

[the shorts]



jenn topper

These are short, short stories. You may explore a variety of emotions while reading them. Brace yourself.

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Maggie & May

(Excerpt from upcoming novel, Maggie & May)

By Jenn Topper

Tits hanging out and her skirt hiked up, the emaciated, bloodied hooker stumbled through the door into Bobby Collins' bar on 44th Street and 8th Avenue at about 1am. One tank top strap was torn and swinging freely, leaving open her neckline's conspicuous strangle marks. The hair across her forehead was crusted to the dried blood, it was hard to even see where the wound was. Beneath her busted lip was a glaring omission of teeth. Collins had seen its share of beat-up hookers, skanks, pimps, hustlers, losers, and shady folks; situated right off Times Square there was at least two generations of low-lives who called this joint home. But everyone in the bar, glassy-eyed and tired, stopped their drunken, pointless conversations and stared at this horrendous trainwreck, who stood in the middle of the room holding a tiny, packed purse, a half-smoked cigarette, and a can of beer. In the moments before anyone took action, it wasn't immediately apparent if she would collapse. Her limp was either attributable to whatever beatdown she just incurred, or the broken heel on her pump.

"What the fuck do we do with this now?" Eddie the barman asked Maggie, not even bothering to whisper.

"Oh for the love of Christ, Ed, can't you get her the fuck outta here," she responded, not even looking up.

The silence in the bar was stunning. Here was a place filled with alcoholics whose voices became so loud by this point of drunkenness that their scratchy, nasaly voices all sounded the same, one outdoing the next with fantastic feats of self-delusion. And the sight of her made them all pretty much stop. It was this silence which Maggie felt the need to respond to, not the vision of this horrifying victim of the streets.

"Maggie, holy Christ, Maggie I think it's your sister," Ed said, this time whispering and leaning over the bar to Maggie, who was tabulating something with a stack of papers, envelopes and a calculator.

Maggie looked over at the woman, who was doing the crack dance and about to nod out right there on her feet. She glanced over at the woman for a moment and then looked back at her papers. Maggie then looked up, took a sip of coffee, and clinked the cup back on the saucer jolting everyone in the bar in a statement that was louder than any words her lungs could have shouted.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph, May, that's not you, right? You're not my May, right?" Maggie said in a quivering voice, looking straight ahead, not even in the direction of the crumbling woman.

A man seated by the window put his drink down and walked over to the woman, and caught her under her arm just in time before she would have fallen on her face. An older woman tip-toed over and put her cigarette in her mouth, then adjusted the hooker's tank top to cover her up, and pulled her skirt down, pulling harder than the skirt would allow, as if covering up the bruises and cuts

would make them go away. She looked as if she would do more adjusting and cleaning up, but the cigarette smoke was getting in her eye so she needed to take a drag and step away.

“Give her this, clean her up a little, get her on a chair,” Eddie said as he handed a damp cloth to someone sober enough to grasp onto it. The volunteer helped the other man drag the woman over to the banquette where a couple of regulars reluctantly slid over and moved their pitcher off the table.

As they clumsily plunked her down on the banquette, her legs splayed and her skirt rode up again to her hips, revealing a sight that everyone evaded. Maggie walked over with her hand over her mouth and took the cloth from the stranger and dabbed it on May’s forehead and around her face, as she mindlessly closed her sister’s legs and pulled a jacket over them that was strewn on a table.

“What in the name of God have you done, now, May,” Maggie recited as she worked on her messed up sister.

Someone said to call 911.

“It’s not necessary. She’ll be alright. It’s not necessary. You can all go back to what you’re doing, now. Thank you,” Maggie said with a distraction on her hands bigger than she’d dealt with in years.

Eddie came over with another damp cloth and some towels and a pot of tea.

“These rags stink like beer, Eddie, can’t you find a clean one?”

The irony of her statement was saturated in sadness.

“Honey I’m at the end of my rope with you. Four years go by and this is how you come back to me,” Maggie said as she dabbed at May’s cuts and scrubbed away the crusted blood and dirt.

“She smells like piss,” the older woman croaked, taking a sip of whiskey before walking away back to her spot at the bar.

“Thanks, thanks a lot for that, Carol, I’ll be sure to mention something complimentary about you when they haul you out of the gutter, you old hag,” Maggie retorted.

“There’s a way to treat your customers,” the old woman’s companion snapped back.

“You’re not my goddamned customers, you’re my dead husband’s customers. You think I like spending my days and nights at this decrepit hellhole with you?” Maggie was known as the crabby, abrasive owner of Collins Bar, ever since her husband died after an attempted robbery two years ago. He wasn’t killed by the fake guns that the junkies used to hold up the place. Rather, he had a massive heart attack when they trashed everything and cracked the mirror behind the 100-year old bar. Maggie’s 44 years were constitutionally longer and harder than most, but not more than her 38 year old sister, May, whose life as a whore and a junkie belied her years. They both looked over 50.

Eddie was back behind the bar already resuming his role. A few loomers hovered behind Maggie as she emptied the contents of May's purse on the table. As she opened her sister's cellphone, it fell apart in her hands. Maggie huffed. Condoms, lipstick, some crumbled papers, a pen with what looked like blood on it, two hair clips, matches, and a locket without the necklace containing a photo of the sisters as young girls and their mother. There were no keys in the purse. Doesn't everyone have a key, either to a car or an apartment?

Time stood still for Maggie as she sat there and watched her sister sleep. She held the locket in her hand and sipped the tea that Eddie made for her. She got up and pulled a bottle of whiskey off the shelf of the bar and poured some in the tea and sat down again. Maggie methodically replaced all the contents of May's bag back into the cheap, tiny purse, realizing that the zipper was busted anyway so it wasn't going to close even with fewer items. She picked up one of May's hands and inspected it, not taking much care because she knew that gentleness wouldn't matter to a passed out junkie. She scrubbed May's hand scrupulously, in between the fingers, top and bottom, and the nails. She put the limp hand down and went behind the bar and returned with a nail kit. Maggie put on her glasses, hanging from a chain around her neck at all times, and went to work on May's nail, scrubbing the dirt from around the cuticles and underneath. She clipped and filed where necessary. Then she moved on to May's hair, which was knotted around a clip.

"A rat's nest. May, you're a hooker and you're supposed to look appealing. Your hair, May, your beautiful hair," Maggie moaned. As she tried to move her sister's head to the side to comb it through, she noticed a bloody, crusty patch where May's hair had been torn from her head.

"Oh dear God, May, what did they do to you?" and finally, Maggie broke down in tears that hadn't rolled down her cheeks since she, herself, had been dragged by the hair as a 13-year old girl across this same bar by their father.

She waited an eternity for her sister to come to but kept busy bathing, grooming, and attending to her sister. Eddie closed out the bar as he usually does, but didn't turn on the music like he usually does. The silence that caught Maggie's attention earlier in the night now served as the short bit of serenity she would savor until May woke up.

The Fucking Dress

By Jenn Topper

The team came back from the HR Retreat in the mountains with no more or less motivation than they had started with before the trip. It was an expensive one, but something that the department was entitled to, Barbara thought. She decided that instead of small bonuses, that the team would appreciate, well, some team-building. Barbara doesn't spend much time or energy outside the office, so she doesn't realize that no one gives a shit about the team-building and spirit-pumping that a corporate department retreat would provide. She thinks everyone should be putting in as many hours in the office as she, because what else could possibly be more interesting than human resources for a mid-sized insurance company in Pittsburgh? Her team really hates her, but no one comes to work with anything but apathy so the hate really doesn't translate well. There's no office drama like in the movies. There's no office humor, like on TV. Just an office, with an especially despised HR department and Barbara, the director, at the helm, promoting really boring, unimportant, waste of time paper pushing stuff.

Barbara knew better. She wasn't kidding herself; she was just playing a role she felt she needed to play. It gave her meaning and definition. The identity that she couldn't develop on her own was constructed for her by the job, and nothing else.

The role she really liked was the one I made her play. I feel a little bad about it now, but it makes a good story and I think I did change her life a little. It started when her employees—her team—bought her some language lessons as a Christmas gift. She didn't get around to making an appointment until June. I'm a graduate student getting my PhD in Economics and I teach Spanish on the side until my fellowship kicks in next year.

I came to her apartment a few minutes early. She melted a little bit when she saw me but she disguised it by acting surprised to see me. But my first impression of her was sterling: 50-ish and hefty, football-helmet haircut that aged her by 10 years at least, overly made up probably hiding a nasty complexion, support hose, and hadn't been fucked in years—probably ever.

She couldn't make eye contact. She was blushing and started to perspire when we sat down at her glass dinette table. It's filthy when someone heavy with a half-inch of bad makeup starts to sweat. I could smell her perfume mixed with her nervous sweat. In there somewhere were some pheromones—that I could sense easily, it's the first place I stop. Oh, Barbara, you are going to be in for a good one. But I'll make you beg, first.

She was totally incompetent at learning languages, which was all the better so I could weaken her artificially constructed patina of superlady HR director. Hers was harder to penetrate than others'. She was totally alone and her employees couldn't stand her—but she just didn't care. We talked more about her job than we did about learning Spanish, because I like when people trust me so I listen to them.

I acted interested in human resources, though I really couldn't understand even after hours and hours of discussion what the hell the purpose was. Seems to me like a black hole in corporations,

but I've never worked in one so I can't judge. All I knew now was that HR was her life, and she had nothing else.

But she liked me. She really liked me. After that first afternoon, she signed up for weekly classes for the rest of the year. Each Tuesday night at 7pm I would ring the buzzer outside her apartment. I could hear her footsteps even on the heavy carpeting inside, and she would wait a moment or two before opening the door. It was funny that she didn't realize I could hear her breathing on the other side of the door—she was catching her breath. I could almost feel her heart beating through the door.

She would swat the cat away and welcome me in. By the second lesson I leaned in to greet her with a traditional Spanish double cheek kiss, which caught her off guard completely. She had a silly smile when she was flirting. She had absolutely no control over herself at some points. She would giggle uncontrollably to the point where tears would start streaming and her pudgy fingers would rush to contain the black eye makeup gushing down her face. I would lean back and smile, wink occasionally.

One night I brought some wine. I told her it was authentic Rioja from Spain. I bought it at the market down the street, but she didn't seem to know any better. I let her drink most of it while I nursed a glass. After a glass or two she was exactly who I thought she would be.

After a few weeks I noticed things in the apartment changing. The shades weren't drawn, there were fresh flowers on the table, the catbox wasn't in the middle of the living room. She was also losing some weight. In the corner of the room I could see a stack of exercise videos and a rolled up yoga mat.

By the middle of the summer we started taking our "lessons" on the patio of her apartment, leaning our chairs back and looking at the darkening sky, clutching our wine glasses. I noted to her that she was looking thinner. She blushed and said she was on a heavy duty diet for health reasons. I said she looked beautiful, why change.

I thought this was a completely over-the-top and contrived comment that she wouldn't buy, but she didn't call me out on it. Instead, she started to cry. She said no one had ever called her beautiful. This is where I wanted to jump off the fucking deck and never come back. But I started this, I'm going to finish it with a bang.

I took a two week break to get my thesis together and get back to see my family in Spain. I vowed to keep the lessons going with Barbara until I absolutely couldn't take any more. I returned to her apartment and when she answered the door I waited for the delay but she opened the door immediately. She must have starved herself because it looked like she dropped 20 pounds. She went to the tanning booth, her hair was looser and not all poofed out. She looked relaxed, but I saw she had already opened a bottle of wine. This was going to be a different kind of lesson, I thought to myself, wanting to laugh at the stupid irony. I should be writing pulp instead of studying Economics, I thought.

It was a stunning dress she had on, truly. I hadn't seen her cleavage before, but someone dressed her up well in this. While she was still on the porky side and her upper arms dangled like mush, the dress suited her and she knew it. When she turned around to head to the patio, I noticed the dress still had a tag on the back, so my guess about her being dressed by the private shopper was correct. I complimented her. She noted that she just got it on the way home from work. I suggested that we go out for dinner, spend some time out of the apartment, and celebrate my fellowship. She was delighted. I don't think she had ever been on a date. I wanted her to feel like this was a date.

Drinks and tapas, Latin music club, late dinner, more drinks and a long walk by the river holding large cups of sangria and she was putty. We returned to her apartment. She said I've tantalized her all summer and that she'd dressed up for me. This was the moment. It took her months to get the courage and self-confidence to say those words. It took her months to shed the HR director lady veneer and emerge as a person—a sexual, living, breathing, woman.

I couldn't go through with it. I froze. I trembled. I led her to this point and I never had any intention of fucking her. It was mean and cruel at first, but then I realized that she was changing and improving herself, so I let it continue. I had nothing to lose.

But then I excused myself from the apartment, acting embarrassed and confused.

I heard a glass break as I jogged down the stairs. I turned to go back upstairs, but I knew I shouldn't. I walked around the back of the apartment complex to see if I could catch a glimpse of her one last time. I had a clear view right into the apartment and the patio. She had one arm arched reaching to her back and the other arm reaching behind her. I couldn't tell what she was doing—looked like yoga at first.

Then I realized: she was trying to unzip the dress. She fussed and turned and reversed arms. First both arms reaching to the back. Then just one arm. She tried pulling the dress up over her but she couldn't get it over her waist. She stomped and wrangled. The image reminded me of a calf captured in a rodeo. Then she started wriggling violently. Her hair came out of her clip and large, unruly wisps stuck to her face. She was getting entirely too worked up over this dress. But then again, I've never had to try to take off a dress with a tiny zipper between my shoulders.

Come to think of it, how is she going to get out of that dress? How does any single woman get a dress like that off? Her loneliness was underscored by this desperate scene. It made me sad.

I stood there in the shadow feeling very uncomfortable. I can't leave—this is too engrossing to watch. I can't go up there again or else she'll know I was watching. There was no movement for a few minutes, and then the lights went out. Maybe she got the dress off. Maybe she just passed out.

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My Drunk, Dead Cousin

By Jenn Topper

He was my oldest cousin, by about 10 or 11 years. He was the first one to show me the Clash box set. He showed me movie posters from the 1950s. He loved old horror flicks, especially with Bela Lugosi. He collected horror film masks and I was enthralled. I was too young for him to really talk to me, but when he did I was over the moon because he was so interesting. His character was especially unique, since his household wasn't especially creative. Strictly working class and provincial, my cousin's family was an eastern Long Island stalwart—where a trip to Manhattan was an earth-shattering affair. He would illustrate beautifully. He could talk about classic movies forever. He was an encyclopedia of rock music.

He dared go to college. It didn't work out after a couple of years. We later figured out that his partying was more than just college guy partying. He hit the sauce hard. So he got a sales job in Manhattan and an apartment. From what we knew he was living large. Our family moved abroad for a couple of years, snobs and elitists that we were, so we didn't hear many details except on the once-per-year home leave trip we were awarded. Squeezing all the details of life into that short time was impossible, since there was also so much bullshit to pile on.

He liked to drink. Some of his best stories—and they were great stories—involved drinking somewhere. He had such a knack for telling stories, it didn't matter if they were self-destructive tales, we were all entertained and he enjoyed telling. Though the behavior got kind of trite, year after year at the holiday gatherings, with his drunkenness. But he was really no worse than his sister or father, at least on the surface. But apparently the drinking got bad enough that it was deemed best for him to move out of Manhattan and perhaps with his grandfather in Arizona. And that's all we knew.

Grandpa was a raging alcoholic, himself, so I'm still not sure what the thinking was behind the move out west. I was in college by this point, so on occasional phone calls with him I learned that he was in so much trouble that he was going to prison. Drunk driving? I didn't know enough to ask the right questions. He was on a work-release program, where he was allowed to attend his job, but then had to return to jail on nights and weekends. Then the job petered out—how could it have not?

Years went by and I got my own apartment in Manhattan. One Easter hosted at my parents' house, he came back and the whole extended family enjoyed a reunion. We caught up, talked about movies mostly, and he thought it would be great if he came back to the city with me and my boyfriend. Great, I said, it'll be fun. We'll go out, he'll stay over and take the train back in the morning.

So we all hit the bars that night. Oddly, he kept leaving the bar and walking around outside, clamoring, he said, for New York City air. He hadn't been back in so long and he missed it so. It was getting late, so we're going to head back to the apartment. No, he said, he's going to stick around a while and walk around the village. I gave him a key, reminded him where we live, and we went our separate ways. My boyfriend and I ran into some friends and had one more drink, then onto pizza, some laughs and a slow walk back home.

He was back at the apartment passed out on the couch. On the kitchen table was a roll of tin foil and some matches. Holy shit, my cousin just smoked some goddamned drugs in my place.

Stunned, disappointed, and shaken, I crawled into bed and shuddered all night.

I never mentioned it to him. If he wanted to think I was stupid enough to fall for whatever gimmick he used to explain away the foil and matches, what purpose was it for me to change his thinking. I realized at that point he had been so far gone for so long that nothing I could say or do would make any difference. Now all the disparate details about his life started to make sense. Of course, an addict would do that, I thought.

We only saw him sporadically from then on, and my mother and her sister didn't exactly share a warm relationship, so the family get-togethers at holidays were getting squeezed out by lame excuses about traffic.

Saw him years later at another cousin's wedding. He was a fucking mess. Crying all over the place, wildly overweight, and slobbering. He moved back to Long Island and was living in my aunt's house. He was working as a golf pro, for the time being. He lost his driver's license permanently. No girlfriend or wife. It's not like he was a tormented artist—he never even gave himself an opportunity to get there. He got fucked up on drugs and alcohol before he even had a chance.

A couple years later he was at my grandmother's wake. His state was worse, and he had aged so much he was unrecognizable. He didn't show up for the funeral; no one knew where he was.

He felt things intensely—that was something we shared in common. I remember when our grandfather died, I was about 15. We were all totally devastated by my grandfather's death—he was the greatest. I was standing in my aunt's kitchen, and he quietly walked in and stood against the counter adjacent to where my aunt was emptying the dishwasher. In a flash, he tore the top drawer of the dishwasher out of the machine and hurled it across the kitchen, with glass shattering everywhere.

I heard that my uncle was a violent guy; or at least beat up on my cousin emotionally. Apparently he was a real bully and took it out on my cousin. I don't know. I hadn't spoken to him in the last 2 years, since his father died and he called me for hours at a time. I listened to him talk and said very little.

Last week he had just come out of rehab, again after countless attempts, this time for 22 days, but his neuropathy was so painful he continued to drink once he got back to my aunt's house. I guess he had no job either. He was hopeless and in agony. He passed out on the couch watching TV. My aunt couldn't seem to wake him up to get him to go upstairs to bed. She got Nancy, my other cousin, to try to rouse him but he would just open his eyes a little and go back to snoring. A few minutes went by and they heard a gurgling noise and then silence. They rushed back in the room. Nancy said he was grey. She shouted at my aunt to get out of the house and run next door; the neighbor was a cop. Nancy called 911 and they talked her through CPR, after she tried clearing his throat. He was dying. She tried to revive her brother, riddled with drugs and alcohol and depression for so many years. The EMTs arrived and worked on him for 40 minutes. He was dead on arrival at the hospital.

Last Saturday my cousin died of a massive heart attack. He was 49.

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The First Interview: Mo

(Excerpt from forthcoming full length novel Getting the Old Gang Back Together)

By Jenn Topper

I thought I would start with Mo, anyway, since he seemed to be the mystery that everyone was really interested in; and from how my dad describes him, he was really the smartest out of the gang, so his perspective on Howie is probably the most interesting. I'm trying not to project and turn this into fiction, but I want to make a brutally honest and comprehensive account of Howard Kessler—through the eyes of his childhood friends—as I can.

Mo is also the one that no one knows how to get in touch with.

One phone call to a friend at the D.A.'s office and I had a couple of phone numbers and a work address. I drove out to Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn on a sunny Thursday morning. I had never been there. Dad was never interested in taking us back to where he grew up, and having spent my formative years in Bergen County, I didn't make it to Brooklyn with the exception of the hipster clubs in Williamsburg and frou frou restaurants on Smith Street in Carroll Gardens...another world away from Brighton Beach, Bensonhurst, Coney Island and Sheepshead Bay.

Mo's work address listed a large health club. It is a freestanding building right off Emmons Avenue with a huge yellow neon sign, and floor-to-ceiling windows on its three floors. I walked in and asked the receptionist where I can find Mo. She looked at me like I had ten heads.

"Does he work here anymore?" I asked.

"I don't know what you mean—he doesn't work here, he owns here. He doesn't come in probably next week though."

"Can you tell me where I can find him now?"

"That bad, huh? I can give you a cell number, I can't tell you where he is though. He's usually good about answering his messages."

As she was writing down the number on a card, I couldn't figure out what she meant by her comment. Sometimes people just say weird things so I didn't think about it much. But it was something to catalogue for when I do meet him.

It was a different number than the two I had from the D.A.'s office. As I exited the building and walked to my car, a thin woman in spandex pants and matching jacket called to me.

"You're looking to find Mo?"

“Yes, that’d be great.”

“Who are you?”

“I’m just the daughter of an old friend of his and was hoping to speak with him about some news,” I answered, not thinking that what I was doing could have been construed as illicit in any way.

“If you go out to the harbor, past the charter boats, you’ll see a couple of house boats. The one with the blue and white flag is Mo’s.”

“Really? A boat? That’s great—thanks so much, I really appreciate it. Can I tell him you gave me the info?”

“Please don’t do that, I’m not on his favorites list right now.”

I didn’t delve further, even though I wanted to, I wasn’t writing a story about Mo, I was writing a piece about Howard and needed Mo’s experience and perspective. But there were certainly enough details already that made me think I’m writing the wrong story.

I kept the car where it was and walked through the damp morning air to the harbor. I found the boat that the woman had mentioned, but I had no idea how to board it. There was no doorbell or anything, and it was just attached by a couple of ropes. I stood there for a few minutes wondering if I should just jump on.

As I walked closer to gauge the distance of the jump, I saw someone walking around inside through the windows. I stepped back a moment to watch him. This has to be Mo. He has his shirt off and is holding a cigarette and a take-out cup of coffee in one hand and his phone to his ear in the other. He looks pissed. I can’t hear anything because of the water slapping against the boats and the pier and the wind across the harbor. In his animation yelling into the phone, he spills his coffee and fumbles with the cigarette, the now half-empty cup, and the phone, still arguing verbally and physically.

I stood and watched for a few more moments just voyeuristically without having any intention of boarding the boat to speak with him at this point. I’ll come back. I turned to walk back to the car. A few steps down the pier someone grabbed my arm and swung me around. I didn’t even hear him coming.

“What are you doing here?”

It was Mo, presumably. What the hell am I getting into? There isn’t a soul in sight. I don’t know this guy. He could be a fucking murderer, and may have been one back when my dad knew him. My heart raced and I had trouble spitting out the simple words that I needed to in order to defuse the situation.

His grip was tighter on my arm and he raised his voice. “Who are you? You better be fucking lost, girlie.”

I took a deep breath. “My name is Jessica Plotkin. You knew my father, Karol, I think—are you Mo?” I said feebly. I am unused to being scared. I haven’t been one of those journalists on the front of a warzone, and my exposes haven’t exactly probed into the underworld. The most dangerous situation I was in was getting stuck in the airport at Phuket before the torrential storms in Southeast Asia when I was doing a story on girls’ secondary education in Cambodia.

“He’s dead?”

Those words seemed to snap us both out of my fear and his suspicion.

“No, my dad? No, he’s not dead—“

“Then why’d you say ‘you *knew*’ him? You made is sound like he’s dead—“

“No, I’m sorry, it’s just that it is my understanding that you guys haven’t been in touch in years, so it would have been weird to say you *know* him, because, well, really, you probably don’t.”

He looked at me quizzically.

“Sorry, this wasn’t the right timing, I had a whole different speech prepared—“

“Let me get this straight, Punch is not dead; you’re his daughter you said?”

“Yeah, I’m here because I wanted to talk to you about—“

“How is Punch?” he smiled and instead of gripping my arm like he was going to break it off, he grasped both my arms and stood me in front of him to inspect me. “You look like him! Same nose!”

He obviously didn’t know that I’ve been conscientious of my nose for years so it wasn’t the way to my heart.

“He’s good, he’s, uh, lost his leg and rolls around in the chair quite nicely now. Diabetes. He lives in New Jersey and retired a couple years ago from AT&T.” How could I summarize my dad’s past 50 years (especially when I’ve only been around for 30) to this guy?

“His leg? Wow, I can’t get over that. Punch was so athletic. He kicked my ass all the time over on the courts,” pointing in the direction, of Brighton Beach where they used to all play pickup basketball. “He OK otherwise, though? Hey I’d love to see him—“

“He’s fine, yeah, and he’d like to get together, too—Howard Kessler is here and also wants to get together, but I’ll let you guys chat about that.”

“What? What is all this going on? Howie’s back? I was just thinking about that guy,” he sounded confused and I guess it was all too much at once. Whatever he thought I was doing spying on him, plus the blasts from the past, it seemed like his head was spinning. He wasn’t wearing shoes.

“You have a few minutes?” He asked. “I’ll buy you a cup of coffee. I’m sorry for jumping on you like that, it must’ve scared you a little. You wouldn’t believe the people out here—” he trailed off but I knew that he’s got people after him. You don’t act like that, live on a boat, and come running barefoot after people on the dock, if you’re an innocent bystander.

We walked over to a diner across the street for a coffee.

“I’d like to write a story about you guys, and Howard. I was hoping to get your thoughts, memories, experiences. Raw, unbiased, as you remember them. Are you up for that?” I asked bluntly. I didn’t want to insinuate anything about Howard, and how I didn’t like what I thought he might be up to.

“What kind of story? I mean, I don’t know what your dad has told you about me, but I don’t exactly want any spotlight on me.”

“No, of course, I understand. If you’d like to remain anonymous, that’s fine, I think I can work with that. It’s the recollections that are important. Above all, I want to be truthful.”

I can’t believe I said that. It was like Journalism 101. And, frankly, I’m not so sure I wanted to be truthful, but I had no idea of the background between Mo and Howard, or between any of the gang, so I tread lightly.

“Lemme think about it. I’m a busy guy, you know, I own that health club over there.”

I could see his full-of-shitness and was a little disappointed he thought I would buy it. I was straddling a fine line: a journalist and a subject’s daughter. I had to be a little more flexible than I ordinarily would have been.

“Well, I came all the way out here hoping at least to get a little background on your relationship with Howard back when you were young, and the last time you were in touch with him, you know, some basic stuff.”

“You don’t have a microphone or anything, a recorder, right?”

“No, not this time. I mean, not for this project. I recognize the sensitivities. You can attribute when and where you want. I just ask you one thing in return: that you don’t tell Howard about this in any form at all whatsoever.”

He put his cup down and glared at me. I was scared again. I got the confidence to confront him on my terms, and he then squashed me without words. Jesus, this guy is powerful. Why am I

doing this story, again? If I feel like I'm in over my head before the interviews even begin, I should go back to covering NPR stories on woodcarving artists' communes in Wyoming.

"What the fuck are you doing? Who do you think you are?"

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck!

I stared back at him for the longest few seconds in the history of time. I felt my body temperature rise to the point I thought my ears would combust. The whole story is a bust if Howard finds out about it. This thing could go down the drain before I even put pen to paper.

"Eh, I'm only kidding. Lighten up, will ya? How about some blintzes? This joint makes great blintzes." And he motioned for the waitress.

(Excerpt from forthcoming full length novel Getting the Old Gang Back Together)

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Touching

By Jenn Topper

I just love touching people. Their hair, their clothes, their skin. I have no problem touching feet, nails, you know, some of the gross stuff like pubes and pits. It just doesn't bother me. I know I'm making them more beautiful, even if they're ugly.

It didn't feel like any special day, but in retrospect I should have known something special was going to happen, just by the way the leaves on the trees were blowing, and the air. The air just smelled sweeter than usual.

I walked into my room and my client was already in there, her bare back turned and she was seated. She was hoisting her long, black hair up with a clip. She turned to me and my heart immediately shot through my throat.

"Hi, I'm Angelina. I need a deep-hydration treatment, after that exhaustively long flight. I still have no solution to that awful, dry air on the planes."

She was the most beautiful person I have ever seen. I see a lot of beautiful women in my profession. In person she just glows. I was stunned for a moment and couldn't find words. The floor felt as if it was rising; and I had to take a deep breath before I could even take another step into the small, dark room, lit only by candles.

I just need to act normal with her. That's all, just do and say normal things. I can't help what runs through my mind.

I couldn't believe her lips. It sounds cliché, but her lips protruded like petals wanting to be kissed. As she lay back I turned on the steam treatment and just tried to keep my cool. Something inside me is transformed in her presence; I have no other words to describe it.

She lay there like a corpse. It was beautiful. Her skin was...seamless. That's the word, seamless. She was seamless. Each of her body parts melted into another. Her face melted into her neck, which flowed into her chest. Nothing was attached, it was all one piece of flawless beauty. I specifically remember feeling like I wanted to melt into her body and feel it from the inside. How would it feel to walk in her legs.

As I gently scrubbed, exfoliated, toned, massaged and hydrated her skin, I watched my fingers enter her face and pick it up. I could just take her face with me everywhere I go. I could prove to everyone how perfect her skin is. I could take her eyes and lips. I could take her hair and get lost in it. I could swim in her skin.

She seemed edible. She was so sweet and delicious. I drank her and it was like silk. I sank into her curves and continued my work.

Extractions? Could I humiliate her with extractions? Should I make her feel imperfect and real? How will she feel once I squeeze the garbage from her pores?

She will feel small. I can make her ugly. I can ruin her. I can destroy her. I will suck the sick pus from deep inside her and let it ooze slowly, leaving a stinking trail of infection. I want to see tributaries of waste streaming down her face, tainting her like poison. I'll bring it all to the surface. We'll see what she's really made of.

And just like that, I made her squirm in pain. She grunted like a sow.

"I'm sorry; I don't mean to make you uncomfortable. These are just really stubborn—," I recited as if I meant it.

"No, of course. I hate this part."

Of course you hate this part, you whore. They pile on crap makeup using sponges and brushes used on dozens of others, transferring bacteria and dirt from other peoples' filthy skin to yours. It's what you get when you fucking smile all day at everyone and bring sunshine to the darkest parts of people's lives.

Where is your sickness? I've looked and looked.

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The Wind Is Cold

By Jenn Topper

The school was on a 160-acre campus, just a few short blocks off the wondrous miracle mile of glitzy suburban shopping strips, near a wooded patch secluded away from any residential or commercial area. In its parking lot waited dozens and dozens of high-priced luxury cars, whether for the high-school drivers or the mommies and nannies to pick up the younger ones. She sat in her car for a moment and smoothed her hair, reapplied her lip gloss, and checked her phone. Her palms were sweating and she couldn't breathe as easily as she would have liked. Nerves, she thought, maybe from memories from her own childhood?

Though she knew what was coming, she refused to face it and continued to forge ahead without asking herself any hard questions. She looked great, a new crème-colored custom suit, Louis Vuitton purse, Hermes scarf, shoes—well, exquisite as always. How could anything be wrong when everything looked so right? She checked one more time in the mirror and stepped out of the car. The wind was cold, and it snuck up on her like a thief, seizing her balance and slapping her sharply. Punishment. She hustled to the double doors of the middle school. The first door she tried was locked and in the moment it took to move her hand to the next door, she felt doubly violated as the wind bullied her again. The second door opened and she slammed it behind her, securing it as if to keep out the mugger. As she turned around, a school administrator scowled at her for the door slam. “The wind,” she said.

She collected herself in the reflection of a window and smoothed her hair again and retied her scarf. She proceeded down the long, quiet hallway to the conference room noted on the paper she clasped in her hand just inside her purse. Room 124, North Wing, 3pm sharp, Mrs. Barnard and Dr. Schimm. Her daughter, 5th grade, was in her 3rd year at this elite, private school. She was on the waiting list for 3 years before she was welcomed in a spot vacated by a hedge fund family who moved back to Manhattan.

She approached the room and felt her heart race and her palms sweat again. She stopped in front of the door, but stepped aside for a moment and turned her back. She felt the heat to the tips of her ears. She took a deep breath, the kind her yoga and pilates instructor trained her to do: a deep breath from the abdomen, hold it, keep holding, hold one more, then release slowly, like pouring water from a tall pitcher. She just couldn't shake it, though. The breathing didn't make her feel any better. She felt a creeping nausea and proceeded to pace around the hallway, rhythmically like she used to do as a child when her parents used to scream at one another and throw half-drunk glasses of aged scotch across the living room.

All these years she's played by the rules, she's done everything expected of her, and made all the right choices, she thought, to position her to have all the right things in life. She met the right people and stayed in touch. Met who she thought was the right man and married him. Though he's not the right man, he had the right bank account so at least she and her daughter can live well while he's off gallivanting in London for the company. She doesn't try too hard, by her standards at least, and appears self-confident and easy-going.

Is it time to think seriously about the choices I've made, she thought to herself? She felt chills up her back. It seems like now is the time to think about what's next. What if we moved to the cabin, out in Pennsylvania? There are probably no schools near there for her daughter, who clearly needs more attention than even this private institution can provide. Alright, it's not attention she needs, it's more than that—she's not growing out of the fits.

She heard some kids down at the other end of the hallway and it snapped her out of her thoughts. Enough of this, she thought. I'm not going in to this conference room with the school psychologist, headmaster, and her daughter's teacher to hear everything I already know. I had planned on acting surprised, and what good would that do? I'm tired of bullshitting people. Why am I playing this game anymore? Everything isn't perfect. I can't put a gloss on it all. My kid is fucked up and it's time I deal with it the right way.

She stormed into the conference room.

“Look, I know my kid has problems. You don't have to set up a scolding session for me—there's enough shame involved in it anyway. Do you want her out now, or can we finish out the year?” she said in one breath, not looking any of the administrators in the eye.

The headmaster stood up, placed his large hands on the table with some force and leaned in. He took a deep breath and looked down.

“Mrs. Porter, it's not your daughter that this meeting is about, it's you.”

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Interview with a Marginal Character from a Mediocre Story

By Jenn Topper

I had the opportunity to interview Bill Sachs, fictional character, neighbor of Carol and Steve Sherman, the protagonists of a short story, The Street Goes Dark, a mediocre and hackneyed tale about how a block comes together after a blackout during a rainstorm. Bill is a marginal character and not even related to one of the central tenets of the story, so the time I spent with Bill was especially valuable to learning more about the mechanics of poor writing and character development.

Bill, thanks for taking the time, though I know you don't really have much else going on.

Thanks for having me; this is truly a first.

First, tell me a little about *The Street Goes Dark*—when are you introduced, what is your connection to the plotline?

Well, first, as you know, I wasn't thought-out very well. First the writer introduces me as the fat, balding, nebbish neighbor to Carol and Steve who doesn't interact with anyone but his dog. But then in a later scene, I invite myself over to their backyard for a barbeque and proceed to cause a ruckus with my beer-drinking wife, so there are a few inconsistencies and they are mostly contradictory, and not subtextual.

I see. That must have been difficult.

Not really, I mean, I am a fictional character so I am what I am written to be and I don't have many feelings about it. After all, I am one-dimensional.

How was the interplay with the other characters? Did you find any others like yourself?

For the most part I didn't have much to do with other characters. There were so many like me, though, that we at least had some commonalities in that respect. There wasn't really a theme to the story so that didn't bond us. Just the notion that the story was so trite: a neighborhood where few people knew each other is forced to turn to one another when faced with adversity. But the writer didn't reach beneath the surface and so many—if not all—of the characters interacted on just one dimension. We didn't have any development so the reader really didn't have much to empathize with. I was especially marginal, though, so my role in the plot could have been deleted and there would have been no difference.

Was there anything special about you, something the reader could take away or learn from?

No, not really.

So is your existence punctuated by the mediocrity of the story, or is there more to you? Will you reappear somewhere else?

The good thing about being one dimensional and marginal together is that I can reappear in many forms in hundreds—if not thousands—of other stories written around the world by mediocre writers. It's phenomenal how Bill Sachs can fill in just about anywhere and appears for no reason in storylines that just don't have any need for me. And since I don't drive the plot in any way, I just take up words—but not too many descriptors--anywhere. The good thing is that I don't have baggage. I have no history, no nuance, so I can be dropped in any form where the writer just hasn't thought about theme or subtext. I don't have any meaningful existence, so I'm totally flexible.

This is not your first time in a mediocre story?

Oh, no, not at all. Well, technically as Bill Sachs specifically, yes, it is the first time. But symbolically, so to speak, a character with no attachment to a story that has little purpose can appear empirically. Someone once said that unless a character or dialogue advances the plot, don't put it in because it has no use and it just takes up words. Well, I can affirmatively say that I don't fulfill any of those requirements.

Would you ever appear in a well-written story?

Oh I don't think I have that capability. It's just not possible, unless--and I'm going out on a limb here—it's totally absurd. I can't envision it, but with absurdity anything can happen so I wouldn't put it past a writer who could incorporate meaningless, one-dimensional characters into a story with no beginning, middle or end.

And what about existentialism? Does that come into play at all?

Hey look, I did this interview as a favor, so I don't appreciate that accusation. I exist, ok? I am here, on paper, and that's undeniable. How much I emote is a different story altogether, but I was in no uncertain terms a product of the writer's story, whether meaningful or not, I am there and the reader cannot deny my existence. Just because I am marginal, and meaningless doesn't mean you can slap some heavy philosophical label on me.

I'm sorry, I really didn't mean for it to be an insult. I was thinking empirically, about all the other marginal, fictional characters. Perhaps there is a theme there.

We have nothing in common and there is no underlying meaning behind our existence. We are here, as one, as all, because so many writers are indifferent to the purpose of our existence. I can't help it.

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Ramblings of a Hooker in Paradise

Originally appeared in Gupter PUNCHER Issue #1 2010

By jenn topper

It's not long before Hollywood eats you up. I'm not talking about the mean old streets of Skid Row. I'm talking about the illuminati—the cultural icons and full-on celebrities—and their destitute souls who sink into the denial of a spiritual compass. Excess for these people doesn't exist. They own it all, they want more, and they take it right out of our hands.

I am a hooker. I'm a spiritual person, and I believe in G-d. I've tried all kinds of gods—Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Pagan—but it doesn't matter to me. G-d is G-d. Sunday mornings are my time off, and I attend services somewhere. Being in a house of G-d, even when surrounded by the haughty Hollywood bloodsuckers, is my respite. You may think it's contradictory or even insincere for a woman who fucks for money to follow the scriptures and the word. Your judgment doesn't account for my faith; and likewise, I don't pass judgment on the hijinx.

Many years ago I realized the beauty of faith when I got called to the set for *The Last Temptation of Christ*. I thought it was a joke, but I was 15 and did what my pimp told me to. After my job was over I stumbled out of the trailer with a fistful of cash and stole a script on my way out. On the bus back into town I read the script and thought of whichever character just fucked me—Judas? Jesus? Or just one of the apostles?

They called me back often, and I fucked just about every member of that cast during shooting.

Whichever character it was, there was one who was usually still in dress and so I couldn't help but imagine myself as Mary Magdalene. I was no Barbara Hershey, but there was something transcendental about the experience. Now it wasn't easy. Most of these guys were originally from Brooklyn—Harvey Keitel, Willem Dafoe, Paul Herman, Paul Greco, Victor Argo (though I think he's from the Bronx)—so in character or out, they weren't convincing as dudes from 2000 years ago roaming Nazareth. But something about the whole environment seemed to work for me.

Nevertheless, it sparked an interest in me to pursue a higher purpose that had little or nothing to do with fucking for a living. The two are separate. So I've watched these celebrities come and go—so to speak. Excuse the puns, but when they're on top, they want to reach so low into soulless depths that

they lose themselves in depravity. When they start to go downhill is when they start reaching for the spiritual heights and that's when I start seeing them at services.

Take Hugh Grant for example. He was at the peak of his career. When he got caught down the street from me busting a nut for the sweet Divine Brown on Sunset Strip, he couldn't have been more morally corrupt. Now that he's nowhere near his celebrity apex, he's a fucking saint. I see this pattern all the time, but it doesn't shake my own faith in the universe as a balanced place with justice usually overcoming evil. But honestly, it was so cliché and gratuitous it was as if it were a planned PR stunt. It wouldn't be beyond Hollywood's puppeteers to pull such an exploit. Yet a little time goes by; Hugh acts pious and serves up an apology via another celebrity venue and gives some dough to an AIDS charity, and he's on his way.

I have to confess that I tried to get on the set of *Passion of the Christ* to try to reclaim some of that bliss and I know it sounds stupid—a hooker going to a movie set for spiritual guidance. But I have to say, just hanging around there, in between jobs, you know, I was inspired and felt heartened again. Even though I'm not in the mainstream entertainment business, per se, I should get spiritual credit for finding solace anywhere, right? Well, let's just say the set was a much different situation than *Last Temptation*. I mean, there were actual priests on the set, evangelicals or whatever.

I have a few thoughts about this. First, my bank account increased fivefold while working on the set. Some nasty shit, too. But second is that these people were taking themselves so much more seriously. Ok, there were more historical references that stayed true. Like, no Brooklyn accents in Jerusalem. But then I questioned my judgment on what makes one movie more “realistic” than another? No one has captured the essence of sex workers in a fictional movie because we're all different. So who even knows how to portray Jesus? It's ridiculous.

So back to my point. I don't want you to think I'm righteous or judgmental—though in a way I have to say, some of the behavior of the loftiest celebrities boggles my mind. I'm not saying that if these people saw the light they would behave any differently. Excess begets excess. And I don't want to add to the litany of Hollywood hooker stories, of which there have been so many nothing surprises me anymore.

And that's what I mean about the illuminati of Hollywood. They tell us what is real, they take the truth, and they make their own moral rules. But without it, I'd be out of work. That's why I had to create my own moral compass and draw up my own rules in faith. I have faith that I won't catch gonorrhea again. I have faith that I'll never have to fuck John Travolta again. I've made a good living off the celebs, quietly, discreetly, with few perks. As long as I have my Sunday mornings off for services, I'm good.

I eventually hit 30 years old so the sets didn't want me anymore and my ratings plummeted among the celebrities. More often than not I never even saw them anyway. Just face down in the pillow and what's done is done; money's on the nightstand, now get the fuck outta here. No different than any other john.

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Gin for Christmas

By Jenn Topper

“It’s the drunk tank, ma’am, it’s not prison. She’ll be here ‘til the A.M. Just sit tight, is all you can do. I suggest you just stay put and let her sleep it off. You can come down to post bail tomorrow after the judge set it. Ain’t nothing to do right now for you. Nothing at all. So, ma’am, please don’t come down here tonight. We busy, it’s crowded, and it’s Christmas.”

Her mother, Aneta, set the phone down on the granite countertop, gleaming and new, in the stunning designer kitchen. Her impeccably manicured nails on pudgy fingers tapped the counter.

“This is not about me. This is not about me. Liliya has the problem. I can only try to help her. This is not about me,” she said aloud in monotone, stating the affirmations her therapist has trained her to do. As she spoke she clenched her fist. For a moment it appeared she would smash her fist against the granite; but then she just feigned the punch in slow-motion repeatedly.

She walked around the island slowly and kept her hand on the countertop of the kitchen island. It became a security device throughout the night. It contained all of the items she needed for surviving the news: Cordless and cell phones. Legal pad and pen. Organizer opened up to lawyer’s number. Carton of cigarettes and a Swarovski crystal bowl that doubled for an ashtray. Yellow pages for police station and various bail-bondsmen. Ice cube tray, glass, and bottle of gin. She didn’t sit down at the cushy stools. Sitting might mean giving up or giving in to the massive fight ahead; and there would be a massive fight; with whom, she may not have been sure. She stood, walked, shifted her weight, and leaned on the counter as if it was a bar, and lit cigarette after cigarette.

Those were the days. She eyed the gin like it was seducing her. She closed her eyes, cocked her head, and smiled, remembering how she used to lean in on the bar pushing up her bust, using her body to attract men—at the very least to buy her drinks. It was a nice escape.

I’m nothing like Liliya and never was, parading around like a cheap slut, drunken, strung out whore. No class. My own daughter, she can’t take care of herself or find a man to do it for her, she mumbled or thought.

“Do you resent her now, Aneta?” Evgeni said from the dark living room.

“Shit, you startled me. How long you been here? Sneak, you are a sneak. I don’t need you here now needling me. It’s bad enough as is.”

“What were you just thinking about? I saw you smile. I really hope you’re not enjoying this.”

“I told you, Geni, stay away from me right now.”

“Were you thinking about when we met? At the bar? You were standing the same way you know. You stick your ass and tits out. You fat now, though.”

Aneta took a deep breath in and flung her glass towards Evgeni with all her strength. She didn't say a word. The overhead lights weren't on in the living room and she didn't know where he was sitting, or else she would have aimed straight for his head. The glass just shattered a side table and knocked off its contents. The heavy carpeting muted the sound of what Aneta hoped would be a dramatic end to the direction of the conversation.

“You think she's doing this because of the drugs? She's doing this because she's you. She learned from the best.”

Aneta held her head in her hands at the kitchen island, steaming.

Evgeni was Aneta's third husband, but they had known one another since high school here in Brooklyn. Their families are neighbors in a town outside Odessa. Two nights ago in a pre-holiday dramatic escalation of emotional illiteracy, 17-year old Liliya drunkenly confessed to having a crush on Evgeni and leaned in to kiss him at the dinner table. When he stood up abruptly, Liliya ran crying from the house and hadn't returned. Evgeni still spoke with a thick Ukrainian accent and wore it like a badge.

“This is not about me, and I know you are trying to make it about me but it is not. I can handle this, you lecherous pig.”

“Hey, I didn't sleep with her; I didn't do nothing with her. You can believe what you want to believe, but I didn't do nothing to your girl. You know me so many years now. I'm not pleading nothing with you, Aneta, because you have your problems.”

Aneta believed him because he was telling the truth.

“She just not my type, you know—“ he baited.

“You bastard!” Aneta screamed and leaped into the dark living room in a fit of tears and high-pitched hysteria.

“Don't act like you're protecting her now, crazy bitch!” he yelled as he pulled her off of him.

Aneta collapsed on the floor and over-compensated for a little push Evgeni gave her. She was acting, but to what extent she was acting over feeling truly emotionally shocked at the past couple days' events, even she didn't know.

The both fell silent.

“You have to decide if you really want to care about your daughter. She's gone down this road, Aneta, and tonight, I think you know, there's no coming back. She fucking—she—ech, I can't even say it. She fucking raped a Santa Claus, Aneta, for godssake, an old man at Macy's—“

“Stop it! Stop saying that! We don't know what happened. I don't know what to do. I can't even think now. What could make her so sick—“

“You hear yourself?” he said.

The phone rang and Aneta jumped up to get it, clumsily catching a shoe on the carpet in the living room and running into the kitchen, to her home base island, to fetch the call.

“Hullo, yes?—I am. Yes that’s right. – Uh huh. Ok. At 8 o’clock at the precinct or at the courthouse? – Mmm, ok. – And what are they charging her with, if that’s how it happened? – Oh. I see, ok. That sounds—uh, huh. Alright then.”

“What now?” Evgeni asked.

She walked to the cabinet and reached up for another glass and turned to reach for the ice on the counter but noticed that it had all melted and the sweat had soaked through some of the loose pages of notes and phone numbers, rendering them illegible. She stared for a moment and then grabbed a towel from a drawer and tried to sop up the water on the paper, futilely. As she was cleaning up and getting more ice from the freezer, she started speaking, but not necessarily to Evgeni. Her habit of talking aloud was one she didn’t care to change since it never bothered her, though confusing to others.

“She was drunk again and pushed some people out of the way on the line to see Santa Claus at Macy’s. She set on his lap and started kissing the man and reached into his pants. That’s all, the cop just said, that’s all, but they charge her for that. She just drinking, Liliya, why you have to do that so much, you’re a young girl—“

“Aneta, stop it. You’re judging your daughter on a different bar than yourself. You were already pregnant and married at 17. Why you think she doing crazy things now? You holding her to a different standard.”

“You won’t win any parent awards for that mentality, Evgeni—“

“That’s why I ain’t no father, if you haven’t noticed, dear. I run my business and my women fine without childrens.”

“You are a heartless sonofabitch. Why I marry you I don’t know,” Aneta said, without looking up from her pointless chores at the kitchen island.

“It’s late. Or early. I’m going to try to get some sleep, you piece of shit,” Aneta said ambivalently.

“You going down there tomorrow for her? I think you need to think a little more before she come back into this house.”

“I don’t know. I don’t have no idea what I’m going to do about her.”

Basking In Conformity: The Slave

By Jenn Topper

They paraded through the breakfast room one after the next, like automatons with their uniforms on, but with a slight swagger in their steps. Harrumphing through their eggs and freshly squeezed Florida orange juice, back-slapping and guzzling away at what appeared to be their last meal ever, they all looked, sounded, and acted like they were auditioning for the same role. They sped out to the golf course together in their speeding carts, the piss-bottles hanging from a nifty rack across the back. Men basking in conformity and ob-so-pleased with themselves for fitting in so perfectly well.

I see you every morning in this room and you are all the same. You make no eye contact. Our interaction is as personal as if you entered your breakfast order into a machine. I am not a machine.

You elevate your voice when you speak to me, as if my accented English indicates I am hard of hearing. That you do not even look at me to bark your orders doesn't help clarify the communication. I can understand what you are saying even when you whisper to your buddies at the table. I can hear you when you quietly comment about my ass. And I can also hear you when you not-so-quietly comment about my tits.

That you don't say thank-you when I fill your coffee cup doesn't phase me. That you can't look at me when I'm pouring it makes interacting with you enormously difficult. You only look at me when you or your friends make a joke out of pronouncing my name, when you finally decide collectively that it is ok to mark me as your target. It is not a hard name to pronounce in English, so it's woefully insulting when you deliberately mispronounce it in a sorry attempt at denigration. You are actually proud that your names are all monosyllabic. Mike, Tom, Bill, Bob, Ted, Phil, Jon, Rich, Jim, and Steve. What a phenomenon, that you masters of the golf club feign ignorance in the name of group laughter. I am not hurt; you embarrass yourselves more than you know.

I sweep the golf cart path as you whiz by. I manicure the landscaping so it's easy on your eyes. You don't speak to me even when I stop the hose so you can walk by unencumbered by the sprinkle.

I watch you cheat all throughout your golf game. You cheat with each other, you cheat behind each other's backs. You lie. You get frustrated and angry and behave like impetuous children. You laugh, you joke, you back-slap and clap. You compete fiercely. You look at one another for approval after making a joke, nasty comment or brutal attack. You are shameless in your treatment of one another. You complain about your wives, not uncommon or terribly mean. But then you use it as an excuse to gloat about your affairs, and the adulation you received at the strip club last night...as if you didn't pay for it.

You return to the hotel from your steak dinners, after multiple mojitos or whiskeys, and you don't even tip me for helping you out of the car and into your room. You don't say thank you or come seek me out the next day to apologize for slobbering all over me. You throw up all over your room. I clean your puke while you are still passed out on the bed, naked, bloated, and stinking. You see me the next morning and give no nod of acknowledgement; you don't even hang your head in shame. You are shamless, when you are with your pack. You are arrogant and frightened, like an animal cornered by shotguns, when you are alone.

It's another day of pouring coffee, cleaning half-eaten buffet plates into the trash. It's another glorious, beautiful, palm-strewn day with you clamoring for attention from your client or boss, hoping you don't stand out too much, safely suited in your uniforms. You are afraid of being different. You are terrified of thinking differently or saying something unexpected, so you don't converse with me even when we make eye contact inadvertently.

You will not look at me. So I stare at you, steering my gaze to penetrate your false armor. I lean over you and reach to deliver your egg white omelet and touch your shoulder with my chest. My perfume lingers on you for hours. You want to fuck me. You excuse yourself to the men's room to ejaculate. You imagine me, voluptuous, sensual, brown-skinned Latina with thick lips and dark eyes, on my hands and knees looking back at you. You have me positioned like you've never had your wife. You own me.

I am on my hands and knees to scrub your floor.

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Balloon Boy Grows Up

(Originally printed in December 2009 issue of Gupter Puncher)

By Jenn Topper

Panda had just turned 21 and couldn't celebrate. He saw this birthday as a deadline, a chore, a reminder of a commitment he had made nearly 10 years before. He knew that soon he must get on a plane and fly to California to see his parents, and maybe his brother and sister. He couldn't avoid it any longer. If he defaults on the contract to renew the relationship, the money wouldn't come and the whole separation would be pointless.

Except it wasn't pointless. Panda's identity began to coalesce and he learned to have his own opinions, thoughts, and personality without cameras around. Instead of being the dark, cloistered kid who left home as part of an experiment years before, Panda flourished at Cooper Union in New York's Greenwich Village and he was on track to become a brilliant design engineer. Few people now remember his past, so he had less and less to explain as the years went by. He was his own person now.

But in recent months, in the lead-up to his birthday in November, he knew that he had to face his parents on Christmas day. He spent a couple of weeks trying to ready himself for the meeting. As he always learned to do when things got particularly fucked up, he hunkered down and watched movies, in the hopes that seeing stories worse than his own wouldn't make him feel so awful about his life and the deal he made in order to escape from his family.

After years of torment as the center of their reality TV hopes, Panda—even his name, which was an attempt to get an endorsement deal with the San Diego Zoo which had adopted its first panda when Panda was born—tried to escape his past. His parents made appearances on reality TV shows *Wife Swap*, *Nanny 911*, *Cross-Cultural Family Ties* and a half dozen more. All they wanted was a show of their own; they hoped that Panda would have sealed that deal for them.

The separation deal was made with the Riverside County district attorney who investigated the family when they pulled a hoax of gargantuan proportions, at Panda's expense. It took a year of legal proceedings and another year in foster care for Panda to strike the deal—he gets \$5 million from Donald Trump if he can stay away from his family for 10 years, and if they can manage to stay out of any media spotlight. Their incentive is that hopefully Panda will share the money.

First up was *The Boy in the Plastic Bubble*, the 1976 movie about the kid with no immunity who had to live in a sterile environment. Panda couldn't remember watching the film as a kid, but the video rental guy recommended it. John Travolta played the sick kid.

"I'm looking for films in which children are, well, how do I say this carefully without sounding like a pervert—exploited? But you know, not *exploited*, just normal movies," he said in kind of a whisper.

“I think I know what you mean. But are you looking for films *about* the exploitation, or films that just clearly exploit the child actors? Because there are a few of the first, but several of the second,” the video rental guy pressed him.

“Interesting distinction. I’ll have to think about it. Let’s have one of each and I’ll figure it out. I’ll be back later for more depending on how things turn out.”

He didn’t really think *Boy in the Plastic Bubble* fit the bill; and either the DVD was either a pirated version or its re-release contained inaccurate and sloppy copy, because it wasn’t based on a true story, it was just inspired by a kid in Dallas who had the same condition and was in the news a lot back in the 1970s. And the picture of Travolta was from a few years ago, not when he was in his early ‘20s and played a 17 year old. Plus, there were so many contradictions in the film though (e.g., like taking off his astrosuit because it runs out of oxygen while inside his sterile bubble—wouldn’t the outside of the astrosuit contain fatal germs?), that Panda focused on them instead of basking in the story’s exploitation of the boy. He didn’t feel any better, since his parents and the reality TV media had done much worse to him when he was coached to hide and feign floating away on a UFO-homemade balloon in the backyard.

He went back to the video store to talk to the same dude who gave him the other recommendations.

“Isn’t there something that the kid is inherently messed up and the parents or his environment exploits?”

“Oh, I think I understand now. Messed up kids and the parents mess them up even more—unfortunately there’s more of that in real-life Hollywood than in fiction. Think about all the child stars, the ones who wound up doing softcore porn to pay off their crack dealers, like Dana Plato who played Kimberly Drummond in the 1980s sitcom *Different Strokes*. Or the two Coreys—what a fucking train wreck they were.”

“Yeah, that’s true; I hadn’t thought about the real-life part,” and he recalled his roommate recounting a story about Corey Feldman nodding out at Grey’s Papaya on the corner of 8th Street and 6th Avenue at about 4am one night, hunched over a couple of half-eaten hot dogs and dressed like Michael Jackson, complete with face makeup.

Then he came across Peter Bogdanovich’s *Mask* and Victor Salva’s *Powder*, both about kids, but it was the kids who were messed up first. Though they were equally fucked up in their exploitation of the kids, the stories surrounding them were more compelling but not what Panda needed to feel prepared to go back home. Salva was convicted of child molestation, and midway through the shooting of the movie the whole cast freaked out. Bogdanovich apparently trashed the studio for their final cut while in Cannes and disavowed the film thereafter.

Video store guy recommended *Little Miss Sunshine*, and though it was entertaining and demented, it was only the one perverse Superfreak scene that made him feel better. Panda didn’t really feel like the girl was adequately exploited to really damage her psyche to a magnitude anything close to his, so

he kept searching for more stories. There had to be something that was worse than his own upbringing.

“Dude, everyone hates the holidays. Everyone hates going back to their family’s place. You can’t find a story bad enough that someone has documented out there that is worse than yours, because everyone has it equally bad,” the video guy told Panda.

“Dick,” Panda said, and left the store.

He thought about what he said, and he may be right. But Panda thought about some of the ridiculous things his parents did to get in the media spotlight, like dressing Panda in ragtag clothes and showing him how to beg for money at the local mall. Or when the Sixth Sense came out, they totally copied the story and trained Panda—albeit poorly—to pretend to communicate with dead people and sent him on news shows. He was 9 years old at the time, and faced dozens of media interviews and even a shot on the Today show.

His life had been worse than the worst movies about children, and he had to face that now. Was \$5 million worth it? How much would he give his parents, and would they learn to shut up? Couldn’t he just go on with his life? He had to inform Trump that he planned on going home, knowing full well that there would be a media parade in front of his parent’s house.

* * * *

Flying out of JFK Airport on Christmas Day wasn’t as calm as he thought it would. He would have much rather been home to see the release of Godfather 4. Some of the world’s greatest movies were released on Christmas day, and he’d been there at each one for the past 10 years.

He stepped out of the taxi and hesitated before the long walkway up to the front door of his parents’ Swiss chalet-style house—quite an odd site for a suburban, southern California home. There were fewer news trucks than he had expected, but perhaps because when he was 11 the trucks looked bigger and more intimidating. The agreement is such that he must have Christmas dinner with his parents before the check is issued and any media interviews are granted.

“Oh my god, oh my god, here he is, I can’t believe it, he’s beautiful, oh my god!” his mother shouted in an excruciatingly high, frantic tone, as he walked slowly up the front steps. “Get the door—go get him at the door! Do you have the video camera?” she yelled at his father, who already had the camera on the tripod set up in the foyer.

Panda was solemn and collected throughout the reunion. Neither his brother nor his sister attended. It was a lonelier Christmas dinner than he had spending it alone over the years. His parents were weirder than he remembered; but maybe the past 10 years in social isolation did that.

He felt no connection to them, or anything, any longer. The emotional climax of the reunion didn’t come when they embraced him in the doorway, with the goddamned camera filming it and dozens of TV crews recording the event. The emotional climax came months before when he received the

call from Trump Enterprises that a film production of his life was wrapping up and would be released on Christmas Day. Since he loved sequels so much, he thought he could set the stage for his life movie, part 2.

After dinner was complete and his father ran out to the front yard to call in the media and his mother picked up the phone to call Trump Enterprises to confirm the reunion was a success, Panda reached into his duffel and pulled out a large camera.

In the time it took for the Access Hollywood crew to set up on the front porch of the home, and others to camp out at the windows, he roped the camera's lanyard from the rafter on the ceiling over the dining room table. It was a tight fit, but it would work, just as he thought. As he pushed the table from under his feet, he heard his mother come running in since it was quite a dramatic clanging and crashing of turkey carcass and dishes against the hardwood floor. He heard her screaming, but didn't feel her tugging on him or trying to save him from suffocation.

"Are you filming this?" were the last words Panda heard.

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