

THE FEATHERTALE

REVIEW

25





THE FEATHERTALE REVIEW



**WOW, TWENTY-FIVE WHOLE ISSUES!
AND IT ONLY TOOK US FIFTEEN WHOLE YEARS!**

THE FEATHERTALE REVIEW



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ISSUE NO. 25

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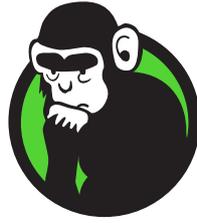
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FROM THE MONKEY'S DESK



If you trust the automorphic number on our cover, you may believe this to be the 25th instalment of Canada's most celebrated illustrated literary humour magazine. But just like Gen Xers on Tinder, we've been lying about our age for a while (and, to some extent, our accomplishments too). Although this is officially No. 25, it could just as well have been branded *Feathertale* No. 27. But to do that we would have had to re-evaluate a nearly decade-old decision that ultimately created a couple of freak issues of *Feathertale* which have always stood out from our lineage like some mysterious little pointy-eared kids at a family reunion.

We wish we could say there was a valid reason for the numeric omissions, but it was 2012 and 2013, and edibles were new to us and none of us believed there would be lasting consequences when we published two issues of *Feathertale* without affixing the usual digits. To the librarians, subscribers and pornographers who have collected each issue since our inception, we belatedly apologize for any unexpected confusion caused on your bookshelves by *Feathertale's Big Book of Exquisitely Egregious Poetry and Diverse Versification and So Forth and Such* (our non-canon 10th issue, better known as our "poetry book"). Same goes for *Eat It: Sex, Food & Women's Writing*, our literary cookbook.

Not long ago, we would have summarized all of this by saying hindsight is 20/20. But now that we're nearing the end of 2020, we feel the word that best characterizes this numerical phrase would be *dangleberry*.

This is our 15th year in print. To mark the momentousness of this occasion, we have created an issue that can literally glow through a pile of shit excreted by any living thing. If you don't believe us, go ahead and turn

out the lights, block out the sun and watch the monkey on the front of this thing emit a phosphorescent glow that may well set off a Geiger counter.

So here we are, slowly irradiating you with what is either our 25th or 27th issue, though most definitely not our 26th. A few years ago when we hit 21, we remarked that we were getting close to the life expectancy of an 18th-century Prussian. We're now knocking on the suicidal age of rock stars (the notorious 27 Club). Speaking of dead musicians, there are a few within these pages, notably a spaced-out Keith Moon and a naked John Lennon ("The Who Girls," p. 44). If you're more into musical theatre, then flip instead to p. 74 or 86 for appreciation of the positive power of *The Phantom of the Opera*.

In addition to the usual assorted mix of manic nonsense that makes up our pages (letter from Tammy, p. 9), we've included helpful pandemic-related content, including but not limited to an enlightening public health advisory about the sanitary benefits of urinary saturation (p. 12). Other highlights include: a deconstruction of what it means to be edgy (p. 88); the largest collection of comics to be published within our pages since "The Consummately Cartoonish Comics Compendium" of *Feathertale* No. 7 (p. 97); and philosophical musings about life and humanity in the form of a Proust Questionnaire completed by Kim Jong-un (p. 152).

We send this issue forth to you now in the hope that it brings you some cheerful light amid the dreadful darkness of the pandemic. The initial lockdown of bookstores across the country resulted in the delayed shipment of our previous offering (No. 24). That delay caused this issue to swell to 160 pages, matching No. 20 as the largest *Feathertale* we've ever produced. It's also, quite literally, our greenest issue to date, thanks to the nuclear hue of Pantone No. 802.

Assuming we survive the pandemic, we aspire to pump out another issue with no number attached and a title that is essentially just a definition of fiction. Assuming you survive the pandemic too, we hope you will read it.

Until then . . .

— *The Editors*

*SURGEON GENERAL'S WARNING: Due to the glow-in-the-dark ink on the cover of this magazine, keep this product away from children and your genitals.



— THE FEATHERTALE FORUM —

A SELECTION
OF RANDOM
CORRES-
PONDENCE
MISDIRECTED
INTO OUR
MAILBOX

Dear Edith,

It's been an eternity, hasn't it, my dear? Almost eight months (or has it been three years?). I'm no longer sure how to answer the "How are you?" phone calls and emails. Usually my autopilot responds with, "I have nothing to complain about," followed by something about the hardship of those less fortunate. I run away if I hear the word *Trump* or if there is whining about the weather, masks, fly-fishing, wait lines (waistlines) or sauerkraut.

There was a time back in the spring when I would start my emails with "Hope you are all well" or "Trust this finds you well," but now I start with "Sigh! It's me again" or "I hope this finds you wellish and inciting a riot" or "I hope your grass is greener than mine."

Then there is the sign-off which, in my case, usually follows a short account of my somewhat empty schedule: "I heard an echo in my calendar . . . calendar . . . calendar!" Gone are the days of writing about recent travels, concerts, gossip and news from the obits — though I do still write about the obits because people continue to disappear, never to be seen again. I wonder where Regis Philbin got to?

I like to sign off on my correspondence rather than leaving that white void which means it could have come from anyone — Bill Gates, Boris Johnson or Julie Payette, whose office wrote me recently on account of my advanced age, and whoever signed for her wrote "Winnie the Pooh," which I thought awfully cute. Lovely curls.

Closing with "Best" is lazy — would you write "Worst"? "Be well" is cute but a tad presumptuous. "Awkwardly yours" is, well, kind of awkward, even if, in my case, it happens to be true.

I signed off on one email recently with "Please remember me" and got a quick reply saying, "Do we know you?" I'm not sure if people still end their correspondence with "Peace." It somehow reminds me of the Grateful Dead, San Francisco (If you're going to San Francisco . . .), Woodstock, Joni and sit-ins.

I often think about you and the scrapbook you had started when we last met. I keep looking for it in the pages of *The Times Literary Supplement*, but my eyes do fail me, so I may have missed it.

We should get together for a coffee or tea — I could sit on my porch and you could sit in the street. I do hope you and your family are thriving and you have finally started to shave.

And now, the sign-off. Take your pick:

Yours in anguish,
Later . . . maybe,
The “Hallelujah” chorus will play when I press send,
Remember to spay and neuter your pets,
I remain (where you last left me),
(And my current favourite:)
Invariably yours,
Tammy Wynette

Dearest Rosalind,

So sorry to hear about Sydney. You should have left him when we were all rising stars, the roads were paved with pickles, and Dick Whittington (slut) sold his cat.

I don’t see how I can wait for your visit. My body aches with hotness and wetness — the couple upstairs are forever bonking — so much so that the chandelier’s tinkling is attracting the birds. I awoke to the swallows pecking at my breasts and the finches nesting in my hair.

And so, Rosalind dearest, not only am I delighted that you are alive, but also getting married. Is it your seventh, dear? I’m never sure if you counted the conjoined twins as a unit. You all looked so dazzling together, but I did wonder how you managed, given their attachment . . . at the head.

I really must go and do my legs, as we have Rodney and Abigail coming down for the weekend. They are bringing their pet porpoises (porpies), which is always a bother when they make those horrendous mating calls at all hours of the night (the *porpoises*, dear — not Rodney and Abigail).

But enough! George is wearing nothing but a chef’s hat and is calling me into the pantry.

Next week I’m off to do some facial tweaking in Argentina with that darling Raúl González Blanco — I will write you upon my return. Perhaps you might join us?

I look forward to Christmas and letters from my family. How I love your rants about the obscure and the murky. You are a dear, dear friend, but how you go on and on and on. The pigeons would have a field day nesting in your Brillo pad.

Although I cherish these ever-so-brief shining moments with you, pretty petal, I must leave and get dressed before the fog in my head lifts and the dark skies glimmer their good-morning nonsense.

As they say, “See you later, crocodile; in a while, alligator.”

The feather always rises — except when it’s attached to the ostrich.

Kisses to you and cuddles to the Welsh boys’ choir in the parlour,

Dorothy ◊

DUE TO COVID-19 IT IS BEST FOR PUBLIC HEALTH IF THIS ENTIRE CITY IS DRENCHED IN PISS

By Jacob Pacey

Come now, citizens, do hear this:

As the director of public health in a large North American city, I must recommend that everything be drenched in piss.

You must understand this isn't my first choice, but I must put down my fist.

Washrooms are a breeding ground for COVID. They are worse than a kiss!

Please, I beg of all of you: close down your washrooms to the public and cover this city in piss.

You may ask, But what about the delivery drivers bringing me all the food that I miss? Working long days, surely they must need a place to piss?

To that I say, Allowing them access to your washroom is a sanitary abyss!

It is much cleaner for everyone if they just pee in an alley. This you cannot dismiss.

You may say, But what about the road trippers, travelling for some COVID-free vacation bliss? Surely they must need a place to piss?

Sorry, gas station washrooms can no longer be Swiss.

Let them pee in a bottle and throw it out the window. On this I must medically insist.

You may protest, But what about the family park goers — a mom, a dad, a brother and his baby sis? Surely they must need a place to piss.

This is a good point, and if I fail to answer this question I would be remiss.

It is absolutely imperative for public sanitation that every square inch of that park be soaked in piss.

I understand that on these directives you may resist. Is there no alternative more sanitary than this?

Allow me to assure you that piss is absolutely sterile, nothing is amiss.

It is my firm medical opinion that nothing is better for public health than coating every last surface of this city with dried human piss.



THIS IS FINE.

SPRING 1851 JACK PARTS THE LOVERS.

the foot of the stairs he raised, and strained her? could he announce his presence without bringing a cry to her line?

FAMOUS MOTHERS

By Marta Balcewicz

Illustration by François Vigneault

Brandon's mother drives a Honda Civic, not at all what I expected. "Where are you going?" Brandon asks.

"Your mo—" I say, already out the door, running down the stairs of his building. "Your mother!" I say each time I hit a landing. "Your mother!" I push open the front door. "Your mother!" I yell. "She's getting close. I can feel it."

I'm barefoot. My socks slipped off on the third floor and I've cut my feet on the cracked landing tile. The sidewalks have been salted and my wounds sting but I don't have time to massage them. Brandon's mother is executing the last turn of her parallel park. I yank on the handle of the driver-side door, but it's locked from the inside — like she knew I was coming.

Brandon's mother turns off the ignition. She stares at me through the

glass. "Susan?" she mouths. She does not roll down the window.

The glass is reflecting more than showing, so that in addition to her unwavering brown eyes, I can see Brandon's building, and yes, even Brandon in the window of his apartment, waving his arms. "Susan!" he yells.

On the half-reflective window, he and his mother make a palimpsest, better than any family portrait. There's no doubt he's biologically hers; their eyes are identically wide.



"You know, my mother saw the Beatles play."

Brandon had said this as casually as if he were telling me an ordinary fact about her: that she has bangs or teaches second grade. We were getting ready to share a couch cushion on our third date and I'd just finished selecting the soundtrack: George Harrison's *Dark Horse*. Brandon cracked open a Coke.

"Saw the Beatles *how*?" I asked.

Brandon put his arm around me. "*Saw* saw," he said.

"*Saw* saw?" I said. I pulled away so I could see his expression. His mouth had opened. He seemed alarmed, like he thought he'd said something to offend me.

"Live?" I asked.

"Yeah. Here. In '64," he said, relaxing. "Are you a huge fan or something?"

I had to think about it. I'd just put on a George CD even though I could've put on anything else. I owned lots of CDs and this wasn't a CD I listened to often, and neither was any Beatles record. I knew their music just as well as any normal human being did. I appreciated their genius in the impersonal way I appreciated Einstein or Newton or Bill Gates.

Still, learning that I was sitting beside someone whose mother had witnessed a Beatles show — in the sixties no less, at the height of their fame — triggered something. It felt like a disease, dormant in me until now, had awakened. It made itself felt, like the start of a cold or flu would, though it was more primordial, more a part of me, you, everyone,

than any virus or bacteria. It had nothing to do with Brandon's mother.

"She had pretty close seats and at one point Paul winked at her, though obviously every girl around her probably thought he winked at them."

"And you're her biological son?" I asked.

Brandon laughed. "Oh my God. What kind of question is that?"



I prop my knee on the fender and am surprised by how cold it feels, even through good-quality denim. I climb the hood, gripping the antenna for leverage. The heat of the motor feels nice against my feet; it soothes the cuts, an antidote to the salt. I pull off my T-shirt and throw it over the car roof. I scream — no words, just a single shriek, vulgar and prehistoric. I scream again.

Brandon's mom brings her face up to the windshield and presses her palm into the wheel, making a pathetic *beep-beep*. I make a fist and pound the windshield in response, like I'm banging on a door in a horror movie. She recoils and her hands crumple against her chest. She mouths something I can't decipher, so I scream again. I scream once more after that.

THE THUD MY FOOT GENERATES IS A WIMPY FRACTION OF WHAT MY FIST HAD DONE, SO I BEND DOWN AND PUNCH THE GLASS SOME MORE.

I didn't mean to scare her. I wanted the opposite, in fact. In my head, earlier, it had played out differently. The way my bra made its appearance was subtler, more mutually willed. We talked about books and movies first. We talked about art.

I stand up, teetering because the hood is really hot, and I kick the windshield. The thud my foot generates is a wimpy fraction of what my fist had done, so I bend down and punch the glass some more. I just want



to say hi, to slide into easy conversation, to form a connection, yet somehow I fall back into that old scream again. I am simply too excited.

Brandon comes running out of the building. He yells, "Put your shirt back on! What the hell?"

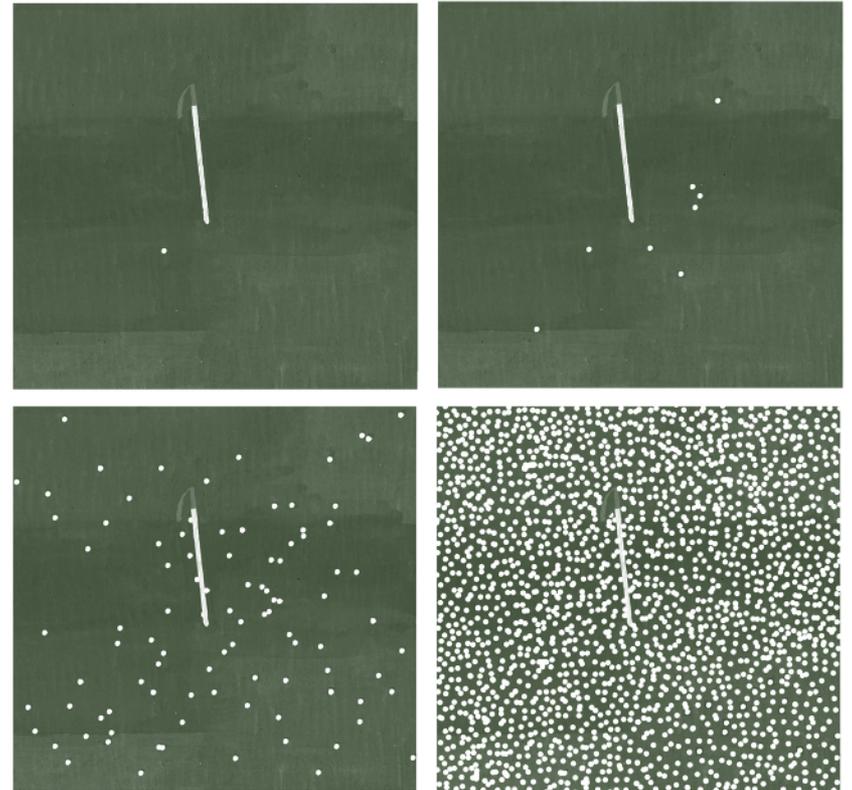
I'm wearing my best bra. I had put it on knowing Brandon's mom was coming. It's red and padded, with a pearl between the cups. Because Brandon is trying to grab my feet, I scale the windshield and climb onto the roof, kicking him in the face as I get away. I discover a sunroof, and through it, an unobstructed, up-close view of Brandon's mother. The part in her hair. Her grey roots. And behind the slope of her nose, a bit of cleavage. "EEEEEEEEEE!" I scream. "EEEEEEEEEE!"

It's stupid, I know, but the cleavage undoes me. It shatters me. It is too much. Cleavage is personal and usually clothed. Cleavage is sex and *closeness*.

I pound the sunroof. I feel closer to her than ever. Even closer than when her biological son and I had intercourse. The rest I have to learn later from Brandon's recap.

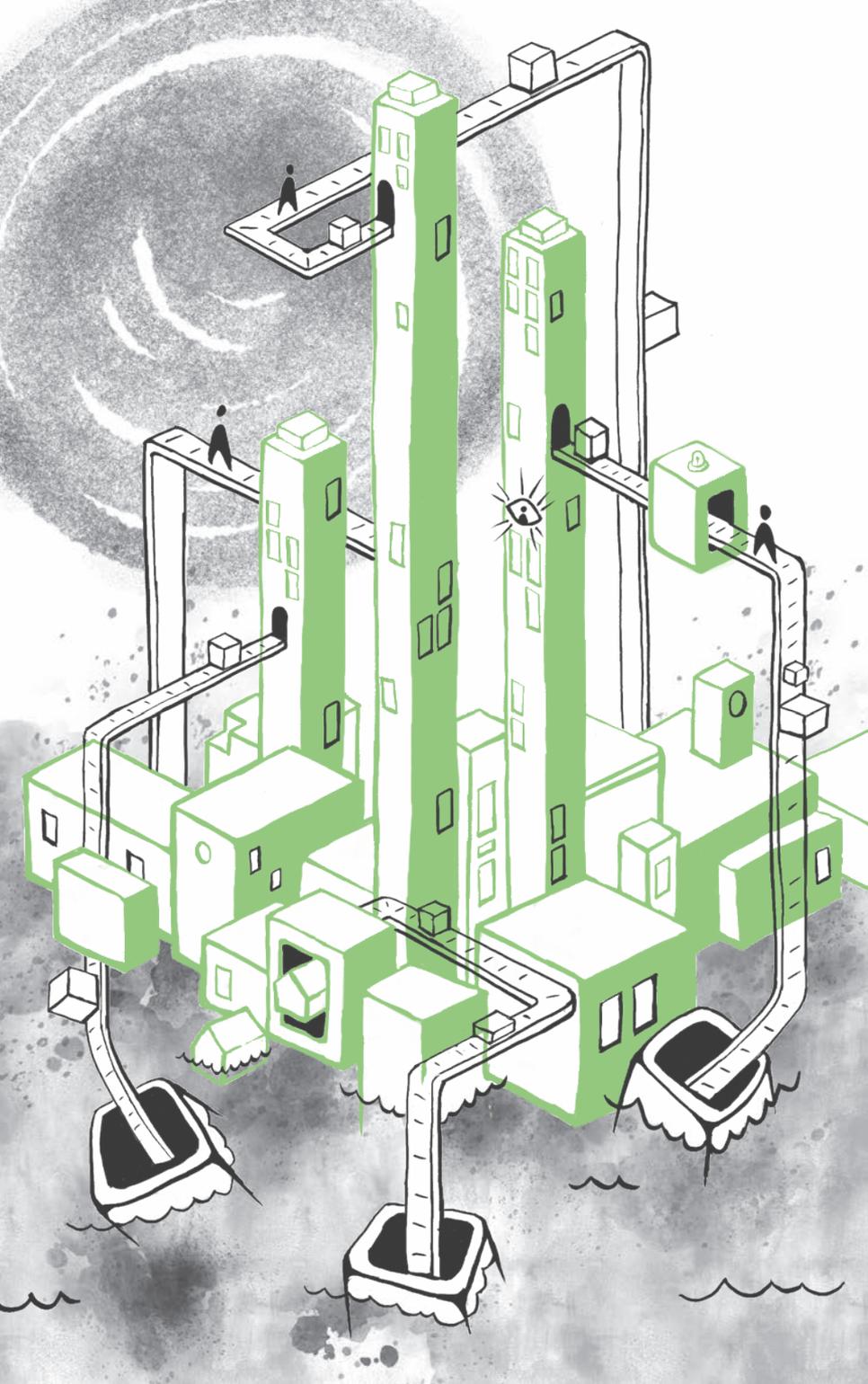
I hear that I gripped my body longingly, as if it were someone else — like Brandon's mom — and ran my hands up and down my sides, as if coaxing out something elemental. Brandon had climbed up the back of the car and grabbed me, taking advantage of my moment of enthrallment. As he carried me across the street, into the building and up the stairs, my hands were pressed to my face like that Munch painting. I was still shrieking as he set me on the couch.

Minutes later, the sirens came, and after the police talked to Brandon's mother, they all left, the cruisers forming a protective motorcade around her. At this point, Brandon finally let me look out the window, holding me firmly by the waist because otherwise, he said, there was no question I would've jumped. I wanted badly to see her. But the street was empty, save for one of our neighbours, standing on the curb with his phone out, taking a photo of where her tire marks had stamped the snow. ◦



**IF YOU DO IT ENOUGH
YOU WILL GET THE HANG
OF IT EVENTUALLY**

By Kenzi Inouye



THE MANAGERS

By Jess Taylor

Illustrations by Karam Bajwa

The city would be run like a business. This wasn't unheard of — other cities had been run this way under the guise of governments and “balancing budgets.” This would be a city with no deficit, only profit. The city would own all of the housing and provide all of the jobs, and people would pay to live in the city. The city would own the grocery stores and pay the people who worked in the grocery stores. People would move to the city after hearing about the employment boom that followed its creation: people needed to build the city and people needed to run the city and people needed to feed the people of the city and people needed to clean the city.

The city would make money in two ways: off of exports of items made in the city and interest on debt. Its citizens, of course, would never be able to fully afford the housing with the wages provided, and so they would use credit cards for food and loans for schooling, all of which the city's banks would control. And making sure that everything functioned smoothly, that would be the job of the managers at every stage, ending with the most senior managerial board. And while there would be many managers who reported back to the board, they could have the opportunity to one day run things, if they only worked hard enough. Hard work always paid off in the city.

The city was built where oceans had washed out the cities from before. Buildings and roads and infrastructure were deep underwater. A new sustainable construction method had been developed, which compressed old trash and plastics into heavy, dense blocks that could be used to build up land again, and people all over the world were using it to build new coastlines over where the old ones had disappeared. Most were using this to restore cities that had been damaged by the water, but where the managers' city was built was too far gone for recovery and had been lost for too many years. Time to build a fresh city.

A cluster of towers was a necessity and so was built, right in the centre of the city, towers for the people to run the city. They were built to sway as the wind caught their frames, taller than the buildings around them. Inside each building was a member of the senior managerial board and on each floor was a lower manager.

Despite the managers who worked endlessly answering emails and filling out forms, the city had problems. The initial influx of residents seeking jobs never ended. People kept moving there even after the jobs were filled and the housing was all occupied. There were more people to track and understand. The city was getting overcrowded. People abroad were starting to say it was a city without a heart, that people only moved from home to work and back again and no one was happy. They were critical of the amount of people who were jobless, critical of the people who moved from joblessness to poverty to a state of visible mental illness. Critical that the city did nothing to help. Others, even

city residents, were critical of the city's social structures, said that everything about the way the city was set up led to turmoil and inequality. That it was impossible to be content with the towers stretching up into the sky. These people went to graduate school and wrote papers on these conditions. Some of them wrote about their own experiences with joblessness, of the city making them feel insignificant, of the existence of jobs making them feel insignificant. They made it through graduate school while explaining that graduate school was another structure, like the city, really an extension of the city, where certain people, depending on race, gender, ability, were given more opportunities and that some people would graduate, despite their education, and still be caught in the conditions of the city and others would become managers of the city. They wrote their papers and some debated pieces of these papers. They took breaks in the middle of their papers to post the main argument on social media and everyone agreed that the city was sick.

The graduate students graduated. Some remained caught in the conditions of the city. Others became managers.

The managers didn't stop with managing the comings and goings of the city and its workers; they also gave themselves what they felt was a truly altruistic goal: they would create a sense of warmth and community in the city.

Through vibrancy, a manager dutifully typed in a memo, *we will create a new sense of culture in the city*. She smiled to herself after she pressed send, and it did land the way she'd intended. All the managers agreed: this manager, a newer manager just graduated from her PhD, had vision.

The managers were on a break, but they spent their breaks answering emails. The emails they received were long and cascaded down the screen, clause after clause connected by only commas — there were so many concerns. *How I would love to eat a muffin in piece*, the manager with vision wrote another manager.

Do you mean "peace" or do you mean you'd like to eat the muffin in one "piece"?

The manager with vision laughed and then realized maybe it would seem odd, laughing in front of a computer screen, alone, alone in this of-

fice that was much too big for her. The newest manager, already labelled as having vision. This was why they hired her in the first place. Her master's had been in urban planning and then when she did her PhD, that was when she shone, with a focus on sustainability in urban planning, especially as it pertained to the rebuilt and new cities that were springing up around the planet.

She specifically discussed how the majority of the plastoblocks were made of items cast away during the pandemics of the early 2020s — plastic bottles left over from hand sanitizer, disposable face masks, and vinyl gloves. She briefly remembered being a child during the last pandemic, needing to be bathed as soon as she got in with her mother, a rough washcloth wiped over her hands and face. Picking out a mask with cartoons on it to wear as she played with other children. The newer masks that had eventually been created, much more expensive and precise than the disposable surgical masks of her parents' time. While doing her PhD, she had loved poring over footage or doing a site visit to watch the plastoblocks get made: the trash compacted and pressed and heated up into the new building materials. She loved that they were transforming the bad decisions of her parents' generation and the generation before them, that the city she now lived in would never have been built without those disasters, that sustainability allowed them to create something new and beautiful from disaster.

The manager's desk was in front of a big empty window. She'd imagined having a desk in front of a window when she had become a manager, but when she saw the window, it looked over a street so grey and depressing that she'd instantly drawn the blind. Little by little, as sunlight began to hit the blind, she rolled it up. Across the street was a building where she could see another desk where another manager sat, typing at the computer. The manager with vision had never met this manager, as she must work for another department altogether, and didn't even know her name. If they'd ever been on the same email chains, she wouldn't have known this was the manager who had replied. In her mind, she was only "the other manager." This other manager never looked out the window, and the manager who looked out the window began to love her.

"Got a minute?" one of her favourite staff members asked, striding into her office, interrupting her gazing mournfully from one window into another. They fiddled with her pens in her pen holder. They were always asking for the thing everyone asked her for: permission. How odd, asking for permission. She imagined that if she had children they would be like this, but wilder. Her past romantic partners never had to seek her permission — they were equals, figuring the world and their routines out together, though she had noticed a small shift with her most recent partner after getting the job as manager. Her partner had started to ask her opinion more often than before. More and more decisions about money began to be hers, as her partner was not a manager and did not understand what it meant to be a manager, and although these decisions still weren't at the level of granting permission, a thin line had been drawn, a nudge in the asking-permission direction.

No one ever said hi to the manager. If they said, "How are you?" it was said with fear. Most times it was just "Have a moment?" or "Got a minute?" And from more timid employees, hovering at the edge of the doorway: "Sorry to bother you, do you have a second?"

The answer was usually, "Yes." Sometimes it was, "I'm just running to a meeting, can you email me?"

But the way the staff member touched her things casually on her desk made her realize that somewhere there had been a miscalculation in her creation of their relationship. The staff member knew or thought they knew that the manager felt more kindness for them than she did the other staff. She couldn't be surprised by this either — the reason she did feel such kindness was because of their intelligence and ability to observe, though it had now created a problem for the manager. While she knew she would feel pain later, the manager said, "Actually, no, I don't have time right now. Come back later." And without making eye contact with her employee, she turned her attention to a stack of forms awaiting signature.

She tried to explain it to her partner at home over dinner. About the employee, about the manager across the road from her, about being alone in her office for the most part, the silence only interrupted by the

occasional employee or the sound of reading emails in her head. Their dinner was from a nearby restaurant, delivered to them on bikes. When she went down to retrieve the meal, she asked the courier if he was participating in the couriers' recent unionizing drive; she had included a little message of support on the app that was used. The couriers had been trying to unionize for decades, and this time it seemed like it actually could happen. She was proud of herself for showing her interest — she could be a manager and still be progressive. Nothing had changed about who she was, truly, on the inside. You couldn't change that. The courier looked at her, looked at her clothes, gave her a sideways glance and shook his head. "I'm not interested in any of that," he said.

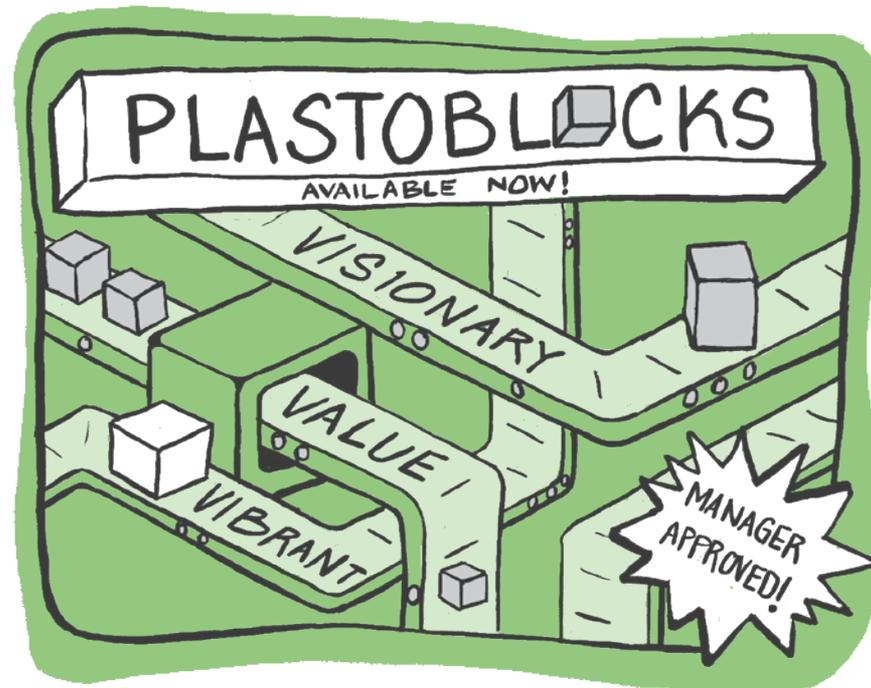
ON THE MANAGER WITH VISION'S FIRST DAY, THE MOST SENIOR MANAGER IN THE BUILDING DESCRIBED TO A GROUP OF THE MANAGERS A DAY WHERE SHE WAS NEVER ABLE TO GO TO THE BATHROOM.

She knew he was lying, wanted to believe he was lying.

As they ate dinner, the manager told her partner about how insignificant she'd felt when the other manager hadn't looked up. That she likely would never meet the other manager since she worked in another tower, would never know what she was working on or which department and teams she managed.

Her partner listened politely, but then the way he was looking at her changed — became darker. "I thought you were always too busy to breathe." Sometimes he was so cold and hostile that she wanted to scream.

Only in the middle of the night did the manager realize she'd forgotten to tip the courier through the app, even though her partner had reminded her and had asked her to promise the courier. But she'd gotten distracted with her own thoughts about the unionizing drive, and then the dinner, and then her partner's comments, and then her thoughts



about work swirling in her head. She woke more often in the night now that she was a manager. This was a part of the job, but none of the managers mentioned it to each other.

In the middle of the night, the long, complaining emails she received came true. She wrote responses in her mind. While she slept, she had conversations with her employees where she did things she could never really do. She held a hand, she grieved alongside an employee who'd lost her mother. She told an employee who'd felt overlooked that she deeply valued her and gave her a hug. She said sorry.

One of her dreams, when she finally did get to sleep that night, took place in the office. She opened the blind on the window. The window, despite normally being sealed to not let out any of the expensive circulated air and to keep all of the pollution — still in the atmosphere — out, flung itself open like the windows of the manager's childhood. The manager pushed her head outside into the air and it was fresh. Wind pushed

back her hair as she climbed onto the sill and then she walked forward.

In the dream, her body clenched, expecting to plummet down storeys and storeys (she'd had a dream like this before, and only woke up right before her body was going to hit the ground), but instead she was able to wade through the air as easily as if it were water. Up high in the sky, she crossed the road that separated her tower from the tower next door. And directly in front of her, she could see the other manager, smiling with her own window flung open, arms outstretched, waiting for the manager to arrive.

No one ever discussed the difficulty of being a manager unless discussing being slightly disturbed by their employees in the middle of another task or in the middle of some human thing, which of course had to be discarded. Being a manager was more important than the body. And even then, this sharing took on a different form.

On the manager with vision's first day, the most senior manager in the building described to a group of the managers a day where she was never able to go to the bathroom. She'd gone into the hall and been interrupted by a staff member. The staff member had something to discuss that was very urgent, so the manager had forgotten about her bladder and followed the staff member away from the bathroom and into the staff member's office. But this staff member claimed that the root of the problem was another staff member. This led to the other staff member's office. But then the root of the problem was actually another staff member, and so on until it was all over and it was time to leave. Only when the manager was close to home did she realize the weight of water within her, pressing to get out. Depending on who she told the story to, she would describe a little trickle just beginning to soak into her underpants as she unlocked the door.

Everyone laughed when she told this story. But she was the most senior manager. That's what people always did. The manager with vision felt something else creeping in her stomach and wondered if others did as well: horror. Did becoming a manager really mean no more bathroom breaks, no more time to yourself? "The sign of real power," the senior manager finished her story with, "is how many people need you all the time."

These were the things the manager never could explain to her partner, despite feeling the need to explain to someone. Instead, since she'd become a manager, they'd barely talked. The manager cared about the environment, so she and her partner carpoled to work. "Maybe in the summer you can bike," he'd said, since her office was fairly close to home and along some of the safest bike paths. The civilians had protested and organized town hall meetings to get the bike paths barricaded behind concrete barriers, unobstructed by automobiles and ensuring a cyclist couldn't be cut off or hit by a car door. Driving was slower now, the cars reduced to one lane, but both the manager and her partner had attended all of the meetings and handed out leaflets in their neighbourhood.

DEPENDING ON WHO SHE TOLD THE STORY TO, SHE WOULD DESCRIBE A LITTLE TRICKLE JUST BEGINNING TO SOAK INTO HER UNDERPANTS AS SHE UNLOCKED THE DOOR.

But she laughed because she imagined herself as she had been when attending graduate school, pulling a bike helmet and air filtration mask from her head, her sweaty shirt sticking to her body, her hair getting caught in the foam pads meant to keep the helmet from slipping. She imagined going like that into a board meeting. All the other managers looked like they'd just stepped out of a salon. "I don't think so."

To avoid talking, she and her partner listened to public talk radio in the car. The people on the radio never talked about life in the city — the city made sure programs like that didn't air. Instead, the radio talked about other cities, different countries, wars and maybe even the threat of another pandemic if a new vaccine wasn't implemented fast enough. "In Chicago, three buildings collapsed due to unsound structures," the news announcer said. "More after the break."

The manager's partner said, "I think Chicago only uses plastoblocks now. That could happen here."

The manager knew her partner was trying to get into a fight, but this

was why they listened to the radio anyway. “It won’t happen here.”

“Do you know that for sure? It sounds like a lot of people were hurt. I bet some even died.”

“You studied the plastoblocks too. You know they’re safe.”

“I don’t think so. Not necessarily. And it depends on the way they are used. They need proper oversight.”

“Well, I’m one of the people who does that oversight, so you might want to think about that before you continue with this conversation.”

“Come on, we used to talk like this all the time.”

“Well, maybe I’m sick of it.”

THE BLIND HAD BEEN LEFT UP OVERNIGHT, AND LIGHT SPILLED ALL OVER HER DESK AS THE SUN GREW AND FILLED THE SKY. A RARE SUNNY DAY. SHE LOOKED OUT THE WINDOW.

They had arrived at the manager’s tower. She didn’t kiss her partner on the cheek as usual, but she still squeezed his hand. She couldn’t stop herself from shutting the door a little too hard. He went speeding off to where he worked as an engineer, overseen by a manager, who was overseen by a higher-up manager, and so on.

As she scanned her fingerprint, she continued to fume. The city hired engineers like her partner and urban planners to design green rooftops. The manager was especially proud of this. She was proud of the plastoblocks. She knew, of course she knew, that the city had its problems. And yes, she used to debate her partner about these problems for hours, dreaming that they could be the ones that would come up with the solutions. The difference was that now she was able to actually put these solutions in action and he, well, he was stuck following orders, as anyone who was not a manager was stuck doing.

She entered the elevator and nodded to the other managers who were boarding. They were all required to arrive exactly thirty minutes before any employee and leave thirty minutes after any employee to create the

illusion of always being present and working. Normally, the manager with vision would try to have a conversation with the other managers, but she was lost in her thoughts, the disaster in Chicago.

As the manager entered her office, the lights flicked on automatically, sensing her movement. She adjusted her papers and sat at her computer, scanned her fingerprint to log in. The blind had been left up overnight, and light spilled all over her desk as the sun grew and filled the sky. A rare sunny day. She looked out the window.

Across the street, in the building opposite hers, the other manager was arriving. The lights went on in her office; she sat at her computer and scanned her fingerprint. Her hair was the most beautiful colour, thought the manager with vision. A type of rust that surely was dyed, but seemed a part of the other manager all the same. Look, thought the manager. Look. Please. Look.

But the manager who did not look out the window didn’t even know that the manager who did existed. All the manager had worked for didn’t matter. The manager didn’t matter. Love didn’t matter. Light coming in through the window, whether the blind was rolled up or rolled down, none of it mattered to the manager who didn’t look out the window. So how could it matter to the manager who did? ◊



SU- PER- HOST

By Laura Clarke

Illustration by Maria José Arias

Each week a new premier is elected in one of the one hundred and thirty provinces. Or maybe there are one hundred and forty. A jumble of provinces shaped like various items of clothing and household appliances interlock and shift on the ever-changing country map. I can't remember when the elections started; I can't imagine them ending. Each week a newly elected premier declares his province "open for business." I hadn't known a province was a business; my landlord, on the other hand, had always known. My rent is close to three thousand dollars a month despite the fact the roof leaks and new mould blooms in the bathroom daily. I secretly rent out the extra room upstairs on Airbnb; the fifth guest is the one I fall in love with.

Each day I spray vinegar all over my bathroom and scrub the tiles with steel wool to try to keep the mould at bay, even though it is beautiful in its own way. My friends often say I smell good, which at first seemed strange. When I asked Chani why she liked the smell of vinegar so much, she said I smelled like her grandmother's house — peppermint leaves and perogies — and she found this comforting. I asked Chompers why she liked the smell of vinegar so much, and she said I smelled like *her* grandmother's house: all the spices that go into gingerbread but not quite gingerbread itself.

The Airbnb guest and I barely speak except sometimes in the dilapidated kitchen, with its once-white, now-grey tiles and peeling ceiling paint and dabs of electric yellow goo on the floorboards to keep the cockroaches away, or at least at bay. We talk about the weather and politics. I am attentive to her footsteps as they land on the creaky fourth step to the second floor she inhabits, her delicate burps, her quiet shifting from foot to foot while the water for her Earl Grey tea boils. When I arrive home, I sit quietly in my living room, pretending to look at my phone, listening closely to determine if she's there. Does she consider it home? Does she refer to it that way to other people? She's been here a month now. I wait for a small noise, a creak of a floorboard, the drone of a podcast, the running of water, a loud sigh, a quiet sigh. I don't know if my Airbnb guest realizes the walls are so thin; I wonder if she can also hear my sounds. Then again, I have been trained since childhood to be stealthy and quiet. I walk on my tiptoes and eat soft food and cry only in the shower.

"Jesus Christ, why are you always creeping around like that?" my father would say when I was a child. He wasn't happy when I made noise either. His solution was that I should announce myself whenever I entered a room by saying, "Hello, it is I, Lala." This was the first full sentence I ever uttered. I didn't speak until I was four. I was a timid child, due in part to a fear that I smelled badly, which I now know was the result of perceiving my own scent in relation to my grandmother's house (mothballs and nosebleeds and wet dog).

My ability to seduce my Airbnb guest therefore depends on the scent of her grandmother's house and whether she views it in a positive or neg-

ative light. I rehearse various conversations in my mind where I casually ask her about the subject, but I become flustered and end up rambling about the premiers, how they're passing a law that requires everyone to wear Open for Business baseball hats outside the home. We agree we're fine with wearing them as long as the spirit is ironic. We agree on everything. It's not intentional on my part; we are truly just compatible. In fact, I usually disagree with most people. The premiers also passed a law requiring everyone to put Open for Business bumper stickers on their cars. If you own a vehicle, you could potentially be fined fifty dollars per day for the rest of your life. I can't drive, and the truth is I do not feel open for business, not at all. I feel closed off and small, no matter how confidently I've learned to enter a room and announce my presence by saying, "Hello, it is I, Lala."

I cry in the shower daily, wondering what I smell like to the Airbnb guest, whose own scent is fresh-cut flowers and sharp, tangy dirt and even a little bit of vinegar. I wonder if she is sleeping with a florist, discreetly in the afternoons. She never stays the night anywhere but this apartment. Each morning I wake before her. I hear her alarm, some stirring from within the comforters on the bed, then usually the alarm going off a second time. The details of her actual job are confusing, and it seems too late to ask for clarification. Today I woke with one thought exploding huge and red and bleeding in my mind: most people have two grandmothers. How did one grandmother scent become elevated over another? Did I present a mix of both scents to some people, or was it always one or the other? Was it perhaps the greater absence, the grandmother that had been gone the longest, or the grandmother's love that was the toughest to earn, that prevailed? If you had never met your grandmothers, did I smell clean and neutral, or perhaps suspiciously of absolutely nothing at all?

I phone my dad to ask him to teach me to drive. "Jesus Christ, why are you always creeping around like that?" he grumbles. He tells me he loves the new premiers of all one hundred and forty-five provinces. I ask him if he thinks the Open for Business slogan seems like a sexual euphemism. "What? How?" he shouts.

“I dunno, I feel like when I wear the mandatory hat I’m saying my vagina is open for business.”

My father sighs and says, “Jesus Christ, Lala, why does everything have to be sexual?” I have never mentioned sex to my father before, so this seems unfair — as unfair as being accused of creeping around solely with my voice.

I hide my drinking from the Airbnb guest by stashing my cases of beer under my bed. The premiers recently passed new laws making it easier to buy alcohol anywhere, so now I can purchase vodka at the laundromat and guzzle tequila at the library. At home, I mix elaborate concoctions of herbs and pretend I’m drinking healthy teas for my womb in order to impress the Airbnb guest, but I’m really just pouring bitter eastern European liqueurs into teapots full of dandelions I ripped up from the front lawn.

AT THE GYM A MAN WITH A MOUSTACHE WHO GRUNTS LOUDLY WHILE DOING PULL-UPS LOOKS RIGHT AT ME. I LOOK BACK AT HIM. HE POPS UP ON MY DATING APP WHILE I’M ON THE TREADMILL AND WE MEET UP THAT NIGHT.

I don’t care about my womb at all. I tried tossing all the evidence of my alcoholism into the recycling, but the bottle collectors clanged around loudly in the bin at night, exclaiming over how many empties they lucked into finding, yelling, “Jackpot!” and “Thanks, lady!” outside my window. I’m not sure if my Airbnb guest notices sounds the way I do. She doesn’t creep around. She doesn’t need to announce her presence when she enters a room. My new strategy is to buy lots of candles and pretend I gather these old bottles in somebody else’s recycling bin to use as candlesticks. I only buy unscented candles because I want the Airbnb guest to smell me.

One night the Airbnb guest brings a man home, which is not allowed — the rules for the Airbnb room say “no additional overnight guests.” They’re quiet and giggle a lot and then there’s some thumping for three

or four minutes and then no sound at all. On the kitchen table, he has left his Open for Business hat, and on the chair he has left his black puffy jacket. Her own hat is hung up properly on the rack. His shoes — brown, pointy — are gone by the time I wake to make my morning coffee.

At the gym a man with a moustache who grunts loudly while doing pull-ups looks right at me. I look back at him. He pops up on my dating app while I’m on the treadmill and we meet up that night. His right leg is in a brace; I’m not sure if he’s recovering from something or if it’s permanent. He refuses to wear an Open for Business hat, risking fines from local bylaw officers. He comes over to my place because he lives with twelve roommates and I only have one Airbnb guest. Our sex is much longer and most likely better than the three-minute sex the Airbnb guest had last week. My bare foot accidentally touches the cold metal of the leg brace in the night and I wake with a start; above, I hear gentle footsteps pacing back and forth. The man tells me how good I smell, how he can’t get enough of it. When I ask him what I smell like, he shakes his head and says he can’t describe it. He sleeps with his face tangled in my long dark hair.

I ask the Airbnb guest where she’s from. She says a nearby province, the small one shaped like a mitten. We mix up our respective Open for Business hats and I smell her floral but pleasantly dirty scent all day. That means she’s also smelling me.

The Airbnb guest was supposed to be here for a month but asks if she can stay three more weeks. I say yes and cancel all the other guest reservations, which costs me several hundred dollars. Moustache man comes over and fucks me loudly again, and I swear I hear creaking above and then a pause, as if she is standing completely still, listening attentively.

My dad picks me up in his van, which is plastered with Open for Business stickers. We drive around the No Frills parking lot so I can practise stick shift, and he claims I reek of perfume, which I do not wear.

“You’re giving me a headache,” he complains, rolling the car windows down. A yellow plastic bag blows into my face. I drive gently into the shopping cart pavilion.

He says, “Jesus Christ, Lala, why do you always have to drive into everything?”

After he drops me off and heads to the racetrack, I sit quietly in the living room with my phone in my hands. Is the creak I hear her stretching her muscular legs at the desk next to the window? Is she perched on the old blue chair gazing at the magnolia trees in bloom, blowing gently on her too-hot tea (she doesn't drink coffee)? Or is it simply the house shifting its bones, settling in for the night, sighing over its neglect? I invite moustache man over and suck his dick as loudly and theatrically as possible under the very spot I usually hear the creaking.

"Holy shit!" he says after he cums all over my favourite pillowcase. I break into a grin when I hear the sound of running water from above.

Chani and Chompers and a couple of other friends decide to throw a party for me and moustache man when we get engaged. I'm unsure whether to invite my Airbnb guest. Our relationship technically exists only out of necessity due to the overpriced real estate in the metropolitan city in which we live, only in the private sphere of a rundown apartment, that, as of this week, is infested with mice. The Airbnb guest proactively constructs a trap: a large bucket of water with peanut butter smeared around the edges under the sink. Each morning when I open the cupboard door, there are several drowned mice floating in the light brown water. I am in awe. She is no-nonsense. She is brutal and assertive. When I think of her bare hands smearing peanut butter all over the white bucket, a shiver runs down my spine and my mouth falls open. The moustache man, now my fiancé, refuses to kill mice out of principle. He refuses to do a lot of things out of principle.

"It's weird how it seems like there's more premiers than there are provinces now," Chani says at my engagement party as I allow her to lean in and deeply inhale the scent of my hair. "My uncle claimed to be a premier at Thanksgiving, and when I looked it up on Wikipedia, it said it was true."

"What province is he premier of?" I ask, thinking of the Airbnb guest; I didn't end up inviting her and now I'm spending the whole party imagining what she is doing.

"The small one shaped like a mitten," Chani says, drinking vodka straight from the bottle. I let her sniff my armpits; this happens some-

times when we're drunk.

The Airbnb guest asks if she can move in permanently; she has lost her job after cuts that Chani's uncle made to arts funding in her home province. I say yes and cancel all my reservations and close my Airbnb account. We agree that she can keep living here after the wedding; the moustache man, my future husband, will move in as well.

Since she is no longer an Airbnb guest but a roommate, she is now allowed to bring whomever she wants to our place. But she doesn't. I often wonder about the guy she brought home; I look into the eyes of strange men as I pass them on the sidewalk, wondering if it was any of them who fucked the Airbnb guest for three or four minutes. Did he know how brutal and no-nonsense and therefore sexy she is? Did he know what her job was before Chani's uncle ruined her carefully planned-out career track? Did he know how she stacked her vegetables in the fridge crisper? Did he know what each of her sighs signalled, that one was happy and contented, one was wistful, and one was frustrated?

I love the Airbnb guest with no expectation — the way our lives layer upon one another day after day so seamlessly is perfect. I can't risk losing her by declaring my affection. Moustache man is the next best thing — he has a hot body and will never leave me because he can't get enough of my smell. When my hairdresser gives me a bob, he's upset he can no longer wrap his face up in my hair while he sleeps.

"Wow, that haircut looks fucking great," the Airbnb guest says.

"Thank you," I say, ducking my head under the sink to look at the floating dead mice to prevent her from seeing me blush.

I ask moustache man what he thinks of the Airbnb guest.

He says, "Yeah, she's nice."

I ask him what he thinks of her sounds and he says, "I never hear her."

I ask about my sounds and he says, "You have a very heavy step," which goes against everything my father has ever told me.

Moustache man wants me to grow out my hair. I tell him I'll do it if he shaves off his moustache. He looks crestfallen. I suspect his huge moustache functions as a receptacle for keeping vaginal secretions close to his nose so he can smell them all day long. He gasses a lot about how he

loves to eat pussy and at least it's true, unlike a lot of the other things he brags about. I never say his name when I cum; instead I stick to guttural moans while I incant the Airbnb guest's name over and over in my head.

"Hello, it is I, Lala," I announce as I enter the kitchen.

Moustache man is boiling water with his back to me. Our wedding is in two months. I stroll over and slide my hands down to cup his butt cheeks.

"Jesus Christ!" he squeals, and pours hot water all over his hand. "You scared me."

I stare at his right hand turning red and then at his moustache, which seems to be getting bigger each day that I'm alive. "I thought you said I have a heavy step," I say.

I open the cupboard door; there are several protein bar wrappers floating in the bucket water. "This is not a garbage," I say.

He shrugs, running his hand under cold water. "Aren't dead mice garbage?"

He doesn't realize I perform a small funeral rite in the backyard for each fallen mouse. I file this away as evidence he doesn't know me at all.

Chompers says, "Well, he can't get to know you if you do things so secretly and furtively all the time."

I shrug.

"Does he know about all the alcohol under your bed?" she asks gently.

That's a good question.

"Hello, it is I, Lala," I announce as I enter the kitchen wearing my wedding dress, which is quite simple, just a long white slip. My wedding is tomorrow. I know it's bad luck for your husband to see you in your dress before the big day, but what about your Airbnb guest? Maybe it's *good* luck. Maybe it could change everything. We lock eyes as she pours boiling water into her cracked blue mug.

"Wow, you look amazing," she says. "You don't have to announce yourself, though. I can hear you coming."

I lean against one of the rickety old wooden chairs at the kitchen table, picking at a cuticle on my thumb. "But how would you know it's me? It could be moustache man. Or a visitor."

She stirs her spoon in her tea, pouring in a tiny bit of agave sweetener

just the way she likes it, and says, "I know what you sound like. You don't smell like anyone else — I mean, *sound* like anyone else."

She walks past me with both hands cupped around her mug. Her hands smearing peanut butter on the bucket flashes in my mind, and I shiver. Upstairs, she sighs loudly and puts on a podcast about aliens.

I wake early on my wedding day and start drinking. I don't even have to get out of bed — I just reach down and grab a warm beer. The Airbnb guest is invited but cancels via text at the last minute due to the flu. I do not hear a single sound upstairs all morning. At the venue, a friend of my mother's smears makeup all over my face. She says I should take another shower because I smell like vodka and rotten bananas. My mother wonders how I already reek of ham when dinner has yet to be served. I decide at the last minute to wear a long pink wig, which upsets everyone, especially moustache man and my father. I take it off. My father accuses me of being attention-seeking, but I know the truth: the synthetic smell obscures my scent and terrifies everyone, makes them wonder if they know me at all.

We managed to save up for a cheap honeymoon to another province. This one is shaped like a kettle. Or is it a kettle bell? We score a special wedding discount at a hotel because Chompers's brother's best friend's husband is the premier. It's difficult to orient myself within a sexual situation without the Airbnb guest in close proximity, without the ghost of her presence guiding each motion of my body, without picturing her directly above me as moustache man fucks me vigorously (he relents and lets me wear the wig). I try yelling my husband's name in the spacious, clean hotel room and choke on it. The walls are so white. I try again and my voice cracks. I try a third time and it comes out finally, small and quiet.

"Louder," he says.

I say it louder. ◦



THE WHO GIRLS

By Sarah Barmak

Illustration by François Vigneault

No one could have prepared her for Samantha. Samantha in ankle hiking boots with tube socks rolled neatly down. Samantha laughing, glossy saliva gleaming off clear braces. Samantha quietly sitting at her desk, writing each verse of a poem in a different coloured pen in her notebook. The reserved, symmetrical curve of the *h*'s and *n*'s, the last stroke of sparkly blue dollar-store ink almost, but never quite, breaking the faint blue ruled line below it. Samantha Banana. Amanda Moon, a man in the moon. Samantha Lilian Silver, age eleven.

The late, hot summer means the beginning of school in Thornhill, Ontario. Ruth is twelve and a half, but she is already going into grade seven. Through her school bus window, thin maple saplings pass in equidistant formation, separating the white squares of sidewalk from the street. Nascent trees, figments of trees, each held up straight as a stop sign by two stakes and bright green elastic bands on either side.

Thornhill didn't exist until a few decades ago. Or that's what Ruth's dad, who is named David, says. All this was farmland, he says, sweeping one hand at the flat newness outside the windshield while he drives the station wagon up Yonge Street's northerly tendrils, one-storey strip malls on either side. New but not new. In order to be new, there would have to be an old. Thornhill has no old, no before. Only the perpetual now. Now is where David Bornstein wants to be.



The first time Samantha invites Ruth over to her house after school, it means simply getting off the bus a little later. It is easy. Sam lives in a small white house with hedges lining a walkway that leads abruptly to a front door without a porch.

ALL THIS WAS FARMLAND, HE SAYS, SWEEPING ONE HAND AT THE FLAT NEWNESS OUTSIDE THE WINDSHIELD WHILE HE DRIVES THE STATION WAGON UP YONGE STREET'S NORTHERLY TENDRIL, ONE-STOREY STRIP MALLS ON EITHER SIDE.

Samantha is half-Jewish. That means one of her parents, her dad, is Jewish, and the other one, her mom, isn't. But Ruth wonders what all that means. And whether it explains why, although she and Samantha both have brown eyes, Ruth's hair is dark brown and curly and Samantha's hair is dark brown and straight. Being half-Jewish gives Samantha a

certain something her other friends don't have. Spending time at Sam's house has a refreshing laxity. Sam's family is free of the weekly demand of observing Shabbat, but they have both Christmas and Chanukah. Ruth is fully Jewish. She wonders if there are other things about her that are half, while Samantha is whole.



Ruth stands in front of a display of comic books. She picks up a *Batman* issue, with art by DeCarlo. She looks at Batman. His muscles are modest compared with the fleshy ripples of other superheroes like the Punisher.

A memory surfaces. She is eight years old. She is at the old house with Mom, before the divorce, in the pinkish bathroom next to her pinkish bedroom. Mom is giving her a bath. She is waiting for the moment when Mom unplugs the drain. When she does, Ruth gets her treat. As the water rushes out, she skids back and forth on her bum, kicking off against the sides of the tub, singing a tune she half-remembers from an ad for a backyard Slip 'N Slide that ran after *Power Rangers*. She's been doing this after each bath since she was small. It's not as fun as it used to be. She's growing bigger, her skinny legs longer, and the dusty rose tub is shrinking around her. There's less room for her to play her game. She still does it, tucking her knees up so she can take up less space.

But that is not the memory that comes to Ruth while she looks at comic books. It's what she saw in the mirror after that bath, when she stood in front of the broad, frameless wall mirror as her mother stood behind her, drying her. She doesn't typically look at herself in the mirror. But this time, she notices her skinny chest and arms.

Ruth lifts both arms into a muscle-man pose. Tiny bulges form on nine-year-old biceps. Doing this is satisfying. Her chest is flat and smooth, with small brownish nipples.

"Mom," she says. "Aren't I strong?"

Her mother looks at her daughter's face in the mirror, hesitating, then agrees that she is strong. Ruth feels as if something inside her has

slid into place. Underneath her black hair cut into a schoolgirl bob, bangs tangling with indistinct black eyebrows, she is growing the body that she wants.



Samantha and Ruth sit in the younger girl's bedroom. Samantha is a year younger, but she seems to have a clearer idea than Ruth of what they will do, how they will spend the hours before dinner. She sits on the carpeted floor next to her single bed, and Ruth does the same. Samantha turns on a small Casio boom box in her bedroom. She presses play on a cassette tape. It's called *With the Beatles* and it has a stark-looking black-and-white cover. They listen to the jangly guitars, which sound happier than the cover looks. Samantha says her father has a lot of this band's records that the family listens to downstairs, but that she had asked for the cassette so she could play it in her room. Ruth contemplates the idea of a family listening to music together.

Ruth isn't sure what to do while the music plays. She looks at the cassette insert for a while, the floating moons of the boys' faces. Samantha's shins and ankles are planted into the broadloom. Sam's legs are strong-looking, thicker than hers, with the tiny, dark beginnings of stubble. Ruth doesn't shave yet, and she looks at the smooth, speckled skin. She realizes that the black flecks must be embarrassing for Samantha in some minor way, and she feels an urge to say something nice about the leg and its hair. To run her fingertips over the black dots and feel them catching at her fingertip ridges like Braille. To say that the skin feels smooth.



Ruth and Sam are lying alongside Beth Grainger on the cream broadloom of Beth's bedroom, listening. Beth is an only child, like Ruth, so her bedroom is as big as a living room. Around the three girls lie multiple record sleeves with creased corners and faded images that show con-

fidant, unbridled, sometimes lost-looking young men in creative poses with artsy backgrounds.

Beth has long, dirty blond hair in pigtails. Sam and Ruth had been murmuring the lyrics to "Maxwell's Silver Hammer" one day in class, and the introverted girl next to Sam had stopped drawing wizards in her math homework and looked over at them. She said her dad had all those old records at home. She said that he said that the Beatles were okay but they were a little silly — just four silly, pretty boys in fussy suits. He said the Who were real men, because they were louder. Real rock men. Them and Zep.

The three girls start going to Beth's house after school to listen to records. They never go to Ruth's house because her dad doesn't have any records, so Ruth never invites them over and they don't ask. She knows no one wants to listen to her dad play his Israeli hit "Bashana Haba'ah," inevitable prelude to slightly exaggerated tales of volunteering for the Six-Day War in '67 (never saw action, hung around a kibbutz for six months after). Her dad isn't like the other dads. Instead, she asks to watch Beth's dad's rock movies. The Beatles run campily from fans in *A Hard Day's Night*. One night they have a sleepover, eat gummy candy and watch *Quadrophenia*, based on the Who's album of the same name, with its dark yet glamorous themes of rebellion and street gangs.

Each of the three stakes out a favourite Who boy and Beatles boy. Without discussing it, they are careful that their choices don't overlap, which they all know would be a violation of implicit etiquette. It is understood that these musicians would have been their boyfriends.

Sam talks non-stop about her favourite, Keith Moon. He played drums for the Who and was famous for smashing them on stage. He took the most drugs of any of the musicians and died of an overdose. She says his name often, sometimes in an overly familiar comment; at other times, she intones it softly to herself as she looks at his picture.

"Keith really hated that hotel. That's why he destroyed his room."

"Keith just wanted attention. He wanted to be loved."

"They never gave him enough attention, so he had to be loud."

"Keith."

Then, one day: “Keith loved me.”

Beth and Ruth glance at one another.

“What?”

“What’d you say?”

“He did. Because I was his wife.”

“*What?*”

“My name wasn’t Samantha then — it was Amanda. Amanda Moon.”

“Okay.”

“I tried to help him. We loved each other so much. But I couldn’t help him. So he died.”



Ruth walks down Clark Street toward Atkinson, which will take her to Tangreen Circle and her house. She passes one maple sapling every ten steps. She sees a stand selling the *Canadian Jewish News*. There is a story about a famous Lubavitcher Rebbe visiting Toronto.

She thinks about the black-and-white pictures of people thirty years before. All those ecstatic people. Maybe some other people didn’t like it. All that happened, she thought, but we don’t talk or live like that now.



“You need a person for you to be in *your* past life,” Sam says to Ruth one day. It was during an afternoon they had spent at Sam’s house when Beth had been sick. Sam talked about what her life had been like back when she was Amanda, and what she had looked like: a willowy, beautiful, sad-eyed woman. She never mentioned that it was Keith Moon’s daughter who was named Amanda, and not his wife, who had been named Kim. Beth and Ruth don’t learn until years later that Sam simply hadn’t liked the name Kim; she had liked Amanda.

“I do?” Ruth says.

“What if I knew you then? I probably did.”

Ruth has never imagined herself as anyone other than who she is.

The invitation to do so is bewildering, intoxicating. She thinks about the world inside the black-and-white photos, people with glossy dark bangs and wide pouf sleeves and black eyes, eyes made black by the camera. The men: feminine, with long hair and vulnerable, thin faces.

“I don’t think I would have been a girl,” Ruth says slowly.

“No,” Sam says after a moment. “Maybe you weren’t one then. That sometimes happens with past lives.”

“Maybe I was a guy,” Ruth says. All those parties, with their mixes of band members and hangers-on and journalists and managers. People glance up for a second before the flash. “I wasn’t in a band — I was a writer. I took pictures.”

“Your name was Ron,” Sam says. “I remember you.”

Something within Ruth slides into place.



“We all died at the end of the seventies right before we were born here in Thornhill,” Sam says.

Beth did too, they tell her, though she hesitates to say what her past-life name was, responding in a monosyllable when they ask.

“Then our souls floated around for a while. Then we came back here, in Canada, to live with our parents.”



Their old classic rock history book lies open yet again to the Annie Leibovitz photo of John and Yoko, its carefree nudity, the tense, pale J-shape of his body against her dark clothing. Ruth is examining with curiosity the faintly visible line in the centre of John’s skinny white butt, curving down and disappearing between his legs — the buttcrack of a Beatle! — when she realizes Samantha is sniffing. She sees her gazing down again at a page in her hardcover prestige-format biography of the Who from Beth’s dad’s library. Another picture of Keith: a strained smile, sweaty, his eyes wild. Sam’s eyes are wet and rimmed with pink, her cheeks flushed.

“They just wouldn’t leave us alone,” she says.

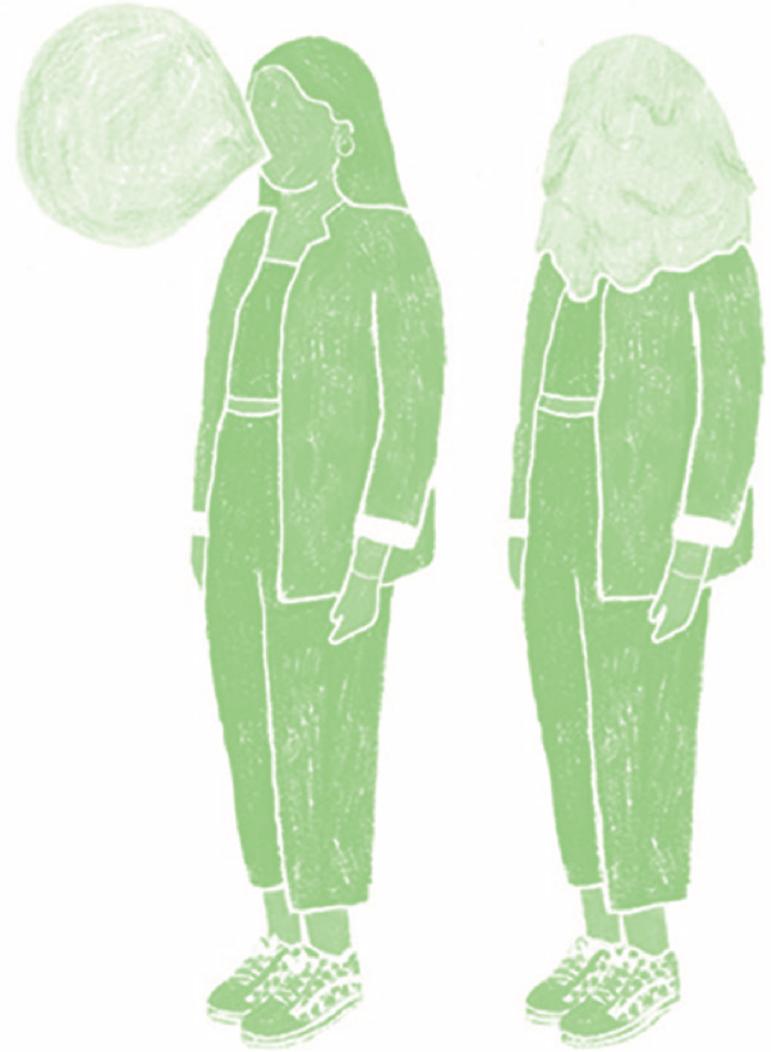
Ruth pauses. “Who wouldn’t?”

Sam’s face crumples. “The reporters,” she says, her voice a high whine. “The fans. All of them. They didn’t understand. All we wanted was to be left alone!”



It is a Thursday in history class when they have to turn in one page about the British North America Act. Everyone passes their paper to the child in front of them, until all reach Mr. Fordclaw’s desk.

Sam’s paper is in the stack handed to Ruth, who too late glimpses its top-right corner, the name traced in sparkly light-blue ink, its letters the same size as others on the page but canted to the right, its *n*’s sporting long tails that cascade down through the blue ruled line, ending in a decorative star. She sees this only as the papers disappear into the hand of the bored student in front of her, away into the dull, beige afternoon:
by Mandy Moon. ◦



HOW TO AVOID UNWANTED SMALL TALK

By Kenzi Inouye



THE ACADEMY

By Jonathan Danielson

Illustrations by Maria José Arias

Lecturer Carl C. Carlson had finished teaching his thrice-weekly course, returned to his office and checked his email, when news broke of the end of the world.

More precisely, since Lecturer Carlson's profession as a scholar required nothing but the utmost contextual precision: On an unseasonably warm day, Lecturer Carlson hurried across the abandoned strip mall which housed the university's satellite campus — the university getting a really fabulous deal on the property during the last recession — and after arriving at his classroom he waited the university-mandated fifteen minutes for his students to

arrive. When none did, he humped back across the mall to his office, his button-down soiled with sweat as he passed the old smoothie joint where he had worked in high school (now a computer lab), and the car dealership where he had worked during undergrad (now an admissions office), and the bookstore where he had worked during his master's and PhD (now the university bookstore, which sold university-sanctioned hoodies, T-shirts, ties, bras and lacy G-string panties, but no actual books) until he reached the stairwell near the dumpster and trudged up the flight of stairs to his department. He hurried past the moist and repetitious noises of scholarship coming from his colleagues' offices and found his way to his cubicle, located just a few feet above a cluster of TVs in a Hooters restaurant — the only occupant of the strip mall to have fended off the university during their takeover of the property. Lecturer Carlson flipped on his computer, checked his email, and saw that his department had awarded its annual fellowship to the same four faculty members who had received it the previous year, and the year before that.

Lecturer Carlson swore, realizing he had wasted another year chasing a fully paid contract release to focus entirely on his scholarship. The fellowship was the most sought-after award in his department because it provided the dream of every scholarly practitioner of education: the opportunity not to teach.

“Dammit,” Lecturer Carlson said.

He had felt good about his chances this year. Only five faculty members had bothered to fill out the hundred-page proposal, secure three letters of recommendation, and revise and submit four years' worth of writing samples. Of

the five, he'd been the only one who hadn't received the fellowship.

“Dammit,” he said more loudly. “Goddammit.”

He stood and peered over his cubicle to see if anyone had heard him. The last thing he needed was an email from his department chair demanding an inquiry because some student lingering around his office had complained how Lecturer Carlson “demonstrated a paucity of verbal ability and complete disregard for students' sensibilities,” or whatever nonsense they pulled from the handbook to justify firing the philosophy professor last year after a student misheard the hundred-year-old instructor's denture-warped pronunciations of *Kant* and *Balzac*. Fortunately, there were no students around, and all of Lecturer Carlson's colleagues whose cubicles were closest to his were at a conference. The only associates in the building were down the hall, the echoing smacks of their raw, wet scholarship far too loud for them to hear much else. Lecturer Carlson leaned back in his chair. The ceiling tiles above him were water-stained from when this part of his department was still used as the building's janitorial space before the university purchased the property. All that time wasted, Lecturer Carlson thought. All that time away from his scholarship.



Lecturer Carlson checked his watch. He loosened his tie and cracked his neck. He had no more classes for the day. The rest of his afternoon was *his* to do what he liked. No better time to get back those hours of work than now, he figured.

Lecturer Carlson unlocked his desk and pulled out some tissues. He squirted Vaseline on his palm from the jug next to his computer. He again checked the cubicles around him, just to be sure they were still empty. He never liked doing this here. It was hard doing this at his office, what with his colleagues always around. Maybe *hard* was the wrong word. He unzipped his fly. *Difficult* might be better. *Distracting*? He continued searching for a better term, but waved away any connotative issues he might have raised. *Raised* also wasn't a good word, he thought, so he disregarded that too. He took a deep breath and focused.

HE HURRIED PAST THE MOIST AND REPETITIOUS NOISES OF SCHOLARSHIP COMING FROM HIS COLLEAGUES' OFFICES AND FOUND HIS WAY TO HIS CUBICLE.

And then, Lecturer Carlson went to town. For twenty minutes nothing excited him as he went to work. At first he had scrolled through his favourite sites, hoping to find something, *anything*, that would do it for him. A few times he even read the abstracts of a few articles from the university library database, but alas, nothing. Who was he kidding? He knew he couldn't do this right now. Not here. Not after that email. No, he was in absolutely no mood for scholarship. No mood at all.

Lecturer Carlson wiped the Vaseline from his hand. He balled up the tissues and tossed them into the trash can. He logged off the library and surfed the web, checking box scores and bringing up the live stream of that afternoon's

baseball game. And it was then, as one team hit the ball deep into right, that the game was interrupted by breaking news. The sun, the news reported, that bright beacon ninety-three million miles away, that gaseous celestial body which tiny spaceship Earth took 365.25 days to orbit, had exploded.

"Yes, but what do you mean, *exploded*?" the anchor asked the scientist with whom she shared the screen. It took Lecturer Carlson a moment, but he recognized the scientist as the head of the astronomy department at the university's flagship campus.

"I mean, poof!" the scientist said, making a fist and flicking it open. "As in, kablooeey. Kaboom. Adios. Gone."

The news anchor nodded with practised interest. "Yes, right, very interesting stuff," she said. "But what does that mean, exactly? I mean, how will that affect the economy, for example?"

The scientist snorted a laugh until he realized the news anchor was serious. "Well," the scientist said, "it takes eight minutes and twenty seconds, plus or minus a few microseconds, for the sun's light to reach Earth. For what happens there to be felt here. So, by that calculation, we should feel the explosion's shock wave, which will destroy our entire planet and kill all life as we know it, in" — he checked his watch — "seven minutes and fifty-nine seconds. Fifty-eight, seven, six, five . . ."



In his seminal work on relativity, which Lecturer Carlson had read during a science as literature course during his

sophomore year, Albert Einstein argued that the perception of time changes for an observer after . . . something . . . Lecturer Carlson couldn't really remember. What he did remember was that time supposedly felt different under certain circumstances. Or something. That was the gist of it, anyway. And it was true, he discovered, because upon hearing news about the end of the world — and from such a trusted source like a scholar from the flagship location, no less — Lecturer Carlson's observations of time did, in fact, change. As he watched the broadcast unfold, time seemed to stand still. It seemed to stop, even though eighty-four seconds passed by. Those eighty-four seconds were spent like this:

Lecturer Carlson continued watching the broadcast. After the scientist finished counting, the news anchor stared hard at him for eight seconds, after which she spent three seconds responding, "I don't understand." The scientist took three seconds to say, "We're all going to die," to which the anchor replied, "That's a bit alarmist, don't you think?"

The scientist looked up from his watch. He gave a tight-lipped smile, the same type of smile Lecturer Carlson had given his wife over the years when she would remind him of one of their kids' sporting events, which she knew he wasn't going to attend because of all the work and scholarship he needed to do.

"Right now the shock wave from the explosion is hurtling toward us at the speed of light," the scientist said. "When it hits, our planet and everything on it — you, me, the folks watching at home — will instantly be incinerated. Whatever molecular by-products we leave behind will ride the crest

of the shock wave out into the endless expanse of space until probably forever. Is that alarmist to you?"

The anchor stared hard at the scientist. Then, at the seventy-ninth second of the whole exchange, she thanked her guest and tossed it over to the weatherman for the five-day forecast.



Lecturer Carlson did not know how long he sat in his cubicle after the weatherman informed his viewers of the storm that was supposed to hit next week before the broadcast went back to the game. But he sat, doing nothing, absolutely nothing, as the clock ticked, ticked, ticked away.

“WHEN IT HITS, OUR PLANET AND EVERYTHING ON IT — YOU, ME, THE FOLKS WATCHING AT HOME — WILL INSTANTLY BE INCINERATED.”

Likewise, he did not know how much time had passed before he finally got up and wandered the hall of his department, aimlessly seeking someone — anyone! — with whom to talk to. Not argue with. Not brag about a publication, or complain about department politics or injustices to. Just someone with whom he could share this moment. Question it? Come to terms with it? He didn't know. In that moment, he just knew he needed someone. But every faculty member in his department was busy, all of them hunched over in their cubicles, all the non-tenured track faculty working to bring themselves and the university



fame and glory with their criticisms and positive student evaluations so they could be promoted to tenure-track positions, while the tenure-track faculty worked toward bringing themselves and the university fame and accolades with their publications so they could be granted tenure, while the tenured faculty worked on finding a better job at a better university. Regardless of their rank, though, all their cubicles shook arrhythmically, sometimes a random foot or two (depending on how flexible a particular faculty member was) appearing above the divider walls as they devoted themselves entirely and unabashedly to their scholarship.

And as the moans and groans, and sometimes weeping (a lot of weeping, actually; sad, desperate weeping) hummed

over the department, Lecturer Carlson stood paralyzed among the cubicles, the seconds disappearing one after the other. Outside the window, the campus bustled, with faculty begrudgingly heading to their classrooms to teach. Some had actually taught Lecturer Carlson when he was a student. Others were former classmates with whom he had studied and hit the job market after graduation. Others were former students of his from years back when they too were just beginning their academic sojourns, first as students, then as faculty themselves. And standing there, watching them come and go, Lecturer Carlson couldn't help but focus on the building from which they came and went, that building across the mall where Lecturer Carlson had taught since he finished his doctorate, where he had studied for that doctorate, as well as his master's and undergrad. That old building with its familiar A-framed shape from when it was still a Wiener Schnitzel before the university bought the property.

And as thoughts about the broadcast and humanity's impending doom raced through his head, Lecturer Carlson just stood there, frozen, transfixed by that building's ancient and mysterious pyramid shape. He was only now realizing that he had spent the majority of his life within that building, having scholars teach him before he taught others to become scholars themselves, who, afterward, turned around and taught even more future scholars who became university faculty as well. He was still standing there when Professor Wagner Von Warner de la Cruz, PhD, MS, MA, MA, called out from his office at the end of the hall, an actual office with a closing door.

"Oh, Lecturer Carlson!" Professor Von Warner de la Cruz said, and with his free hand he waved Lecturer

Carlson over. “Lecturer Carlson, come hither, please! Come! Come!”

Lecturer Carlson and Professor Von Warner de la Cruz had known each other since their undergrad days, when they worked at the car dealership (before the school took over the property), shagging vehicles between oil changes. It was just Carl and Wagner back then — two pimply faced teens who had not yet passed through the rigorous rites of passage toward their academic titles, such as the eighty-hour work weeks, the complaining about the eighty-hour work weeks, and the difficulty keeping track of how many hours they actually worked, then just rounding up to eighty when they were expected to complain.

Back then, the boys were instant friends the moment they met. Carl taught Wagner how to drive stick before management discovered Wagner “exaggerated” on his application, and Carl also covered for Wagner when he was too sick (usually from drinking) to work. They were best friends the way all friends become best friends during that first semester of college, that first job. But then Wagner talked himself into an assistant manager of car shaggers position, a title which had never existed before. Then he studied abroad in Germany for four weeks, his program a notorious bar crawl through Oktoberfest, and came back Wagner *Von Warner*, an homage to his noble Germanic roots. Then he stopped hanging out with “serfs” like Carl once he talked himself into a position in sales, working all the way up to assistant manager of the entire dealership when they were juniors. It wasn’t until they were seniors that they even talked again — aside from when Wagner would bark at someone to retrieve a customer’s vehicle

— after Wagner was informed he was not in line for the upcoming GM position and he asked his good old buddy Carl if he wouldn’t mind filling out a grad school application for him too while he was at it.

And in the ten years since they had finished their degrees and went to work for the university, Wagner, now Professor Von Warner de la Cruz (adding *de la Cruz* after a semester teaching Shakespeare to war orphans in South America), had become the head of the department’s most prestigious institutes and committees, including the highly coveted Committee on Committees and Institute of Institutes. He was even named department chair, until an undergraduate student worker hired to file paperwork realized no dissertation had been filed under Professor Von Warner de la Cruz’s birth name, chosen name, or pen names, and therefore he did not qualify to hold his department’s highest title, or, technically, his other titles. This revelation caused quite the scandal until everyone seemingly forgot about it when they became engrossed with the hearings conducted by the student disciplinary committee (which Professor Von Warner de la Cruz oversaw) as they very publicly expelled the department’s now-former student worker for violating the university’s code of conduct for “extremely egregious” and “depraved” actions which no one could recall.

And while the department was still waiting to read Professor Von Warner de la Cruz’s doctoral work, while he had published no other academic works to his credit, he had, as a high-school student, self-published a slew of online erotica, and had no less than twenty thousand Twitter followers. And it was there, through discourses of two hun-

dred and eighty characters, that Professor Von Warner de la Cruz made his name by sharing memes and calling for the cancellation of no less than one hundred and nineteen works of literature, as well as their authors. It was even rumoured he might soon be endowed with a prestigious grant for like-minded geniuses due to this work.

“Come, come,” Professor Von Warner de la Cruz said as he waved Lecturer Carlson into his office with his free hand, his other toying with his scholarship, his research displayed on all three of his computer screens. “I believe congratulations are in order.”

Every time Lecturer Carlson entered Professor Von Warner de la Cruz’s office, he was overwhelmed by the sheer volume of books. There were so many. There were books under the chairs and on top of the chairs and all over his desk. Books stacked along the walls. All three of Professor Von Warner de la Cruz’s computer screens were perched on books. An unreasonable amount, Lecturer Carlson always thought, even given their occupation. In fact, there were so many books it was difficult to comprehend how one person could read them all. How a person could have read them all during a single lifetime, and done other things too, like eat and sleep and breathe. And overwhelmed by that, Lecturer Carlson always became distracted from what had brought him into that office in the first place. And distracted like he was, he was always overcome suddenly by the desperate urge to run back to his scholarship just to catch up.

“Congratulations for what?” Lecturer Carlson said. His eyes wandered to the titles as he tried to look here, there, anywhere except at Professor Von Warner de la Cruz’s slow and methodical methods of scholarship.

“Didn’t you hear?” Professor Von Warner de la Cruz said. He bit his lip. “They announced the fellowship recipients.”

“I heard,” Lecturer Carlson said. “I didn’t receive one, though.”

“Of course you didn’t,” Professor Von Warner de la Cruz said, the pace of his scholarship quickening, the university coffee mug filled with pens on his desk shaking. “I did.”

As Professor Von Warner de la Cruz’s pace reached feverish speed, Lecturer Carlson’s eyes continued tracing the shelves, the books, some the same titles he had read during his doctoral studies, his master’s, undergrad, the same books he had sold back to the bookstore or donated the moment he was done with them. As the three computer screens shook, and a stack of books fell off the desk and onto the floor, Lecturer Carlson kept scanning them, some titles familiar, some not, but all of them dusty and sun-bleached, some with bookmarks inside them, others with their spines uncracked. Untouched. Shipped straight from the publisher. Whole shelves like that, he realized. Entire cases.

“I’ll be damned,” Lecturer Carlson whispered.

The university mug tipped over, the pens spilled. “You know, when I lived in Germany, we would say, ‘*Gratulation! Ich gratuliere! Wir gratulieren!*’ to someone’s good fortune,” Professor Von Warner de la Cruz said as he fell back in his chair.

Outside the office, the sun shone as big as a basketball, its light streaming through the blinds, beautifully burnt and orange. Lecturer Carlson checked his watch. How many minutes had he stood here? How many seconds had he wasted here, in this office, not just now, but all the times

Professor Von Warner de la Cruz — hell, *Wagner* — called him in to brag or argue about something? How many minutes had he wasted here when he could have devoted them to his scholarship instead? And how many minutes had he devoted to his scholarship instead of elsewhere? After all that time studying, what had he actually learned? What significant contribution had he ever really made?

“Well, I will just wait for your congratulations at the reception this evening!” Professor Von Warner de la Cruz yelled as Lecturer Carlson ran down the hall toward the exit.



Lecturer Carlson pulled his phone from his pocket as he barrelled down the stairs toward the exit next to the dumpsters. He dialled his wife Tara. At first she didn't answer. They had been married since undergrad, he an English major and she in pre-med, first meeting at a fraternity dinner at the Buca di Beppo, which was now the university cafeteria. Together they had a son, Brandon, who played centre for his middle school's basketball team and really needed to work on his ball-handling skills while he was still bigger than everyone else, otherwise those other kids would grow up and he would position himself right out of the game.

They also had a daughter, Jodie, who was eleven, a straight-A student and captain of her gymnastics team. Besides that, Lecturer Carlson couldn't say much about his children. When had they grown up so fast? They were just babies the last time he checked. When had they started going to school? Was he still getting his master's then? His

doctorate? Was he in the job market, trying to work his way up to a tenured-track position which still hadn't come to fruition? When had they learned to read? Crawl? What had he been doing while they had learned to walk, let alone pull down rebounds or do back tucks and running front fulls, which his daughter had performed effortlessly at her last competition? Lecturer Carlson had seen this after his wife sent him a video. He had been too busy peer-reviewing a manuscript for publication to go himself. He watched his wife's video, rewatched it, then stared out the window for an indeterminate time.

“What's up?” Tara said when she finally answered.

“Hey,” Lecturer Carlson said. “You see the news?”

“No,” Tara said, followed by the rustling of paper and plastic. “I've been busy seeing patients and dropping Brandon off at practice and picking Jodie up from school and trying to hit the store before I go pick him up again. Is this important? Can we talk when you get you home?”

“It's important,” Lecturer Carlson said. “I need to tell you something. I need to —”

“Hey, can I call you back?” Tara said. “I have to put the frozen stuff away. And now I'm getting paged by the hospital.”

Lecturer Carlson tried to interject, but she was already gone.



The sun was the size of a satellite dish when Lecturer Carlson left the stairwell and passed the dumpsters on his way to the quad. Actually, it wasn't the sun that was so large,

but rather the appearance of the sun, its last outburst blazing toward Earth. Toward him. His observation of it. As Lecturer Carlson passed the Hooters underneath his office, their TVs tuned to the baseball game, he took off his tie. The heat was unbearable. He undid his top buttons. All around him, faculty members wandered to and fro — all of their scholarship left unfinished back at their desks, their seats well-worn in the shapes of their butts.

Above him, the sun was the size of a truck. Lecturer Carlson closed his eyes. The heat was scalding yet soothing. He was going to stay right here just like this until it was done. He was going to stay just like this for whatever time he had left. Then a woman's voice startled him.

AT THAT MOMENT A HARSH WIND ERUPTED, AND THE SKY ABOVE THEM WAS NO LONGER ORANGE BUT AN OCEAN OF VIBRANT SHIMMERING REDS REFLECTING BACK THE IMAGES OF THEMSELVES UPON THEMSELVES.

“Dr. Carlson, could I ask you a question?” the woman said, and when Lecturer Carlson opened his eyes he saw Heather, one of his students, next to him in her white tank top and orange hot pants. In one hand she held a tray of Coors Lights, while with her other hand she dug into her apron and pulled out a few rolled-up sheets of paper. “Could you explain these comments you made on my essay?”

Above him, the sun was the size of a house. Lecturer Carlson unrolled the essay.

“Yeah, I wrote here you don't have a thesis,” he said.

He asked for a pen from Heather and made some notes. “But by explaining this a bit more, and making your statement here a bit more direct, that should fix it. This is an all-right paper overall. You just need a more clearly defined purpose.”

“Sorry I wasn't in class today,” Heather said as she took back her essay. “They made me work a double. I'll see you next week, though.”

“Sure,” Lecturer Carlson said. The sun was the size of a Boeing 747. “Next week.”

Heather headed back to the patio, the beers on her tray perfectly balanced, the glasses never teetering. Never spilling. It was pretty impressive, such balance. You'd have to have such balance to get through a day at a job like that, Lecturer Carlson supposed. The table Heather served was filled with frat boys — his students, he realized, Heather's classmates, all of them underage. Lecturer Carlson again faced the sky. The sun was as big as a building. A skyscraper.

“Yo, Professor Carlson, can I ask a question too?” a voice at his elbow said, and when Lecturer Carlson looked down, Anthony, another student, stood next to him in his greasy apron, essay in hand. “Heather said you were looking over stuff.”

There was no sun above them anymore, just brilliant and terrible light. It was almost pretty if you didn't think about it.

“Sure,” Lecturer Carlson said, and he took the papers and skimmed them. With Heather's pen, he made a few notes.

“Yo, thanks,” Anthony said. “And sorry I wasn't there again today. They called me in early. Next class, though.”

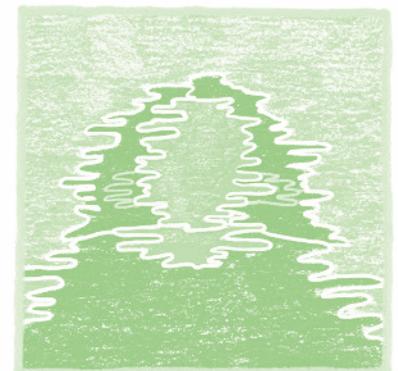
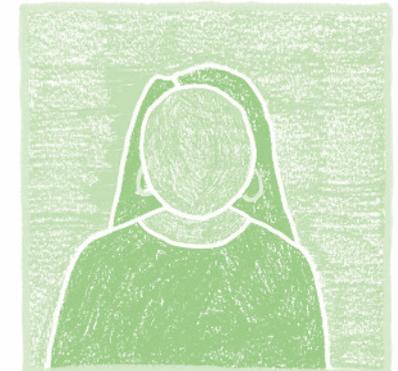
“Right,” Lecturer Carlson said, and he handed back the essay. Then he saw all the frat boys lined up behind Anthony, beers in one hand and late papers in the other.

At that moment a harsh wind erupted, and the sky above them was no longer orange but an ocean of vibrant shimmering reds reflecting back the images of themselves upon themselves. Lecturer Carlson reached for the next student’s paper but he didn’t look at it. Instead, in the glow of the ever-nearing sky, the sky falling down on top of them, he stared up at his reflection, at his students’ reflections, and at the reflections of the university and Hooters and that old Wienerschnitzel.

Then Lecturer Carlson saw in those waves of the falling magnetosphere his house off in the distance, and in the collapsing sky he saw through the window his wife on her phone with the hospital, and his daughter reading while stretching her hamstrings for her next competition. And farther past his house, in the swelling and dropping exosphere, was the gymnasium of his son’s high school, and he could hear the squeak of his sneakers echoing off the ionosphere tumbling down upon him, upon them all, everything and anything, and in the final light, red and blistering, so close he felt he could reach up and touch it, a light for which none of his scholarship had prepared him, Lecturer Carlson hoped maybe, just maybe, his family would look up for a moment and see him too.

The frat boy cleared his throat. “You grading that or not?” he said. “Cause I want to get back to the game before the ninth inning.”

And with pen in hand, Lecturer Carlson put his head down and went back to it. ◦



**IF I'M NOT WEARING MY GLASSES AND YOU'RE WEARING GREEN,
THERE IS A 90% CHANCE THAT I MISTOOK YOU FOR A PLANT**



OF PHANTOMS AND FACADES

By KC Hoard

Illustrations by Kara Pyle

I was a deeply gay child.

My voice remained firmly lodged about an octave higher than my male peers long after it was supposed to have dropped. It was just my mom and I at home and together we would alternately spin Madonna's and Shania Twain's greatest hits whenever a CD player was nearby. At recess, my weight and sheer lack of athleticism prevented me from running properly with the other kids, so I usually opted to skip instead. I loved it so much that I started to skip everywhere. Walking was so slow, and running was exhausting. I saw skipping as a happy medium and didn't understand why the other kids glared at me while I did it.

Being called a faggot became less a threat and more a promise for most of my childhood. It didn't happen daily, but the word was hurled my way regularly enough that I could expect to go to bed most nights with it ringing cacophonously in the space between my ears.

Other cruelties were less conspicuous. I was always picked last during gym class, I always ate lunch alone. I dreaded days when the teacher would have us group together for projects because I'd either end up alone or be stuck with some kid who could barely stand my presence.

Granted, I was never much use on a sports team, nor was I any good at striking up conversations. I threw daily in-class tantrums and my wardrobe pretty much consisted of unflattering T-shirts, baggy shorts and Walmart sneakers. But in my seven-year-old solipsism, I was convinced that I was the main character of everyone's story; the other first-graders just hadn't yet picked up on my star power.

I was lucky to have some reprieve when I got home. Although it was just my mom and I growing up, she made every effort to indulge my gayest interests — Madonna and Shania included — and I felt unconditionally loved and comforted in her presence.

But summer was always my El Dorado: a gleaming golden destination at the end of every slog of a school year. Summer meant sun-soaked trips to the park and days wasted on *Pokémon* amid crisp air conditioning.

But the summer after second grade was different. That summer, I went to New York City. It's the first trip I can really remember. I used to think the sprawling fields in my school's playground were huge, but nothing could have prepared me for the enormity of New York. I may have been wider than the average seven-year-old, but I was shorter than most of my classmates, which made the city's towers even more impressive.

I remember waiting in line to buy tickets to a Broadway show. I did not yet fully understand what Broadway was, and erroneously assumed that a Broadway show was just some sort of fancy movie. It was 2006, and my mom was desperate to see *Jersey Boys*, the then-new musical about sixties doo-wop group The Four Seasons (although *Wicked* and *Spamalot* were still hot at the time and would have made for excellent alternatives). When we got to the front of the line, my mother was crestfallen when the ticket seller informed her that most of the Broadway shows were sold out. She could only buy tickets to something called *The Phantom of the Opera*.

We got to the theatre just as the show began. A massive chandelier, intricate and glimmering, hung precariously from the centre of the ceiling. It gave the theatre a much more luxurious vibe than the USS *Enterprise* that hung in the foyer of the suburban cineplex that I was used to. I lapped up the luxury, took my seat next to my mother, and awaited the start of the movie.

There wasn't really anything in my life up to that point — not Madonna, not Shania and certainly not *Pokémon* — which could have prepared me for the confusing yet exhilarating performance that was about to reshape my childhood. I was still waiting for the previews to start when an unseen orchestra came to life with the hammering of keys

on an organ. Then came people — real people! — walking onto the stage, and before long they were all singing and gesturing to each other in ways I never thought possible. I was immediately entranced by the narrative and the spectacle.

There was something about Christine Daaé’s story that sang to my seven-year-old self. She was just a shy chorus girl whose talent I recognized from the start, but which only seemed to get noticed by her opera company after its resident prima donna — the overblown, hyperemotional Carlotta — stormed out of their production in a huff. Christine had been receiving lessons from a mysterious tutor, or so her fellow chorus members whispered, and she’d become quite good. She performed the hell out of the show’s big aria and secured a spot as the new star of the company.

SUDDENLY THE CHANDELIER WAS CRASHING TO THE STAGE, PEOPLE WERE SCREAMING, AND SOON IT FELT LIKE IT WAS JUST ME, CHRISTINE AND THE PHANTOM DESCENDING QUICKLY TO HIS LAIR OF DARKNESS.

I was all in on the show even before the ghost problem kicked in. I didn’t know what to make of the strange entity known as the Phantom when he began to demand hefty stipends and premier seats from the company’s new owners — especially after they foolishly dismissed his demands and he retaliated by wreaking havoc on the theatre.

Even at seven, I was old enough to recognize that things were taking a turn for the strange when Christine was lured into a misty underground dungeon by her mysterious tutor, who had thus far solely communicated with her as a disembodied voice in the cracks of the ancient opera house’s wall. Upon descending deep beneath the theatre, I was as surprised as anyone, even Christine, when we discovered that her tutor and the Phantom were one and the same — a man whose face was obscured

by a strange white mask. He dwelt in a candlelit lair, his only company an obscenely large organ. He said he’d been composing his masterpiece — an unlistenable opera called *Don Juan Triumphant* — and Christine was to be the star. But first, she needed to become his bride.

I sat in my nosebleed seat, straining to make out the details of the actors’ faces, transfixed by what I was experiencing. When the lights came up at the end of act 1 — which culminated with Christine and her handsome lover Raoul exchanging sweet nothings in the epic love ballad “All I Ask of You” — I found myself positively stunned. The orchestral swells and unbridled melodrama of *Phantom* were satisfying some primal craving within me — a craving not even “Like a Prayer” could temper.

As the lights came up and the people on stage disappeared, I glanced desperately at my mom, who assured me that we were only halfway through the show. Minutes passed, and the significance of all that had transpired before me started to sink in. The sparkling chandelier. The thunderous organ. The indecent wedding proposal. The Phantom! The intermission went on for what felt like a century. I began to panic. Then came act 2.

As the Phantom’s obsession for Christine and his jealousy of Raoul grew, I became tense at the thought that all of this might soon come to an end. Suddenly the chandelier was crashing to the stage, people were screaming, and soon it felt like it was just me, Christine and the Phantom descending quickly to his lair of darkness. I knew Raoul was close behind, hounding us à la Gaston, the overzealous, hypermasculine suitor from *Beauty and the Beast*. Then there was more screaming (and singing) and the Phantom’s mask was ripped from his face to expose his hideous deformity. Then came the kiss. That softening kiss. From Christine to the man with the deformed face and then — nothing. Poof. He was gone, leaving just the mask and Christine and an angry chorus mob.

The curtains rose and the actors took their bows. I came to, staggered by the emotional intensity of the story. Tears rolled down my cheeks; they stained my shirt as I rose to my feet. I slapped my hands together as hard as my chubby palms could manage. My mother and I stayed in the



theatre long after the rest of the audience had dispersed. A grey old ush-
erette came up to me, eyes wide, wrinkled hands gesturing at the stage.

“Do you want to see something cool?”

I nodded, still speechless from the spectacle. We watched as the
chandelier was hoisted back to its original spot, regal in all its incan-
descent glory.

We returned to Ottawa and summer wilted away, but my love for *The
Phantom of the Opera* continued to bloom. If I was in the car, my mom
and I were belting out the soundtrack. My voice hadn’t dropped yet, so
I ended up singing Christine’s parts. There’s a bit in the title song where
the Phantom demands Christine sing for him, and she launches into
some vocal runs that can only be described as completely bonkers. I hit
every note.

If I was at home, I was rapturously watching and rewatching the Joel
Schumacher-directed movie adaptation, which cranked up all the gay-
est and horniest elements of the musical: Christine spending most of
the movie running around trying to keep her breasts in her shirt, while
Raoul’s clothes, always about a size too tight, are torn to shreds on mul-
tiple occasions. The Phantom — played by a tone-deaf Gerard Butler
— seemed equally as keen on caressing Christine as staring at Raoul’s
chest. I didn’t fully appreciate what I was watching until much, much
later, but it’s now clear the film is the Platonic ideal of Schumacher’s un-
canny ability to wring queerness out of any popular intellectual prop-
erty, including Batman.

Schumacher’s Phantom became *my* Phantom — a campy meditation
on the power of unbridled libido. It connected the dots between what
I saw on stage in New York and how my closeted brain interpreted it. In
Schumacher’s hands, the characters weren’t just acting out some stilted
Victorian soap opera, they were dissecting their own relationships to
beauty and sexuality through the power of song. The Phantom’s mask
wasn’t just concealing a deformity — it was hiding his queerness. That
might seem like a reach, especially given queer folks’ seemingly irre-
sistible tendency to imprint our identities onto the movies we like, but
Schumacher’s unshakable, profound gayness cannot be understated. He
was the queer Midas: everything he touched turned gay.

The *Phantom* movie was both my sexual awakening and my cozy
hearth, equal parts horny and homey. I zealously clung to it all summer,
watching it on loop until each lyric and line were burned into my brain.

As the school year approached, I took sanctuary in the music of the
night. Grade three began, and with it came the old bullies. But I felt
different. I’d discovered strength and resilience during the summer. I
was growing into myself, slowly but surely. I even made a friend, a boy
named Will who shared my love for video games and was always avail-
able to duke it out in a *Pokémon* battle. School became less hellish with
each passing day, and I finally had a buddy to keep the loneliness at bay.

I took up piano lessons, in part because they reminded me of the
Phantom and his organ, and also because I wanted to take part in my

school's end-of-year talent show. My mom gifted me a wearable replica of the Phantom's white mask. And although it was made for an adult and was far too big for my prepubescent face, I wore it around the house with pride nonetheless. As my piano lessons progressed, I began to teach myself some of the songs from the musical. The Phantom's big number, "The Music of the Night," was my go-to.

Having a single mom meant constant stress over who would supervise me while she worked, but luckily my school had a before- and after-school program that allowed her to put in a full eight hours at her government desk job. One day, as I waited for my mom in the after-school program, I met Jesse, who was a year older than me. An imposing figure, he stood several inches taller than most of the kids in his grade, and was even taller than some of the more pubescent kids. He and I had a somewhat tepid relationship, but we would often play cards together and, slowly but surely, a tentative friendship began to form. I confided in him about some of my more feminine interests, including the *Phantom*. He generally shrugged me off and kept our conversations superficial, but it was nice to have someone to talk to when Will wasn't around.

Around this time, some tests administered by the school informed me I was "gifted," and my teachers got me into a grade two/three split so I could skip ahead. I was mostly bored with my newly advanced education, but being in a two/three split meant I got to use the grade-three bathrooms, the walls of which were regularly marked up with juicy gossip. On my first day as a newly minted splitter, I marched to the washroom, eager to read up on the latest buzz. I entered the gossip stall and was greeted with five words I was all too familiar with, scribbled crudely in black marker: *KC Hoard is a fag*.

I bolted out of the bathroom and back to class, my eyes hollow, my shoulders slumped. I was used to hearing that word volleyed my way, but there was something about *reading* it that got to me. It was etched into the stall, where everyone could read it. Spoken words are ephemeral — they disappear into the atmosphere just as quickly as they coil off the tongue. But writing is forever, and I understood written words to contain fact.

That was the worst part: knowing they were right. I was a miserable, irritating, disgusting, fat, lonely little gay boy, and there was nothing I could do to change.

I went to daycare the next day and saw Jesse. I told him what I had read in the bathroom stall. His eyes darted to the side and his cheeks turned red. He muttered an excuse and awkwardly inched away, all but confessing to having written the message.

Mercifully, the day eventually ended, and my mom picked me up. I had begun to act out on a regular basis — throwing tantrums in class, needling other students until they flipped out, throwing pencils — and my mother was just about at her wit's end with my antics. When we got home, I fled to my bed, tossing around restlessly until I fell asleep.

I WENT TO DAYCARE THE NEXT DAY AND SAW JESSE. I TOLD HIM WHAT I HAD READ IN THE BATHROOM STALL. HIS EYES DARTED TO THE SIDE AND HIS CHEEKS TURNED RED.

As I lay in bed I thought of Christine Daaé and her troubles in the early days at the opera house. I took solace in her story and how she was celebrated for her talent and lauded for her beauty, picked from the chorus to single-handedly steal the spotlight. She was universally adored and undeniably excellent. Above all, she had immense charisma and unwavering confidence. She had all the talent but none of the unbearable vanity of Carlotta, the diva she had replaced. I wanted so badly to assume Christine's status at school. I wanted boys to love me, I wanted to be envied and beloved by my peers.

But I was trapped in my body and imprisoned by my circumstances. I couldn't strip off my rolls to reveal a gorgeous woman, and I couldn't hide my limp wrists or my soprano vocal register. I had been relegated to a social dungeon — a sad, damp thing lit dimly by orange candles. I knew, deep down, that I could never be Christine. I was despised. I existed at the base of my school's social ladder and I saw no prospect of

ascent. I had more in common with her captor. So I put Christine out of my mind and concentrated instead on channelling my inner Phantom.

I spent the next few weeks preparing for the upcoming talent show. Hours slipped by as I sat at my piano, my Phantom mask resting gently in the space beside my sheet music while I hammered on the keys. I wanted flair. I wanted drama. In retrospect, I wanted camp, though I didn't yet understand what camp was — which is campy in its own way.

On the day of the talent show, nerves flooded me as I waited backstage. My mother graciously waited with me until I stepped into the spotlight, my cape flowing behind me. I peered through my mask and saw a legion of kids staring at me, obviously confused by my getup. It was a mandatory event, so the entire school was sitting cross-legged on the gym floor. I caught Jesse's eyes; he was seated about halfway to the back wall, but he was tall so he stuck out.

THE OPENING CHORDS OF “THE MUSIC OF THE NIGHT” RANG OUT FROM THE PIANO, SOON JOINED BY MY VOICE. “NIGHT TIME SHARPENS, HEIGHTENS EACH SENSATION,” I COOED. “DARKNESS WAKES AND STIRS IMAGINATION.”

I swept my cape to the side and sat at the piano bench. I set my sheet music on the piano and ran my fingers across the faux-ivory keys, drawing power from their musical potential. Then I began to play.

The opening chords of “The Music of the Night” rang out from the piano, soon joined by my voice. “Night time sharpens, heightens each sensation,” I cooed. “Darkness wakes and stirs imagination.”

I'm sure it was a strange sight: an overweight second-grader practically drowning in a black cape, attempting to simultaneously play the piano, belt out a musical theatre standard about the power of spooky opera, and keep an oversized mask from falling off his face. Perceptions didn't matter to me, though. The entire school remained hushed, forced to

pay attention to me. I'd never had so many eyes on me before. Suddenly I knew what it was like to be Christine.

I kept going, fumbling my way through the chords. I'm sure it sounded awful — my squeaky voice mixed with the school's out-of-tune piano. I really only had a rudimentary grasp of piano at the time, so I was probably just haphazardly smashing the keys and howling out the song like a dying wolf. But I couldn't hear myself or feel the keys or notice the spectators scrutinizing me. I was floating above it all, experiencing elation like never before. I wanted to stay there forever, pummelling the piano, my heart springing from my chest, my soul soaring beyond the gymnasium.

I reached the song's big finale, where the Phantom holds the note for the final lyric “night” for a full twenty seconds. I think I got about five seconds in before my lungs surrendered. I finished up the final chords and returned to my body. I stood up, swept my cape to the side, and bowed deeply, soaking in the applause.

Jesse, the gossip stall, the word — everything plaguing me had vanished. My stardom was finally being recognized. I was getting my own *Don Juan Triumphant*. The mask was off, and the garish light of day was beating down on me, exposing me for all I was. The kids that I thought hated me had listened to me pound out my favourite song. I was cloaked in a cheap vampire cape I got from the Halloween store, imitating a middle-aged basement goblin with an aptitude for melodrama. And for a fleeting moment, that made me the centre of the universe.

What could be gayer than that? ◉

10

MUST-HAVE ITEMS FOR WFH

(ACCORDING TO THE
PHANTOM OF THE OPERA)

By Tu Anh Dinh

1. CANDELABRA: Get a million of them — you honestly can't have enough! It really adds to the mood. Are you having a cozy work-from-home, or are you finalizing a deal with Satan? Ha ha — who knows?

2. A REALLY GOOD ZOOM BACKGROUND: Sometimes I'm a little messy! I'm a messy bitch, I admit it. The tunnel system I live in — *yikes*. It can be a handful to clean. So I have a folder of different Zoom backgrounds that I throw on the screen whenever I need to hop on a call. Currently, I'm really into the Central Perk coffee shop from *Friends*. Such a conversation starter. I mean, I'm definitely a Monica.

3. GONDOLA: I've got jacked arms, and you know why? *Gondola*.

4. SPARE CHANDELIERS: I keep several for crashing when I need to dramatically exit a Zoom meeting or when people aren't listening to my ideas. (I break a lot of chandeliers.)

5. NINETEENTH-CENTURY PIPE ORGAN: I love to play loud, haunting tunes all day long.

6. A TONYMOLY HYDRATING LAVENDER SHEET MASK: Any opaque sheet mask will do, really. I usually cut mine in half because, you know, my face is a melting skull. When I'm feeling lazy, I just fold the mask in half for double hydration!

7. LUMBAR PILLOW: Girl, trust me.

8. ATHLEISURE: Did you know Lululemon makes capes? Well, they don't, but they should. I've been *living* in their leggings, though.

9. THERAPIST: *Très* important! My doctor says I've been making so much progress. Or at least she would, were she not locked up in my room of glass. If you can't afford a therapist, kidnap a young ingenue and project all your childhood trauma on her. I swear by it!

10. ORNATE CHEST FULL OF ITEMS STOLEN FROM YOUR BELOVED: Okay, hear me out.



WHAT PASSES AS A JOKE THESE DAYS

By Grace McGrenere

Illustration by Jenna Pyle

I went to my first stand-up comedy show last summer. The headliner was American comedian Iliza Shlesinger.

My friend and I discovered her on Netflix one evening, in between handfuls of popcorn and gossip. Shlesinger's hard-hitting, feminist-centred jokes appealed to us. Unlike other comedians' sets I'd seen on TV, Shlesinger's was nuanced and reflected contemporary notions of feminism and womanhood. It was also hilarious. She opened the show with striking conviction, drawing attention to microaggressions that exist within female relationships and feminism.

"I'm excited you showed up," she said, pacing back and forth. "I'm excited you're capable. I do not hate you because you're younger than me or prettier than me or as successful. However, you showed up and so did I, so let's get it started 'cause life's a competition. Like, let's do it that way. Okay? And I know other women feel the same way, not just because you're laughing at what I'm saying, but if you look at the language that

women consistently use to uphold one another, the language is aggressive. 'Cause women are aggressive — we're just not allowed to show it because 'likeability and wrinkles.'"

Shlesinger's ability to identify hypocrisy within feminism is refreshingly subversive in a way that's entirely different from the usual shock humour that comedians often employ to achieve a degree of edginess. In 2017, Shlesinger got herself into trouble during an interview with *Deadline*, when she responded to a question about the language women use to represent themselves in comedy today.

She said, "I do think many women think, 'Oh, if I act like a guy, if I go for the low-hanging fruit.' Everything's about sex, or how weird I am. It all just kind of runs together. I could walk into the Improv, close my eyes, and I can't tell one girl's act apart from the other. That's not saying that thirtysomething white guys don't all sound the same sometimes, but I'm banging my head against the wall because women want to be treated as equals, and we want feminism to be a thing, but it is really difficult when every woman makes the same point about her vagina, over and over."

Her comments, which attracted ridicule and condemnation from several women comics and comedy writers, spoke to a double standard within comedy and raised the question of whether certain jokes should be off-limits — not just to certain comics, but to all of them. It's a subversive question for a subversive art that still manages to be sexist as hell.

Regardless of gender, comedians and satirists have always tried to push the boundaries of social acceptance in the name of humour. Watch any old comedy set on YouTube and you might find yourself cringing at the overt racism and misogyny driving the audience laughter. For years, the urge to be "edgy" has served to normalize anything from an ethnic slur to a rape joke and created a modern comedy scene that thrives on its power to subvert, but which grants its male comics greater latitude than others.

There's a patriarchy to the comedy scene that goes all the way back to the days of jesters and which has been preserved by television through generations of pop-culture comics. You don't have to look very hard to see it, because it's everywhere. From the vaudeville shtick of George

Burns and Gracie Allen ("Say goodnight, Gracie") to the post-#MeToo humour of Louis C.K., what passes as a joke in our society is often degrading to women.

Back in the 1950s, actress and comedian Lucille Ball starred alongside her then husband, Desi Arnaz, in the iconic show *I Love Lucy*. The show focused on Ball's character Lucy, who dreamed of leaving her domestic life to join her husband in showbiz. But Lucy's husband didn't want Lucy to have a career of her own.

At the time, Lucy's attempts to break away from her domestic servitude were deemed comedic because a woman chasing a career was considered a funny concept. Her quirky and eccentric attitude seemed to get her into trouble and in need of male rescue.

Ball was a master of her craft, a quick-witted woman who helped pave the way for more gender-inclusive comedy from the likes of Mary Tyler Moore, Ellen DeGeneres and Julia Louis-Dreyfus. At first glance, Lucy may appear inoffensive and docile, the very embodiment of female domesticity. But beneath the smiling exterior is the story of a woman who was pushing back against the patriarchy and challenging what was acceptable.

Lucy's friend Ethel sums up this sentiment in the episode "Equal Rights," when she says, "You mean to tell us that we have equal rights, but you certainly don't give us a chance to act like it."

Sixty-seven years after that episode first aired, men and women are still not treated equally in comedy. Nor can one make this argument about the disparity between men and women in comedy without pointing out that trans and non-binary folk continue to face even greater socio-economic and gender-based disparities on the comedy stage.

In 2017, queer Black comedian Rebecca O'Neal wrote for BuzzFeed about her experiences with toxic misogyny in the comic community. At one point in her story, she detailed an incident from a few years earlier when she "watched and listened after my set as a comic I looked up to told graphic jokes about my body and about having sex with me onstage, in front of hundreds of people. . . . Audience members near me who'd just respected and listened to me as a professional entertainer were now

turning to look at me and laughing at the things he was saying, nodding in agreement.”

O’Neal’s story is troubling but not altogether surprising. She was writing at the start of the #MeToo movement, and Louis C.K. had just admitted to masturbating in front of women on several occasions. O’Neal was asking readers to reflect on what drove them to laugh at misogynist jokes like the ones C.K. was famous for, such as this one from 2009: “You should never rape anyone . . . um, unless you have a reason . . . like you want to fuck somebody and they won’t let you.”

I hope such a joke wouldn’t be met with the same complacency today as it was eleven years ago. But I do believe that C.K. would probably still be trying to get laughs from his rape jokes if he hadn’t been caught up in the #MeToo movement. His comedy today may be more subdued than before, but it’s still problematic.

In C.K.’s April 2020 comeback special, *Sincerely Louis C.K.*, he deflected attention from his sexual misconduct by trying to shock the audience with racial humour, saying, “Man, I was in a lot of trouble. Wait till they see those pictures of me in blackface. That’s going to make it a lot worse because there’s a lot of those. There are thousands of pictures of me in blackface. I can’t stop doing it. I like it. I like how it feels.”

The audience, laughing along in the months before George Floyd’s death and the social awakening that followed, may well feel differently about that joke today. Yet they still found it within themselves to chuckle along when C.K. went back to his usual dick shtick.

“I like jerking off,” he says. “I don’t like being alone, that’s all I can tell you. I get lonely — it’s just sad. I like company. I like to share. I’m good at it too. If you’re good at juggling, you wouldn’t do it alone in the dark — you’d gather folks and amaze them.”

Gross. If Louis C.K. can get away with such a joke after everything we know about him, what hope is there that comedy might soon overcome the structures that allow rape culture to flourish within it?

In February 2020, two months before C.K.’s special came out, comedian and talk show host Nikki Glaser triggered a backlash for a joke about molestation while performing a stand-up routine at the University

of Rochester in upstate New York.

Glaser joked that she wished she had been molested so she could talk about it. The joke was apparently centred around the idea that “people who have been molested are so much cooler.”

Glaser defended her joke, telling the *Campus Times*, “The joke was that people who have been molested tend to be more interesting because they’ve had to persevere past such a terrible thing. If anything, I’m standing up for victims, saying that you are cooler and a better person because of what happened to you.”

Shortly after the performance, students took to social media to denounce the joke as promoting rape culture, and began sharing resources for those audience members who might have been triggered. Unlike C.K., Glaser wasn’t so easily permitted to slip behind the defence of just trying to be “risqué” or “edgy.”

That’s not to say that the long-ingrained comedic attributes of raunch and edginess aren’t afforded to female comics. Joan Rivers, for example, was about as edgy as any of her contemporaries, as is Ali Wong today.

Wong is a comedian and actress best known for her role in ABC’s *Fresh Off the Boat* and for her 2016 Netflix special *Baby Cobra* — a shock-laden comedy routine she performed while pregnant. In 2019, she was asked by *The New York Times* whether certain material should be avoided because it’s deemed offensive. “People can get away with doing really offensive things as long as it’s funny,” she replied. “Because if it’s funny, then the laughter wins over the feelings of hurt and then you’re doing something right. It comes down to writing and instinct.”

At one point in *Baby Cobra*, a very pregnant Wong jokes about a previous miscarriage, telling the audience she was secretly relieved by the experience because she had been carrying twins. Asked specifically about the joke later by *The Guardian*, she said, “Being able to joke about it was such a relief. Comedy only works when it comes from an honest place, and the relief that I’d miscarried twins was real!”

Unlike C.K. and Glaser, Wong wasn’t solely aiming to manipulate a sensitive experience for shock value, but rather to articulate her experience in a way that was comedic and relatable.

Like Wong, Amy Schumer has developed a crass style of comedy that has seen her labelled as a “no-holds barred comedienne,” but which has also seen her attract flak. She has been accused of stealing jokes, being too political, fat shaming, and using racially insensitive humour to get a cheap laugh. But she has faced perhaps the most condemnation for leaning on jokes about women’s bodies.

During her 2017 Netflix stand-up act, *The Leather Special*, Schumer, who is a sexual assault survivor, joked, “[Her] pussy smells like a small barnyard animal. Not a fucked-up llama, but a small petting zoo.” In its review of the show, the *Los Angeles Times* wrote, “Ironically, the dirtier it gets, the less daring it feels. Part of the problem is that she doesn’t drop in enough context from life of late, and the material feels like it could have come from a set three years ago.” *Newsday* wrote, “Too much of the carnal Amy, not enough of the smart culture critic Amy.”

But the most patronizing reviews came from everyday members of the public tearing apart one of her jokes online. The joke went like so: “There was a study done, and it said that women mostly fear violence. That’s our number-one fear. And the same study showed that men’s number-one fear was ridicule. Oh . . . yeah, God. I’m so sorry, I didn’t know you guys were going through that. It must be hard for you. Do you guys run home? Because you’re afraid of somebody telling a little jokey about you?”

One user responded, “Does she not get her XXXL panties in a bunch because they tell her she’s not funny?” Another chimed in, “So basically men’s fear is a joke to her and society. It’s great knowing that we can support our women, but we can’t do the same for our men.”

There’s an irony that’s surely lost on user A and user B and others who fail to see that Schumer is critiqued when her jokes veer to the “carnal,” yet when she delivers a sober punchline about rape culture, she is accused of being insensitive towards men. She can’t really win, but she isn’t the first female comic to be ensnared by this reality.

In 2004, Whoopi Goldberg was rebuked after she told a joke that poked fun at President George W. Bush’s surname while performing at a New York fundraiser for Bush’s electoral opponent, John Kerry. “We

should keep Bush where he belongs — and not in the White House,” she said as she gestured at her crotch. That joke attracted the ire of the entire Republican establishment and caused her career to nosedive. “I lost everything, really,” she recently disclosed.

There is little equity among penis and vagina jokes. We live in a society where girls are raised to be unassuming and gentle — taught to suppress our feelings towards pleasure and to take our seats in the audience while the boys take care of the jokes. That needs to change if we’re ever going to really start disassembling the patriarchy at the core of comedy. Until then, we’re reliant on female comics to take the stage and subvert the system. But don’t take my word for it — take Margaret Cho’s.

The comedic icon was the victim of prolonged sexual abuse as a child and teenager. In a 2016 episode of Jerry Seinfeld’s *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee*, she explained why she decided to incorporate the most upsetting experiences of her life into her own humour.

“I’m trying to do material about things that are really tough to talk about and very upsetting to people when I talk about them, which is sexual abuse and rape about that,” she said. “If you can actually take the silence away, then you can take away predators. They have nowhere to hide. Every time I talk about it, my rapist is super scared.”

“That’s good,” Seinfeld piped in, nodding.

“But there’s that idea that ‘I can’t laugh at that, I’m not supposed to laugh at that,’” Cho continued.

“That’s just comedy,” Seinfeld replied, still nodding. “Comedy solves that. Because comedy is always on the way. We’re on the way someplace else.” ◊

A SLOW-MOVING ISLAND

By Greg Santos

The sea air feels sprinkled
with salt and magic.

The sun is doling out
drops of vitamin D.

I should consider myself lucky
to live in such a wonderland.

My children emerge
from a sand dune.

They speak:
You are the right man for the job.

It seems like just yesterday
they needed me to burp and wipe them.

When did they get so wise?
Now look at those two: offering me a cushy job.

I am grateful,
I brought an updated CV.

I toss my white beard
over my shoulder, adjust my tie.

Take a deep breath of ocean air.
It's go time.

THE FEATHERTALE REVIEW

PRESENTS...

ILLUSTRATION BY KARAPYLE



THIRTY-TWO PAGES OF COMICS AND STUFF!



* I became a cat foster instead.

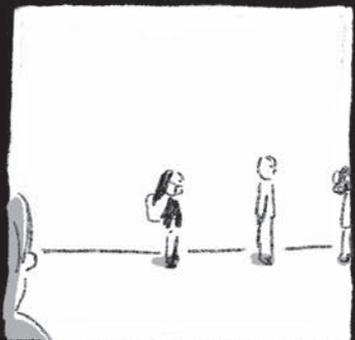
WOW, THEY ARE
PRETTY BUSY TODAY!!



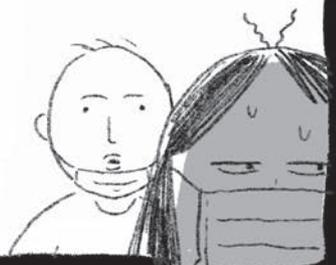
OH, SOMEONE IS
COMING
BY!



I'VE BEEN COOKING
A LOT MORE SINCE
BEING AT HOME.



BRUH...



IS IT SAFE TO TURN
AROUND NOW ???



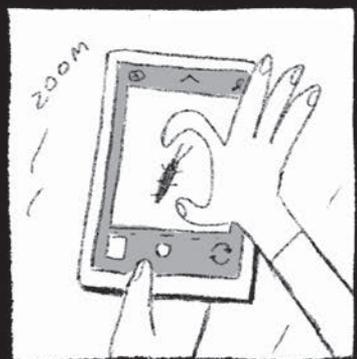
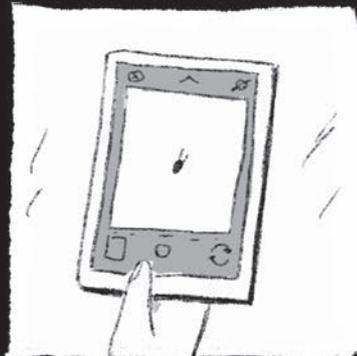
HOW DID GETTING GROCERIES
BECOME A MARATHON COURSE?



...I JUST WANT TO EAT
FOOD OTHER PEOPLE MADE.







BY: LINDA YAN

STRANGE TIMES.

BY CHARLIT

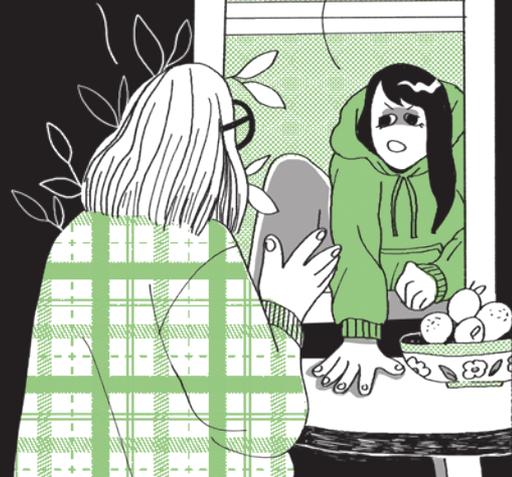


EARLY LAST SPRING,
MY TEEN SELF APPEARED.



WHAT ARE
YOU DOING?

COMING
INSIDE



SHE TOLD ME I HAD
SUMMONED HER BY
STAYING INSIDE FOR
TOO LONG.



I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND AT FIRST, BUT THEN I REMEMBERED

o o o o



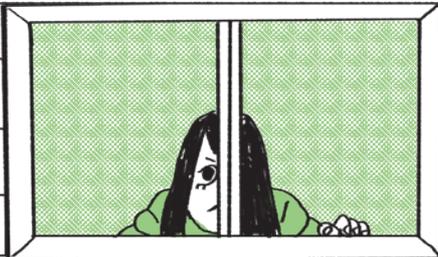
I CAUGHT HER UP ON A FEW THINGS.



... I HAD DONE THIS BEFORE ...



I USED TO SPEND ALL DAY IN MY ROOM.



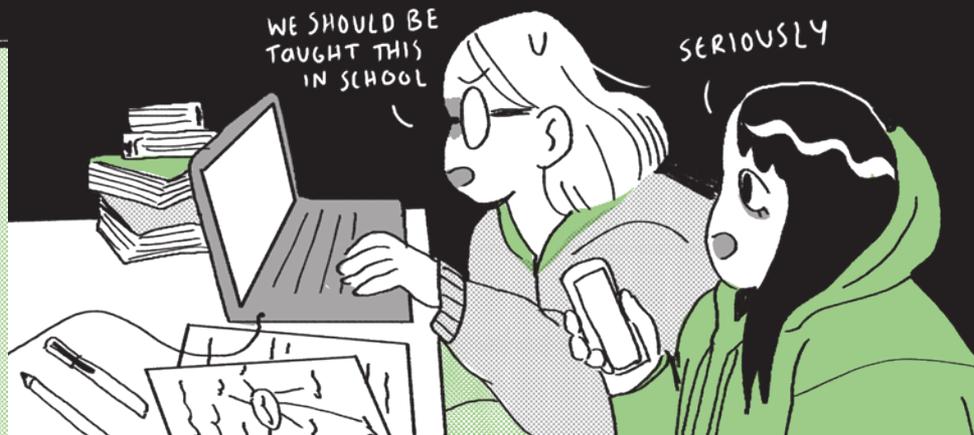


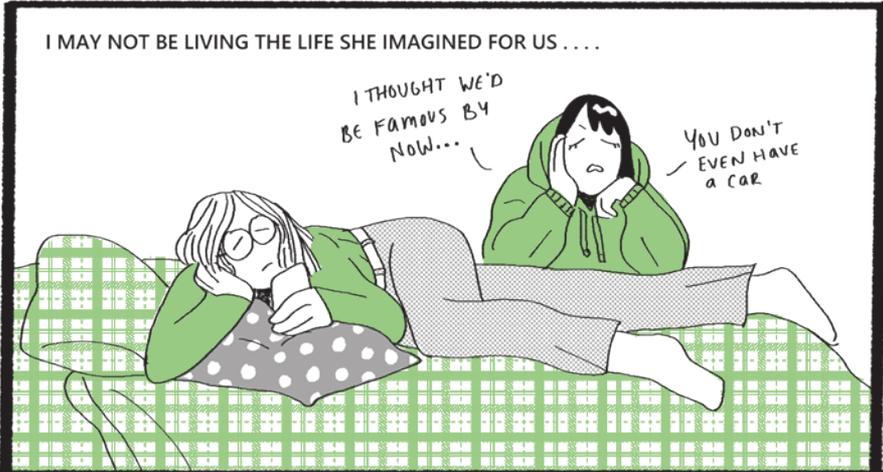
... HOW TO GET CARRIED AWAY WITH STORIES ...

SHE FOLLOWED ME THE FEW TIMES I DID GO OUT.

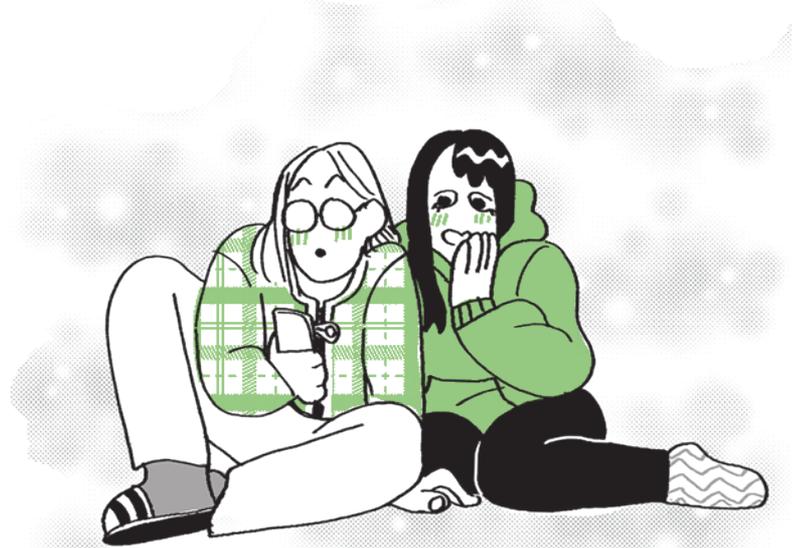


... AND HOW TO LEARN NEW WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD.

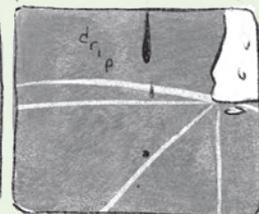


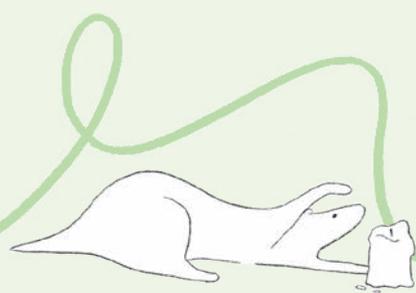
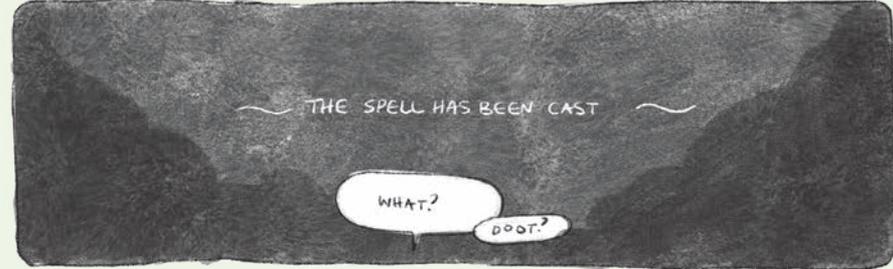
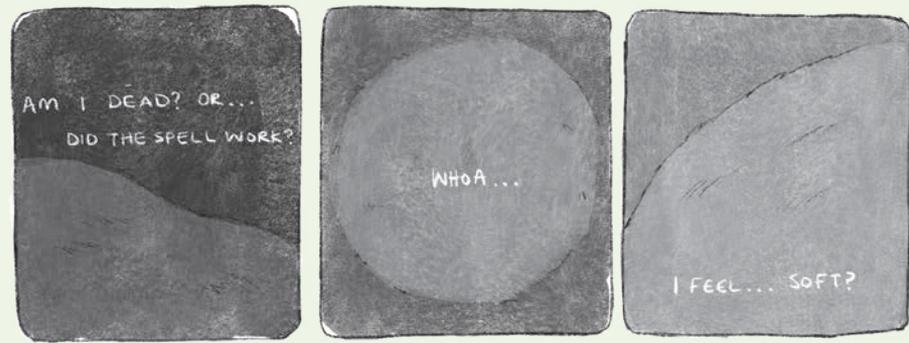
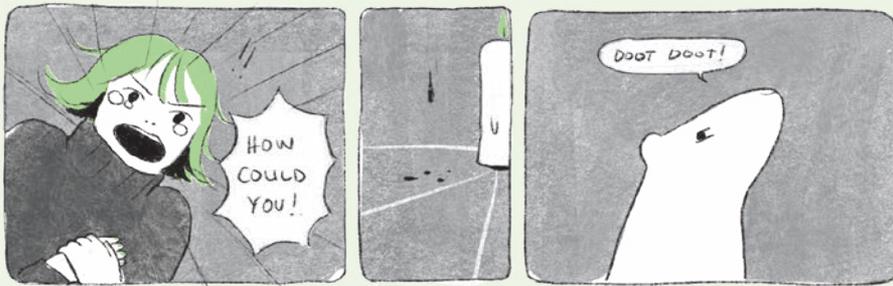


... BUT THE WORLD IS A LOT STRANGER THAN SHE REALIZED.

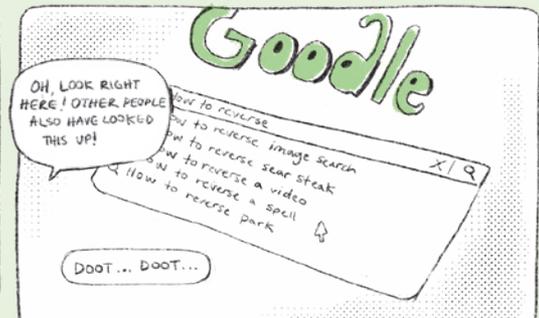
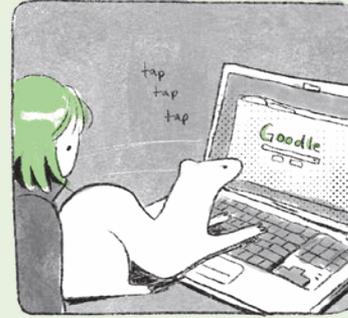


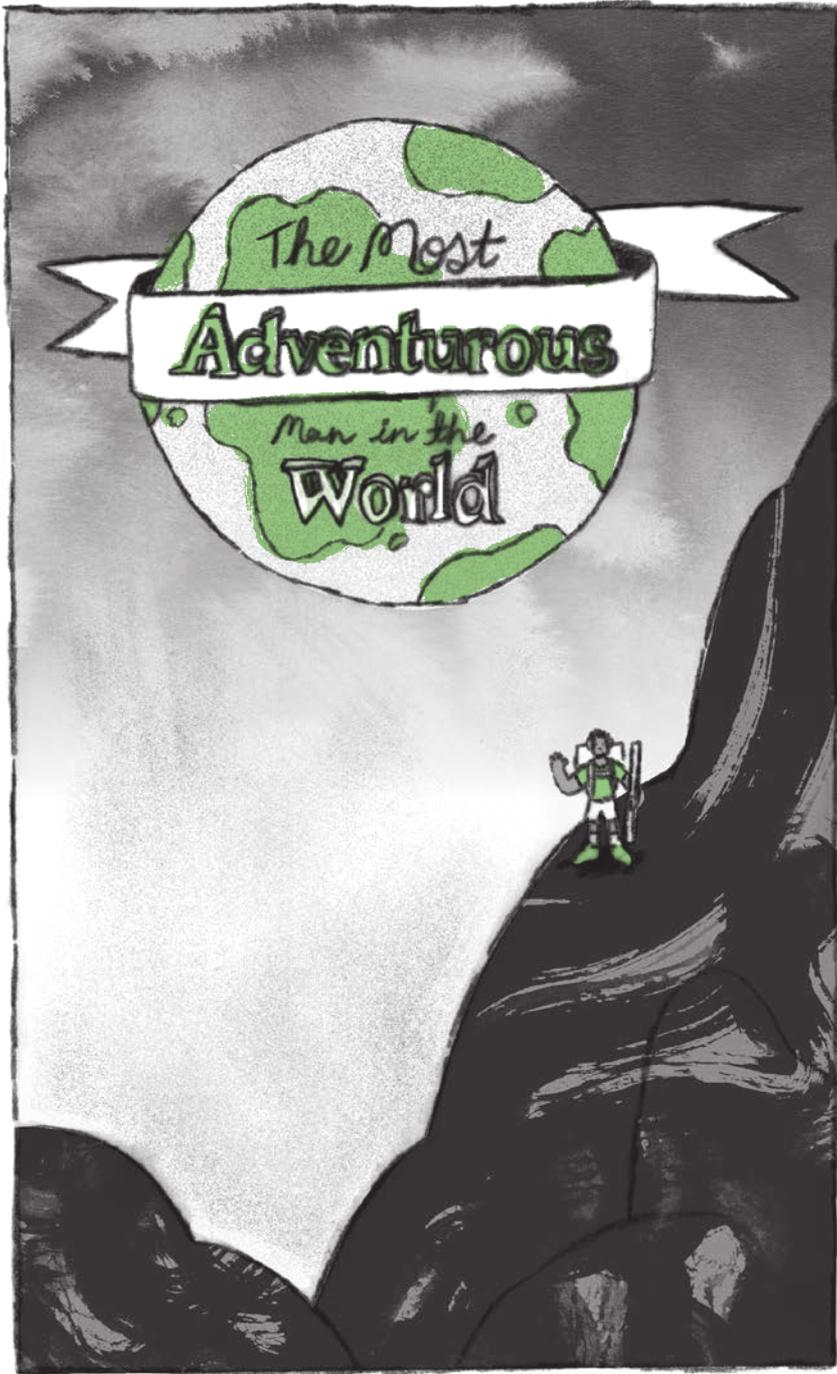
BUT AS LONG AS I'M STAYING INSIDE, I'M GLAD SHE'S HERE WITH ME.

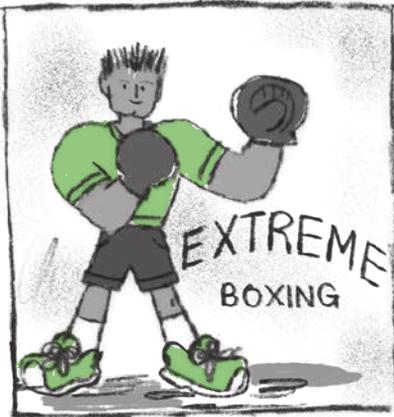
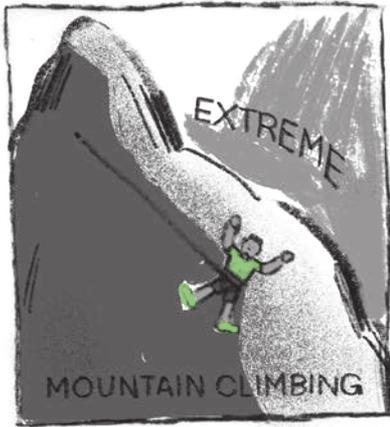


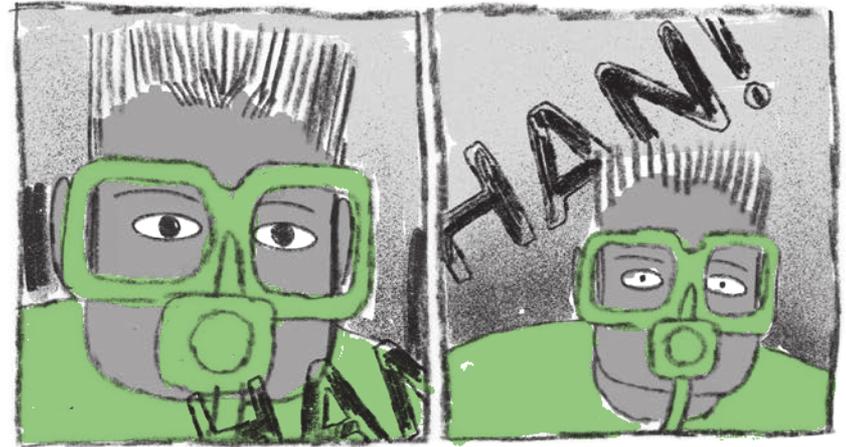


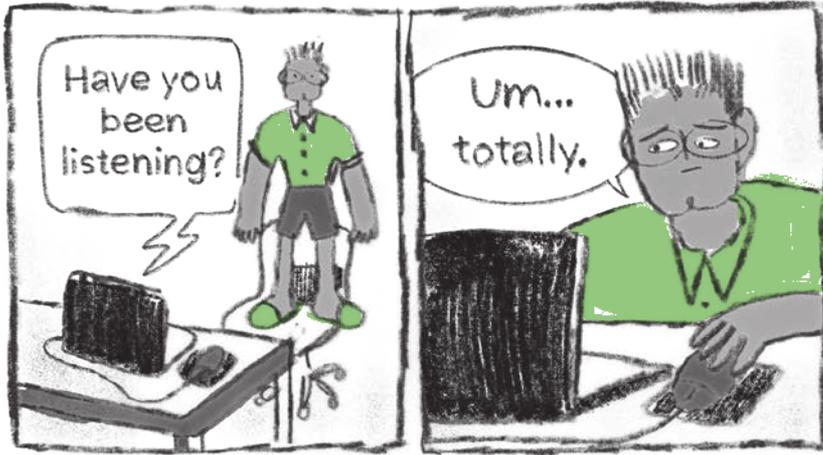












MAGNETIC

By DJ Tyrer

He had a magnetic personality

Unfortunately, the wrong polarity

Repelling the rest of humanity



An Egregious Interview with the Man Behind the Hand Inside **ED THE SOCK**

Speaking to Natalie Pressman

Illustration by Kara Pyle

Steven Kerzner is the creator and gravelly voice of Shosier-inspired puppet Ed the Sock. You may remember the satirical celebrity sock puppet from his MuchMusic heydays, hosting shows like *Ed's Night Party*, *Fromage* and *Ed's Nite In*.

From his humble beginnings on local cable TV in 1987, the cigar-chomping Ed went on to host awards shows and tour nationally, and over time has maintained a loyal fan base. Kerzner quit MuchMusic in 2008 following a change in management, and Ed's appearances became more sporadic thereafter. In 2016, he launched a website with his wife Liana called the FU Network, featuring new and old video clips of Ed the Sock.

On the inspiration for the comeback, Kerzner says, "Ed was too potent a character."

Kerzner has been criticized for Ed's bawdy brand of humour over the years, particularly for the ribald hot-tub segments of *Ed's Night Party*. But in reality, Kerzner says he is a champion of women's rights, thanks to the influence of his wife.

"We had cast members who were never given any direction of what to do," he recalls. "We said, 'Go and have fun,' and they would come up with their own shtick. They were never censored. We used their names. They were not objects, they were people. They had microphones, they could interject whenever they wanted. They were young women who were using the power of being young women, which has been suppressed by society, by religion, because generally people have been afraid over generations, over centuries of the female sexual power."

Kerzner credits Ed's enduring appeal to his unique appearance and unfiltered utterances.

"Comedy has a long history questioning authority," he says. "It goes back to the jester in the king's court, who was the only one allowed to make fun of the king, and so I said, 'Let's do something different.'"

JUST THE FACTS

YOUR FAVOURITE SOCKS THAT ARE NOT ED: I don't give any thought to socks that aren't Ed. I just need socks to be comfortable and warm. I am not a big fan of crazy pattern socks to show off because it's just a trend, and I have no patience for trends. It's like, "Look, I'm different, just like everybody else." With that being said, I do encourage people to buy Ed the Sock socks on our website, funetwork.tv.

SOMETHING YOU NEVER LEAVE HOME WITHOUT: Some method of recording ideas. Otherwise I forget, because that one idea leads to another idea, leads to another idea, leads to another, leads to another. By the time you're six iterations in, you're at a separate idea and you can't remember the first one.

MOST RECENT GOOGLE SEARCH: About finding out stats on audio podcasts for business. Not very sexy, is it? Before that, I was reading about upcoming plans for Superman comics.

YOUR FIRST JOB: I worked the smoked fish and cream cheese counter at a retail outlet. My job was to sell fish to people who would come in every day and ask the same question: "Is it fresh?" And then you'd cut up the fish and wrap it up and then they'd say, "You know what, I don't want it."

I had to stand on a milk crate for people to be able to see me. It was a very high counter.

I had to come home and get the smell out of me. The theory was, a cold shower got the smell out, and then a hot shower was a shower, but if you took a hot shower first, it just embedded the smell in you, which I think is an old wives' tale. So I'd come home from work, at thirteen, and I'd have to take a cold shower after spending the day elbow-deep in cream cheese and cutting up fish for people who then didn't want it.

NUMBER OF SOCKS USED TO CREATE ED OVER THE YEARS: Ed is on his — I'm trying to look here in the cabinet where all the Eds are — I think Ed is on his twelfth skin right now.

JUST THE ANSWERS

FEATHERTALE: How would you describe Ed's shtick to someone who has never heard of him or seen him?

STEVEN KERZNER: This is a very good question because many people take different things from the character and the brand of Ed the Sock, though nobody questions what Ed stands for in the sense of truth and authenticity and speaking his mind, and not being controlled by any particular corporate powers. Anything Ed says, no one is paying for it.

We had an ad agency do some market research, and what they came back with is that people's view of Ed is pure Canadiana, but the strongest take-away was "Ed says what I'm thinking and wish I could say." Ed would describe himself as a "pragmacrat," in the sense of not right, not left, but looking for the answers that would help the

most and hurt the least, at least politically. But he's had a long career and he's taken shots at boy bands and pop divas and so on, and the one line that runs through to what is going on now is just an absolute lack of patience for any obvious attempts of manipulation by media or politicians or covert messaging that comes through the media from corporations, or political groups, or general social messages.

Ed's always been about "Hey, take a look past what they're showing you. There's a lot more here to look at and it's a lot more insidious, often, than you think it is."

FT: How did Ed come to be?

SK: Ed started in 1987. I was eighteen and running a cable station, and I had a friend who was hosting a late-night-type TV show. At the time I was doing political programming, so I wasn't going to go on and be his co-host. Ed was created as a hybrid of two people that we knew and we lampooned to figure out what they would say in certain situations.

I went to the kids' section of the TV station, which was a cabinet full of props and art supplies. I found some clean socks, glue sticks, some fun fur, and I took that and went back to my office and used what used to be called Letraset letters. I pulled that together with a cigar that happened to be there, and used the little Os from the vinyl stickers as the eyeballs, used the glue stick caps as his eyes, and the fur as his hair, and that went on to become the co-host.

The character kept evolving and hosts kept changing, and Ed got more of the focus and the spotlight, and I enjoyed Ed because it was a fun thing to do. And then it just

caught on to the point where I kept reshaping the show and getting better co-hosts and reshaping it, evolving, basically based on my tastes. In the beginning, it was rather hard to follow because he was so irreverent. And going back and forth with pop-culture references and annoyances, it was very lightning fast.

The show was designed to be a kind of in-your-face alternative to traditional television in Canada at the time, which was very, very bland, very, very white bread. I found it was a lot of bullshit, and so it was designed to really upset the status quo. So, you're not supposed to say those things, or talk about those things, or do it in that way? Well, who says? Try and stop me.

It happened to catch on and went across the country nationally when I named the show *Ed's Night Party* and made it a late-night talk show with the late Eric Tunney as co-host.

FT: What do you think it is that made Ed so popular?

SK: Ed's strength is taking complex issues, boiling it down and expressing it in the vernacular of everyday Canadians, using — sometimes — pop-culture references as metaphors to help make people understand. And Liana was very heavily involved in making that happen. People always credit me because I was the creator and I was there from the start, but there was a very noticeable rise in Ed's popularity and power once Liana joined and was part of the decision making. She's sort of the unsung hero of what Ed has accomplished. She's gotten to the point now where she says, "Stop telling people that, because no one believes you." They think you're just going on about your wife.

That's also how I've uncovered some of the ways that

women are dismissed in our society, because people would assume that she was just there because she was my wife, not that she had anything to offer. Even after they worked with her — and I wasn't there, they worked with her only — there was still just this sexism. It really sensitized me to the expectations people have of women versus men. And that's sort of when Ed started to champion women. And it's a short step from there to championing gay rights.

Ed was championing gay rights on mainstream television before anyone else was doing it. Ed was saying that gay couples should be allowed to marry, should be allowed to adopt, because as Ed would say, "I know lots of heterosexual couples who shouldn't be allowed to adopt or even have natural children." So why should we be preventing gay people from being parents? There are so many kids out there who need loving homes.

And, again, short step to not having any patience for bigotry of any kind. I don't mind laughing at our differences because that reduces tension, but laughing because there are differences or laughing because someone is different, that's toxic. It's not just a joke — it helps to "other" people, it makes them less than.

FT: Do you think that would have been as powerful if you would have done it as yourself rather than through a sock?

SK: No, absolutely not. Ed is the power. You trust non-human creations more than you trust people, because there's an automatic reaction amongst people when somebody is criticizing you, which is, "Who the hell are you to criticize me?" Non-humans are observers. That's a strength. Ed has a distance from human beings, and yet, at the same

time, is very human in his responses.

Humour always works and — listen, when terrorists attacked in France, they didn't attack the newspapers. They didn't attack the TV news. They attacked a satire magazine. And why? Because comedy is more powerful than officials issuing condemnations. Because power comes from people being intimidated by you, people being scared of you. When you've been cut down to size by humour, by incisive, smart mockery, people are never as afraid of you as they were before. You never gain back that sense of authority, that sense of intimidations, because people remember the jokes about you that were fair jokes, fair criticisms.

Comedy is exceptionally powerful in taking down the mighty. Comedy has a tremendous power. Comedy is politics by other means.

FT: I read that in another interview you said, “If you come in with a closed mind, we're going to pry it open with a crowbar of humour.” Could you expand on that?

SK: Laughter humanizes, but it also bonds. If you are so much of a zealot about an issue that you say, “There's nothing funny about this,” you've lost perspective. There is nothing that humanizes a person like laughter.

Ed broke Lenny Kravitz once, famously. He'd been acting like an asshole all day at the MMVAs, refusing to rehearse because he didn't get the type of cookies that he demanded. He was just being a pain in the ass, he wouldn't do anything. For some reason he agreed to do an interview with Ed. There's this great video of him trying to hold his composure, and then he just broke and started laughing. A legitimate laugh.

And then in the corner — I didn't know he was there — Denzel Washington was there. Denzel started laughing and he knocked over a tray of glasses of water. And after that, Lenny Kravitz started co-operating completely, because you can't maintain that bullshit facade once someone's seen you're human, that you laugh too, and you laugh at the same things we do. That's what FU Network is all about.

FT: Tell me more about the FU Network.

SK: I created FU Network with Liana, the name being deliberately fun and provocative. FU Network is about retaining that core of classic MuchMusic — but not just about music, because music videos do not have the cultural currency they once did. And politics is the new rock 'n' roll. It's classic Ed.

FT: What do you mean by “politics is the new rock 'n' roll”?

SK: I mean that the things that energize young people, like music used to, is politics. And that's because music stopped speaking to people. Music stopped saying anything. Music was a conscience that was being expressed. It's not anymore. So what do people gravitate to now who are passionate about issues of conscience? Politics.

FT: It's obvious just in talking to you for a little bit that you're very proud of what you do, so I'm curious to hear what you are most proud of throughout your career.

SK: It comes to small moments. It's individuals telling you their stories and how you made a difference in their life in a positive way. It's being able to take the power that people

give you — because, let's face it, Ed's power comes from people liking Ed and trusting Ed — to take that power and use it to benefit people.

There is very little that makes me more angry than people who take power and use it against the people who gave it to them. It's a sacred trust. Being on television, being a media figure, that's a sacred trust. You are so lucky. That's why I'm so disgusted with Jian Ghomeshi, who used his influence and his power as a media person to take advantage of people in the workplace and elsewhere. Liana and I feel we owe it to them to return to them service.

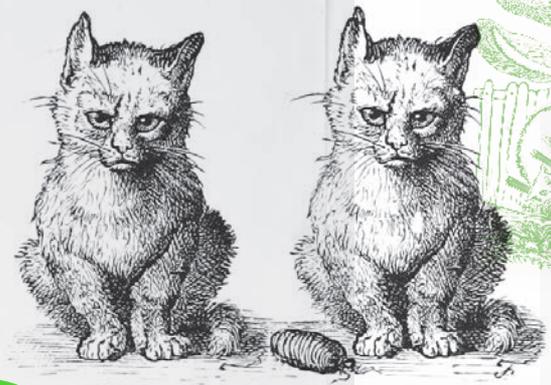
Ed speaks for the little guy, and I mean that gender neutrally. There's more little guys out there than there are people in power. Nobody shouts Ed down. Nobody wins in a battle of wits with Ed. And Ed is only about eight-and-a-half, nine inches tall, so he is a little guy.

Ed is the voice for the majority. But the majority has not had a voice for a very long time. And you might think that's a fairly deep thought for someone who puts a puppet on his hand and goes out and speaks in the vernacular and tells jokes that sometimes are a bit rough-hewed. It sounds oddly deep for somebody who does a sock puppet, but that sock puppet allows for Liana and I, and the people who work with us, to make the world a better place and speak up for people who have no voice. There is no greater trust and no greater privilege than being given that trust by people and using it to help them out.

FT: Do you think that Ed would have the same answer about using the power that people have given you to return voice and representation?

SK: Ed would say, “There are a lot of assholes out there — and they're very, very loud. But nobody is louder than me. And I speak for the people who aren't assholes, and I shout down the assholes. And I might do it in the same ways that assholes work, but it's in service of people who are being bullied and discriminated against, rather than in service of bullying them and discriminating against them. There are a lot of assholes out there and they need to be taken down. I went away for a decade and nobody stepped up. I thought I gave everybody tools through *MuchMusic* and *Fromage*. I thought I gave everybody the tools to be literate about media messaging, I thought it was okay to go away. I come back, and look what you've done with the place — it looks like the aftermath of a frat party. Everything is a mess, and in that time nobody stepped forward in the media to say the things I say, and say them without apologizing, and say them without fear. Nobody stepped up. If no one else is going to do it, it's time for me to do it again.” ◦

**THIS
IS
STILL
FINE.**



THE VILLAGE OF DUNG

By Habib Mohana

Illustrations by Jenna Pyle

The small, sleepy village was perched on the hill overlooking the purling creek that fed vineyards, wheat farms and vegetable plots. The residents of the village ate the wheat of their farms and drank the milk of their buffaloes. They spent the summer days under the shady trees, chit-chatting and singing songs. During winter nights the families sat around fires, snacked on roasted peanuts and avidly listened to the stories told by the elders.

One day a maniacally adventurous explorer stumbled upon the village. The long journey and the punishing sun had given him a deep tan complexion. *The sun was on the verge of sinking when I discovered the village, and it took my breath away at first sight*, he gleefully jotted in his dusty diary. The villagers accommodated him in the community centre and brought him food. He stayed for several weeks and made entries in his diary, first about the flora and fauna of the village, and then about the language, religion and ethnicity of the villagers. At night the villagers



gathered in the community centre and he regaled them with stories about the life of the city dwellers.

One night he said to them, “You’ve tons of milk. Why don’t you take it to the city and sell it?”

“You must be joking — the city people buy milk?” one farmer asked.

“No, I’m not joking — the city people buy and sell milk,” the explorer replied.

“Our ancestors strictly forbade us to sell milk,” the village chief said. “In our language, we have the same word for *light*, *eyesight* and *milk*. To sell milk is sacrilege in our culture.”

One morning while the explorer was doing his packing, he said again, “Milk sells in the city.”

The villagers stared at him in disbelief, so he said someone should accompany him to the city and see for himself. The villagers held a long meeting, and at last an intrepid man was readied with a small milk churn strapped to his back, and he accompanied the explorer into the city.

Some days later the man returned to the village. Men, women and children poured out of the houses to welcome him.

“Milk sells in the city,” he said, showing the villagers a handful of shiny coins.

On the second trip to the city, the intrepid man was accompanied by his cousin. On the third trip they went as three and designated themselves the village’s milk sellers. Before long the entire village was selling milk. Then came winter. During the cold nights, the villagers sat around fires and talked about the city, the money, the dearness and insecticides.

After some years, the city people ran a small freight train to the village to expedite the transferring of the milk. Sometimes the trains were stopped in their tracks and raided by savage bandits. So the city people built an underground pipeline to carry milk from the village to the city. In order to keep the bandits away from the milk pipeline, the village men were enlisted in the freshly minted Elite Milk Militia.

All was quiet and the milk continued to flow. But over time the city people began to suspect the villagers were diluting the milk with water. Experts from the city were quickly dispatched to the village to solve

the problem by permanently hooking the udders of the buffaloes to the milking machines. It proved a great solution for the city, as the machines never stopped sucking the milk, leaving nothing to chance and even less to the villagers.

Then one day the villagers started to complain. “Our babies don’t have milk to drink,” they said.

The city people replied by letter: *We’ll send you a truck full of white powder; mix it with water and give it to your children. This powder mix is far more refreshing and nourishing than the milk that comes from your dark, ugly beasts.*

The next day a truck full of bags of white powder trundled into the village. The villagers tore open the bags and emptied them into the pond on the outskirts of the village. They rolled up their trousers and waded into the pond to stir the water with their feet, spades and sticks. Soon they were standing in a chalky white mixture. Then the mothers brought their children to the pond to drink. But as night fell, tomcats, jackals and foxes gathered at the pond to lap the chalky white mixture, so the villagers hired a watchman to keep the wild animals away. And although the watchman succeeded in repelling the wild animals, his rifle was useless against the fish, frogs and crabs that lived in the milk pond.

Time kept speeding.

One day a written order came to the village by way of the city. *Feed pistachios to the buffaloes, give them rosewater to drink, don’t let them walk*, it read. *With walking, the buffaloes’ milk dries up.* The next morning, a truck brought a load of massive, custom-made padlocks to the village, along with more instructions for the villagers. *Secure the legs of the buffaloes with the padlocks*, the instructions read. And so the villagers did as they were told and locked the buffaloes into place.

Then, after some time, the city people issued another decree to the village, ordering the villagers to replace the old names of the buffaloes with modern names concocted in the city. The city veterinarians believed that the modern names would exert a pleasant effect on the brains of the buffaloes, which would produce a pleasant effect on their stomachs, which in turn would relax their mammary glands and thus raise



the buffaloes' milk production by 65.73 per cent.

The new names were applied. Then one morning a group of painters from the city descended upon the village and painted the buffaloes white, red and green. The next day, a courier delivered to the villagers a mechanical buffalo stud of improved variety for breeding purposes. The buffalo stud had the appearance of a grey langur, while its outside was covered with crimson velvet. Around its neck was a booklet, dangling on silk string. The booklet said that with the new stud, a new breed of buffaloes would come in green, purple, pink and beige, and the new breed would have rose bouquets instead of curvy black horns, and they would have golden silk tassels for tails.

The new stud could not tell when a buffalo cow was in estrus — it was only fond of mounting. After mounting a cow, the stud would doze off and remain in that position for days. When a buffalo was not available, it mounted a donkey, a tree, a wall or a heap of manure.

One day the city people saw from their long-range surveillance cameras that the village was sinking into animal excrement. This was alarming to the experts in the city, who concluded that bacteria from the excrement posed a grave threat to the milk. So they concocted a plan to hoist all the buffaloes high in the air over the village with crawler cranes. Lifted away from the growing piles of excrement, the buffaloes instead blocked the sun from reaching the village. When the wind blew, they swung back and forth like inflated balloons and would sometimes become entangled. When the quadrupeds defecated, the village was blitzed by poo bombs, and the villagers would push their children under beds or tables.

In a few months the buffaloes had shrivelled into skin-covered skeletons, and they were so low on energy that they could not even moo. But sometimes they managed to turn their bleary eyes to the verdant pastures where once upon a time they had leisurely cropped the wild grasses while the birds chirped and flitted in the nearby trees.

Time kept speeding.

As the years passed, the buffaloes produced more shit and less milk, and the village again began to sink into manure. Then one day the buffaloes stopped producing milk altogether, and so the milking machines started sucking their blood. But the city's food experts were ready, for when the blood reached the city, they mixed it with a wonder chemical that turned it into synthetic milk.

Then, after a very long time, the buffaloes stopped yielding blood, and the city people forgot about the village.



A century later, a fearless adventurer from the city set out on a great journey of exploration. He ventured into the wilderness and wandered freely. One day he stopped to take a leak on a tree and heard low voices coming from a nearby dung hill. He poked his walking stick into the mound of excrement. Then he squeezed into a narrow pathway and entered the heap of feces.

What he found within enthralled him: bean-sized buffaloes grazing on minuscule mushrooms, ant-sized men and women chatting and doing their chores, and rye-sized children playing marbles made from dung. The adventurer scribbled down the time and date of the discovery in his soiled diary. When he returned to the city, he told the newspapers and TV and radio stations of this newly discovered village.

Soon archeologists, economists, philosophers, poets, anthropologists and sundry scientists descended on the village. They gazed with fascination at the tiny creatures crawling around in the dung hill. The visitors' skulls were bursting with ideas about what they could do with what they could see. They returned to the city and published bulky books and theses with their theories of how the humans and buffaloes of the village could have shrunk.

HE GINGERLY INSERTED HIS RIGHT INDEX FINGER INTO THE PILE OF ANIMAL WASTE, COLLECTING A GREAT NUMBER OF MEN, WOMEN, CHILDREN AND BUFFALOES ON HIS FINGER.

The village was soon designated a city heritage site. The international media complained that the country where the village of shrunken creatures was located was ill-equipped to protect the site. World leaders lashed out at the country's rulers: "You daft idiots, you aren't doing enough to save this marvel of nature from the harsh climate. If you're strapped for cash we'll give money. If you lack expertise we'll provide expertise."

A palatial white building with a lofty dome was erected in the heart of the city, and the newly discovered village was dug up and transported to the site. The facade of the building carried the bold caption The Village of Dung.

Tourists from every nook and cranny of the globe came in enormous numbers for the opening of the Village of Dung. "You people are so

lucky that you've inherited the Village of Dung," the tourists said as they made their way to the great white dome, lit by thousands of lights. The building's white marble floor shone as if it were made of diamonds.

The curator of the Village of Dung — a portly little man in a blue safari outfit — scurried into the building, followed by a swarm of tourists, students and researchers. He delivered a short lecture on the history of the village. Then he turned a key and opened the glass door.

"Today the weather is friendly, so we can open the door of the Village of Dung," the curator said over half-moon spectacles as the visitors held their breath. "It is awfully fragile, you know."

He gingerly inserted his right index finger into the pile of animal waste, collecting a great number of men, women, children and buffaloes on his finger, which he held before the gawking visitors.

"This is the essence of creation," he proclaimed. "Can any other civilization show us something like this?" He kissed the tiny creatures crawling on his finger. "I've dedicated my entire life to them. They're my children — or rather, I'm their child. Amazing!"

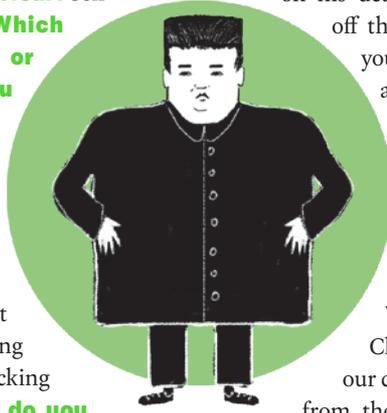
He kissed them again as tears filled his puffy piggy eyes. ◦

— PROUST QUESTIONNAIRE —

KIM JONG-UN

Dear Respected, Great Successor, Supreme Leader of North Korea and the Chairman of the Workers' Party of Korea

What is your idea of perfect happiness? Synchronized swimming in the pool with my ladies. **What is your greatest fear?** Self-decapitation. **Which person, living or dead, do you most admire?** Mr. Bojangles. **On what occasion do you lie?** I don't lie — others lie and they are shot in front of a firing squad while plucking chickens. **What do you most dislike about your appearance?** The squareness of my body — and of course my sunken nipples. **What or who is the greatest love of your life?** I'm still looking for love. I do love tap dancing, though. **When and where were you happiest?** Jamming with Kid Rock, surfing at Venice Beach and go-karting with Yoko and my generals. **What three people, dead or alive, would you like to share dinner with?** I'm rather fond of the dead. Propped up at my dinner ta-



ble you would find Michael Jackson, whose last words were, "It was the chicken," Benito Mussolini, who on his deathbed said, "Get off the breathing tube, you sick bastards," and lastly, my dear, dear Elvis, whose final words still bring tears down my legs: "I'm going to the bathroom to read." We would eat Chinese — without our clothes — and sing from the Elvis songbook.

What is your greatest regret? Rejecting Dennis Rodman's offer of marriage (we would have had tall, chubby, somewhat illiterate children with size 16 feet) and refusing to play the female lead in *Octopussy* opposite Roger Moore. They wanted me to go to Hollywood and wear fishnet stockings, which had some appeal, but I was grieving the loss of my horse Champion, may he neigh in hay. **How would you like to die?** On stage with the cast of *Hamilton*. ◦



**KEEP YOUR DOG
SMELLING PINE FRESH**

By Kenzi Inouye

BY DAVID MILLEN; ILLUSTRATION BY KARAPYLE

A FIELD STUDY

By Mitchell Gunn

It defies taxonomy,
slithers through the lacunae
of our zoological knowledge.
It ate Darwin for breakfast,
alongside Defoe and Díaz,
Dickens, Doerr and Dostoevsky ready
for lunch. Only a couple days
and we're already almost on to *E*.

Plump and feathery,
iridescent purple,
at least two metres
in height and length,
much greater in wingspan.
Quite a time finding a big enough cage.
Eight limbs terminate
in palmated paws,
each of them three-toed
with hooked talons.
Thick nictitating membranes.
Veiny musculature.
Sketches appended.

At feeding times,
its maw splits into an eager grin,
each tooth a thick tome
yellow as vellum
and glossed with saliva,
then a pulsing gullet
slick and glistening.
I toss in another volume —
hard-bound, anniversary edition,
lengthy introduction.
Its jaws snap shut,
molars gnash, incisors mangle.
The spine cracks like a dead tree branch.

Minutes later it regurgitates
the gizzard-churned mass.
Occasionally
I can still make out
a line, a paragraph,
or, rarer still,
the author's name.

CONTRIBUTORS

Maria José Arias is a Colombian-born art director and illustrator based in Toronto. She enjoys working with bold colours and patterns, and seeks to bring the brightness of her hometown to her work.

Karam Bajwa is an illustrator and software developer. He likes keeping the TV volume at even numbers and dislikes it when midway through using urinal facilities the auto-flush comes on in full force.

Marta Balcewicz's writing has appeared in *Catapult*, *Tin House*, *The Malahat Review* and elsewhere. She lives in Toronto and is the fiction editor at *Minola Review*.

Sarah Barmak is a freelance journalist and author of the 2016 book *Closer* (Coach House Books), which was recently translated into French as the enjoyably titled *Jouir: en quête de l'orgasme féminin*. She lives in Toronto with her husband and child.

Erin Clark is an Ontario-based illustrator who grew up on a tiny island in the Atlantic Ocean. She graduated in 2020 with a BAA from Sheridan College. Erin is passionate about pencil crayons, macramé plant hangers, novelty mugs, cargo pants, gouache, astrology and turtlenecks.

Laura Clarke is the author of *Decline of the Animal Kingdom* (ECW Press), which was named a top book of 2015 by *The Globe and Mail* and the *National Post*. Her writing has been published in *Hazlitt*, *PRISM international*, *The Antigonish Review*, *Grain*, *Prairie Fire* and *The Puritan*.

Mykah Czarina is a creative born in the Philippines who now resides in Toronto. She is continuously exploring illustration, painting and singing to wield their power in expression. Inspired by womanhood, immigrants and survivors, she hopes her work will resonate with people who can relate.

Jonathan Danielson lives in Arizona, where he is studying to become a doctor, but not one who can read an X-ray or actually help anyone.

Tu Anh Dinh is not allergic to peanuts. She once dated a lighthouse keeper and it was less interesting than you'd imagine. In her roaring twenties, Tu Anh worked in children's publishing and teaching. These days she creates content for an EdTech startup and uses her commanding teacher voice to order menu items with great alacrity. She lives in New York City.

Charlit Floriano is an artist and 3-D animator from Barrie, Ontario. She received a BA in illustration from Sheridan College and works in children's animation, illustration and comics.

Mitchell Gunn is a writer and PhD student at the University of Toronto, where he studies forms of interactivity in contemporary literature as an elaborate excuse to play video games. His work has appeared in *7 Mondays*, *The Feathertale Review*, *Echolocation*, the *Hart House Review* and is forthcoming in *The Lamp*.

KC Hoard is a Toronto-based journalist who has written for *The Globe and Mail*, *Maclean's*, *Broadview* and the *National Post*. He was named Canada's biggest Carly Rae Jepsen stan by CBC Arts in 2019 (and hasn't shut up about it since).

Kenzi Inouye is an illustrator based in Toronto. Her practice includes painting, ceramics and embroidery. Her work is centred around her sense of humour and love for dad puns.

Wenting Li is an illustrator, muralist and comics artist working in Toronto. You can find her with her head in a book, or constantly swivelled over her shoulder.

Grace McGrenere is a recent graduate of Carleton University's journalism school. Bedtime stories with her parents inspired her interest in reading and writing. She hopes to someday write a reboot of *The Vampire Diaries*, a series she has watched at least four times.

David Millen writes weird emails to Feathertale editors that sometimes make just enough sense to merit publication. He lives among elderly people in Ottawa.

CONTRIBUTORS

Habib Mohana was born in Daraban Kalan, Pakistan. He is an assistant professor of English at a government college. Habib writes fiction in English, Urdu and his mother tongue of Saraiki. His short stories in English have appeared in literary journals in Canada, China, India, South Africa, the UK and the US.

Jacob Pacey is a National Magazine Award-winning humour writer and advertising copywriter. His work has appeared in *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *The Feathertale Review*, *The Walrus* and others.

Natalie Pressman is a journalist in Yellowknife who is just doing her dang best.

Jenna Pyle has spent the pandemic successfully binge-watching full seasons of shows that she previously had no interest in viewing. She has no recommendations for any at this time.

Greg Santos is a lifelong potato chip and pro wrestling aficionado. He is the editor-in-chief of *carte blanche* and lives in Tiohtià:ke/Montreal with his wife and two children. His latest book is *Ghost Face* (DC Books).

Jess Taylor is a Tkaronto/Toronto writer and poet. Her second collection, *Just Pervs* (Book*hug Press), was named a finalist for the 2020 Lambda Literary Award in Bisexual Fiction. A short story from that collection, "Two Sex Addicts Fall in Love," was longlisted for the Journey Prize and included in *The Journey Prize Stories 30*.

Michelle Theodore is an illustrator and comics artist from the Prairies with too many cavities and too many dead Tamagotchis.

DJ Tyrer is the person behind Atlantean Publishing whose writing has appeared in *California Quarterly*, *Haiku Journal*, *Tigershark*, *Atlas Poetica*, *Poetry Pacific* and *Scarlet Leaf Review*.

François Vigneault is a Montreal-based cartoonist and illustrator. His science-fiction graphic novel *Titan* was recently released in English by Oni Press. It features lots of tiny drawings of music album covers.

Linda Yan is an award-winning illustrator based in Canada. She enjoys drawing cute animals and little creatures. On her off times, you can find her on the toilet pooping or raiding the fridge.

THE COLLAGES

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PAGES 14-15:

1. John Ashton, *Humour, Wit, & Satire of the Seventeenth Century, collected and illustrated by J. Ashton*. L.P (London: Chatto & Windus, 1883), 184.
2. *Bestiary* — caption: Owl mobbed by smaller birds (England (Salisbury?) 1230-1240).
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8. *Spring-heel'd Jack: the Terror of London. A romance of the nineteenth century, by the author of the 'Confederate's Daughter' . . . Illustrated, etc* (London, 1867), 101

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9. J. Briois, *Untitled* — caption: Bay Owl (Bencoolen, Sumatra, c. 1824).
10. *Cruel Fred and other funny stories [in verse] and pictures* (Edinburgh, 1855), 15.
11. James Freyberg, *Un-natural history not taught in bored schools, etc* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, 1883), 8.
12. *Funny Books for Boys and Girls. Struwelpeter. Good-for-nothing Boys and Girls. Troublesome Children. King Nutcracker and Poor Reinhold* (London: David Bogue, 1856), 16.
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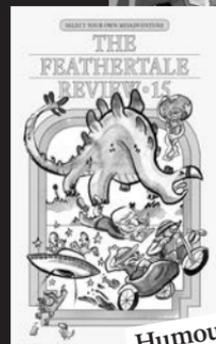


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