

# **The Clarendon House Short Story Magazine**

**Satisfying Fiction from  
Clarendon House Publications**  
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**Issue  
# 6**



**Five gems from some of the best storytellers on the planet**

**Gary Bonn, Jim Bates, Frank Kozusko, Peter Toeg and Alexander Marshall**



# The Clarendon House Short Story Magazine

## Satisfying Fiction from Clarendon House Publications

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Violence, action, explosive drama in a future where the genders are at war...

We hope you enjoy the magazine!

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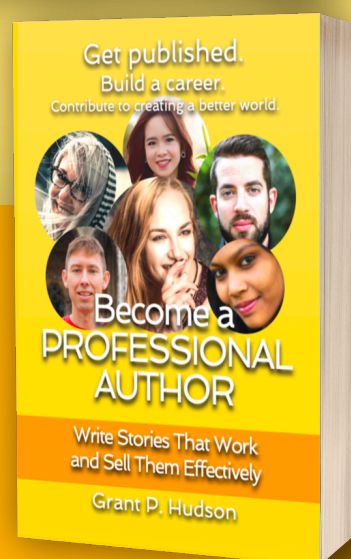
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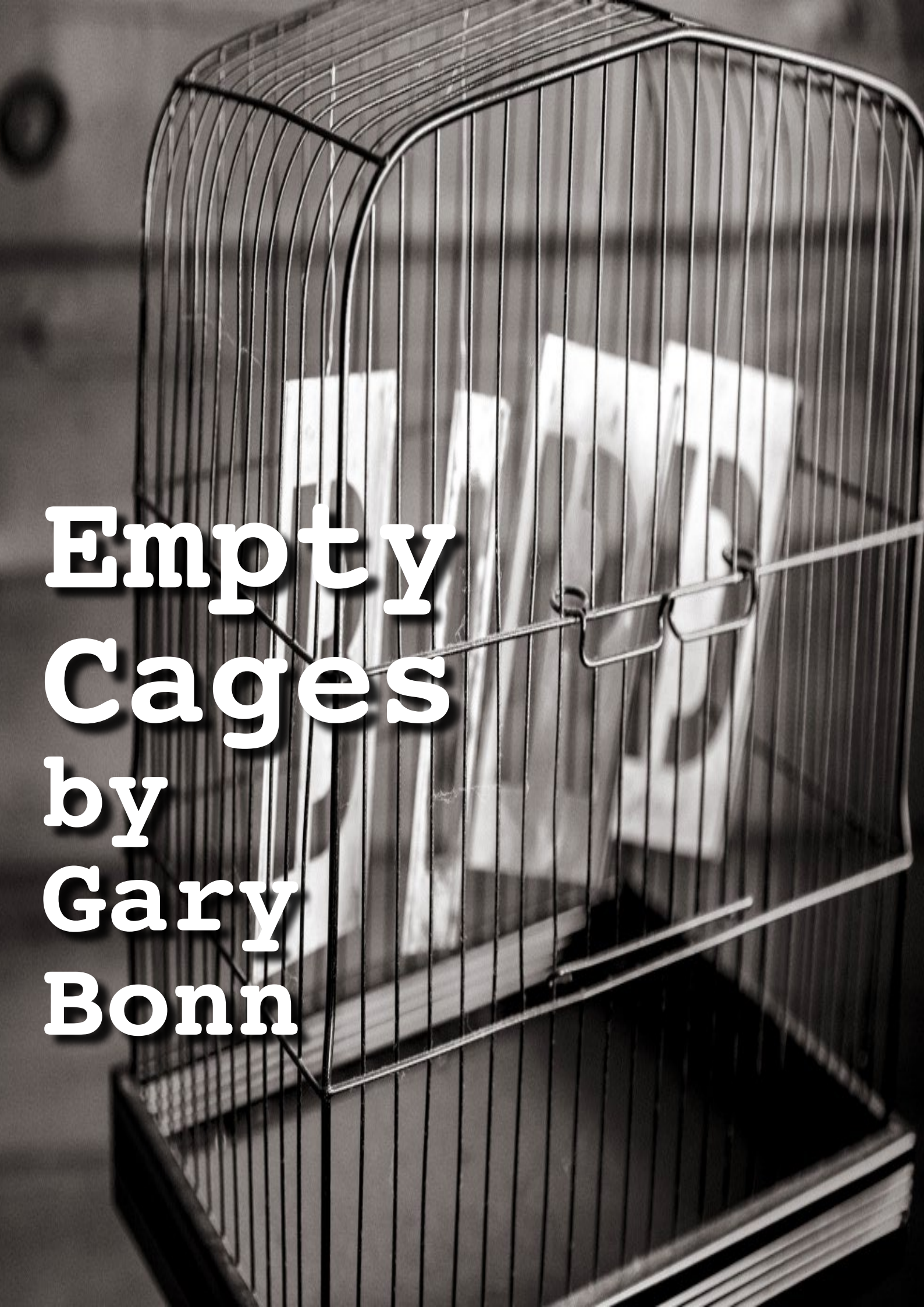


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# Empty Cages by Gary Bonn



Jim doodles in his schoolbook. With a pencil he's chasing an eyelash around the page. An abstract line, looking a bit like an angel, whips and loops over squared paper. He wonders if it is possible to develop a formula linking the line to sounds of a digger outside the school and a bee that's flown in one window, crossed the nearly empty room and out a window on the other side.

The teacher, busy with a laptop and drawing tablet, cables and the frustration of modern convenience, hums to herself.

Jim looks up as the door bangs open. Charlotte, leather skirt, calf boots – even in summer – walks in, scans the room, and asks, "Am I in the right place?"

The teacher nods. "Yes. Take a seat anywhere."

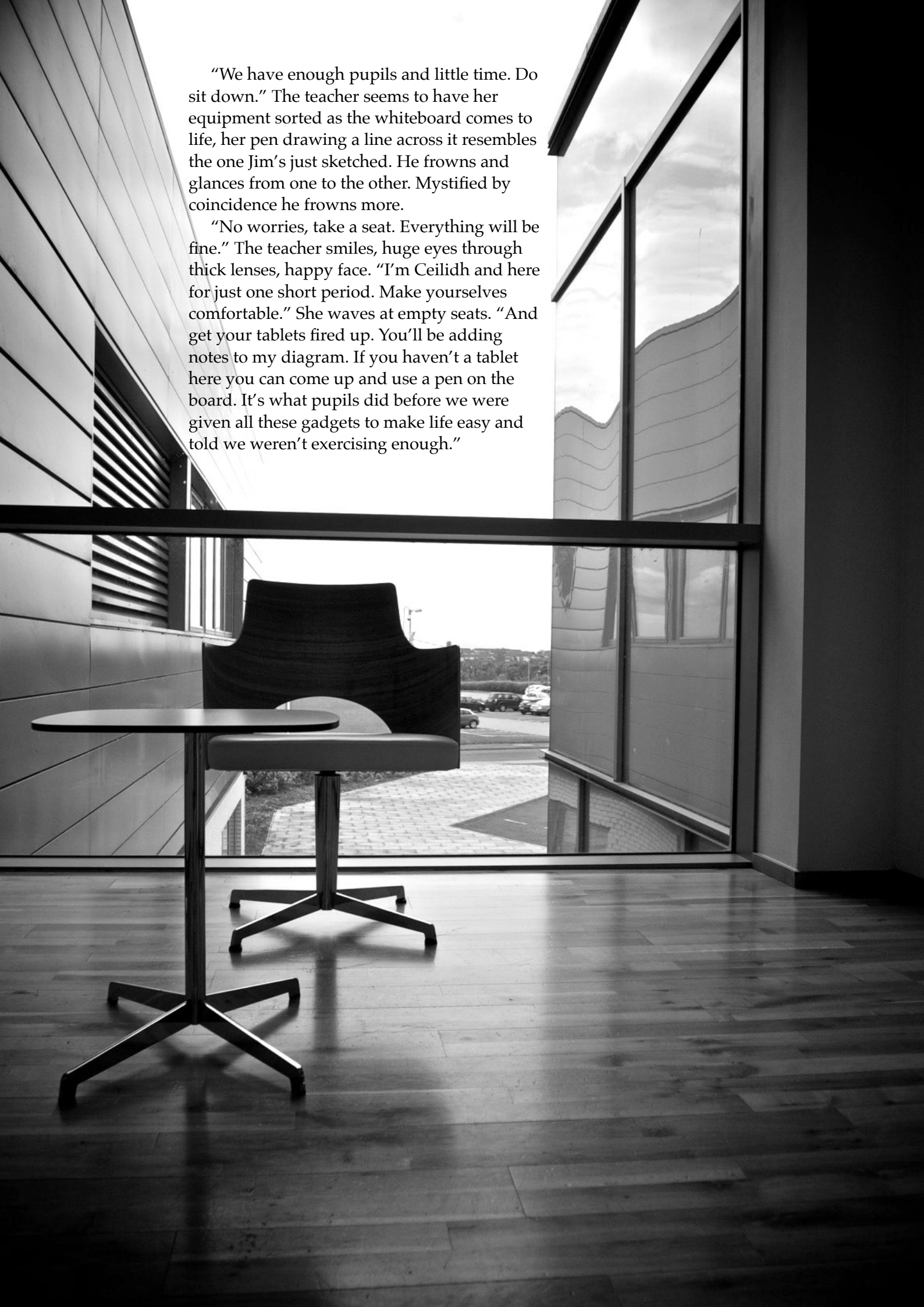
"But... Morag's got my bag... my phone is still switched on. Can I... do you know where everyone else is? I need to get it before there's trouble, and not everyone is here yet."






"We have enough pupils and little time. Do sit down." The teacher seems to have her equipment sorted as the whiteboard comes to life, her pen drawing a line across it resembles the one Jim's just sketched. He frowns and glances from one to the other. Mystified by coincidence he frowns more.

"No worries, take a seat. Everything will be fine." The teacher smiles, huge eyes through thick lenses, happy face. "I'm Ceilidh and here for just one short period. Make yourselves comfortable." She waves at empty seats. "And get your tablets fired up. You'll be adding notes to my diagram. If you haven't a tablet here you can come up and use a pen on the board. It's what pupils did before we were given all these gadgets to make life easy and told we weren't exercising enough."







Charlotte scrapes a chair back. "I... this is about careers advice?"

"Sort of... Look, I'm drawing a factory or police station or prison and a bunch of offices, maybe an insurance company or bank – and here, a school. These involve careers sometimes."

Jim watches the bee fly back through the room and open windows. He's never seen a bumble bee that seems to know exactly where it's going and has windows so completely sussed.

The teacher goes on and more words appear on the board. Jim briefly imagines the electronics to be fake and that it's all done with trained ghosts and invisible pens.

Ceilidh, an elderly lady, short and thin, exudes the energy typical of supply teachers who only work odd days and have time to rest and scream in between. Jim loves them; sharp, not blunt, enthusiastic, not exhausted. She says, "Here, 'Art', 'Philosophy' and 'Spirit'. I'd put them into a Venn diagram but since they overlap 100% it's not worth the effort." She looks round, lips momentarily pressed together in annoyance. "Jim, can you close that window the digger is... no... that would worry the bee. We'll have to live with both."

Jim sits up straight, startled. How does she know his name? She continues, "Spirit. This is about people who care. You've all heard of Gandhi, Mandela and so on but what about the old woman who struggles to look after her demented husband? Never wanting to abandon her partner in life and family to a care home. What about you, Charlotte, and the way you stick up for smaller girls being bullied?"

A strangled squeak comes from Charlotte. "How...?"

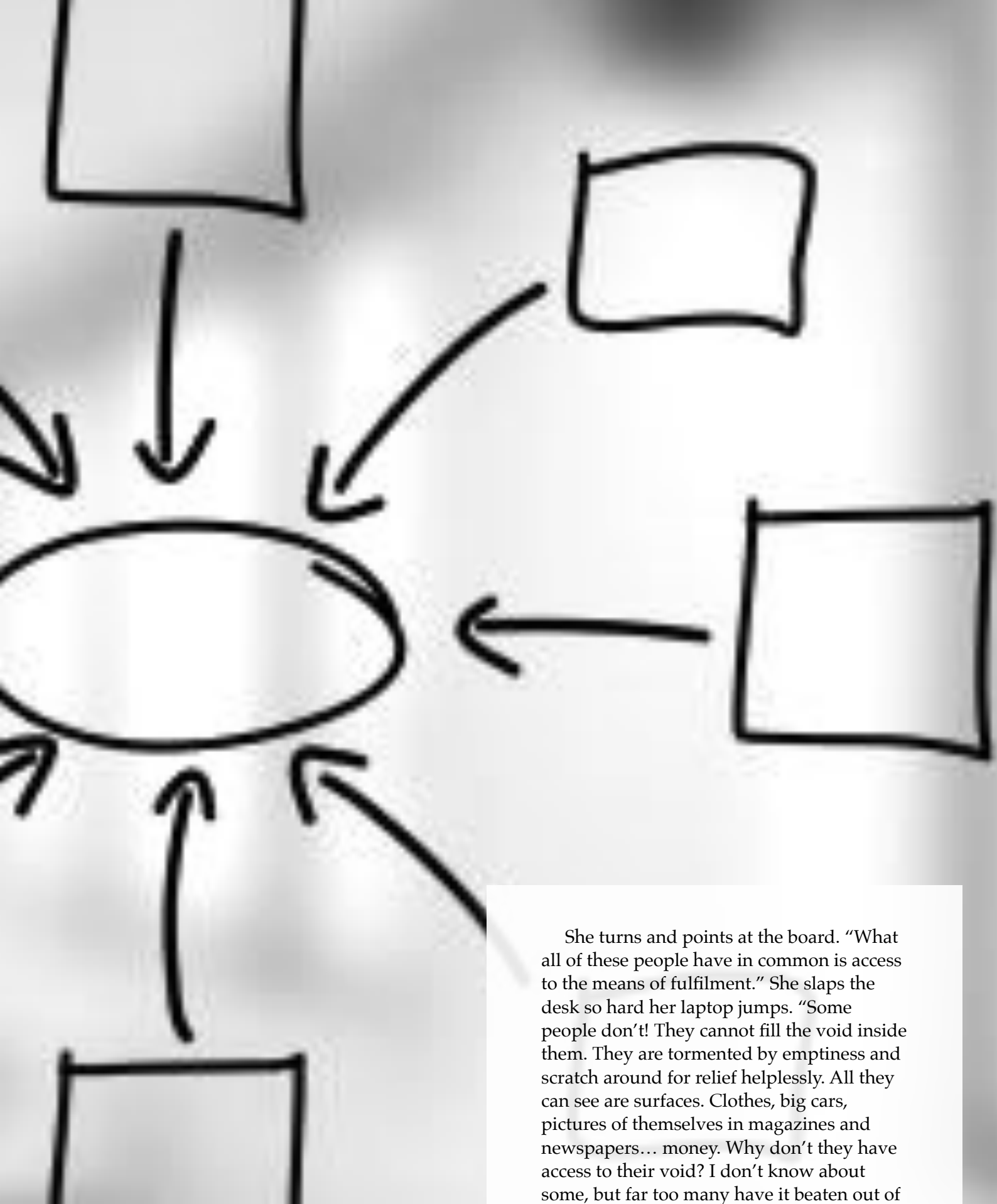


The teacher waves her to silence. "Art, a little more tricky. The old idea that a painter would let his children go hungry while he spent the last of his money on a tube of viridian, the girl who neglects her maths homework to practise ballet, the buskers in their tattered and smelly clothes who play for less money than they can possibly live on. We're thinking van Gogh and the like." She glances round the stunned pupils. "Good, you are all attending. Philosophy. She cares about the way you are told to think, believe, behave. He fights institutional stupidity. They may both be out on the street waving flags and even being arrested. What have they all in common?" She runs fingers through her hair. "I always do this. Get carried away. I plan to have you coming up to the board with examples and discussing but I explode instead. Sorry." She smiles at a girl. "Yes, Amanda, dancing and maths homework. I was talking about you. Don't worry. I know things but I'm spirit and philosophy so I'm not going to tell anyone about how you overstretched your hamstrings and not your grasp of calculus last night. Greg, you spent all evening drawing superheroes. You could have been out with your mates but you made excuses – you had an idea that needed exploring then and there. Sheila, you spent hours of Sunday fighting with Amnesty for the release of a young woman illegally detained."

She looks at all the pupils in turn. "Jim, you don't know yet where you're going because you are still learning your tools, maths and philosophy, and how to use them. When you know what they can do you'll be armed. You are going into the heart of things: you cool metacognitive thinker, you."








She turns and points at the board. "What all of these people have in common is access to the means of fulfilment." She slaps the desk so hard her laptop jumps. "Some people don't! They cannot fill the void inside them. They are tormented by emptiness and scratch around for relief helplessly. All they can see are surfaces. Clothes, big cars, pictures of themselves in magazines and newspapers... money. Why don't they have access to their void? I don't know about some, but far too many have it beaten out of them."





Ceilidh tries to draw on her tablet but she's killed a connection. "Bollocks! I'll just have to write on the board. Arrest me." She pulls a marker pen from her handbag, and turns, using a walking stick to steady herself. The pen squeaks as it leaves permanent marks. "All the philosophers, artists and spirit people are busy. All the others have are illusions and glamour to work with. I'm defining glamour as not filling a void but distracting attention from it: painting over it. These people pursue wealth and status – things that stick to their surface, their image, but never fill them inside." She turns back to the class. "It's tragic for them and for us. They race each other to show how well they've filled their void. They can only pretend to themselves and each other. Money, status, power! It's the power bit that mucks up everything. They grasp it and because they don't understand what we are up to – they screw us. Artists, poets, carers and the rest earn the least and possess a mere illusion of political power. As if that's not bad enough, the elite – as they like to think of themselves – try to program us into thinking the way they do because it helps them make money and keeps them in power. So we are bombarded by their media, adverts, political distortions of reality, anything to keep us in line, working hard in their factories, in their police forces, serving their tables. They set the school curriculum." She jabs a finger at the board. "They have us mocking and sidelining each other, even parts of ourselves. The most useless people to them, who won't do as they're told or even steal the paint they need, end up in prison or homeless. That's the ultimate punishment the elite can hand out. No status, no money, no power: the things that terrify them the most."





She winces as a pneumatic drill sends its violence through the air. "Bastard noise. Where was I? Ah!" She claps her hands. "Getting worked up. Any questions?"

She hardly waits. "That is why you need to listen to yourselves, not them. Find out why you exist, the whole point of your being alive." She slaps the desk again. Pens and pencils erupt from containers and clatter to the floor. "Because if you let them, these poor people will swamp your heads with their beliefs and you'll never find life satisfying. We let them build the cages they put us in because we're busy with real life. The truths that most irritate them are that they cannot lock the cage door and we are able to live outside."

She gathers her things, says, "Lovely to meet you all," and heads for the door, her stick clicking on the floor. The door bursts open and she disappears in a tangle of pupils as they surge through.

Sheila screams, "Careful!" and leaps up, racing forward to help, thinking Ceilidh must have fallen: but there's no one on the floor.

One girl calls out as she enters, "Charlotte, how did you get here so fast? We had to go all round the school because of the building work. You left me to carry your sodding bag."

Jim shouts over everyone, "Did you see a teacher just go out... an old woman?"

"What? No." A boy turns back and looks up and down the corridor. "No, why?"

"Nothing."

**For more of Gary Bonn's fiction, see the next page...**

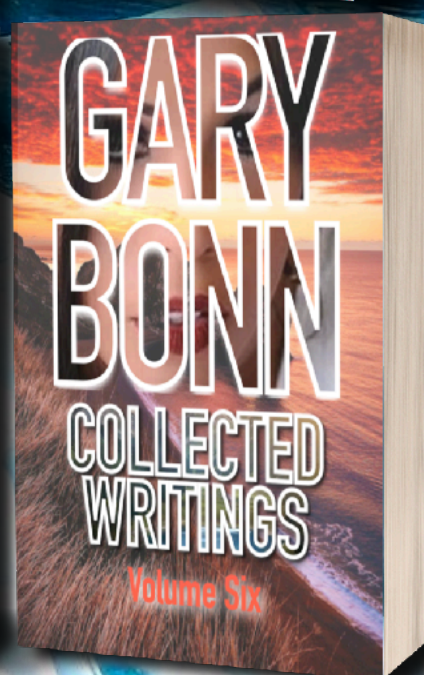
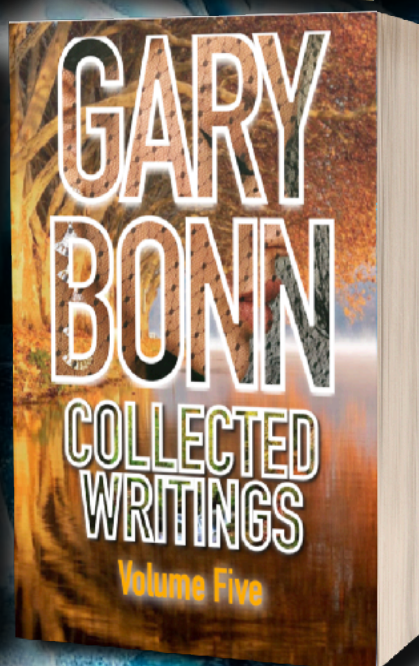
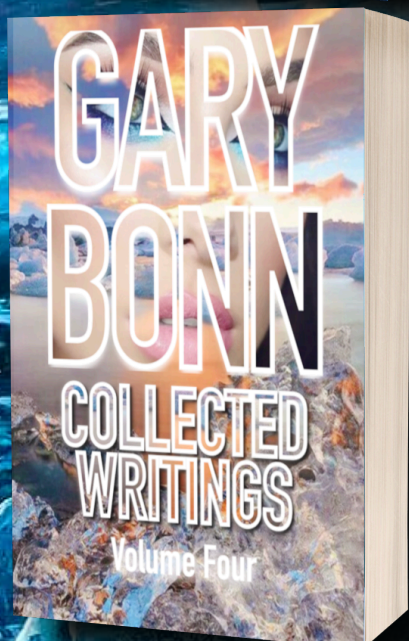
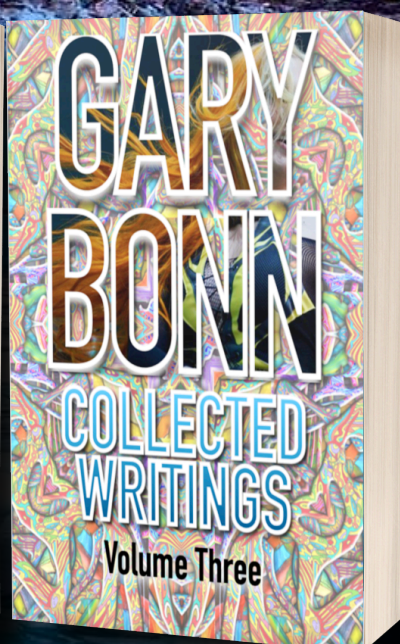
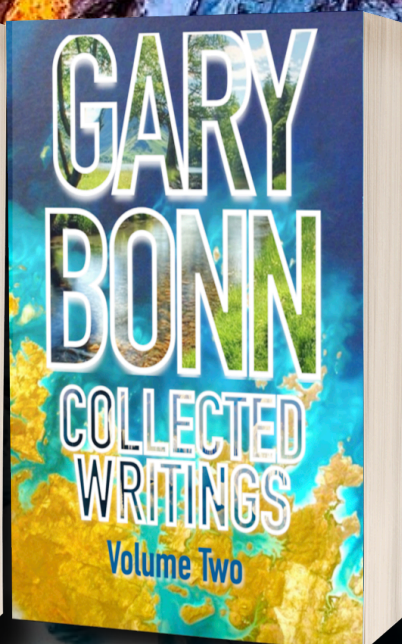
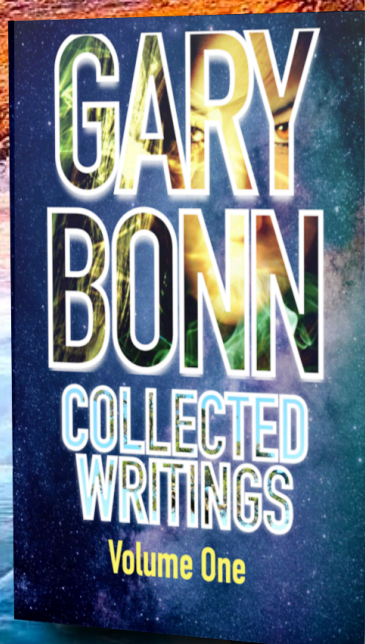


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# Witness Testimony and Other Tales

'Some authors paint such vivid pictures with their words that the reader feels as though he or she is actually present, a silent observer or phantom, almost participating in the events of a tale...'





# DO YOU BELIEVE IN MAGIC?

BY JIM BATES





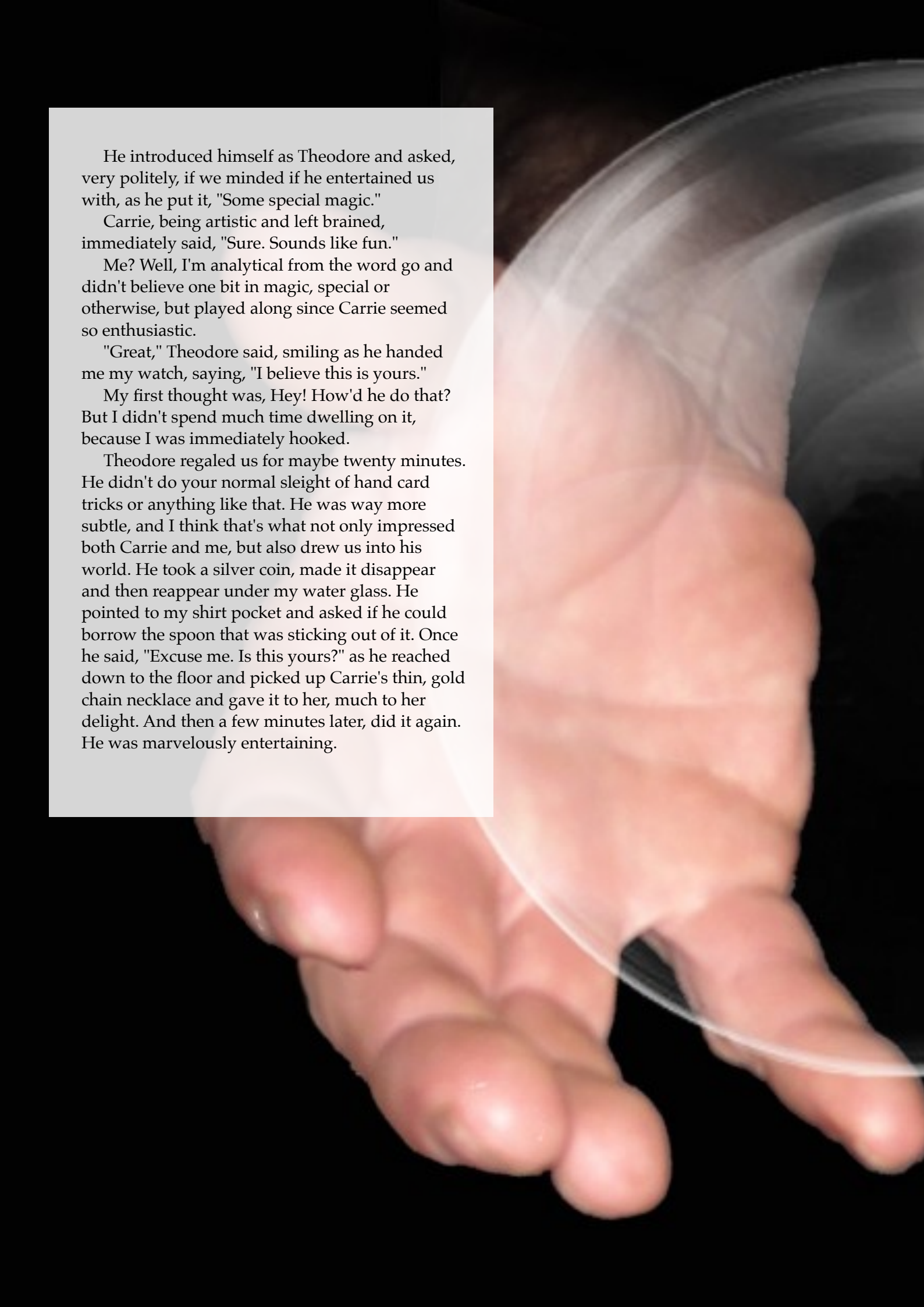
Carrie and I were out to dinner, sharing a meal at our favorite restaurant, George and the Dragon. We'd been dating for over a year and were thoroughly enjoying each other's company, so much better than our previous relationships. We were young, in our late twenties, and both had good jobs: I was a software engineer for a medium-sized electronics company and Carrie worked in the art department for a graphic arts design firm. We'd met at a stargazing class the winter before and had hit it off immediately (under the glow of the Aurora Borealis, I might add.) Now, after all these months, we'd grown very close and felt like we had something special between us.







It was Saturday, February thirteenth, and our date had been a chance to celebrate the end of a rather hectic work week for each of us. Earlier in the evening we'd gone to the Guthrie Theater to see 'Glensheen', a captivating play set in the nineteen twenties about the life of a young servant girl at the Glensheen Mansion, located just north of Duluth on the rocky shoreline of Lake Superior, a place we visited every chance we got. We'd decided to top off the evening with a late night dinner at George's, and it had been as scrumptious as usual. We were enjoying a shared dessert of crème brulee when out of nowhere the magician appeared, and he changed our lives forever.



He introduced himself as Theodore and asked, very politely, if we minded if he entertained us with, as he put it, "Some special magic."

Carrie, being artistic and left brained, immediately said, "Sure. Sounds like fun."

Me? Well, I'm analytical from the word go and didn't believe one bit in magic, special or otherwise, but played along since Carrie seemed so enthusiastic.

"Great," Theodore said, smiling as he handed me my watch, saying, "I believe this is yours."

My first thought was, Hey! How'd he do that? But I didn't spend much time dwelling on it, because I was immediately hooked.

Theodore regaled us for maybe twenty minutes. He didn't do your normal sleight of hand card tricks or anything like that. He was way more subtle, and I think that's what not only impressed both Carrie and me, but also drew us into his world. He took a silver coin, made it disappear and then reappear under my water glass. He pointed to my shirt pocket and asked if he could borrow the spoon that was sticking out of it. Once he said, "Excuse me. Is this yours?" as he reached down to the floor and picked up Carrie's thin, gold chain necklace and gave it to her, much to her delight. And then a few minutes later, did it again. He was marvelously entertaining.





But it was his last bit of magic that really blew our minds and it's stayed with us all these years. I hesitate to even call it a trick — it was so much more.

He was getting ready to leave, after handing Carrie her necklace for a third time, when he paused and asked, "Excuse me, but you two seem so happy. May I ask how long you've been together?"

"Just over a year," Carrie said, giving me a questioning look, like, what's going on?

"Why do you want to know?" I asked, keeping my voice pleasant. With someone else I might have felt he was prying but not with him. He was just so engaging, and a nice guy to boot.

"I was just wondering. I get the feeling that tonight's a big night for you two. Is that right?" he asked, in all seriousness.

We both smiled a little at him.

"Well, not much more so than any other night," I said.

"Just a normal date," Carrie added. "Why?"

"Oh, nothing," Theodore said, looking perplexed. Then he lifted an unused napkin, "It's just that I thought this might be yours."

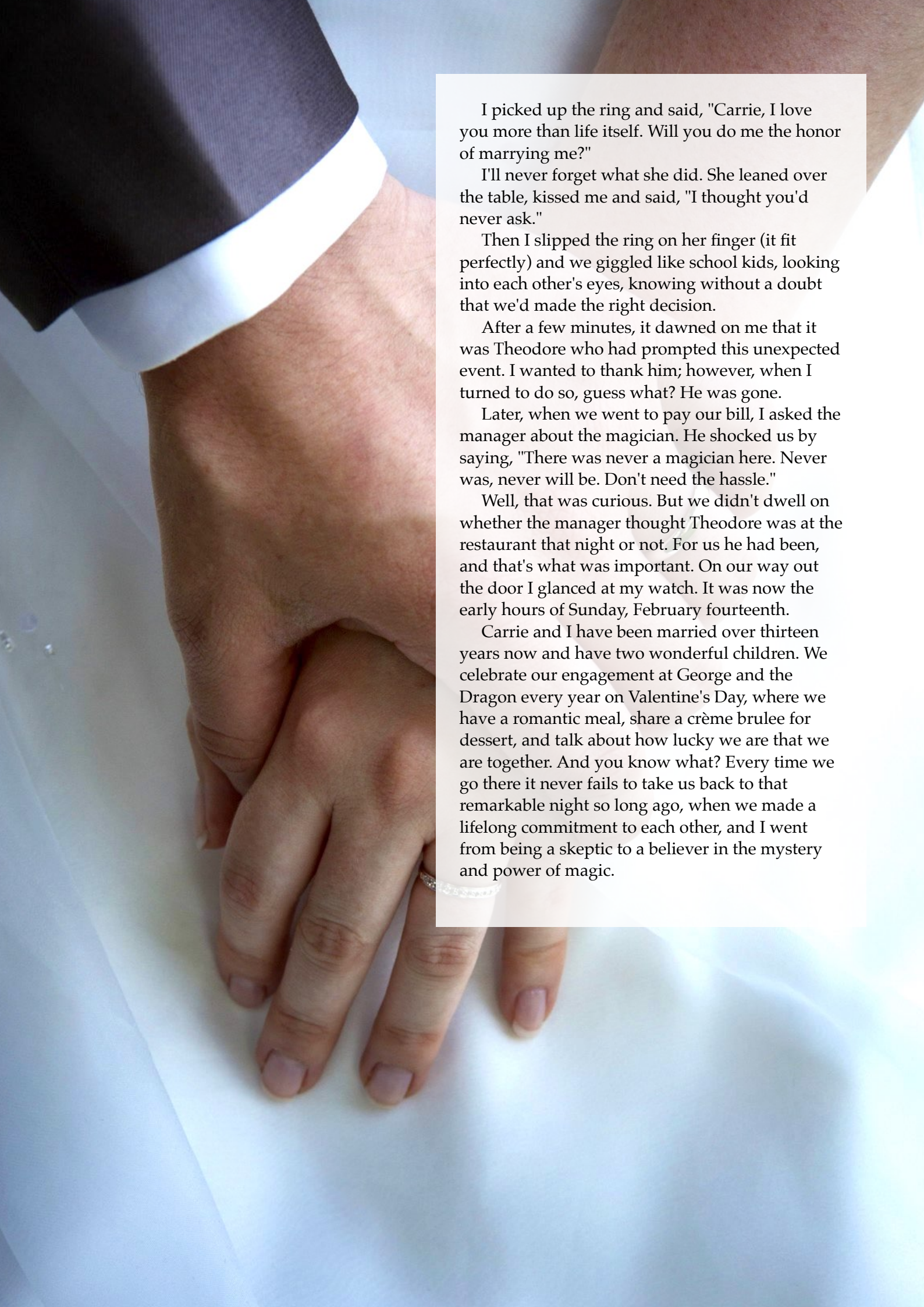
He picked up an object from underneath and set it between us on the table. It was a ring. A thin, gold band with tiny agates encased around it that sparkled in the romantic restaurant lamplight. It was beautiful, and, I swear, looked exactly like one we'd seen on a trip we'd taken up to Lake Superior that last summer. We'd come across it in an agate shop in Two Harbors and remarked on its beauty, both of us thinking at the time (but not saying it out loud) what a perfect wedding band it'd make someday for Carrie.

Theodore let the ring lay on the table and then stepped back.

I looked at Carrie. It had been such a wonderful evening, like all of our times together were. We were not only happy together but good for each other. The best part of my life was being with her. In that moment, something came over me, a tidal wave of love and emotion that was overwhelming, and, with it, the certainty that she and I were meant to be together for the rest of our lives.







I picked up the ring and said, "Carrie, I love you more than life itself. Will you do me the honor of marrying me?"

I'll never forget what she did. She leaned over the table, kissed me and said, "I thought you'd never ask."

Then I slipped the ring on her finger (it fit perfectly) and we giggled like school kids, looking into each other's eyes, knowing without a doubt that we'd made the right decision.

After a few minutes, it dawned on me that it was Theodore who had prompted this unexpected event. I wanted to thank him; however, when I turned to do so, guess what? He was gone.

Later, when we went to pay our bill, I asked the manager about the magician. He shocked us by saying, "There was never a magician here. Never was, never will be. Don't need the hassle."

Well, that was curious. But we didn't dwell on whether the manager thought Theodore was at the restaurant that night or not. For us he had been, and that's what was important. On our way out the door I glanced at my watch. It was now the early hours of Sunday, February fourteenth.

Carrie and I have been married over thirteen years now and have two wonderful children. We celebrate our engagement at George and the Dragon every year on Valentine's Day, where we have a romantic meal, share a crème brulee for dessert, and talk about how lucky we are that we are together. And you know what? Every time we go there it never fails to take us back to that remarkable night so long ago, when we made a lifelong commitment to each other, and I went from being a skeptic to a believer in the mystery and power of magic.



CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR

JIM BATES



Overlapping memories, overlapping lives, wide open spaces and soft but sometimes heart-breaking reminiscences, with the mighty Mississippi running through it all — let Jim Bates take you on rich, human, intertwining journeys into a landscape of souls where you can glimpse beauty and peace, longing and contentment, the burden of past decisions and their forgiveness, and perhaps find yourself . . .








# LINKS

by Frank Kozusko





## I. The Dog Walker

If you asked Mark Radford what he did, he would tell you he was an actor. It was true that he had performed in two off-off Broadway plays. He had had a few gigs as an extra in some of the many movies and television shows that are filmed on the streets of New York City.

Acting didn't pay the bills. So, in fact, Mark was an actor / waiter / dog walker. Mark had the looks and the buoyant personality of a young Tom Hanks. He interacted nicely with the diners and did well in tips. The shifts were flexible, allowing him time to go to auditions, and if he was lucky enough to get a part, the rehearsals and performances. He shared a two-bedroom apartment in the East Village with one other actor / waiter. Even with the apartment expenses split two ways, he found his budget was strained on his waiter's income and he had taken a job with a dog walking company as a morning dog walker. He liked the dogs and they liked him. The job forced him to get up early and get some exercise.

Each Monday through Saturday morning he would make his rounds to gather the dogs and take them for the required minimum 30-minute walk. He walked four dogs: a beagle named Buddy, a golden retriever name Snute, and two standard poodle siblings, easily distinguished as Salt and Pepper. He walked with two bags hanging from a makeshift belt. The bag on the right had plastic gloves and scoop bags; the bag on the left was for stowing the product of the dog walks. Cleaning up after the dogs was distasteful in the beginning but Mark had grown accustomed to it. The biggest problem was restraining the other dogs when one of them decided to linger.

One day while cleaning up after Salt, Mark heard a noise from behind: one of the dogs was choking. He didn't turn around in time to witness the event but the evidence was on the sidewalk: two small shiny objects covered in vomit. Mark reached for a new set of plastic gloves while tethering the leashes from his wrists. He cleaned the objects which then appeared to be a set of dainty gold cufflinks. In a diagonal pattern were engraved the letters S and F. He thought it odd that a dog would swallow cufflinks.



Mark mused over what to do with his find while walking the dogs back home. Maybe he could get some quick cash by taking them to a pawnshop. No, he couldn't be dishonest. He would inform each owner and hope for a little reward.

Salt and Pepper lived in an old Brownstone on East 7<sup>th</sup> Street between First and Second Avenues. Mark never met the owner. It was always the housekeeper, Aina, who put the dogs on their leashes and passed them to him. Aina had a Spanish accent but a good command of English. She answered the doorbell today, as always, with a smile for Mark and pats on the head for Salt and Pepper.

"Hey, Aina, look what I found," said Mark excitedly. "I think one of the dogs coughed them up."

Aina took the cufflinks out of Mark's hand and examined them. "They very nice," she said. "But I not see before. Mrs. Granerous has much fine jewels and her first name Susan."

"Do you know her maiden name?" asked Mark.

"I not know what is her name before she married."

"Well, let Mr. or Mrs. Granerous know about the cuff links."

"Si, si, I tell her."

Mark headed to the Bowery to take Snute home. The Bowery, once an undisputed seedy area, was being gentrified. New luxurious condominiums stood in contrast to the Bowery Mission where homeless men still lined up for a free meal and a chance at a bunk for the night. Snute lived in one of the newest lux condos. The security guard buzzed Mark in and called the "Super", who always brought Snute to and from his penthouse apartment. Mark related his tale about the cufflinks and asked the "Super" to inform Snute's owner.







Now Buddy, the Beagle pulled on his leash, no longer intimidated by the bigger dogs. He knew the way, and led back to Alphabet City, as they called that area between Avenue A and Avenue D. Buddy lived in an old apartment building that had been converted to condos in the '80s. The red brick building's green cornice announced its 1884 birth year. Usually, Mark would push the buzzer for apartment 3C and be buzzed in. Then he would take the elevator to the third floor where Mr. Young would be waiting for him and Buddy. Today there was a note on the windowed door. "Mark, I had to leave early today. Leave Buddy with Lynda in 2B. JMY" When Mark buzzed 2B, a woman's voice answered.

"Hi, I'm Mark, Mr. Young left a note that I was supposed to give you his dog?" There was no answer but the door buzzed unlocked. When Mark got to the second floor, a woman was waiting just inside her cracked open door and stuck out her hand to grab Buddy's leash. Mark was barely able to retell his story about the cuff links before she closed the door with an impatient "Okay, okay" reply to his request to tell Mr. Young.

Mark walked back to his apartment irritated that he had not been able to eliminate any of the

dogs as the cufflink eater. That evening he called all three dog owners. When no one claimed the cufflinks, Mark decided they were his. Mark showed the links to his boyfriend Carlos and told him the story. Carlos agreed that Mark should try to pawn them.

#

The next morning, Mark was groggy after a late night shift waiting tables at the Side Street Café. The dog walking was routine. Still, no one had claimed the links. The rest of the morning was spent at a coffee shop, where Mark used the free Wi-Fi to search for auditions. After lunch, he went to Morrie's Pawnshop.

Morrie greeted Mark from behind his teller's cage. "What can I do for you, young man?" asked Morrie in a heavy East European accent.

"How much can I get for these?" Mark asked, handing over the cufflinks.

Morrie let out a sigh of exasperation as he viewed Mark's offering, tilting his head from side to side as if trying to decide. "Well, they may be gold or they might not be gold. I would have to test. I can give you \$50."

"Is that all?" said Mark disappointedly.



"These are obviously cufflinks for a woman. Not many women in this country wear them. In Europe, maybe, but not so much here. Then the initials." Morrie shrugged his shoulders and turned up the palms of his hands. "You could try to sell them on eBay or Craigslist. Maybe there is a lady with those initials who would be happy to get them."

"Okay, thanks."

Mark had no prior knowledge of eBay or Craigslist but he got help from his roommate Tom. They posted a nice cell phone picture and set the price at \$100. It took only one day to get a callback.

"Do you still have the cufflinks?" asked a male voice.

"Yes," replied Mark with enthusiasm.

"Oh, great. I had been looking for some unusual jewelry for my girlfriend on Craigslist when I saw your listing. Amazingly, her initials are S. F. But I would have to see them in person before buying them. Are you in the city?"

"Yes, I live in East Village."

"Then perhaps we could meet and I can look at them. I think I could agree to the \$100 price and will bring cash."

Mark knew enough to be cautious about meeting strangers through the internet and asked if they could meet in Tompkins Square Park.

They exchanged first names and agreed on noon the next day. Mark said he would be sitting on the park bench next to the gate to the dog park. "I'll be wearing my Detroit Tigers ball cap, probably not too many of them in Manhattan."

#

Saturday morning was like many mornings for Mark: walking the dogs, drinking coffee while searching online for auditions. Well before noon, he arrived at Tompkins Square and sat on the bench he had described to the buyer. It was a sunny spring day and the dog park was full of dogs, running and playing. Mark had been to this park several times when he'd brought Salt and Pepper here for a run. Now he was there to conduct business. After an hour of waiting, Mark checked his cell phone's incoming call history. He hadn't noticed it at the time, but the call from the buyer registered as "Unknown Caller". There wasn't anything that Mark could do now. If the buyer was still interested, he could call again.





Mark didn't head back to his apartment right away. He strolled through the park and up and down Avenues A and B just enjoying the day. He bought some artisan bread at the Farmers' Market. It reminded him of the bread that his mother would make for Sunday dinner in Ohio.

Mark grew tired, not so much from the walk but last night's work and not sleeping well. He decided to head back to his apartment. Maybe he could get a nap before his shift. Maybe his roommate would be out, maybe it would be quiet. Using one hand to turn the key and the other to hold onto his bread, he pushed the lobby door open with his shoulder. Halfway through the doorway, his body was jolted from behind and into the hall. A rope came over his head then gripped his neck as he was shoved and pinned to the wall. Reflexively he dropped the bread and keys and tried with both hands to loosen the garrote. He kicked backward furiously with his right foot as he struggled for breath that didn't come. When Mark's body slackened, his murderer stood back and let it drop to the floor.

Straddling Mark's body, the attacker folded the death cord with gloved hands and shoved it into a coat pocket. Mark's pockets were searched and the cufflinks were removed. The attacker kicked Mark's corpse twice in the ribs. The final deed was covering Mark's face with a white washcloth with large red lettering: FAG.



## II. The Drug Dealer

His mother named him James; he preferred the street name he'd given himself: Jocko. He had been selling drugs in the East Village for over two decades. At first, his product was cocaine, a dangerous business, but the money was good. Jocko could be dangerous too. He had barely escaped trafficking and assault convictions during New York City's crime-busting in the 1990s. The neighborhood gentrified. Heroin became the new high; the liquid form. No needles needed. A more appealing drug to the masses and to the professionals who bought the condos that were once run-down apartments. There was money in the East Village and Jocko was getting as much as he could.

Jocko liked to spend time in Tompkins Square Park. It was clean and safe now. No longer the home of hyped-up or passed out addicts. It had a playground for children and a fenced-in area for dogs to run and exercise. Jocko liked to watch the dogs play with each other. He liked dogs, had several growing up in Maine. He had thought about getting a dog many times during his life in New York. In the old days, he thought it too risky to be walking a dog on the same streets that were contested drug turf. Streets weren't that mean anymore. On a whim, Jocko bought a dog.

It didn't take long for Jocko to learn the downside of dog ownership in New York: the morning dog walking. In Maine, his family would just let the dog in and out whenever the dog scratched at the door. In NYC a scratch or a whine meant a collared walk, a stop, a cleanup. Jocko soon learned that the dog's calls of nature didn't sync well with his own schedule of sleeping late in the morning. Jocko hired a morning dog walker.

Jocko was surprised when he received an evening phone call from Mark, his dog walker. During that morning's walk, one of the dogs in the group had coughed up a pair of dainty gold cufflinks, engraved with the letters S and F. Mark was calling each of the three owners. Jocko denied any knowledge of the jewelry while his mind raced, recalling events and piecing together timelines. He recognized those initials. Could the cufflinks belong to her? It was possible. Jocko needed to get hold of them before they could be used to trace her back to him and his crime. But how? Jocko knew Mark lived in the East Village, he had seen him several times in the area with his boyfriend, obviously gay. Jocko didn't know where Mark lived. The next morning Jocko would follow Mark, looking for an opportunity to get that tiny evidence pair.







After he dropped off the last dog, Mark went to a coffee shop, Jocko followed. Jocko sat in the back and waited hours anxiously watching Mark on Wi-Fi. When Mark left the coffee shop, Jocko once again followed as Mark walked just a few blocks down Avenue A, before entering Eastville Pawn. A sign on the window flashed a promise of quick loans. Jocko took a position across the street. When Mark emerged from the pawnshop, he turned back down Avenue A. Convinced that Mark had pawned the cufflinks, Jocko decided to drop off Mark's trail and check out the pawnshop.

The bell attached to the door summoned Morrie the owner to a "Good afternoon, sir". Jocko acknowledged with a nod and found the display of women's jewelry. After a few minutes, Morrie offered, "Are you looking for anything specific?"

"Oh, I am looking for a pair of gold cufflinks for my girlfriend, she is all into the Annie Hall look these days. Do you have anything like that?"

"I don't get woman's cufflinks in here very often. But it's funny that you're asking now. I just had a young fellow in here with a nice set, but they were engraved S F. So you probably wouldn't be interested."

"Hmm," mused Jocko, deceptively pausing. "My girlfriend's initials are S P, maybe the S F can be changed to S P."

"Maybe? I told the young fellow that I couldn't use them. Told him to try eBay or Craigslist."

It took Jocko two days of scouring those "junk for sale" websites, as he came to think of them, before he found Mark's listing. He called Mark, tentatively agreed to the \$100 asking price. They would meet the next day, noon, Tompkins Square Park dog run.

Jocko arrived at the park early, took a seat where he could view the rendezvous bench from a distance. Mark arrived on time, wearing the Detroit Tigers ball cap that he promised as a recognition aid. Jocko watched and waited. He had to get Mark alone, get the cufflinks and eliminate his connection to them. After an hour, Mark left the park. Jocko followed in frustration as Mark strolled the avenues and wandered through the Farmers' Market.

A few blocks down East 4th Street, Mark reached into his pocket, pulled out his keys and climbed the stoop to his building. This was it: the street, shrouded at dusk, was empty. Jocko closed in. Jocko, the much bigger man, easily overpowered Mark from behind. Mark struggled in vain as Jocko tightened a rope around his neck. After Mark's lifeless body fell to the floor, Jocko searched through his pocket until he found the cufflinks. He left the watch and wallet; the cops would rule out robbery. Jocko would provide them with a different motive, one that would throw so much fear into the East Village that Jocko's other crimes would be back-burnered. Jocko covered Mark's face with a rag with bright red lettering: FAG. Jocko applied two kicks to Mark's ribs, saying: "That's for making me follow you around all afternoon."



### III. The Artist

Sara made jewelry, necklaces and bracelets, which she sold at Union Square when the weather was nice. She didn't make much money, which was okay; she was a "trust fund baby". Her father paid for her apartment in the East Village and provided a nice monthly allowance. She was several years out of college and her father, a hedge fund manager, indulged her free spirit. In the late afternoons, she liked to watch the dogs in Tompkins Square Dog Park. Sometimes she would start up a conversation with an owner, then get to pet their dog. Beagles were her favorite.

One Sunday she saw an exceptional beagle. "What a beauty he is," she said to the owner. "What's his name?"

"Buddy, he's my buddy."

"Hi, Buddy," said Sara, bending over and scratching the dog's ears. "How old is he?"

"He is three years old, got him as a pup." Sara straightened up and offered her hand.

"I'm Sara."

"I'm Jocko. Time to let Buddy run." Jocko opened the gate to the dog park and unleashed Buddy. Sara and Jocko stood at the fence and watched as Buddy ran around and played with other dogs.

Sara and Jocko exchanged small talk about dogs. "I like dogs," said Sara. "But I'm not ready to commit to the responsibility of having one yet."

"Buddy seemed to like you. Would you like to walk him sometimes?"

"That would be nice."

"You know what," mused Jocko, "I pay to have Buddy walked in the mornings Monday through Saturday. Would you like that job? Doesn't pay much."

"Oh, no, I'm not a morning person."

"Okay. Anyway, I bring Buddy here every Sunday about this time. You are welcome to play with him then."

Sara met Buddy and Jocko regularly for several Sunday mornings after their first meeting. Their conversation became more personal. Sara talked about her jewelry. Jocko said he was in construction but there wasn't much work these days. Jocko wasn't really in construction; he was a drug dealer.

Sometimes Jocko would let Sara walk Buddy around the park before they all went home. One time as Sara was returning Buddy, she thought she got a whiff of marijuana. "Is that grass I smell?"

Jocko smiled, turning his head from side to side and sniffing. Then casually nodded. "Yep." Then he looked at her quizzically. "Do you smoke?"

Sara shrugged. "Oh, once in a while if I can get it."

"I've got some joints at my place, interested?"

"Sure."

***Sara Finley***  
***Artisan Jewelry***



***sfjewelry@gmail.com***





Jocko's third-floor apartment was just a few blocks from the park. Jocko put on some jazz and pulled out two joints. They sat on the floor smoking, talking and getting high.

When the joints were finished: "How about some vodka?" asked Jocko.

"Yeah."

Jocko partially filled two juice glasses. Sara emptied her glass quickly and asked for more. Jocko obliged. After more swallows, nearly emptying her glass again, Sara stood up: "I'm tired of jazz, how about some rock?"

"Arctic Monkeys?"

"Yeah, yeah."

Sara stood up and started dancing, Jocko joining her. Then Sara pushed him away and started a striptease. First, she unbuttoned her blouse. Then she unclasped the French cuffs, letting each cufflink drop to the floor one by one. She removed her blouse and threw it at him. Then she wiggled out of her jeans. Seductively, as she had seen at a burlesque show in the East Village,

she loosened her bra while cupping it to herself. Then she pulled it away, twirled it and flung it to Jocko.

Now Jocko made his move. He lifted Sara up and tossed her on his bed. While Jocko removed his clothing, Sara passed out. Feeling the weight of his body as Jocko climbed on top of her, Sara regained a confused consciousness. A pot/booze paranoia gripped her. She screamed and hit Jocko. Jocko had to silence her. His apartment was stashed with heroin as well as grass. He reached his hands around her throat and squeezed.

When Sara finally fell silent, Jocko rolled off the bed onto the floor and stared at the ceiling. It took some time for him to gather his thoughts under the influence of the smoke and drink. He decided he needed to get rid of her body, quickly. He dressed her, retrieving her clothes from around the apartment, but he couldn't find her cufflinks. He stuffed her body into a trunk that he used to bring his big shipments of marijuana into his apartment.





At 4:00 AM, when he thought he was fully recovered from intoxication, he wheeled the trunk to the elevator and out to the street where his van was parked. He struggled to lift the trunk into the back of his van; Sara was not a big woman, but now she was 'dead' weight. Once inside the van, Jocko removed Sara's corpse from the trunk and positioned it near the rear. Cautiously, he drove to Brooklyn where he knew there was a section of empty lots. When he found a spot where there was no traffic, Jocko pulled over to the side, opened the door and pushed the body out. He drove away slowly.

Returning to his apartment in East Village, he was unable to find an empty parking spot. He drove around fruitlessly. It was Monday morning; soon Mark, his dog walker, would be coming to get Buddy for his morning walk. Jocko didn't want to bring any attention to himself by not following schedule. Double-parking his van, he quickly went to his

apartment, got Buddy and met Mark at the entrance to the building. Then he asked his neighbor Lynda, a drug customer, who he knew to be an early riser, if she would be there to take Buddy after his walk. He left a note for Mark on the outer door. He found one of the few remaining carwashes in Manhattan and thoroughly cleaned and vacuumed his car.

Jocko spent the rest of the day tending to his drug business. He gave no thought to Sara's missing cufflinks until that evening, when Mark called to say that one of the dogs he walked had coughed up a set of gold cufflinks with initials S. F. Jocko denied knowing anything about the cufflinks, then quickly checked the business card that Sara had given him: Jocko knew he had to get those cufflinks before they could be used to connect him to Sara. He would kill if he had to.





#### IV. The Detective

Dan Greene pushed passed the crowd outside an apartment building in the East Village. He flashed his badge at the uniform cops as he ducked under the yellow crime scene tape, then pinned the badge to the lapel of his gray suit jacket. The assistant medical examiner was leaning over a body in the entry lobby.

"What'd ya got, Doc?"

"A fresh one, strangled from behind," replied Doctor Edlian. "No indication it was a robbery, his wallet was still in his pocket, \$12, name's Mark Radford. Could be a hate crime, they found this on his body." Edlian handed Green a plastic police evidence pouch that held a slip of paper with the word 'FAG' written in large red letters.

"Now I have two East Village murders to investigate," said Greene.

"Two? I don't remember the office getting a body from the East Village lately?"

"Oh, you guys didn't get this one. The Brooklyn boys found the body of a young woman in an empty lot. No ID on the body, but they were able to identify her through the serial numbers on her breast implants."

Edlian smirked: "We've had a couple of those. So how did you get the case?"

"She lived in the East Village, just around the corner, Sara Finley. She was strangled too. It looked like a dump job and since she lived in Manhattan, Brooklyn asked us to take the case."

"How was she strangled?"

"The usual way, by hand, bruise marks on her throat from the killer's thumbs and fingers."

"Well this guy was strangled from behind by some kind of cord or rope," said Edlian.

"Time of death?"

"Like I said, he's fresh, no rigor yet. I'd say less than two hours. That's all I can tell you now. I will let you know if there is anything else after I get him on the table tomorrow."

"Okay, thanks, Doc."

"He was such a nice young man," said a man standing in the lobby.

"You knew him?" said Greene.

"I'm the Super. He's in 3D, shares a two-bedroom with another guy, both actor wannabes."

#

Greene went with the Super to 3D. When there was no answer, the Super let Greene into the apartment. Greene found nothing of interest.

"Here's my card, have the roommate call me."



Greene sat at his desk drinking coffee and pondering his two open murder cases, making notes in their case files.

Sara Finley: 24-year-old white female. Trust fund baby. Lived in East Village. Made jewelry and sold it at Union Square. No known relationships. Apparently strangled and body dumped in Brooklyn. No evidence of a struggle in her apartment. Father, hedge fund manager living in Greenwich, CT, identified and claimed the body. ...Should canvass her neighborhood with a photo.

Mark Radford: 26-year-old gay white male, strangled in his apartment entrance, possible hate crime, body tagged with a note: FAG. ...Need to talk with the roommate.

Greene's concentration was interrupted by the ringing of his desk phone.

"Detective Greene, Front Desk. I have a guy here who says he is Mark Radford's roommate."

"Okay, send him up."

Greene interviewed the roommate, Tom Wilson. Wilson told Greene that Radford had been pursuing an acting career and supported himself by waiting tables and walking dogs.

"It looks like a hate crime," said Greene. "Did he have any problems with anyone about being gay?"

Wilson shook his head. "No, not that I know about."

"Do you know what Mark was doing Saturday, the day he was killed?"

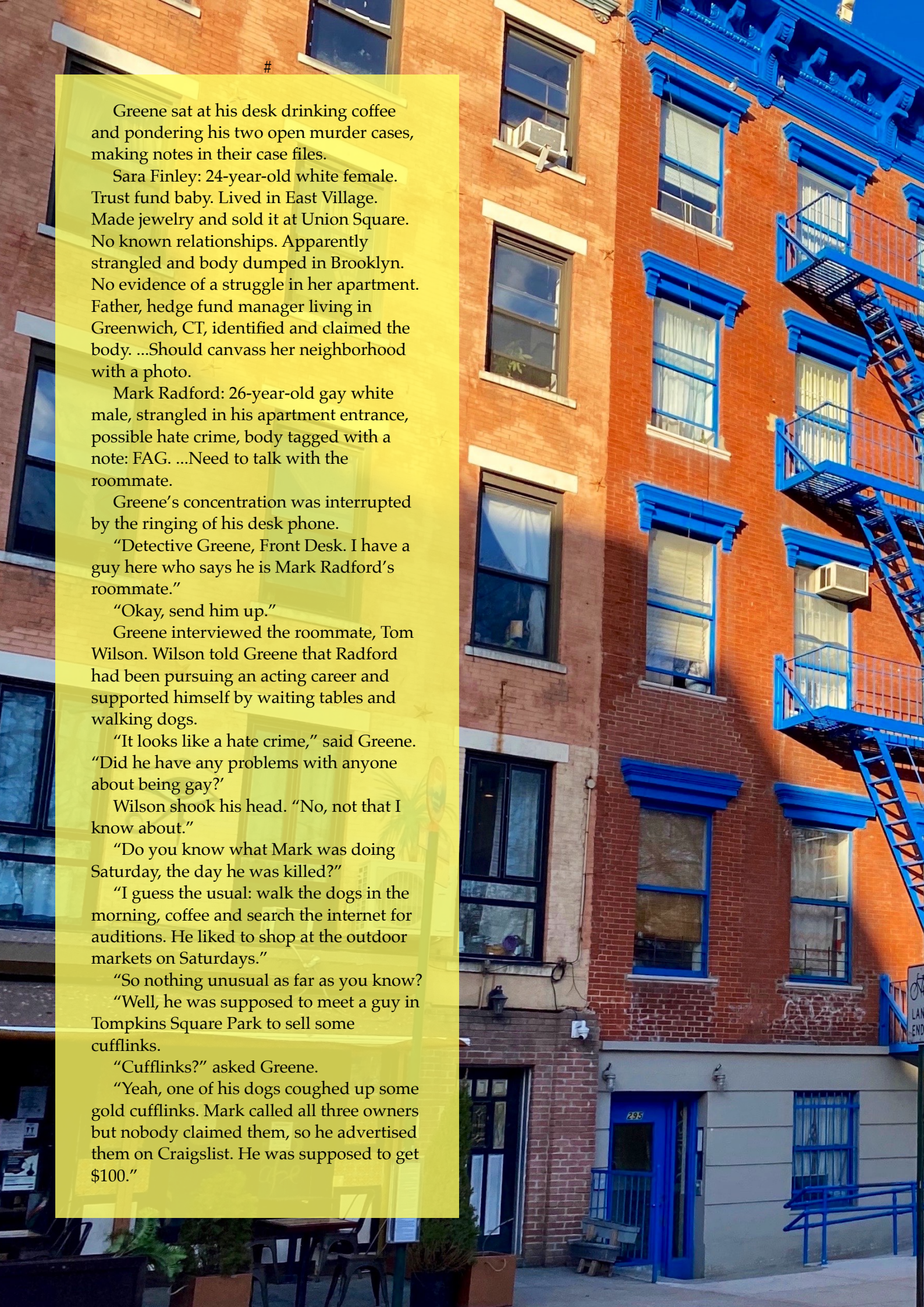
"I guess the usual: walk the dogs in the morning, coffee and search the internet for auditions. He liked to shop at the outdoor markets on Saturdays."

"So nothing unusual as far as you know?"

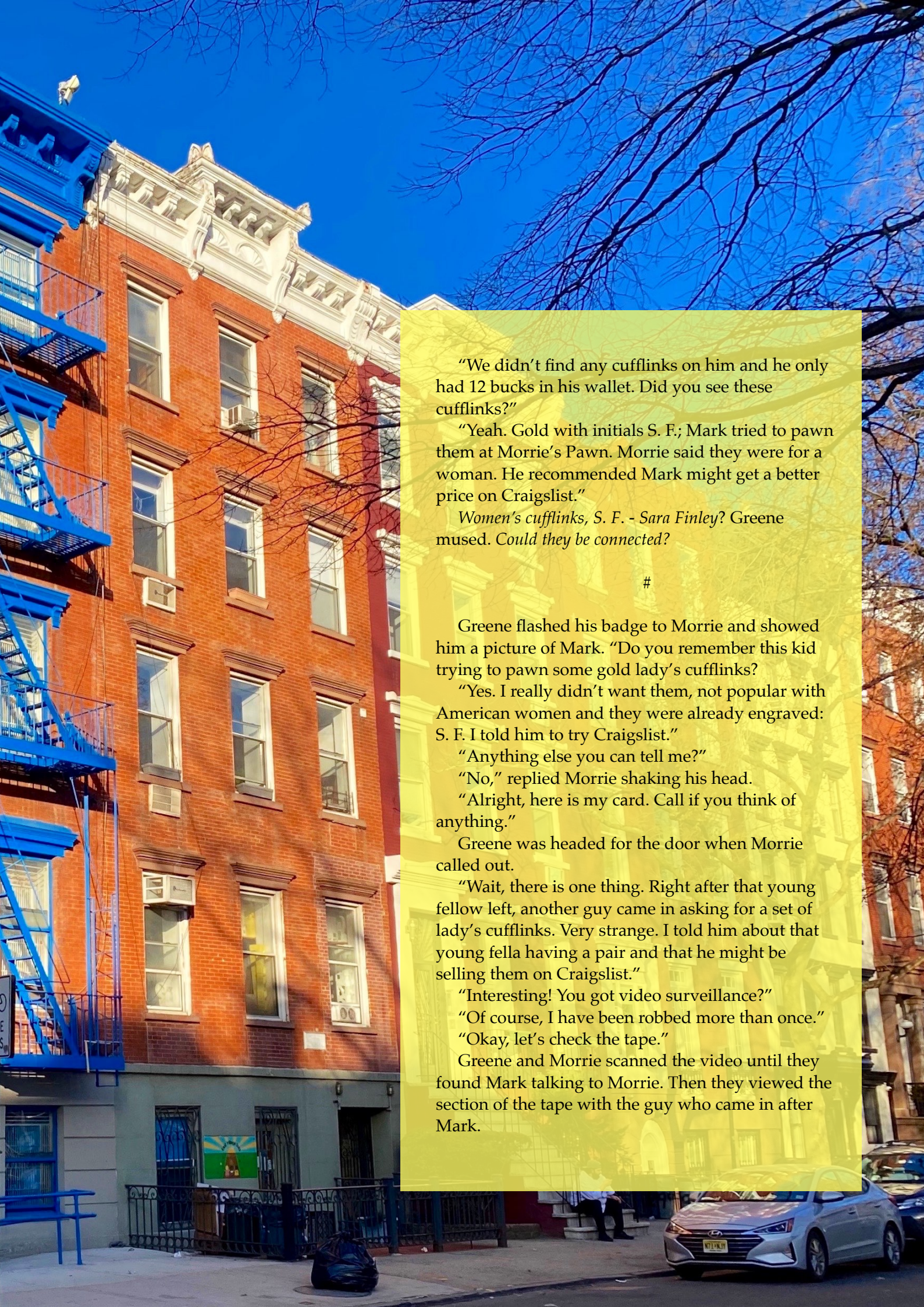
"Well, he was supposed to meet a guy in Tompkins Square Park to sell some cufflinks."

"Cufflinks?" asked Greene.

"Yeah, one of his dogs coughed up some gold cufflinks. Mark called all three owners but nobody claimed them, so he advertised them on Craigslist. He was supposed to get \$100."







"We didn't find any cufflinks on him and he only had 12 bucks in his wallet. Did you see these cufflinks?"

"Yeah. Gold with initials S. F.; Mark tried to pawn them at Morrie's Pawn. Morrie said they were for a woman. He recommended Mark might get a better price on Craigslist."

*Women's cufflinks, S. F. - Sara Finley?* Greene mused. *Could they be connected?*

#

Greene flashed his badge to Morrie and showed him a picture of Mark. "Do you remember this kid trying to pawn some gold lady's cufflinks?"

"Yes. I really didn't want them, not popular with American women and they were already engraved: S. F. I told him to try Craigslist."

"Anything else you can tell me?"

"No," replied Morrie shaking his head.

"Alright, here is my card. Call if you think of anything."

Greene was headed for the door when Morrie called out.

"Wait, there is one thing. Right after that young fellow left, another guy came in asking for a set of lady's cufflinks. Very strange. I told him about that young fella having a pair and that he might be selling them on Craigslist."

"Interesting! You got video surveillance?"

"Of course, I have been robbed more than once."

"Okay, let's check the tape."

Greene and Morrie scanned the video until they found Mark talking to Morrie. Then they viewed the section of the tape with the guy who came in after Mark.



Showing a still shot of the 'person of interest' around the park soon led to an ID: James Young, street name: Jocko, a known drug dealer. Greene had suspected that Mark's murder had something to do with the cufflinks, and the cufflinks led back to the dogs he walked. Greene obtained the names of the three owners; James Young was one.

Greene formulated his theory of the crime: Jocko was somehow involved in Sara Finley's murder. His dog, Buddy, had swallowed her cufflinks. When he got the call from Mark, Jocko feared the incident might lead to him. He had to get the cufflinks back. He found out that Mark was going to sell via Craigslist. Jocko was the guy Mark was to meet for the sale. Mark didn't have the \$100 on him. So Jocko didn't meet Mark in the park but followed him and waited for a chance to eliminate him as a witness. The FAG note was a red herring.

Greene obtained a search warrant. Jocko's van was clean. His apartment was a different story. They found the cufflinks and some of Sara's fingerprints. They also found a short length of rope which matched the pattern on Mark's neck and contained Mark's DNA.

Jocko was found guilty of Sara's murder and Mark's murder.

The cufflinks remain in police custody as evidence pending the appeals process.







# Molecular Man

## by Peter Toeg

*"What is true in our minds is true in the world"*

— Noam Chomsky

He arrived late one spring night in a U-haul, unloaded all his possessions into the vacant house, and became my next-door neighbor. That was the beginning of what would be our strange relationship.

Marie, my wife, and I appreciated living on a quiet street, and this mystery neighbor met our requirements. I worked out of the house, my office window facing his, and observed some activity. That first week I spotted a tall, middle-aged man, bearded and moving cautiously in his yard like one stalks a deer. Perhaps he was observing the squirrels and birds so as not to disturb them. I had intended to stop over for a meet-and-greet, encouraged by Marie, but elected to wait and let him get settled.

A month later, I happened to be cleaning gutters one day. The familiar sound—rolling out his trash bin for pickup—provided an opportunity. I caught up with him as he was inspecting one of the many shrubs on his property.

"They could use a trim, eh?"

He jerked.

I'd startled him.

"Excuse me?" he said, his eyes occasionally making contact with mine.

"The bushes." I pointed to one. "I'm Leo, your neighbor. Welcome to the block." I extended a hand. He had a weak grip, like someone unaccustomed to greetings.

"Uh, okay." He looked at me questioning, tentative, and I wondered if English was not his native language. "Gilbert Mosby... I go by Mosby." His voice a monotone, face expressionless.

"A pleasure. Is it just you living here?" I asked.

"Why?"

"Just curious. I'm married to Marie," I said as if that justified the question.

He looked uncomfortable, shoulders raised.

"You'll meet her sometime."

"For now."

"For now, what?"

"I'm living here for now." A hint of concern fell on his face, or maybe it was a twitch. "The way life is, you never know."





#

Our starter conversation was typical of Mosby's penchant for brevity and obliqueness. After two months of my deliberately crossing his path to borrow a tool (he never had what I needed) or delivering one of Marie's loaf cakes (drawing suspicious stares), he seemed to accept me. Well, he cringed less when I encountered him. I learned to keep conversations brief.

My window with a view told me Mosby kept to himself, never entertaining any visitors except the cable guy. I learned he worked from home as an actuary, a precious fact he relinquished in late spring after balking for a week.

"I deal with risk and uncertainty," he'd told me when I asked what that meant at a backyard fence meet. He spoke in a cautious voice as if I'd asked him a trick question. His eyes flashed when I told him I was an FBI agent.

"Only kidding," I said when he froze, and I sensed his alarm. "I'm in real estate. Commercial. Spend most of my time at home also."

He nodded slowly. Not completely assured I could be trusted to tell the truth again.

I made a mental note not to joke around with Mosby.

Marie wandered over and joined us.

"My wife," as an introduction. "She owns the florist shop in town."

Mosby seemed pleased. When Marie extended her hand, the smile faded.

Casually withdrawing her hand, she said sweetly, "My pleasure, Mosby. Nice to meet you."

I'd neglected to brief her. Mosby didn't like to be touched, another mental note. Marie recovered nicely and immediately complimented him on his gardening skills.

"Those shrubs are beautifully shaped, Mosby. I've admired your handiwork for a while." She pointed. "Freeform topiary is an art. I see boxwood, and those in the back are evergreen shrubs, aren't they?"

"Those are taxus bushes. They're poisonous," as if warning her. "That tall one is an obelisk and has a few tapering spirals."

Marie had found common ground. "And the rounded one partially shaped is—"

"An elephant. Well, it will be. No tusks. Like female Asian elephants."

Elephants, yes. Check.

#

"You guys exchange a few words, and that's all," Marie said later. "Why not invite him out for coffee and have a long chat?"

"Women do that, hon. Oh, and also the old geezers at McDonald's in the morning."

She huffed in exasperation, her trademark emotion.

"He's a curious man," she wouldn't let go. "You should get to know him better, not just in drips. He's always alone. No visitors. He could use a friend."

"Yeah." That was a thought. "I'd like to observe him around other people. And he knows about poisons."

"Leo!"

"I have an idea."



#

I was uncomfortable sitting on the bleachers, but Mosby had plenty of stimuli at the basketball game. Local college summer league, my brother Nate coaching. Loud atmosphere, people sitting close, and action on the court about to begin.

"The scoreboard is not changing," Mosby said. "The boys are scoring." Irritation, a new Mosby emotion to me.

"It's warm-up. This is practice," I said. Where had Mosby been all his life?

"It's a waste. Those shots going in the hoop should be counted."

"Uh, they can get them in the hoop when the game starts, and it counts."

He pondered that, looking in the distance. "Hey, Leo?"

"Yeah?" Mosby was a new kind of animal.

"Did you ever consider we have only so many shots in life?"

#

"He's an actuary. They deal with statistics and distributions. Death. That sort of thing. It isn't like flower arranging."

Marie appeared confused at my spoken thought. "Did he enjoy the game?"

"Enjoy the game? Let me think on that." The perfect description was out there somewhere. "I don't think he enjoyed it. He probably assigned some risk factors to the players. Oh, and another thing he said about the team makes some sense."

"He was involved. There you go." She was rooting for Mosby.

"The team changes. It's not composed of the same members as last year or any year before. Only the name is the same."

"Sounds about right if you put it that way. And...?"

"Bands. Rock groups. He used *Blood, Sweat and Tears* as an example. Same name, but new members, new music even if they play the old stuff."

"Changes are all around us. There's truth in that. Does it matter?"

"It does to Mosby. He's not too fond of change, I'm thinking."

"Hmmm."







#

I occupied myself watching him, almost bird-like working in the yard, head jumping toward an unfamiliar sound, long legs shifting about as he trimmed a bush, or hearing him screech an expletive through an open window when inside the house. I imagined him at his keyboard pecking away at some project, calculating the risk of getting caught in a threatening thunderstorm before finishing cutting the grass. Or maybe when someone might show up at his door unannounced.

And I did.

I was never invited into his house and only caught glimpses of spare furnishings when I dropped by: a loveseat, a table piled high with papers, a speaker (he liked classical music), and a container of wipes. I made accommodations and didn't ask too many questions. Mosby, however, did ask me questions.

Who knew? Maybe I'd encountered a savant? Room on the planet for everyone. He fascinated me, regardless, and every encounter revealed the unpredictability of human nature.

Like...

"Ever think about what's going on in your body, Leo?"

On a warm midsummer day, I'd invited Mosby to join me on our deck for an iced tea. Each week, I tried to find time to share, and help him to break out and relax. Baby steps.

"Well, I'm only growing around my midsection and definitely not fast on the top of my head." I'd come to expect the offbeat from my friend.

"Are you even aware of the battle taking place in your alimentary tract?"

"That would be, uh, the gut?"

"Mouth to anus. And everything in between."

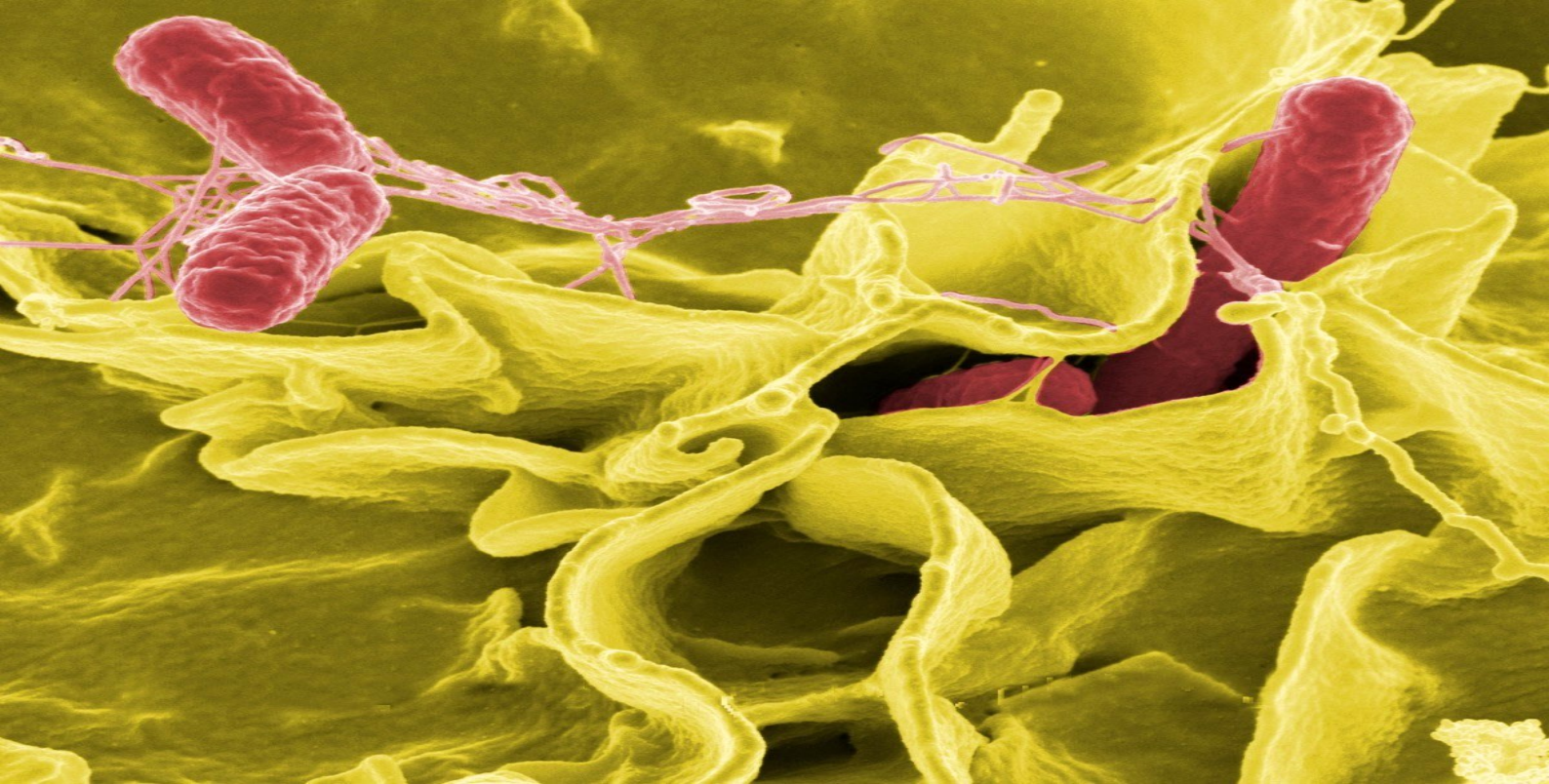
"Oh, gotcha. Well, digestion is happening. Acids in the stomach, absorption of food and all."

Mosby was actually looking at me with a fixed gaze. That was new.

"Bacteria."

"Oh, right. Bacteria to break down food. Is that what you mean?"





"Yep. Bacteria in numbers like you wouldn't believe, mostly in our alimentary tract—and not all good."

"Well, I'm sure—"

"Some are *not human* and can outnumber our mostly much larger cells. So we are plenty human with a lot of squatters, most who are helpful. A whopping 90 percent of your cells are bacterial, viral, or parasitic in nature."

"But we live, and the old gut keeps on working, eh?" *Uh oh. Mosby's not dying, is he?*

"Our defense system does its best to keep out the alien bacteria, but with unregulated immigration, we run the risk of overwhelming our system and impacting the health of the body."

"I guess we should vet those aliens and control the immigration." No smile from Mosby. His tea lay untouched.

"Your gut bacteria can have all sorts of effects on your health, mood, and even thinking." He took a long breath. "The mitochondria in your cells are probably a different creature engulfed by and absorbed into your cells. Instead of being digested, it made itself useful and lives quite well in there, acting as a power source for the rest of the cell."

"How likely is this to happen?"

"It only takes one bad bacterium, amoeba, or virus to start a bad chain reaction." Mosby, in a hushed tone, sounded like an evil doctor.

"They have individual goals?" My stomach was queasy all of a sudden.

"Something to think about." Mosby stood to leave. I wasn't feeling all that great. "Thanks for the tea."

"Wow, Mosby. Great information." Oh, right.

He started down the deck stairs, stopped, and turned to me, an intense look on his face like pronouncing a death sentence. "Do you ever worry that the part of you that is really you is not much of anything at all?"

#

"Sometimes, he scares me." I'd told Marie about our conversation that night.

"Oh, Leo. He's just...different. Harmless."

"When he and I stopped by to see Blake and his classic car a couple of weeks ago—"

"Blake? That old Chevy? He spends a lot of time fixing that junker."

"So Mosby said to me: 'If you own a car for many years and, bit by bit, replace every part of it to keep it running, at what point does it stop being the car you originally bought?'"

"Well, you're definitely not the man I originally married."

"Less or more?"





#

The idea of change was near to Mosby's heart. I think it was the engine that drove him. Like a constant drumbeat in his head. The ultimate subject of everything we talked about. Change. Change.

He joined me under the shade of an awning one late summer day. I could see his bushes from the deck, all beautifully shaped in geometrics and spirals, and the elephant with a sweeping trunk and even a tail. Almost lifelike.

"Finally completed, Mosby. Nice work," I said. He'd spent many hours delicately finishing the project.

Mosby half-smiled.

He inspected the tea and a few cookies on a plate I'd handed to him. His eyes squinted as if microscopically examining the food.

I saw the concerned face as he picked up the glass and sipped. "Problem?"

"It's warm. The tea."

#

Marie was not immune to Mosby's charm. On one occasion in the fall, I asked him to help me move a monster potted plant she was cultivating for her shop. Instead, he walked in on her eating a container of yogurt.

"Eat a cup of yogurt, and you're introducing millions upon millions of bacteria cells into your

body," he said to her. "And again, the next day, and the next."

#

"You know, Leo," she said after that episode. "That man needs a woman in his life. She'd set him straight."

"Mosby actually shared one detail of his brief relationship with a woman with me." Marie frowned. "Supposedly, they dated, and after a month or so, he said *she* proposed they spend more time together."

"Can you imagine two Mosbys?" Marie said, shaking her head.

"Get this," I stopped her. "She said, 'I won't think less of you if you say no.'"

"And?"

"His response: 'Little do you know how little there is of me and everybody else, to begin with.'"

Marie groaned.

"Same thing with Blake's antique car and his replacing all the parts," I said. "The car is no longer the original. I guess neither are we."

"If you believe only ten percent of your cells are human, I suspect you might be right about only using ten percent of your brain."

"Do you ever worry that the part of you that is really you is not much of anything at all?" I deliberately parroted Mosby.

"I consider myself to be driving the body I inhabit. Tell your friend that, Amigo." Marie turned abruptly and left.





#

As winter approached, and some social distance between Mosby and I grew, he discovered we had a cat, sitting in our window watching. . . whatever. I stood in front of my house when he motioned me over.

"What's wrong," I said. His face was ashen.

"You've been exposed."

"Huh?"

"Cats."

"So? And exposed to what?"

"Cats carry a single-cell parasite and then pass it on to humans."

"Mosby, I've had this—"

"The parasite begins to manipulate the cat's brain. Humans are not immune to the parasite. A third of the world's population is thought to have *toxoplasmosis*."

"Toxo—"

"Toxoplasmosis. Infected humans—possibly you in this case—become prone to take more risks, sometimes with devastating consequences like a car crash. Or...it can make you afraid to take risks. In any case, you're permanently changed from the life-long cysts left in your brain."

"You're crazy, Mosby. I'm sorry, but you need to know." I immediately regretted my words.

He shook his head. "Leo, rage is also a symptom. You proved my point. Examine your life."

#

I began to see less and less of Mosby that fall. Not my choice, although I resented his loony behavior. He seemed different, more remote. Like his memory was fading or he was residing somewhere else in the universe. When I ran into him, he looked at me a half-second longer, his recognition unsure, no longer natural. His responses were delayed.

"Mosby? Are you okay?" I asked him one chilly day, calling him to the fence. I happened to be on the deck, bringing in the potted plants for winter.

"Are you okay?" he replied.

"No, I'm asking you. Are you okay? You look... out of sorts."

"Where would I be?" I felt like I was conversing with a potted plant.

As he walked away, I remembered we'd once discussed the ravages of human bacteria on the body.

Maybe Mosby had a terrible disease.





#

"You notice the change in Mosby, Hon?"

"Could I not? He doesn't even look the same. What gives?"

"I blame risk analysis. Or it could be as simple as the narco syndicate collective of bacteria and parasites working to overthrow the oppressive human-celled tyranny—or he's sick."

"What?"

"By the way, I disposed of the yogurt you accumulated in the fridge."

"You know, Leo. It's funny, but when I last saw him, Mosby looked like he had lost weight. On second thought, he looked *smaller* to me."

"Smaller? Like the Incredible Shrinking Man?"

"Strange."

#

Mosby didn't acknowledge me the next time I saw him. He stood on his property just staring at the street. I'd happened to be driving by and waved, getting no response. I backed up to where he stood.

"Hey, Mosby. What's goin' on? Waiting for a bus?"

"Huh? Who wants to know? No buses on this street," he replied in a monotone flatter than usual. Like a robot. "I know you?"

He didn't recognize me.

And he looked smaller.

#

I didn't see him after that. And then the "For Sale" sign went up a month later. And the sign came down two weeks after that, the lockbox still hanging from the front doorknob.

In early February, I spied a different car pulling into Mosby's driveway, and a well-dressed middle-aged woman got out. I ran outside and caught up with her as she was removing the lockbox. She stopped and checked me out, head to toe.

"Are you the agent for the sale?" I asked. I firmly believed all female agents carried Mace. "I'm the neighbor. Mosby and I were, uh, close friends."

"Who?"

"Gilbert Mosby, the fellow that lived here for nearly a year."

She looked at me warily.

"He didn't die, did he?"

"I don't know anyone by that name, uh—"

"I'm Leo. He was a tall guy, gangly, a little, er, quiet." *Why am I describing him?*

"The seller was a short man. Not named Mosby. I'm pretty certain about that." Now she looked suspicious, ready to reach for the Mace.

The agent finished her task and turned to leave. "You'll have a new neighbor soon. Curious guy. Some sort of a biologist."

I didn't feel well.



# DIFFERENCE OF OPINION

BY  
ALEXANDER  
MARSHALL

Write it down.

God, it's still all clear enough in my mind.

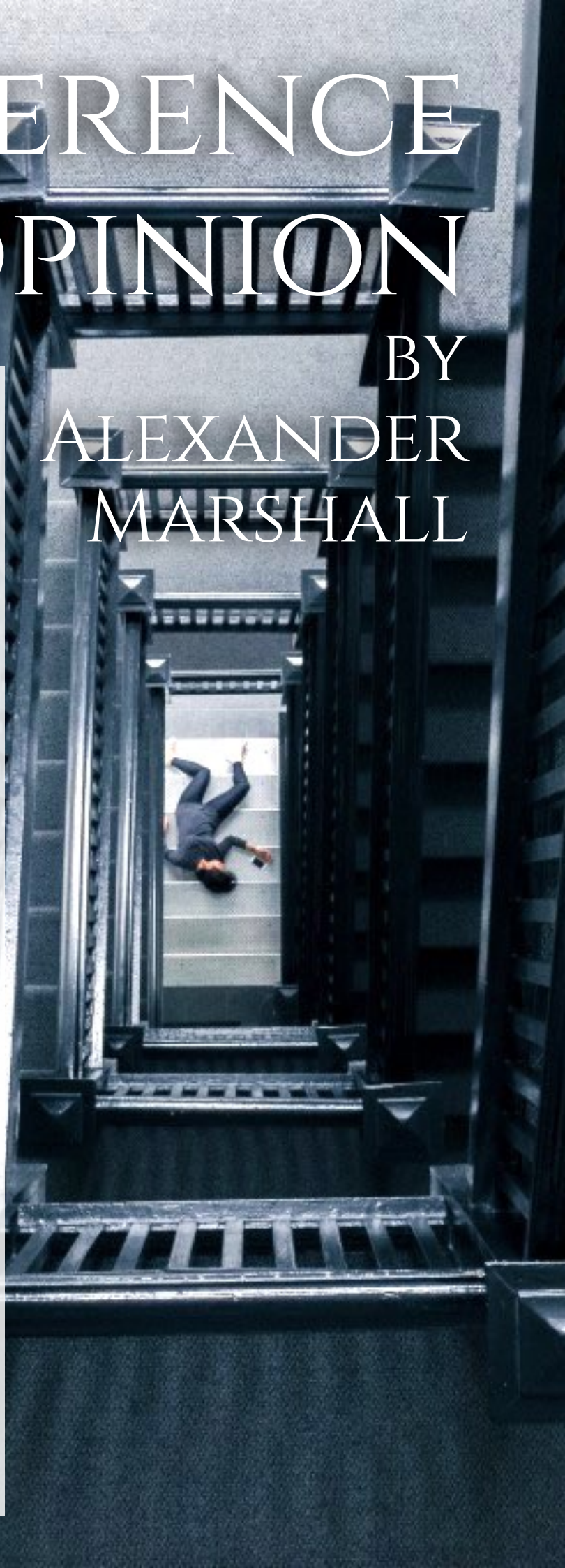
Thursday, May 16, 2075. Morning after the night before. Door bell goes. I stumble downstairs, nauseous as I glance at myself in the hall mirror — hair like a petrified forest, face a moonscape of smeared make-up, but aching in all the right places from a long night of intense sex.

I get to the door and see the shape of two guys through the glass. Cops — we've been tailed from the Clandestine Club, where women who like women meet in violation of Commandment 214 which makes lesbian life a living hell. But my stupid body keeps going towards the door, opens it with the momentum of inertia. I mentally will Tanya upstairs to wake up and get out.

Then it all starts happening too fast, and it doesn't stop.

I click the bolt; I'm slammed into the wall; door smashes open with enough force to crack the glass; three faceless hulks tear up the stairs like they're on fire. Before I can yell anything, hands close over my mouth and I'm pushed to the floor with a needlegun pressing into my breast.

Explosion upstairs. Something hits the house hard enough to make it shake like a flimsy TV set. Two of the guys who disappeared up there crash over the bannisters with a bone-breaking crunch which makes me impulsively puke, but the hand over my mouth keeps the bile in. Can't see the guy who's holding me but I hear him swear and tighten his already suffocating grip — his attention isn't on me, though — he's watching the stairs. This isn't what he expected or wanted, and he's jumpy as hell.







So am I — I wet myself. Another crunch. Screaming. Shouting. Who's beating up who? Can't think straight, head is too full.

Suddenly Tanya's at the top of the stairs, naked, her long, black hair tangled and sweaty —she's breathing hard, holding a needlegun to a guy's head, her arm around his neck, his eyes closed, his body drooping, a dead weight.

'Let her go, freak,' Tanya says, her eyes like lasers, to my guy. I feel him trembling, his muscles are going watery, he starts to breathe differently.

'No way, slut,' he says, but he's a mess of quivering terror, 'no way! I'll blow your little friend apart! You drop him first, and the needle.'

'Okay,' says Tanya simply, 'he's dead anyway,' and she throws her right arm out and the body she's holding heads towards me, a blunt missile of bone and muscle. My guy yelps and tries to shoot up at her but the body hits us hard and he loosens his grip. I look out from under a tangle of dead flesh and clothes and Tanya is gone.

It's all happened in less than a minute from me opening the door. I involuntarily curl up under this corpse and want to die. Noises, swearing, flashes of something like gunfire. My guy gets out from under me and he's out the door, screaming and cursing, using words I've never heard before. I open my eyes — I'm dribbling and shaking like a wet dog. I slide up the wall in time to see Tanya, still naked, flash past me. She hits the door frame, using it to stop her body's momentum, then steadies her aim and fires the needlegun. Sound like a discharge, but not a bullet, some kind of white light.

There's a shriek like a dying cat outside. She rolls back inside, rips off one of the dead guys' coats, throws it over herself.

'Come on,' she snaps at me and grabs my wrist with a hand like a steel clamp, her fingers a mess of drying blood.

'Jack off!' I shout, pulling away, my knees like wet cardboard, my nightgown soaked in something I hope is sweat.



She gets real close, breathes into my face so I can smell her urgency. 'Don't give me any jip. You need to come with me or you'll die,' she spits.

'Don't kill me!' I start to cry — the look in her face is not the look of love and lust I saw last night, it's a completely alien detachment. It freezes me somewhere above the groin, makes me want to shrink into the woodwork like a beetle.

'I'm not going to kill you, you stupid bitch,' she says, softening, kissing my cheek lightly, using her gun hand to stroke my hair while she keeps hold of my wrist with the other. It's not quite detachment, then — she cares, but there's a steel sheath around that caring and I can't take that. 'I like you,' she says. 'It's the Freaks who will kill you.'

'The Freaks?' I whimper, slowly sliding back down the wall, begging her with body language not to hurt me.

'Yes — the Structure guys, these pieces of male meat,' she says, kicking one of the bodies on the floor with her bare foot. I notice there's blood all over her toes, too. Looks like she stabbed them with her foot, like in the old Kung Fu movies.

'Structure?' I whimper, knowing what it means. She must be one of the Conception, the lesbian resistance. I should have known.

'There's no time,' she says, dragging me up. 'We have to get out of here.'

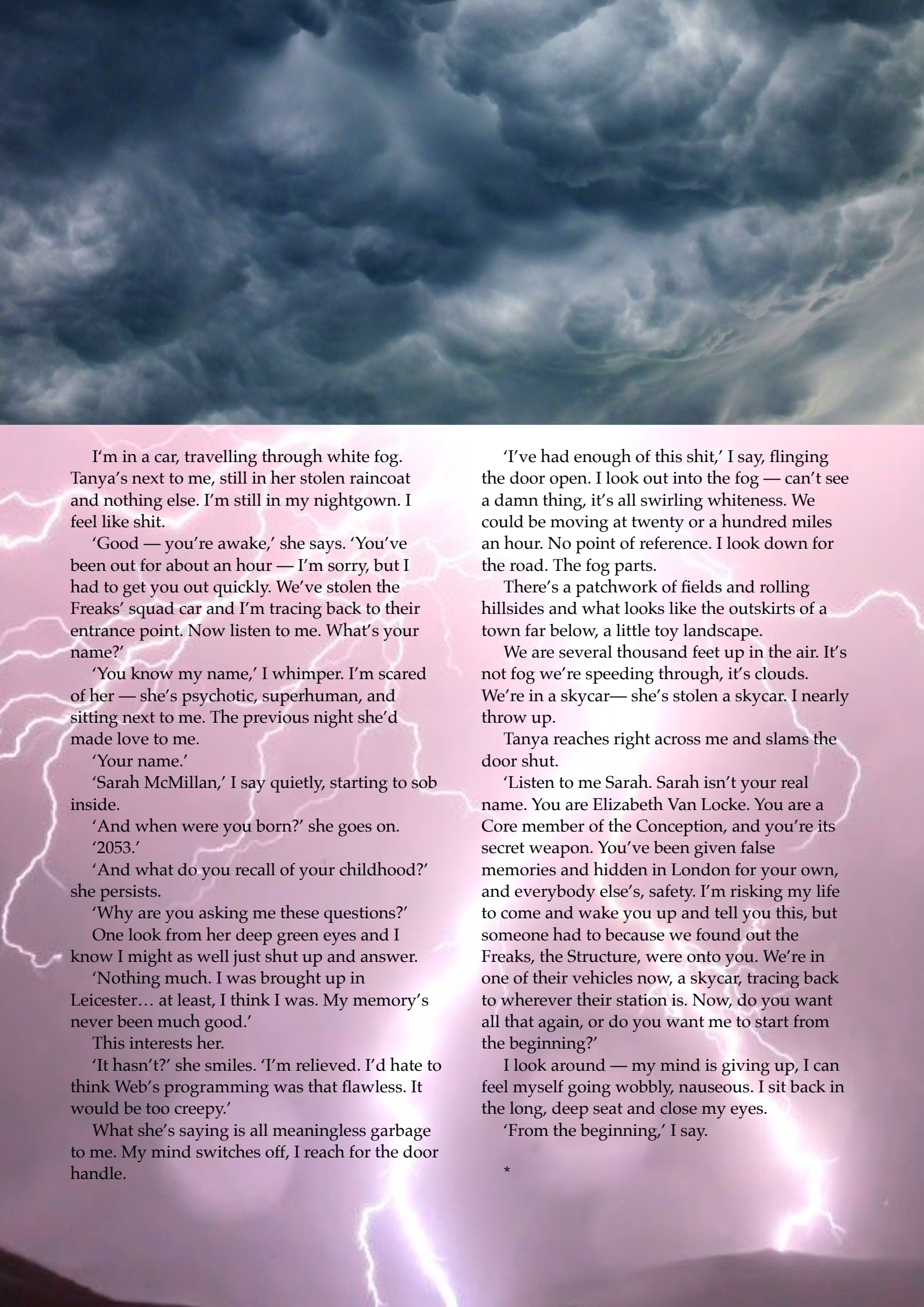
She drags me through my own door.

'No!' I scream. 'No! I don't want to go with you, leave me alone!' Next thing I feel is a pressure somewhere on my neck and I try to scream again but black out instead.

\*







I'm in a car, travelling through white fog. Tanya's next to me, still in her stolen raincoat and nothing else. I'm still in my nightgown. I feel like shit.

'Good — you're awake,' she says. 'You've been out for about an hour — I'm sorry, but I had to get you out quickly. We've stolen the Freaks' squad car and I'm tracing back to their entrance point. Now listen to me. What's your name?'

'You know my name,' I whimper. I'm scared of her — she's psychotic, superhuman, and sitting next to me. The previous night she'd made love to me.

'Your name.'

'Sarah McMillan,' I say quietly, starting to sob inside.

'And when were you born?' she goes on.

'2053.'

'And what do you recall of your childhood?' she persists.

'Why are you asking me these questions?'

One look from her deep green eyes and I know I might as well just shut up and answer.

'Nothing much. I was brought up in Leicester... at least, I think I was. My memory's never been much good.'

This interests her.

'It hasn't?' she smiles. 'I'm relieved. I'd hate to think Web's programming was that flawless. It would be too creepy.'

What she's saying is all meaningless garbage to me. My mind switches off, I reach for the door handle.

'I've had enough of this shit,' I say, flinging the door open. I look out into the fog — can't see a damn thing, it's all swirling whiteness. We could be moving at twenty or a hundred miles an hour. No point of reference. I look down for the road. The fog parts.

There's a patchwork of fields and rolling hillsides and what looks like the outskirts of a town far below, a little toy landscape.

We are several thousand feet up in the air. It's not fog we're speeding through, it's clouds. We're in a skycar — she's stolen a skycar. I nearly throw up.

Tanya reaches right across me and slams the door shut.


'Listen to me Sarah. Sarah isn't your real name. You are Elizabeth Van Locke. You are a Core member of the Conception, and you're its secret weapon. You've been given false memories and hidden in London for your own, and everybody else's, safety. I'm risking my life to come and wake you up and tell you this, but someone had to because we found out the Freaks, the Structure, were onto you. We're in one of their vehicles now, a skycar, tracing back to wherever their station is. Now, do you want all that again, or do you want me to start from the beginning?'

I look around — my mind is giving up, I can feel myself going wobbly, nauseous. I sit back in the long, deep seat and close my eyes.

'From the beginning,' I say.

\*





It was like this: the Structure, the male faction, had developed vicious and devastating energy weapons with the intention of wiping out the growing lesbian community once and for all. Their whole philosophy depended on the total control and subjugation of women generally. The Conception, on the other hand, in true feminine style, had concentrated on defence and research into higher forms of awareness.

Then things got really crazy.

Conception science developed the Angels, enhanced women who were no longer quite human. But the Structure hit back hard, wiping out Conception's home base and imposing a totalitarian state planetwide. The Conception was on the run, forced to live like animals, hunted down mercilessly.

That's where I came in, according to Tanya: I

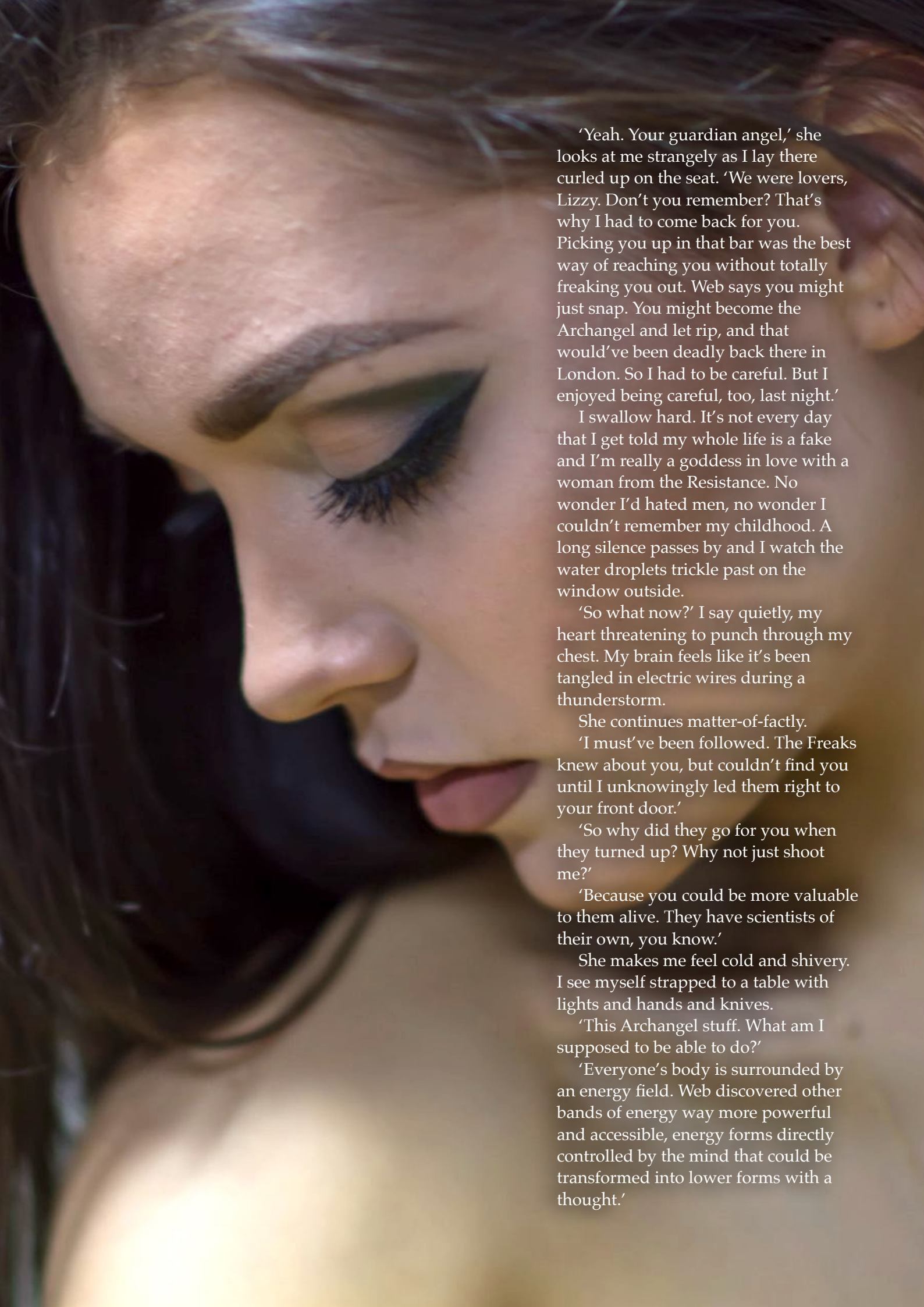
was Conception's secret weapon: an Archangel, artificially enhanced so much that, once I'd learned how to use my power, I might singlehandedly have turned the tables on the Structure, and become a walking, breathing goddess. But the Structure tracked me down — and Web, Conception's resident genius, had to quickly programme me with fake memories and send me back into London where I would be undetectable until they could bring me back safely.

So far, so good. At least it made a kind of sense. I couldn't argue with what I'd seen — there was the skycar, and the needleguns, and Tanya's strength. The way she'd thrown that goon's body down the stairs was frightening. But nothing else was coming through.

'You — you're an Angel?' I ask as we plunge on through a raincloud, wipers going on the windscreen.

She smiles.





'Yeah. Your guardian angel,' she looks at me strangely as I lay there curled up on the seat. 'We were lovers, Lizzy. Don't you remember? That's why I had to come back for you. Picking you up in that bar was the best way of reaching you without totally freaking you out. Web says you might just snap. You might become the Archangel and let rip, and that would've been deadly back there in London. So I had to be careful. But I enjoyed being careful, too, last night.'

I swallow hard. It's not every day that I get told my whole life is a fake and I'm really a goddess in love with a woman from the Resistance. No wonder I'd hated men, no wonder I couldn't remember my childhood. A long silence passes by and I watch the water droplets trickle past on the window outside.

'So what now?' I say quietly, my heart threatening to punch through my chest. My brain feels like it's been tangled in electric wires during a thunderstorm.

She continues matter-of-factly.

'I must've been followed. The Freaks knew about you, but couldn't find you until I unknowingly led them right to your front door.'

'So why did they go for you when they turned up? Why not just shoot me?'

'Because you could be more valuable to them alive. They have scientists of their own, you know.'

She makes me feel cold and shivery. I see myself strapped to a table with lights and hands and knives.

'This Archangel stuff. What am I supposed to be able to do?'

'Everyone's body is surrounded by an energy field. Web discovered other bands of energy way more powerful and accessible, energy forms directly controlled by the mind that could be transformed into lower forms with a thought.'



‘And in English please?’

‘According to Web, you could fry living things at a hundred yards with a glance; punch through steel plate like you were opening a plastic wrapper; blow holes in concrete with a sneeze. And that’s only the beginning. You’re about a thousand times more powerful than me, and I’m the best of the Angels.’

I smile to myself, for the first time since I’d gone to sleep the previous night.

‘I bet you are,’ I say, and tentatively I reach over and touch her arm, half afraid that I’ll burn her with my fingers. She smiles back.

‘Web says that your potential is possibly unlimited. You could maybe create a whole world, or destroy it.’

‘And how am I supposed to access all this shit inside me? Meditate? Have a bad day? Have a huge orgasm?’

‘I don’t know exactly. That’s Web’s department. She’s ready for you now— we’ve just got to get you back.’

But before Tanya can open her mouth to say anything else, the rainclouds part, a red light flashes on the dashboard, and ahead of us is the biggest airship I’ve ever seen — a floating submarine hanging about half a mile long above the white cloudscape, impossibly silent, like a knife slash in the sky.

‘Oh shit! I don’t believe it! I knew they were desperate, but...’

‘But what? What is that?’

‘It’s a Shard, a Structure battlecruiser.’

Can’t stop the car and get out. Remorselessly the ship gets bigger and bigger and blots out the light. We’re sucked into its bowels. Tanya screams, and that frightens me more than the darkness.

\*







It's later. Someone is holding something under my nose. It smells exquisite — not a perfume, not a food smell, something between, something vaguely, then intensely, arousing.

I open my eyes. It's all so dark that I wonder if I have. Can't tell up from down. Head doesn't ache anymore but feels sort of empty and dazed. I breathe in that heavenly smell, and recognise it as Tanya's sexual aroma. As sensation returns to me I feel her pressing into me — she's perspiring all over me, breathing rhythmically and deeply.

'Thought that might do it,' she whispers. 'I've been trying to bring you round for ages. Are you okay?'

'I can't tell whether I'm okay or not. Where are we?'

'Don't know. In a box of some kind, only just big enough for both of us. I've been conscious for about two hours. What's the last thing you remember?'

'My life falling apart.'

'Specifically. Could be important.'

'Big thing in the sky.'

She's quiet for a minute.

'So — you were blanked at the same time as me. We must be inside the Shard.'

I twist around — we're tied together inside a coffin-like box. Muscles start to cramp all over and my heart starts to panic again.

At that instant, we get tipped up and fall sideways — light pours into our little cubicle and I blink and try to make out where we are. We both fall forward onto a soft surface out of a thick metal coffin which has been stood on its end.



'The Renegades, Councillor,' says a faceless voice. I open my eyes and stare at a foot about two inches from my nose — a sandalled, male foot, joined to a leg which extends upwards under a kind of toga.

'Thank you, Bridlington. You may retire.'

'The brunette is very dangerous, Councillor. Four of our best fragments...'

'I'm well aware of what happened to them, Bridlington. But as you can see, both the brunette Miss Bolt and her charming female, shall we say, companion, are perfectly restrained. I'm sure I can look after them myself.'

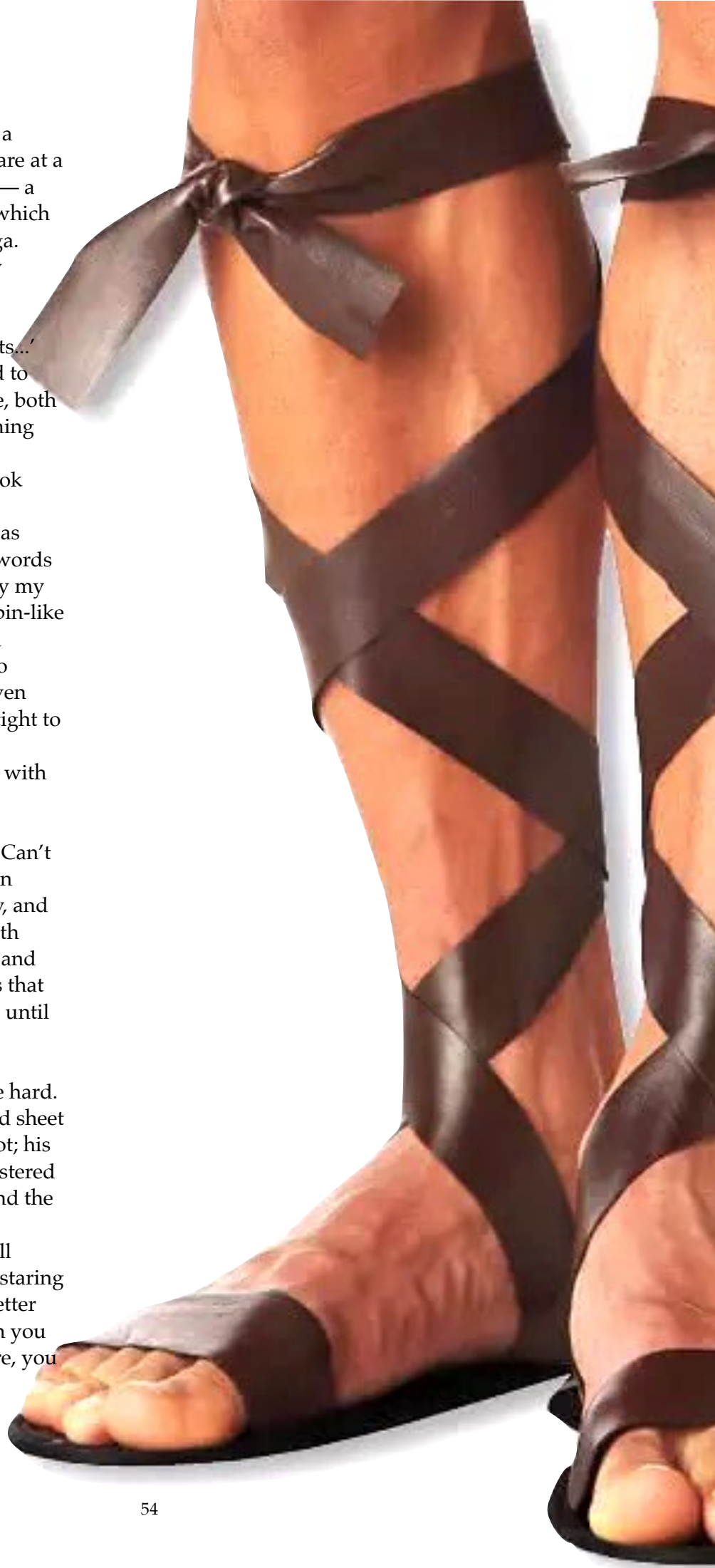
The voice connected to the foot is as smooth as shaven ice, and at its last words the tip of a steel cane taps the floor by my nose. I look up its length to see tiny pin-like protrusions all the way to the frosted handle. I feel like throwing up. I'm so scared again that I start struggling even though I know that I'm strapped so tight to Tanya that I can't move.

Voice chuckles and prods my face with the cane.

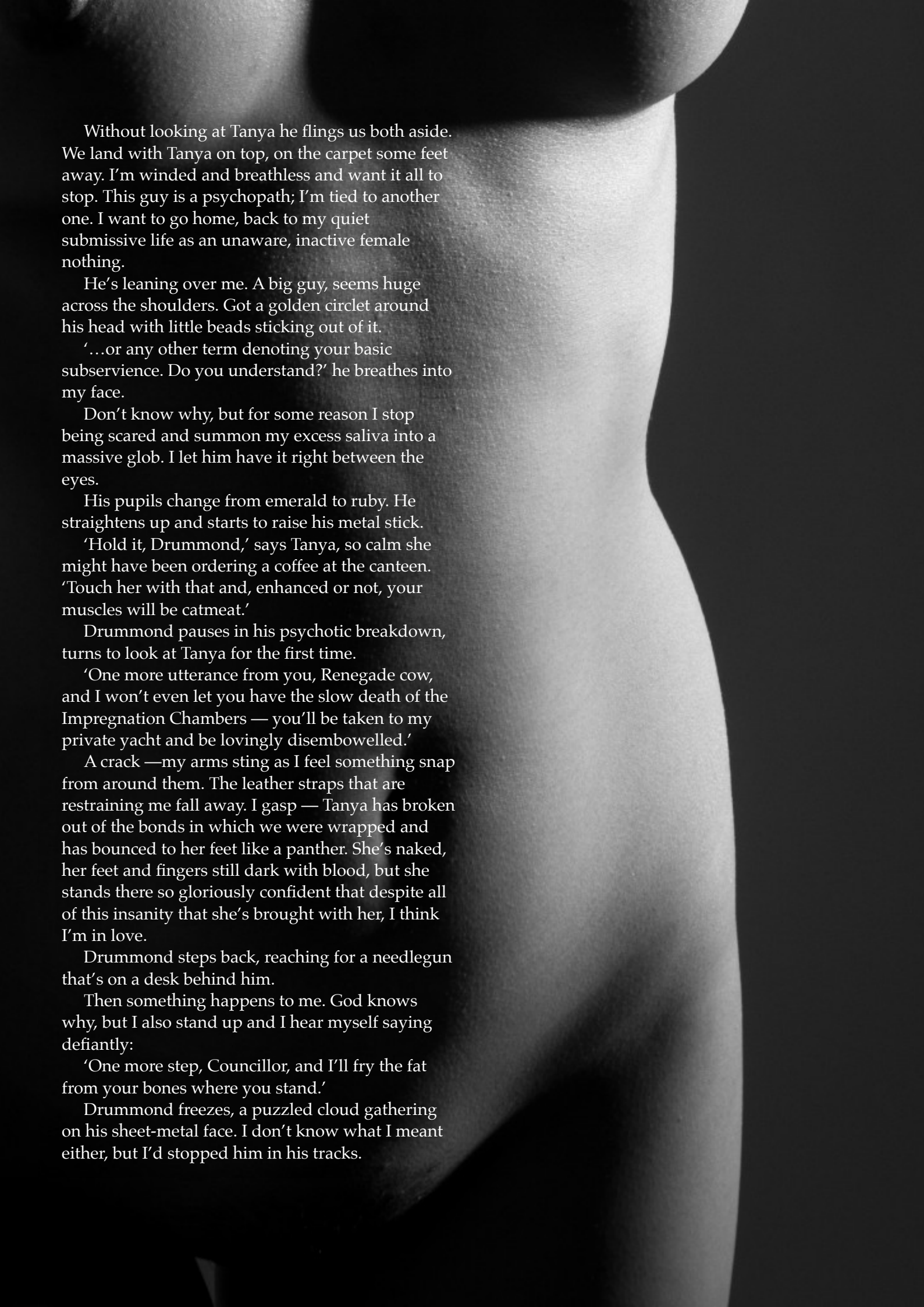
'And your name is?' it says.

'Sarah. Sarah McMillan,' I stutter. Can't quite see his face. He's dressed like an officer of the elite Structure hierarchy, and we are in a round, white chamber with very little furniture. He bends down and with startling strength lifts the straps that wrap us both around with one hand, until he is staring right into my eyes with Tanya's only inches away. I'm nearly choking, the straps are biting into me hard. His face is flat, buckled like a battered sheet of metal, brown as a sun-dried apricot; his eyes are like hard emeralds. He's mastered hatred as an expression. He smiles and the expression warms into contempt.

'Well, Miss McMillan,' he says, still holding us right up off the floor and staring at me, 'I hope to teach you to keep better company. And better manners. When you address a Component of the Structure, you will use the appellatives, Sir, Lord or Controller.'







Without looking at Tanya he flings us both aside. We land with Tanya on top, on the carpet some feet away. I'm winded and breathless and want it all to stop. This guy is a psychopath; I'm tied to another one. I want to go home, back to my quiet submissive life as an unaware, inactive female nothing.

He's leaning over me. A big guy, seems huge across the shoulders. Got a golden circlet around his head with little beads sticking out of it.

'...or any other term denoting your basic subservience. Do you understand?' he breathes into my face.

Don't know why, but for some reason I stop being scared and summon my excess saliva into a massive glob. I let him have it right between the eyes.

His pupils change from emerald to ruby. He straightens up and starts to raise his metal stick.

'Hold it, Drummond,' says Tanya, so calm she might have been ordering a coffee at the canteen. 'Touch her with that and, enhanced or not, your muscles will be catmeat.'

Drummond pauses in his psychotic breakdown, turns to look at Tanya for the first time.

'One more utterance from you, Renegade cow, and I won't even let you have the slow death of the Impregnation Chambers — you'll be taken to my private yacht and be lovingly disembowelled.'

A crack — my arms sting as I feel something snap from around them. The leather straps that are restraining me fall away. I gasp — Tanya has broken out of the bonds in which we were wrapped and has bounced to her feet like a panther. She's naked, her feet and fingers still dark with blood, but she stands there so gloriously confident that despite all of this insanity that she's brought with her, I think I'm in love.

Drummond steps back, reaching for a needlegun that's on a desk behind him.

Then something happens to me. God knows why, but I also stand up and I hear myself saying defiantly:

'One more step, Councillor, and I'll fry the fat from your bones where you stand.'

Drummond freezes, a puzzled cloud gathering on his sheet-metal face. I don't know what I meant either, but I'd stopped him in his tracks.





'Take off your band, Drummond — now!' Tanya snaps, leaping to the desk and grabbing the needlegun before Drummond sees what's happening. He reaches to his forehead, plucks off the gold circlet.

'What are you going to do, you Renegade filth? You're on a Structure Shard, you won't last five seconds outside that door.'

Tanya smiles, taking the headband from his sweating hand.

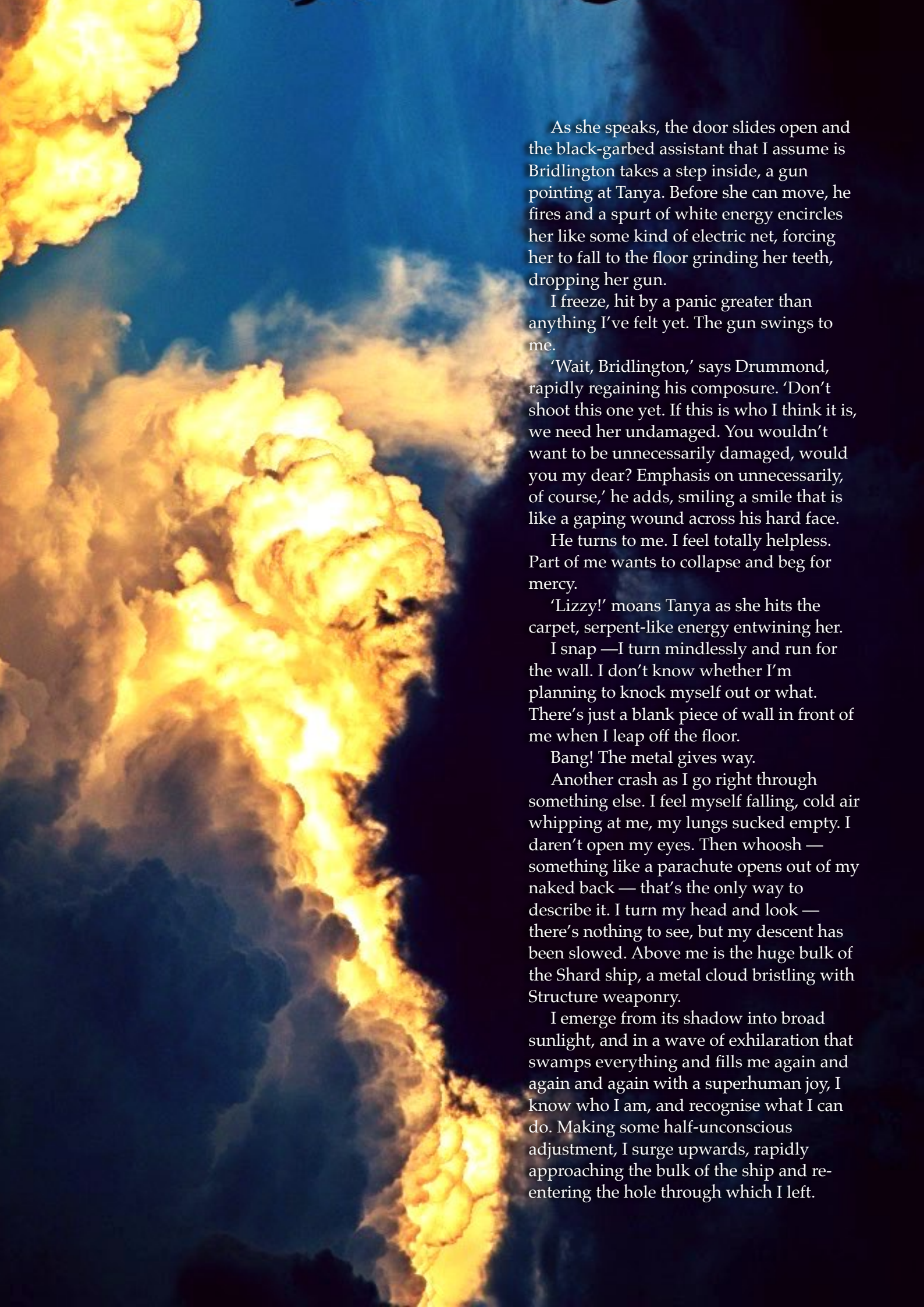
'I'm not going outside the door, you musclebound sack. Here, Lizzy, keep him covered.' She tosses me the needlegun. My fear is coming and going in waves. I don't know what is going on, then somehow I do, but before I can get a grip on it, it's gone again and I'm a shaking wreck. I point the thing at Drummond and watch as Tanya fiddles with his headband. She puts it on — the only thing she's wearing — and starts talking.

'Web! Web, can you pick me up? Come on Web, you're supposed to be the technical genius, pick me up!'

'You'll never get a signal to your filthy friends,' Drummond says, fingers squeezing his cane nervously. 'I told you, you're on a Shard — we are in orbit by now, with our defence screens at maximum. Your pathetic toys can't reach us here.'

'Drummond, if you speak again, your amputated tongue becomes a wet and very bloody bracelet for my wrist. Structure scientists have mis-estimated the Conception for years. Males always misestimate females.'





As she speaks, the door slides open and the black-garbed assistant that I assume is Bridlington takes a step inside, a gun pointing at Tanya. Before she can move, he fires and a spurt of white energy encircles her like some kind of electric net, forcing her to fall to the floor grinding her teeth, dropping her gun.

I freeze, hit by a panic greater than anything I've felt yet. The gun swings to me.

'Wait, Bridlington,' says Drummond, rapidly regaining his composure. 'Don't shoot this one yet. If this is who I think it is, we need her undamaged. You wouldn't want to be unnecessarily damaged, would you my dear? Emphasis on unnecessarily, of course,' he adds, smiling a smile that is like a gaping wound across his hard face.

He turns to me. I feel totally helpless. Part of me wants to collapse and beg for mercy.

'Lizzy!' moans Tanya as she hits the carpet, serpent-like energy entwining her.

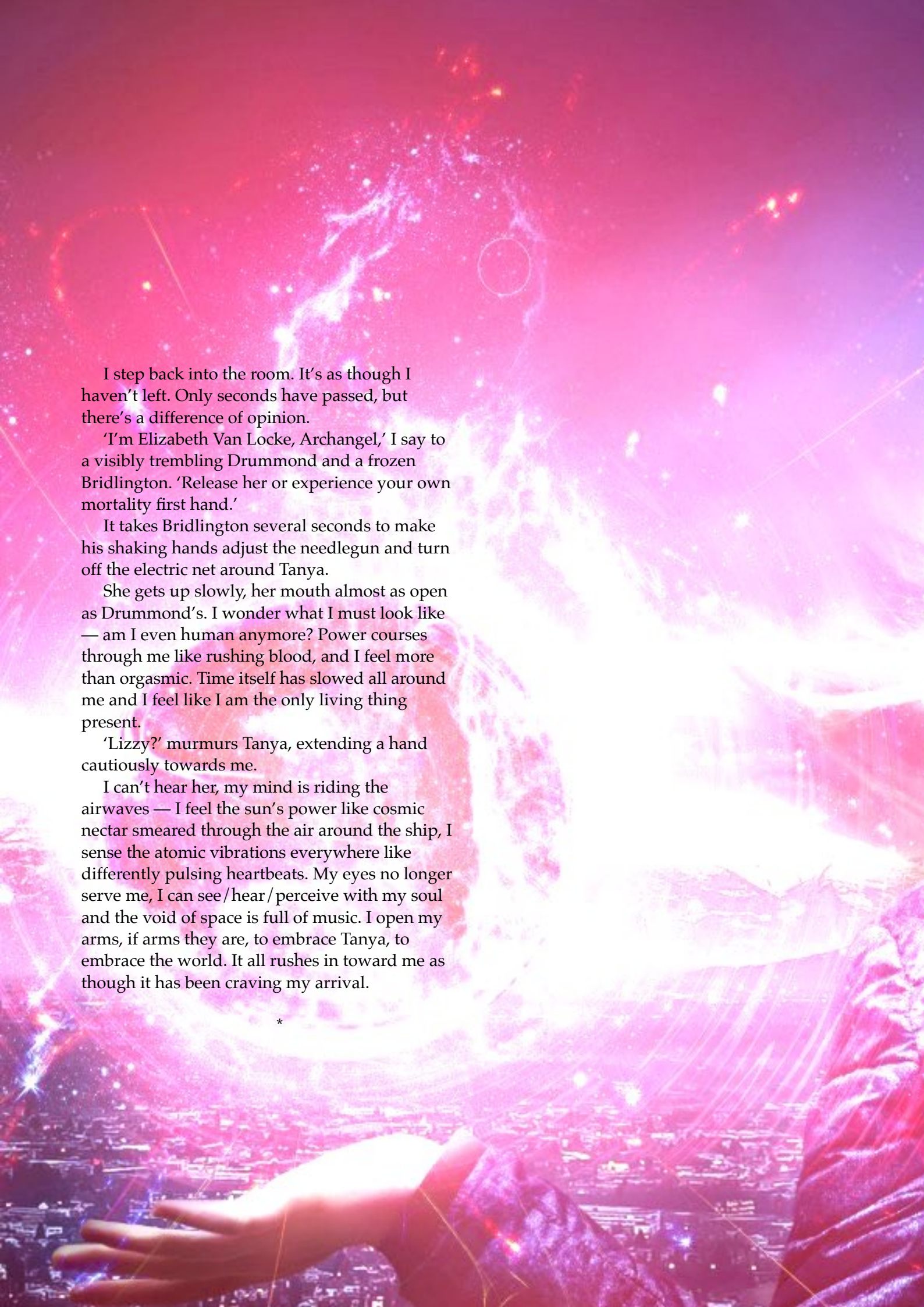
I snap—I turn mindlessly and run for the wall. I don't know whether I'm planning to knock myself out or what. There's just a blank piece of wall in front of me when I leap off the floor.

Bang! The metal gives way.

Another crash as I go right through something else. I feel myself falling, cold air whipping at me, my lungs sucked empty. I daren't open my eyes. Then whoosh—something like a parachute opens out of my naked back—that's the only way to describe it. I turn my head and look—there's nothing to see, but my descent has been slowed. Above me is the huge bulk of the Shard ship, a metal cloud bristling with Structure weaponry.

I emerge from its shadow into broad sunlight, and in a wave of exhilaration that swamps everything and fills me again and again and again with a superhuman joy, I know who I am, and recognise what I can do. Making some half-unconscious adjustment, I surge upwards, rapidly approaching the bulk of the ship and re-entering the hole through which I left.





I step back into the room. It's as though I haven't left. Only seconds have passed, but there's a difference of opinion.

'I'm Elizabeth Van Locke, Archangel,' I say to a visibly trembling Drummond and a frozen Bridlington. 'Release her or experience your own mortality first hand.'

It takes Bridlington several seconds to make his shaking hands adjust the needlegun and turn off the electric net around Tanya.

She gets up slowly, her mouth almost as open as Drummond's. I wonder what I must look like — am I even human anymore? Power courses through me like rushing blood, and I feel more than orgasmic. Time itself has slowed all around me and I feel like I am the only living thing present.

'Lizzy?' murmurs Tanya, extending a hand cautiously towards me.

I can't hear her, my mind is riding the airwaves — I feel the sun's power like cosmic nectar smeared through the air around the ship, I sense the atomic vibrations everywhere like differently pulsing heartbeats. My eyes no longer serve me, I can see/hear/perceive with my soul and the void of space is full of music. I open my arms, if arms they are, to embrace Tanya, to embrace the world. It all rushes in toward me as though it has been craving my arrival.

\*





And that's that.

Now I've written it down.

I understand that the experience has unbalanced me, disoriented me. But I'm not mad. I'm Elizabeth Van Locke, not Sarah McMillan. I belong here with the Conception, fighting the Structure before they destroy everything.

Do you understand now? Now that I've written it all down? All I need to do is remember how to reach inside, how to become the Archangel again, then you'll see.

I'm looking out of the window now, waiting for Tanya to come to me, waiting for Web to send her back to me again, waiting for my angel...



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***Pezzi Pazzi 2*** is a sister anthology to 'Pezzi Pazzi/Crazy Pieces' published in 2019, another mixed genre collection of poetry, prose, fiction, non-fiction and experimental writing. Quirky, eclectic and infused with an Italian–Australian flavour, this collection is presented like a fancy Italian lunch menu. Feast your eyes. **Warning:** Contains sexual references and coarse language. For Mature Readers Only.



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CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR

SHARON FRAME GAY



*Sharon Frame Gay has been internationally published in many anthologies and literary magazines, including Chicken Soup For The Soul, Typehouse, Lowestoft Chronicle, Literary Orphans, and others. She has won awards at The Writing District, Wow-Women On Writing, Owl Hollow Press, and Rope and Wire and is a Pushcart Prize nominee. Her first collection of short stories, **Song of the Highway**, was published in 2020 by Clarendon House Publications. Her master storytelling continues in **The Nomad Diner**.*

# The Nomad Diner

## A Short Story Collection



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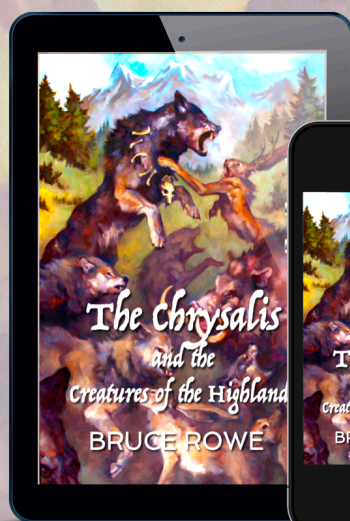
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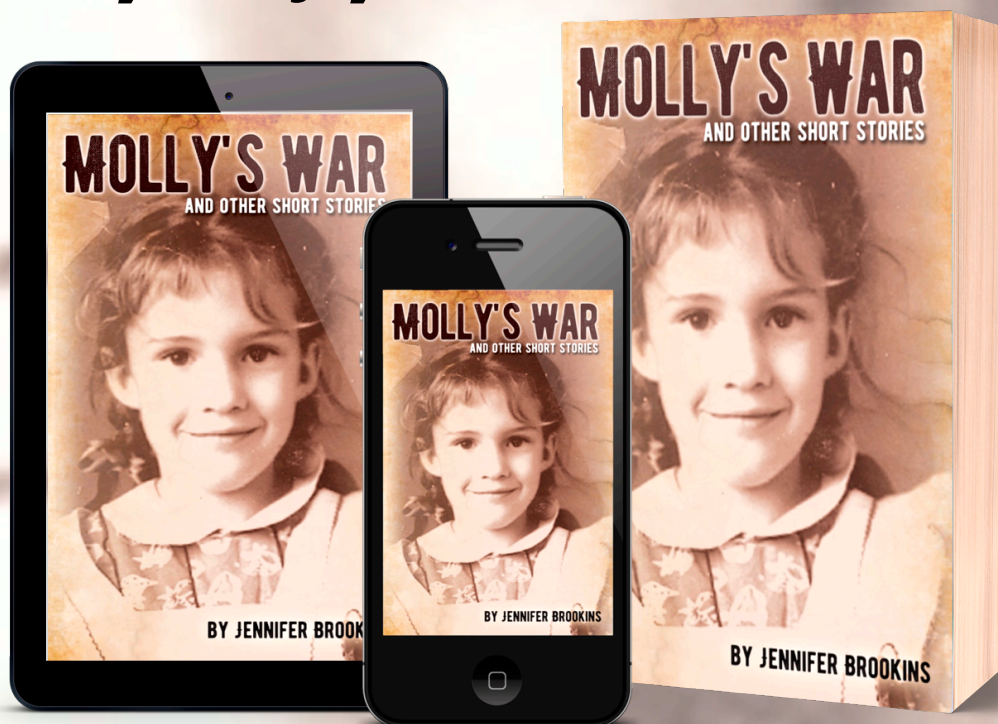
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- E. Montague,  
author

**The Inner Circle Writers' Group** is the social arm of Clarendon House Publications.

ProWritingAid recently listed us as one of the best groups for writers on Facebook:

*'Everyone loves Grant, the founder of The Inner Circle Writers' Group, almost as much as they love the warm, supportive environment that always stays professional and on-topic. The members are encouraging, and the moderators keep abusive non-writers to a minimum. Several professional writers call The Inner Circle Writers'*

*Group "home." Join the group and get ready for lots of interaction and engagement in a friendly, family atmosphere. Everyone shares and celebrates each other's successes, and many feel spurred to become and do better.'*

This group is for writers interested in the craft and practice of writing and everything connected with that. Members are entitled to exclusive services from Clarendon House and are offered multiple submission opportunities.

It's completely free and fun.

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### **J. McCulloch, Author**

Clarendon House has what the majority of other publishers lack; the personal touch. Grant Hudson draws people into his cosy library (also known as the Inner Circle Writers' Group), sits them down and works his magic. Many new writers lack confidence in their ability, so Grant fine tunes their perspective, boosts their morale and sets them up to win. I have been humbled by his untiring efforts to help us all. We are his people. He is our mentor, our eccentric English professor and our much valued friend.

### **D. Taylor, Author**

As I was scrolling fb, and seeing all these ads from people claiming to help authors do this and do that, I thought to myself, Grant Hudson is the genuine mentor. Thanks for your solid advice.

### **P. O'Neil, Author**

Grant is the model mentor for this new age of writing.

### **A. Delf, Author**

The world is better with all this beautiful work seen at last.

### **M. Ahmed, Author**

A place where good literature is nurtured.

### **Brandy Metheney Bonifas, Author**

Clarendon House Publications is everything publishing should be. Grant Hudson is a caring editor and mentor who works closely with authors to produce top quality publications, and his writing community, The Inner Circle Writers' Group, is a safe and encouraging environment where established authors share their expertise and new writers are nurtured to spread their wings. I highly recommend!

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The logo features a yellow five-pointed star with a red circular border. Inside the star, the text "INNER CIRCLE WRITERS' GROUP" is written in a bold, blue, sans-serif font with a white outline.

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