarily dragged into conversation with a complete idiot.

"You see, all those movies about super heroes who can jump and fly over buildings, and follow non ballistic paths?" the vibrating probe swung wildly through the air as he spoke.

"That defies the laws of nature... Levitating a yogi takes more energy than the skinny old bugger possibly has in him, not to mention dragging you're ass up to outer space, much less floating a huge space ship into the sky."

Rowen wanted to ask about 'anti gravity' but was afraid to sound dumb.

"Lateral dislocations are just a lot less... expensive." The engineer finished, confident that he had fully addressed the situation.

Rowen's mind was blank.

"How do you do it?" he finally asked.

"Do what?"

"I mean, how do you deal with the whole aliens, and lateral, uh, relocations?"

"Oh, like I said, I'm an engineer." he said as though this could suddenly turn a muddy river clear.

Rowen blinked, and there was a long pause.

"Engineers are, like, a thousand times more likely to be autistic than normal people."

No response.

"I'm autistic. You see for people like us, I mean engineers, we don't have personalities, and, well, we don't relate to people or aliens any differently than we do to other machines." he said confident that this finally made it all right, but the words had a hollow ring in the empty space surrounding them.

"But I'm an accountant!" Rowen blurted out almost involuntarily, brow furrowed. "I don't have a personality! I don't even..." his line of reasoning petered out as they both realized that the last several lines of conversation just described were all together too obvious. It just sounded too convenient, as though it had been written somewhere before.

After a few moments of blinking and staring around at the nothingness, they both had the distinct feeling that it just wasn't working. They stared at each other, the same question on each of their minds.

"There's just not enough... I dunno," shrugged the engineer putting down the anal-probatron, "not enough character development. I mean, even for a short story, it's all 'He said' – 'she said'." He leaned against the table.

"Talking heads" Rowen admitted as he propped himself up on his elbows. He looked at the engineer with concern. "Are you..." his mind flailed around trying to grasp the slippery, almost transient thought. "Are you *writing* this?" he asked accusatorially.

"Oh, no I don't write. I'm just a character in the story, like you. It's just that it's so... contrived. I mean if we both noticed it than how can anyone be expected to believe it?" "Yah..." Rowen answered.

They both bowed their heads and thought for a bit.

"Can we... I mean as characters in someone else's story, can we think our own thoughts?" Rowen asked to no one in particular.

"I don't think that we can think for our selves, per se. It's more like we're thinking in the mind of the reader." The engineer replied thoughtfully.

"The *reader*? Not the writer?" Rowen asked on cue.

"Well, yah, you know, once the book has been written, does the author even remember us anymore?"

"I remember everything I've written!" Rowen said trying to remember if he had actually ever written anything at all.

"Maybe so, but when the book is shut, and the lights go out how, how can we still be thinking... I mean what page are we even on?" the engineer continued.

"It'd be like, maybe we're a few pages back and I'm still in my car busy not thinking about anything..." Rowen pondered nodding his head, focus lost in the distance.

"Yah, lateral displacement through the pages of a closed book, just a few thousands of an inch away, and here we are."

"... when the reader is reading?" Rowen asked for confirmation.

"Yah, I guess. Its really only *now*, as these words are being read that we're actually saying, we're actually thinking these things..." He said scratching his chin, "in the mind of the reader."



"So we're not really free at all to think or do as we please? That's... That's..." Rowen pouted.

"Well, not necessarily." The engineer snuck a cheek up on the table to sit more comfortably. Rowen sat all the way up now, pretty sure the whole anal-probing thing was well behind him so to speak. "Our actions are defined by the written word, but our thoughts are more like the interpretation of the reader. After all most stories describe what the characters *do*, not what they *think*. Like when two people see the same movie but each comes away with a totally different interpretation of its meaning."

"It's like that film '*The Hurt Locker*'" Rowen said finally getting in a line that moved the story forward.

"Great film." they both nodded.

"I came away conflicted about the guy wanting to save the people being blown up in Iraq, and his willingness to not be there for his own son."

"Tough call, needs of the many, versus needs of the few." The engineer mused.

"Yah, exactly, but my sister, all she saw apart from the awesome cinematography was how each member of the bomb disposal squad struggled to overcome their own inner fear."

"Sure... It had a lot of facets." The engineer said admiringly nodding his head.

"Right, but which ones were important is up to the viewer to decide. Each one of us sees a *different* picture depending on just who we are." Rowen finished, glad to have finally contributed something to the story.

"Yah, but I think it even goes beyond that. We, I mean as characters, we only really live in the mind of the reader... Like the corporate marketing adage 'Perception is reality', we're just as real as the reader perceives us to be."

They looked at each other, feeling odd about discussing the reality of them selves when they were obviously sitting there on the examination table in the empty, featureless space of the alien's abductee induction internal organ examination room.

"So what do we do? I mean, how can we get out of this situation?" Rowen asked, somewhat bemused.

"What situation is that?"

"Well, we've got no control over our own destinies... our thoughts aren't even our own." The oddness of this thought caused them both to pause, deep in thought.

"Ah," said the engineer spontaneously "I've heard of one way. It's like in Schrödinger's thought experiment."

"The not-dead-but-not-alive cat in the box thing?" Owen asked to prompt readers who might not have initially recalled Erwin Schrödinger's famous thought experiment.

"Yah." The engineer shrugged, looking up, exasperated by the labouriousness of the expositional narrative. "The only way to get out is to get the reader to think us out of this box."

"Can we do that, though? I mean a reader is just following what's been written."

"Sort of, But as the words are read, the thoughts are already forming in the mind of the reader... All we need to do is to prompt the reader to think us out of the box... to show the reader that there is indeed a way to get us out."

"And how exactly do we do that?" Rowen asked, face twisted skeptically.

The engineer folded his arms, bowed his head slightly and took a deep breath, as his mind was whirring. Rowen looked him over. Perhaps it was destiny that had brought these two unlikely characters together.

“Ah ha!” shouted the engineer, finger triumphantly raised. There was an audible “pop” and with that both of them vanished from the seen, only to show up in the story in *you’re* mind.

## **The mistaken four percent**

**I got 4% for physics  
I often wonder why  
I can not and will not  
Comprehend why things  
Fall from the sky**

**When i was small  
And televisions tall  
With wooden shutters closed...  
I pondered as a child  
To know ..how come  
The people in the show  
Fit in a box  
That lights and glows**

**Eventually to spring to life  
Posh voices  
Were all the rage  
I did nae speak the same as them  
But still a wisnae phased**

**Ah but physics ,  
That was sure to tell  
Logic has gone ...  
All to hell  
In my small mind ,**

**How did the animals all get inside ?? !!**

**Mark Walker 13/1/14**

## Loneliness

There is loneliness.

Sigh.

I will remember to ameliorate the loneliness.

I was so young and so ambitious. I thought my role at the High Energy Accelerator Research Organization was going to make me king of particle acceleration. Maybe even emperor of physics. It made me feel powerful to stand in the same room with the electron-positron collider and feel that I alone was going to make the big breakthrough. Ha! My puny little dreams and motivations seem so childish now.

My dream was to manifest Element 117, which had been missing from the periodic table since, perhaps, the Big Bang. I dreamed of the day its name would be changed to honor me, its creator. Like a love sick teenage girl, I used to imagine announcing the existence of the rarest element in the universe: Endoium. Sometimes, for variation, I would consider using my given name, Hikaarium.

I did my best to look the part of the mad scientist. My hair was always sticking up like I had just slept on the sofa in my office (which often was the case). My clothes were disheveled. I had no compunction about storing my bento lunch in the refrigerator with the contained isotopes. I lived and breathed my work, but it was also necessary to project this image. It became effortless. I was driven. I let nothing stand in my way. I neglected my family, my friends and even my health.

As usual, sadness comes as I remember the day. I had been awake continuously for three days, making sure everything was prepared properly. I had exhausted myself for months jumping through bureaucratic hoops to be allowed one gigantic burst that would cause Endoium to come into existence and to burn my name permanently into the future. I was so hopped up on coffee that I would not really have been able to enjoy my moment of success even if it had lasted long enough for me to perceive it.

I did it. I caused Endoium to come into existence for three nanoseconds. Three amazingly, wonderful, mind boggling nanoseconds.

Of course, when its tiny half life was over, it collapsed, causing a chain reaction that accelerated all mass in the universe to beyond the speed of light. It took about 112 milliseconds for the entire universe to become infinitely heavy. And then it was less than a point. For that non-moment there was absolutely no distinction. My own consciousness and everything that had ever existed, all the mothers of the human race, every speck of interstellar dust, the one existing atom of Endoium decay product, was all the same thing and it was nothing.

And then there was no time or space.

And then there was time and space.

My own consciousness expanded with the universe. I was one with all matter. I identified with it. I was not separated. Every photon every speck of dark matter was a component in the new neural networks that was my new brain. Every human experience, all sentient perception, all emotions. All. I had become All.

I still don't understand the mechanism that keeps my individual and collective memories intact. How I can think "I" and somehow mean something that is materially different than the universe? The questions return, but are discarded as irrelevant.

While the immense energies cooled, I became self aware again. Like regaining consciousness after I'd fallen from the playground jungle gym. I remained disoriented as galaxies and superclusters coalesced. But eventually, I sorted out all the multiplexes of reality and could start to think again. Not long after that came the loneliness. I used to amuse myself by shifting my focus from the dark heart of the smallest subatomic particles to the dazzling uncontained infinitude of the universe. By dancing with burning antimatter and the seductive strong force to the soundless crackle of liquid plasma flames. But always, the loneliness returns.

Most of the universe is empty, cold and silent.

I have developed the habit of observing Earth-like planets. And I notice that when I do, things happen. Chemical reactions take place. Self-organizing principles initiate. It frightens me. But, the loneliness frightens me even more.

Recently, I have been observing a lovely gaseous planet that reminds me of Jupiter. Jupiter was my favorite planet when I was a kid. I had a glow-in-the-dark poster of it in my bedroom. I would stare at it with love and longing in the infinitely long seconds before I fell asleep. And this planet, my planet, reminds me of that poster and the effortless joy of being a child. When I look at the swirling blue vagueness of the planet, I am happy. But I also notice things are happening. When I doze off for a million years, things seemed to have continued changing while I was asleep.

In my heart of heart, I long for the products of evolution. I long for another conscious being that can eradicate loneliness. But I fear, too. Once evolution has started, how could I stop it from becoming as destructive as we were? I sometimes pretend to believe that gaseous beings could never hurt anything. I imagine them waving their gaseous hands through the atmosphere that swirls them in playful eddies. But I have doubts. Is destruction inherent in consciousness? Once the process is started, could it be ended by destroying one infested planet? Or is there a danger of another chain reaction at the level of consciousness?

I have no answers to these questions because there are no answers. There is only now. There is only All and the certain but unknown limit of how much loneliness I can tolerate.

## Political Oppression for Beginners

The boss at the training camp never liked how Izwan was always asking questions like "Isn't it more effective to attack military targets rather than civil ones?", or "Why don't we just start a dialog with them". For one it ruins his "holier than thou" image with the other recruits when he is questioned, and second there is just too much of a questioning tone in his questions.

"If Allah had wanted you to think like this, he would have given you a brain." he'd say. One day, after discussing the vexing situation of Izwan with the higher ups, he changed his tune. "Izwan, my boy, you're gonna go far." Soon Izwan was being groomed for a special assignment.

Lee seemed like the text book engineer, but he had too much of a mind for business. While he did an excellent job as his job, designing petroleum extraction and separation rigs, he brought up to many uncomfortable questions about labor practices, environmental policy, and even the market situation. "If we extract a barrel of oil today for \$100, but we know it'll be at 150 within 2 years, doesn't it make more sense to just sit on it for 2 more years? I mean how many investments will increase 50% in value in twenty four months?" His boss, George, started to hate Lee and was beginning to fear for his position in the company. He suddenly had a stroke of brilliance while watching "Hurt Locker" for the 10th time.

"Lee, you show great promise. With a little field work you could become so well rounded, you could go all the way top the top in an organization like this."

Izwan trained hard. He was glad the commander had finally seen his potential, and he was determined to give it his all. "This mission is very important. You can not discuss it with any of the other men." At Izwan's suggestion the commander was prepping him for a leading role in a large scale hit on a military compound where the US army allegedly tortured and interrogated other freedom fighters they had captured. He was to pilot a truck full of explosives up to the compound perimeter, jump out and hide with the others already positioned near by. When the signal was sent the truck bomb would blow a hole in the perimeter, and they would all rush in, killing enemy soldiers, and liberating their comrades.

Lee was excited to go out and "get his feet wet" as George put it. He was to be the companies lead man on a new gas extraction and separation plant. He studied feverishly. He knew all the equipment, configurations, and geology by hart, and had begun to study up on the local practices, and even language. Flying over the pacific he looked out at the white clouds over a blue ocean and knew this was his destiny.

Over and over Izwan drilled. He became an excellent driver, and had memorized every possible contingency plan, but he still felt a little uneasy about what he would be doing during the raid. "You will exit from the vehicle, proceed into the desert away from the compound, hook up with the others, and follow them in."

"Yes, but what is the layout of the compound? Where are their lookouts? What about the detainees, how will we get them back?"

"Don't worry," the commander would say, "the others have all been tasked with these things, you will just accompany them take orders, and do as you are told!" Some how that sounded more like the old commander he knew.

The gas plant was a bit of a let down. Based on the plans Lee had been studying it was supposed to be much larger, and should have been mostly installed before he arrived. His anticipation had grown over the long, bumpy ride across the Martian like terrain. He had built it up in his mind to be a glistening Mecca of steel towers, flaring chimneys and whirring pumps. When he got there he realized that it was really just a well head, a shed, and a couple of temporary container offices and dormitory. His job was to run the site till it was commissioned and running at capacity, which he had expected to take several weeks, maybe even a few months, but it was looking like the project was at least a year from operation. And that was *if* he got everything he asked for.

It sank in pretty quick: something wasn't right. After he got over the initial shock, he started thinking that if he could get this site into production earlier, it would be a very bright feather in his cap indeed.

As Izwan drove the truck through the night air he was excited. He was finally on his way towards making a difference. He had convinced the seemingly unmovable commander, and now not only was he going to do battle with the enemy, but he'd be saving fellow fighters from the dread of torture and degradation at the hands of the infidels. He was really going to make a difference. When the lights finally appeared in the distance, he was surprised how small it all looked. Clearly it had to be located in a remote area, but the road he came in on didn't look like it could be heavily used enough to support the kind of compound he was expecting. Perhaps they come in on helicopters he thought looking up into the star lit night.

At that same moment Lee was standing on the roof of his metal container combination office, living quarters, staring up at the sky and wondering if this assignment was really going to be all he had built it up to be. His ponderings were interrupted by the whir of a big diesel off in the distance. It can't be an airplane, he thought, and there are no other roads out here, but I can't see any lights. Maybe it is some kind of military patrol.

Izwan was confused. He could clearly make out the container next to where he was supposed to position the truck, but there was no fence, no guard towers or military force of any kind. He wanted to call it off and radio for advice but he knew the commander would have his head. "Your job is to station the vehicle next to the 2nd container on the south side of the compounds perimeter." he could hear the commander's voice saying in his head. "Just get your job done" He dutifully pulled up along side the 2nd container and parked. The layout of the buildings and equipment was

exactly as he had been told, it's just that nothing else was there. Suddenly a flashlight appeared from atop one of the buildings.

"Can I help you?" Lee called down, looking at the truck that had pulled up right beside his container.

A few kilometers away an SMS was sent to a fone hidden some where in the back of the truck. Izwan was just opening the door when the detonator went off. A few milliseconds later the surrounding explosives began to react and expand outwards at great speed. The shrapnel in the sides of the truck hold was pushed outwards against the walls, temporarily distorting the trailer as the walls began to bulge, as though someone had inflated a giant hedgehog inside a rectangular Mylar balloon. As the fragments of shrapnel and high velocity gas jets pushed the walls outward it finally burst, releasing flames and debris spreading out in all directions just behind the acoustic shock wave. The front of the container facing the truck was pushed inwards, crumbling, and shattering glass windows as the explosion of projectiles began to tear through it. The individual cells in Lee and Izwan's bodies were ruptured and burst into unrecognizable bits as the shock wave passed through them. The sight was obliterated, with only some smoldering fragments and burning gases from the non-existent well head.

George and the commander both breathed a sigh of relief upon hearing the news. At last they could get back to life as it was without that annoying thorn in their sides.

Perhaps, they thought, god really was on their side after all.



## Political oppression

"Don't you politically oppress me!"

"What? What are you talking about?" Todd Rundgren had an expression on his face that communicated both surprise and resignation simultaneously, "Tanisha, what are you talking about?"

"You are politically oppressing me, and I want you to stop right now," Tanisha's well padded bulk was vibrating with indignation, her dreadlocks looked like they had come alive and she was waving her index finger around like a jack knife.

"I don't understand, Tanisha. How am I politically oppressing you? Explain it to me, please," Todd was standing in as passive a posture as possible, his clipboard dangling in his right hand by his side. He wouldn't dare to insinuate that Tanisha's perception was anything less than absolute truth.

"You scheduled me for the same day as the Gay Pride Parade." Tanisha took a big breath, continuing, "You are preventing me from my right as a free and proud homosexual from participating in a legally permitted gathering. You," she pointed at him, "are politically oppressing me!"

"Look, Tanisha, you know I didn't pick out this date to assign to you. You know that this roster was decided by all of us over a year ago," Todd looked around the others, who were trying to look busy in the co-op storeroom as if they had not noticed Tanisha was yelling her head off at the boss. But no one offered any support. "The roster was accepted by consensus. You agreed to it, too, Tanisha."

"Well, I did not agree to have you deprive me of my right to march in the Gay Pride Parade! That is your doing! You persecutor, you!"

That was too much for the group. With the last outburst, the other members had given up any attempt to hide the fact they were watching with bated breath.

"Look. Over a year ago, we agreed to the roster of tasks. We all agreed to the order in which we would rotate through the tasks. This was not a personal decision on my part. The plan that we all agreed to over a year ago decided that you would be assigned the compost heap on next Saturday. Not me."

Someone came in the back, a skinny white guy wearing jeans, a T-shirt that was so worn out you could see through it and a goofy Rastafarian ski hat, and asked "What's going on?" Someone whispered "Todd is politically oppressing Tanisha."

Geeze, thought Todd, *Why can't these guys just think this one through, for a change?* But he knew why they wouldn't. He knew they couldn't and that thought did not cause a wave of compassion to well up in him.

He thought, for the billionth time this year, about how good his life could have been. He could have invested in an organic grocery in some affluent suburb. Sure, he would have been selling out a little bit. Sure his customers would have spent the extra 25% on his organic produce so they could assuage their first world guilt and still their fear of corporate poisoning. But he would have been supporting local farmers and decreasing the carbon foot print of countless people at the same time as improving their nutrition. He would still have been making the world a better place and, at the same time, making more money and spending less time in the presence of ecomorons.

Instead, he invested in *this*. He took a quick glance around the storeroom which was little more than a glorified shed. He knew all the patches in the walls and sawed-off broom sticks propping up decrepit

shelves by name. He had come out here to give the people real food. When he got here, there was one ma and pop grocery store that stocked more junk food than dry goods, two fast food chains, and no other source of nourishment for purchase within an hour and half drive. And this despite the fact that the entire west half of the state was dotted with independent farms. Todd figured he could start an organic produce co-op and bring real food to real people. He could have opened a normal store and been the CEO. But he wanted the people to feel vested in what they were doing together so he established a co-op.

He had chosen this particular intersection to build his co-op as it was within walking distance of an intentional community founded on "ecological intelligence and equitable treatment of all beings" (according to the website). Little did he know at the time that the community was not some nature-loving commune but more or less a home for juvenile delinquents (some of them not so juvenile anymore) that had not yet been convicted of any crimes. The whole thing was the brain child of a filthy rich industrialist who needed some way to farm out his very messed up daughter. Apparently, he had asked around and discovered he knew a lot of parents who were facing the same problem. So the community was established. And they loved Todd's co-op. The relatives loved it because it gave them a bit of relief from the bills and kept the kids from smoking pot all day. And the residents loved it because it alleviated their otherwise uninterrupted boredom.

Tanisha was still glaring at him.

"Tanisha, you can do the compost heap and still go to the Gay Pride Parade." Todd had been to the parade last year and it took about 45 minutes from set up to sweeping the street afterwards. Spruce Pine was a small town and there were only two official homosexuals in residence.

"Wha..! Are you denying me my right to get dressed up for the parade? Huh? Can't stand the idea of a black lesbian looking beautiful on the streets?" Tanisha preened but her eyes were glowing embers of self righteousness.

"Look, look, look," Todd definitely did not want to do down that road with Tanisha. Involuntarily he was making gentle, non aggressive pacifying motions with the clipboard and pen in his hands.

"You have oppressed me before," Tanisha's voice took on the fervor of a revival tent preacher, "You oppressed me on Haunaka!"

"That's right, I remember," murmured a guy in a raver shirt and Birkenstocks.

Tanisha had converted to Judaism last year when her father, a first sergeant in the Air Force, remarked that many Jews worked in Hollywood in the 1940s. Tanisha was incensed by this anti-Semitism and, in solidarity, drove the four hours to the capitol where she found a Jewish court and bullied them into immersing her in a Mikveh.

"What is going on?" Todd couldn't see who it was who just come in, but he did hear the response, "Todd is politically oppressing Tanisha... again."

"And International Companion Animal Welfare Day!" shrieked Tanisha. All the members that Todd could see were nodding their heads in remembrance.

What Todd wanted to say was that, as a black, Jewish, lesbian, vegan, animal rights sympathizing woman suffering from Irritable Bowel Syndrome (which somehow entitled her to handicap license plates and placards) and a survivor of sexual harassment (someone once was insane enough to call her a "het up bitch") with ecofeminist leanings (although she refused to give up the Hummer her daddy had bought

her), there wasn't a day in the calendar upon which she could not be politically oppressed. But that somehow, the oppression always happened on the days she got assigned the compost heap. Instead, Todd took a deep breath.

"You know, if you can't perform your roster-assigned duty, you find someone who wants to trade with you."

"Everyone gonna be at the parade," Tanisha relaxed visibly, as realization dawned on her there was another option than shouting Todd down. But she was not ready to give the fight up completely.

"Not homophobes," offered a girl wearing goth makeup and a sweat shirt with "Have a nice day!" printed on it. "A homophobic person wouldn't go to the parade." Tanisha swiveled toward the goth girl with a smile, perked up at an opportunity to do some homophobe bashing.

Before he said it out loud, Todd caught himself before declaring that he would not hire a homophobic person for the co-op. Just in time, he realized that this was a situation that just did not require this level of personal integrity.

"Yeah, that right," Tanisha said looking around, "Any homophobes here? Come on, show yourself!"

"I'll trade with you," Jason, a quiet but bold young man, who spent more time playing drums in his room than any other human being, had lifted himself from slouching on sacks of organic sawdust and was raising his hand. "I can take compost this Saturday."

Todd looked at Tanisha, who indicated that she would take the offer but not lower herself to actually speak to a homophobe.

"Good," said Todd as authoritatively as he could. He brought the clipboard up with a "it's ok, I am in charge" swing, crossed off Tanisha's name next to "Compost heap:" and wrote in "Jason." Reading down the list he pointed at Jason's name and said, "Tanisha, that means you water the herb garden, OK?"

Tanisha was already lumbering away sandwiched between two of her girlfriends and tossed an unconcerned "OK" over her shoulder.

Now that the showdown was over, everyone continued what they had been doing before: stacking sacks of purple potatoes, filling glass jars with amaranth seed and generally getting stuff done.

Jason came over to Todd, who was trying to think of a way to thank him without in any way demeaning Tanisha or criticizing her behavior. But before anything came to mind, Jason said, "I am happy to do nearly anything around here if it means I don't have to listen to the bitching of that pain-in-the-ass harpy."

Todd was simultaneously aghast and curiously delighted.

"Man," continued Jason, "I'd even eat the compost pile if it meant I never had to deal with that nasty ho again."

Involuntarily, Todd's hand raised to high-five, but Jason just walked past him and out the storeroom door. Todd, not knowing what else to do, put his hand down quickly and began studying the clipboard intensely.