



SLATE

ART & LITERATURE MAGAZINE



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Basil Lexington in: The Escape Plan

Commissioner Synco tapped on a nearby air duct. They had been rattling for some time now, and with all the money Balistia corporation makes on its gizmos and gadgets, it wouldn't kill them to throw some of it to repair their headquarters. He and two other members the Balistia Corporation Police Department, or BCPD, stood in front of the dark gray prison cells in the building's basement level. The whole prison line smelled of mold, excrement and vinegar and was almost potent enough to make his eyes water. A mop lay precariously next to a bucket of water and soap. They all looked in amazement at their latest capture. They had finally done it. The ever elusive Basil Lexington, King of the Vagabonds, sat half naked, in shackles and sleeping heavily on the wooden bench. He snapped at one of the officers. He was tall and lanky, and his light blue uniform was pressed and proper, his badge nice and shiny, but looked like it was too big for him. His partner was shorter than him, but was much, much wider. He also had a smell of old pickles. "You. Officer Soze. How did you find him again?"

Officer Soze stepped forward. "We found him in a drunken stupor outside a pub on Entertainment Line, sir. He had passed out on the side of the street and was babbling to himself about something."

"Of course he did." In his mind, Synco knew this was the moment of his career. He had him. The dirty vigilante who had been causing trouble all about Santo Cresto was not but four paces in front of him and at his mercy. But for some reason, he still didn't buy that he would have gone down easily. He picked up

the bucket of dirty water and dumped it Basil. He watched as his prisoner thrashed about, not knowing where he was.

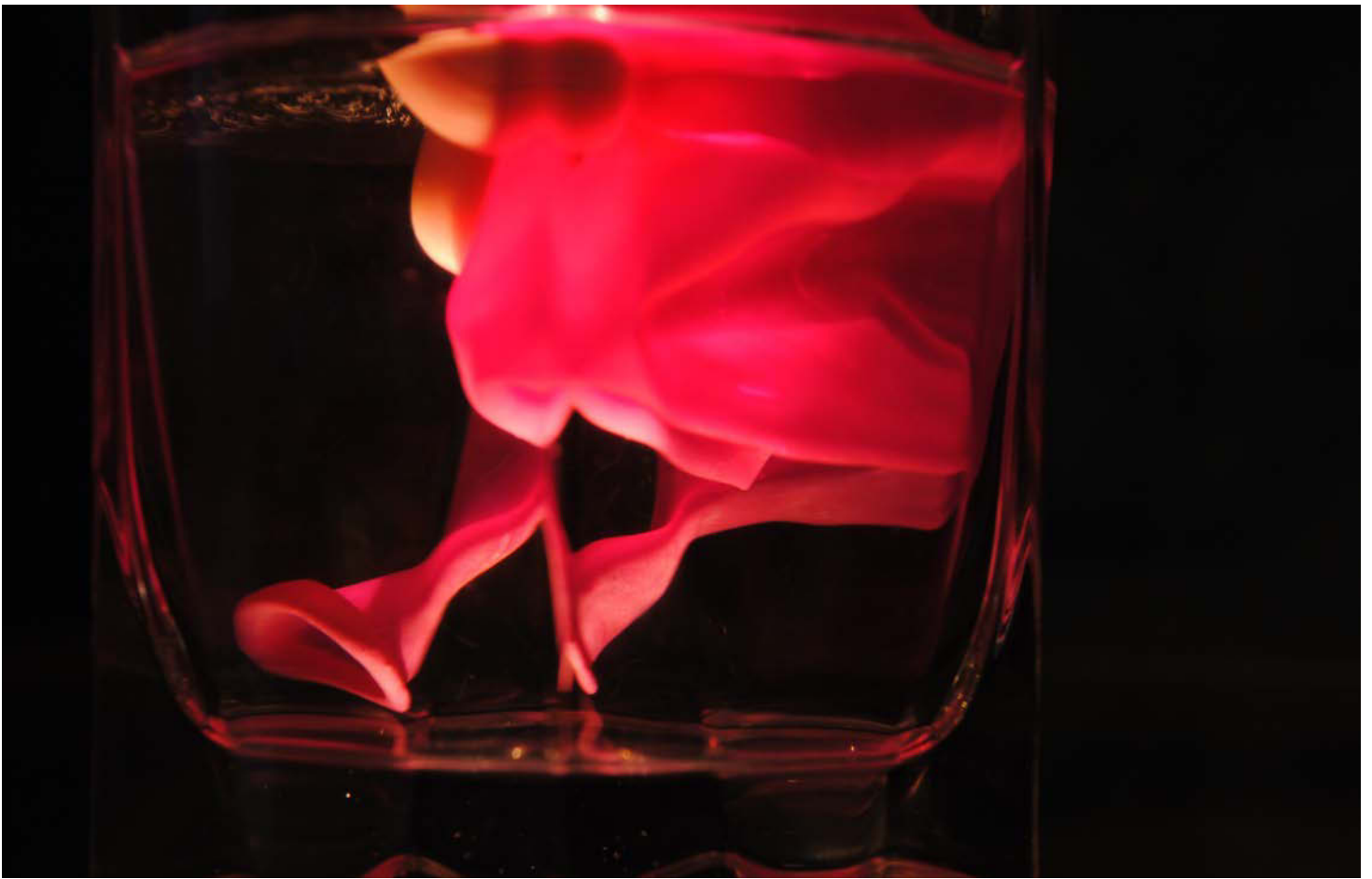
"What! What the hell?" Basil panicky looked around at his new surroundings, freezing water dripping from his mop top hair. He looked down at the heavy chains that bound him, "Where am I... oh. It's you, Synco." Basil scowled when he realized the company he was now in. He righted himself on the bench and looked upon his captors "Well. Looks like you finally caught me, didn't you?"

"Yes, yes I did. And you know what? You're never getting out of here, Basil." He let out a small chuckle and slowly started to walk into the cell. "I just wanted to see for myself that my men had caught the person. And now that my curiosity is piqued," He turned, "I'm off to defend this city from scoundrels such as yourself."

"Alright," said Basil, almost mocking the commissioner "If ya don't wanna know how I escape, that's fine by me."

Synco stopped half way through the cell, "What?" He was genuinely puzzled. "What do you mean escape, Lexington? You're in a properly secure area in the middle of one of the most heavily fortified buildings in Santo Cresto. There are no windows, no conceivable means of escape." He made a complete 180 degree turn with his boot heel to face the scruffy looking man chained to the wall. "Not only that, this room is surrounded by some of some of the BCPD's finest men. And to top it all off, the only way you can escape those chains are with this key." He showed him the key ring on his belt loop. "So, as you can see," He drew in close to Basil, almost face to face, "Escape is highly improbable."

Basil laughed through an exhausted smile, "Oh Synco, Synco, Synco. You should know by now that doesn't matter what you have planned, because I always have a plan of my own." He



Photography by Josh Goodrich

watched as Synco and his goon squad made their way to the door.

“Alright, Basil. I guess I should give you the honor of telling one last story before being left to rot for eternity. So, tell me, how would you escape?”

He cleared his throat, “Well,” he said through his infamous “story tellers” smile, “First off, I got two really good friends of mine on the outside.”

“You mean the girl and the Sasquatch?” Synco scoffed. He knew Lexington’s crew very well. There 15 year old Lana, an orphan and Basils protégé. There was also his pet Sasquatch Wigglesworth. They always accompanied Lexington wherever this ne’er-do-well went. Most of the time, they were foiling one of his operations.

“Yes. I mean the girl and the Sasquatch.” Two of the guards chuckled. “Hey, don’t you laugh. Both a’ them got more grit in them than both of you will have in your life.”

“I see,” continued Synco. “And how, pray tell, would they know you were taken by us and brought here in the first place?” He closed his eyes and tried to think of everything Basil was saying. Unfortunately, that air vent kept rattling. It sounded as if someone was running furiously.

“There’s a lotta people on Entertainment Line, Mr. Synco.” Synco watched as Basil’s happy-go-lucky smile turned into something more serious, “You should know that, being the commissioner of the police force and all that. Ain’t nobody gone the Line and not seen something they shouldn’t have. Course, they keep their trap shut so’s not to suffer the same fate.”

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Synco crossed his arms and gazed at him with his cold, pale blue eyes “We don’t do that. We’re not the bad guys. We’re trying to help the general public”

“Is that why you took Mr. Zimmerman during a raid on his establishment?” Basil’s voice went from laid back to forceful as he tried to stand up and meet eye to eye with Synco. The two guards behind Synco took a hurried step forward, before the commissioner raised a hand and told them to stop. They both stared at each other, as if measuring each other’s coffins. Eventually, Basil calmed down and smiled, “Sorry ‘bout that. Got a lil’ side tracked. So, where was I?”

“You were telling how someone would tell the girl and Sasquatch, Mr. Lexington.” Exclaimed Soze, a little too quick to answer. Synco turned and sneered at the stick of a man, knowing full well he would have to have a little “chat” with him later.

“Ah, yes, that’s right,” he mused, “That’s right. First they would find out where I was, then they would try to infiltrate this heavily fortified

headquarters you got going here.”

“This, I must reiterate, is impossible.”

“No, no. You didn’t say impossible. You said improbable. There’s a difference there, ya see? Impossible makes it sound like no one could ever get in or out. However, there are several ways someone could get into this building.” Basil bit down hard. He looked as if he was going through withdrawal without that omnipresent cigar in his mouth.

“Oh, yes?” Synco winced when Basil said that. He was growing more and more irritated by his prisoners “know-it-all” attitude and he hoped his story would end soon.

“Yes there are. One of them is the air vent, but that’s something I wouldn’t approve of. Big guy like you or me could never fit through that. Maybe if someone lanky and skinny, or if they were properly lubricated could easily squeeze through there. But then there’s option number two.”

Synco froze. How did he know that?
“How do you...”

“Trust me, Synco, I’ve staked this place many times and know the main parts of it like the back of my hand. Anyways, from there, she’ll contact Wigglesworth and...” His eyes flicked to the air vent, but only for a quick second. It was almost unnoticeable, but it was there.

“...What? Lexington? What will she do?”

Basil locked back eyes with Synco, “Oh, that’s when she’ll release the donkey into the station.”

“...A donkey?”

“Yeah, a donkey. What would be a better distraction than a donkey running though the halls of this fine institution?”

“Alright, Lexington. That’s enough!” He rushed over and grabbed his hair, almost pulling it all out along with his scalp. Basil squirmed, grabbing his pants to push him off, but the commissioner didn’t let go and only pulled harder. “I’m tired of hearing this. It’s now apparent to me that this whole thing was a farce and a waste of my time. I hope you’re happy sir, you have wasted everyone’s time here. Too bad it will be your last.”

“Mind taking a step back? I can smell dirty commissioner on your breath”

“Heh, to think that a young girl could enter this facility is beyond...”

“Commissioner Synco, please report to the informational room. We’ve caught a little girl rummaging through our files. Apparently she’s been looking for Basil Lexington.”

“Oh damn it. Officer Keyser,” He pointed at the large, flushed man. “You stay here and make sure the prisoner doesn’t do anything funny. You, come with me.” He pointed to Basil, “By God, if

you do anything”

“What are you going to do? Throw me in jail?” Synco squinted at Basil, trying to pierce his soul with his eyes. Basil just smiled.

Synco and the other officer left the room at a breakneck pace. He seethed under the collar of his jacket, too angry to think. The rest of the building was a stark contrast to the cells below. Everything was a crisp, white marble. It took him almost 7 minutes to get there. All the way he tried to think of reasons why Basil would tell them his entire plan? It itched his brain like a bug bite that he couldn’t scratch. His plan was way too complex. There had to be a catch. Some explanation. He clenched his fists in a rage and moved faster. When he reached the info room, he burst right through door. The room was brightly lit by sunshine and two desk clerks were working on stacks of files, “Where is she!?”

“Where’s who, sir?” asked one of the clerks. He stood in the corner with a confused look on his face.

“You know who! The girl! You said it over the intercom. You had her. It was all part of Basil’s idiot escape pla...”

That’s when the realization hit him. It had been bugging him this entire time. Every word in Basil’s story. “Two ways of leaving this place.” Only two, the front door and the air vents. “Maybe through the air vents, if they were small or had a lubricant.” There was still a bucket of soap in the cells. “How to be masters of stealth.” She was in the vents the entire time. “Taught them how to throw their voice.” The intercom. “Like how you caught Mr. Zimmerman?” who was two cells next to Basil’s. “A good story can make a good distraction.” He remembered when he grabbed his hair. He was so angry. Annoyed. He didn’t even think when he left the room. This was the first time he noticed his key ring was

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missing and that he forgot to lock him up. He remembered that he left Keyser in charge who was also the one who was quick to anger. He already knew he was down there, unconscious, probably chained up for dramatic irony.

He closed his eyes, "It wasn't an escape plan, it was a rescue mission." Holding his temples, he whispered. "...God damn you, Lexington." Then from the window he heard a voice.

"No commissioner. God damn you." Synco looked out to see the devilish smile of Basil, still unclothed, but smoking a cigar. "Sorry about that Synco. I had to let my favorite bartender out of the hoosegow if I wanted a good whiskey sour again. Say goodbye, Mr. Zimmerman," Synco looked up and saw the portly Mr. Zimmerman, also half naked and covered in soap. He next to him was the 15 year old girl Lana, covered in dust and lint. Wigglesworth also stood there.

He looked back at Basil and scowled. "You are a very lucky man, Lexington. Next time you're not gonna have a chance."

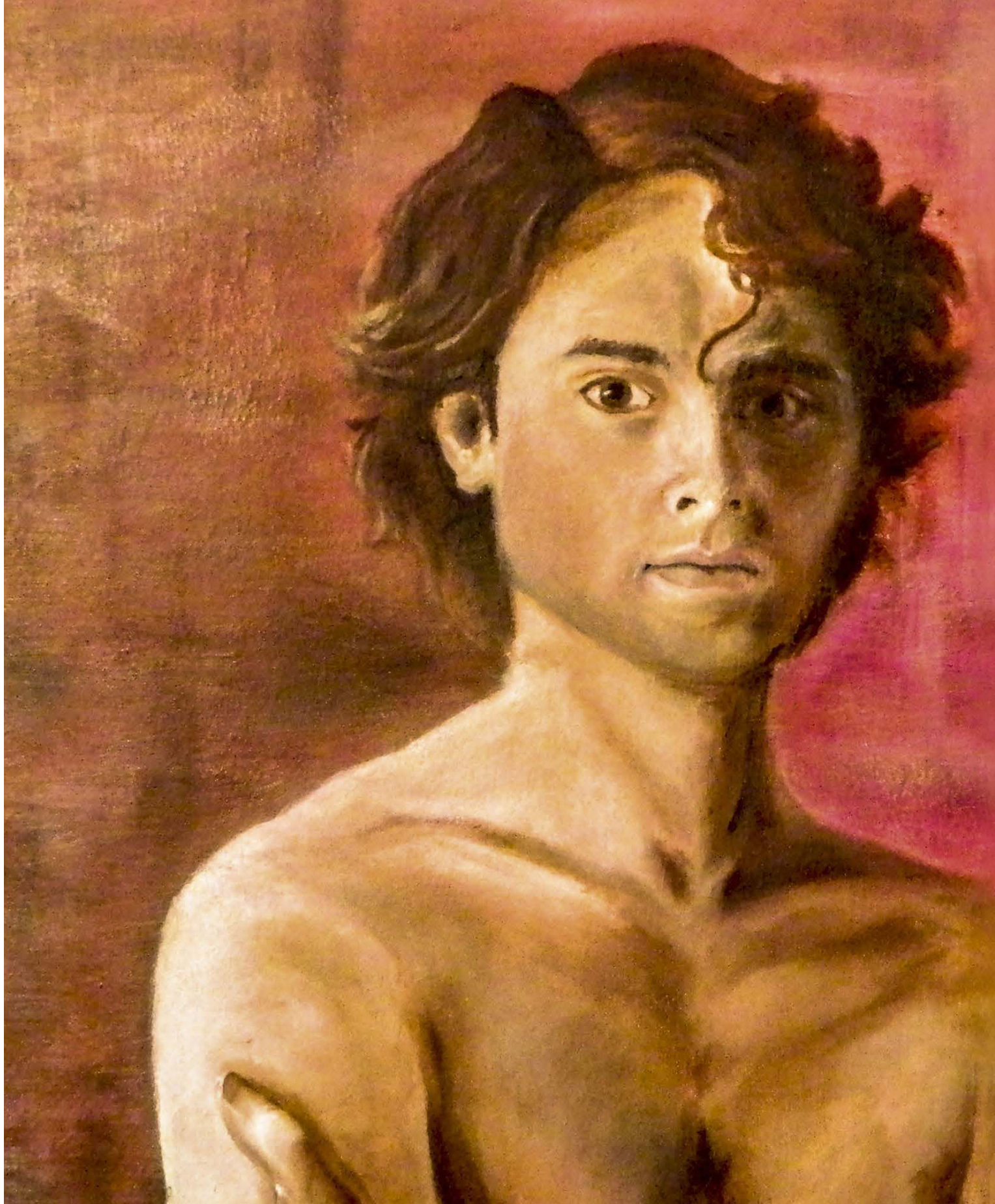
"Maybe not. But you gotta remember, I plan ahead." Basil turned to leave, bounding from the window sill to the roof of the next building. Before leaving though, he cried out, "Oh, and Synco. There is a donkey in your building, but it's really referred to as an Ass and it's in that very room"

Synco looked up as the three of them ran away from the edge of the room. Officer Soze ran out of the room yelling, "Quick! Basil Lexington is escaping!" Synco didn't follow. He knew they would never catch up to him. No doubt they were going to bring Zimmerman to a safe house of some sort. He turned around and slowly walked out of the room, head down and defeated. As he rounded the corner, he smiled and whispered. "Yes, Mr. Lexington. You do plan ahead. And when I do finally capture you, it will make my victory all the sweeter."

Vagabond rule #33: Make sure your plan's so simple a monkey could do it, but too complex for a really smart monkey.



Photography by Dina Peone



Artwork by David Anthony Mathews, title: Selfportrait, Medium: Oil Paint Size: 18" by 24"



Untitled

I, am my past, are the reasons I ran so far away.
Bear in mind, time and distance heal all wounds.
Never again, will I believe my love is bad.
Now, this heart I give to whom I choose.

The Catskills are my home, and home is where I will belay.
My soul sings with every barefoot step in these creeks.
My mind dreams of where I have slept in these valleys.
My heart gives freely with every ramble on these knolls.

I am here, I feel love, and I have come home to stay.
No matter how painful life was long ago; the worst is passed.

My fire has always burned within your hearthstone.
So, take heart, for my love flourishes upon these hills.



Our Town

Our Town, by Thornton Wilder, is the greatest piece of American theater in which I could ever hope to be cast. More than a brilliantly written play, it is also a life-changing experience for a growing student actor because it forces you to create a world so detailed, personal and realistic that you literally *feel at home there*. This kind of development of a true environment is necessary in any acting job, and I feel so lucky that I got a chance to really exercise that skill to the fullest. In order to give the play what it was asking, I really started to be more present in my life, and like a beautiful vicious cycle, this *living my life* made me a better citizen of *Our Town*.

I really think that the play's title refers to communities of every kind, and I started seeing this from lots of angles in my own life. From a human perspective, *Our Town* means the world we all live in together; the existence we all share. As a member of a community college, I started seeing how deep the most casual relationship is, how every classmate and all your teachers knows you in some way, and even the smallest exchange is full of a particular relationship, not to mention old memories and personal dynamics. As an actor, I noticed the same thing with my colleagues. I learned that a play can become a "town" of its own – a group of people come together, each individual with his or her own job, and everyone in the cast and crew develops a relationship with everyone else. We all have our own way, and we all teach each other, if we're listening and watching. This is even more exciting for me because this small, close-knit community within the theater is engaged in a driven, collaborative creative process: actors, director, stage technicians, and stage management alike all work together. For *Our Town*, we actors needed to spin a *whole life*, the kind of life that's so complex we never even think of it, but it exists around us all the time. Together, with minimal physical props and sets, we built Grover's Corners right there on that stage. I know. I lived there.

The level of professionalism in this production was so deep and everyone collaborated for a common cause. We created a show that we're all eternally proud of. I am especially proud, and feel it's really powerful, that this

play was the last one that SUNY Ulster's beloved Ron Marquette saw at the Quimby, and that he said it was the best he'd ever seen on this stage. When I remember that, it makes me want to produce work of this quality every time. Because while we're here, we've got a life that *everyone* shares and we can each fill up by giving and expressing our humanity, and this play, especially this production, shows me how important that is.

When my character, Emily, is dead she enters the graveyard where all the late townsfolk are looking out for that eternal *something*. In playing her, I had to imagine how it felt to be dead and to look at my life as though I'd lost it. I had to see everything as though I hadn't seen it in ten years. And then I let go of it, and looked for that eternal *something*. This was a challenge, but still, Act III spoke to me more than the first two (even though without the other two acts depicting life's fullness and ordinariness, this last one would be meaningless). So what is that *something*? Thornton Wilder must have written it for a reason. People have a lot of different ideas and feelings about it, as we learned when we brainstormed Act III in rehearsal. Whether it's God, Life, Existence, or something we can never name, *Our Town* speaks to that yearning part of us. What makes us live and want to live? This masterpiece makes us think about why our lives are so precious, even in the things that hurt. It makes us really look at *moments*. Well, sure, we may walk out of the theater intent on paying attention to every second of life and not miss a thing, but we just can't do that all the time. We'll inevitably take things for granted. But maybe, just maybe, we'll leave the theatre with a feeling of communion with everyone around us. We'll hopefully start letting life sink in a little more.

That's what I took from this amazing, unforgettable production. I am eternally grateful that I was given the chance to work on such a good play, with such an incredible, hardworking and talented cast and crew, and the gifts of experience I take away from it go beyond words. If I was in Emily's shoes, and could go back and see one moment of my life, as she did, surely the last performance of SUNY Ulster's *Our Town* would be my "happy day" that I couldn't bear remembering.

Sisterly Love

I wish I didn't hate my sister.

I remember the good ol' days. Seeing pictures of myself modeling her oversized clothing around my house and watching our music video randomly. I'm five years old. My outfit consists of my red cowgirl hat, cow print shirt, and skirt. Our bright smiles are visible on each other's faces.

A few years go by; I'm in my late elementary school years. Melissa stops by my babysitter's house. Excitement covers my face because I'm hoping she's picking me up to leave. I'm sadly mistaken. My grandmother was about to drop Melissa off to the bus station. My eyes filled with tears of confusion.

She missed my D.A.R.E. graduation, where I won the essay contest. Most importantly, she missed two birthdays and my elementary school graduation.

When she came back home, she brought two people with her. Her boyfriend, Keith and my nephew in her stomach. Surprise! She's home. During her dreadful nine month pregnancy Keith left. He came back when Keegan was born. Then he left again. When he came back again he seemed changed. Keith and Melissa were in love again. Keegan was growing more every day. It was great to see my sister smile. It didn't last long. He left again.

My sister was alone. She had a few boyfriends, but none that stayed around or accepted her and Keegan together. My family stood by her side through these tough times. She stayed up many nights crying with my brother, Shane, by her side. He would comfort her until she fell asleep. What better treatment could you ask for?

This is where it all started.

She began calling me all sorts of mean names. I won't give any examples; they are all too cruel. Melissa took advantage of me. I was weak. She was the only person I have known to be my best friend. But would a best friend, and even your sister, treat you that way?

Then I started high school. Some days I ditched my sister for my friends. I thought I was wrong at the time, but when I look back, it was one of the smartest choices I've made.

Here we go again. More name calling. I just don't understand it. Maybe this was the point where I should have said something. Maybe ask, "Why, Melissa? What is really going on?" I just didn't care anymore.





Melissa fell in love with Vinnie. My family had known what he was about. A drug addicted crazy man. This is the breaking point for our relationship.

When Melissa finds someone, she holds onto him because she is frightened that it will all disappear. We were all cut out of their lives in the blink of an eye. She was blinded by love.

My parents were blind too. Always believing every word Melissa says. For example, “No, Mom and Dad, you’re wrong! He’s great to me and Keegan. I’m a grown woman and a wonderful mother. I love him.” My parents believed her. Their daughter was happy again, I couldn’t blame them.

The saddest part of this story is about Keegan. Melissa is so wrapped up in her relationship and doesn’t pay enough attention to him. She forces him to play by himself while she spends time with Vinnie. Keegan is diagnosed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Attention Deficit Disorder from his father leaving him. He craves attention that Melissa lacks to give him. My family cherishes Keegan as much as we can, whenever we’re allowed to see him.

Recently, Vinnie relapsed. Came into my sister’s house and went crazy. Punching walls and scaring my sister. Keegan was napping at the time. Is this what my sister wants her seven year old son around?

My main concern is for Keegan. I don’t care about Melissa and Vinnie’s relationship any longer. It doesn’t matter anymore. She’s a best friend I have forgotten about. All I want is for Keegan to be happy and for him not to be forced into situations that he doesn’t deserve to be in.

I wish Melissa would open her eyes. I wish we could be the way we were when I was five. Where did that Melissa go? Vinnie and Melissa aren’t together anymore. At this point, I don’t care. I’ve given up trying to tell her the truth that she will never accept. Some things will just never change.

I wish I didn’t hate my sister.

The “Sorrowful Ballad of Bodecka Extremidad”

“Tonight is the night, Marisol, I can just feel it,” says the man in the shiny lime green / hot pink tiger stripe mask. He pulls absentmindedly on one of the pointed sparkly cat ears on top of the mask as he readjusts the position of his cell phone on his shoulder. He is a short but muscular man. His attire is eccentric; shirtless he is wearing only his bright orange and purple spandex wrestling tights, and a pair of hot pink wrestling boots made of shiny latex with thick neon yellow laces, all of which are covered in tiger stripes that match his peculiar mask. He has a curious scar burned into his left forearm, a semicircle of intricate design reminiscent of crop circles. Cheering is heard in the background as the fans react to another wrestler performing his finishing move within the stadium, “If you can I’d like you to bring Jose and-”

The woman cuts him off, “You know that’s not possible.”

“What about next time? I could get tickets in advance and-” He stops his sentence short as a spray tanned, orange skinned, promoter with greasy black hair approaches him bearing a wryly grin, “I’m going to have to call you back,” he hangs up as the promoter claps a hand on his shoulder.

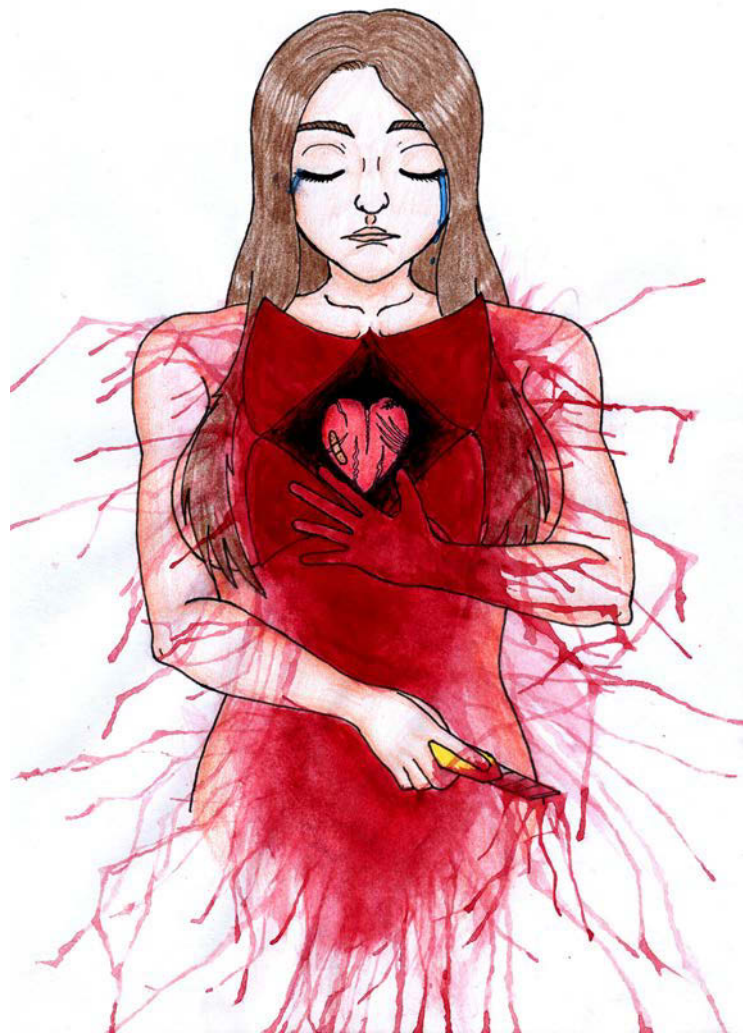
“Bodecka, baby! Still drawing a crowd after all these years, eh? You’re the cat’s meow and I do mean meow!” The promoter laughs at his own awful joke.

Bodecka does not look amused, “Tonight, yes? Tonight I take home the World Heavyweight Title?”

The promoter winces, the look of a child caught with a hand in the cookie jar, “Look, about that... we think it would be better to carry on this little angle, I mean Kato is undefeated! We need to keep this going for awhile you know, let the crowd really take him in. Whadda’ya say? Just this one time Bodecka takes the fall.”

“But you said-”

The promoter cuts him off sternly, “I know what I said, but plans change. We all have to change with the times right? We can’t keep living in the past. It’s time to get some new blood in the business. It’ll be good for sales and what’s good for sales is good for both of us, right?” He smiles deviously, “Look, I even brought you a little peace offering,” he holds out two plastic bags; one, a colored assortment of unlabeled prescription pills haphazardly mixed together in a sandwich bag and the other, a smaller baggie, full of a familiar white substance that makes Bodecka masticate inadvertently. The promoter smirks as he shoves the bags into his hands, “See you out there, champ,” he touches his shoulder encouragingly before continuing down the hall. Bodecka stares at the bags harshly and then shoves them into his duffle bag with an exasperated sigh.





Photography by Alexandro Pacheco, Title: Conceptual

Tonight was supposed to be his night, not that ungrateful Kato's! That man was a disaster from the moment he arrived and refused to introduce himself. He never showed the men backstage even a hint of respect, not even once. Now that fat lummoX was at the top of the world - a spot Bodecka had pushed his entire life to reach. Well, he wouldn't be going down without a fight, no, not tonight.

He could hear the bell sound in the background as a victor was crowned. It was time to separate the men from the pretenders. Bodecka made sure his mask was tightly laced, and began his walk to the entrance ramp. His anticipation rose with the crescendo of his music. As he parted the curtain the audience hailed him like a conquering hero. The stadium stretched before him, thousands of bodies held back by the sturdy metal railings that lined the ring and entryway. He slapped a few outstretched hands and embraced a child wearing his replica mask. Then he slid underneath the bottom rope of the ring and posed for the crowd who showered him with adoration.

Before Bodecka could truly take in this moment of freedom, Kato's music interrupted his festivity. The hostility from the arena was obvious as he stepped through the curtain carrying a microphone in hand. The crowd booed and hissed so loudly that even with the amplifier backing him, his voice was indistinct, "Hola, Pesadumbre! What an inbred mess of illiterate scum you all are," the crowd jeered incessantly, the man only chuckled. Bodecka paced the ring furiously. He never did care for pandering and this man was wasting his time. Kato leered at Bodecka in the ring, "So this is your

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Photography by Alexandro Pacheco. Title: Flowergirl and Untitled

hometown hero? The mouser man who stepped out of a crayon box? Have you all been smoking cat nip? This is a man past his prime and tonight I'm going to prove it."

"Not tonight," thought Bodecka. He smirked as he watched Kato make his way down to the ring.

The two squared off, Kato mouthed a suggestion, but Bodecka ignored him, tossing him to the corner turnbuckle with authority. He delivered a few hard chops across the chest until the man's flesh turned from red to purple. Kato understood now that this was no ordinary match. The two battled back and forth but it was Bodecka who remained dominant choosing old school wrestling methods to reverse any grapple the man attempted. He made sure to deliver back any strikes he received with double the force. The audience was electric cheering Bodecka on. He could not stop himself despite Kato's protests of pain. He wanted to drive home a lesson, just because you're popular now does not make you a legend.

In spite of this display Bodecka could not abandon his duty. He scaled the turnbuckle and froze, staring to the sky as if in a trance. Kato took advantage of this moment he sprang up and seized Bodecka in a headlock then fell backward driving him down hard on his neck. Bodecka felt a peculiar prickling sensation that tingled down his spine; he clutched the back of his head as the referee counted to three and Kato was crowned the victor.

Bodecka continued to hold his head with most of the spectators convinced he was only selling his injury. He felt a strange numbness in his fingers as the referee assisted in rolling him out of the ring. Finding his footing Bodecka hobbled backstage feeling weak. Management offered no support. The sleazy promoter glared at him, "What was that?!"

“Que?” Bodecka questioned brazenly.

“Don’t give me that Spanish crap! You know what I mean! We told you to fall,” bellowed the orange man.

“I fell,” shrugged Bodecka.

“You know what you did!” shouted the promoter now red in the face, “This is a media nightmare! I’m trying to create a legend and you damaged my property! Do you know how many advertisers I’ve been lining up for this man? Now what am I going to do for the photo shoot? The collector’s cups are going to be delayed, merchandising, does any of this mean anything to you?” He didn’t allow him time to answer, “No, of course it doesn’t! Get out of my sight! You make me sick,” he spat on Bodecka’s boots. There was a time when this offense would have earned this man entry into a world of pain, but he could tell by his dilated stare that the promoter had already been digging in his own stash. Bodecka left the arena feeling his defeat not only in his body but in his very soul.

Arriving home he found that he could not bend to remove his wrestling boots. He shoed away his Bengal cat Bandito and collapsed into his favorite armchair. He attempted to remove his footwear once more but there was a sharp pain in his back that made this act impossible. Bodecka took out his cell phone and placed a call to his sister. Hearing his misery she rushed to his home with her son, Jose. Immediately upon arriving she found issue with the condition of his home. His absence in a home full of cats made the odor overwhelming. There were little clumps of fur, and small patches of vomit that required his attention.

Bodecka ignored her complaints, “Hermana, please, I’m so tired. Help a poor old man take off his boots,” he begged. Little Jose dropped to his feet swiftly and began delicately untangling the knots in his laces, “That’s a good boy,” Bodecka grinned. He begins unlacing the mask behind his head revealing his broad face which is showing signs of age;

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Photography by Dina Peone



heavy smile lines line his mouth, a large black mole has recently formed under his left eye, and heavy black bags now hang under his almond-shaped eyes. His hazel eyes have that sluggish zombie stare of a practiced insomniac. His nose is pressed flat on its bridge from the pressure of his mask. When he grins there is an absence where his front canine should be.

“Don’t listen to him! He should be in a hospital, but no! Eduardo is too proud for that, Eduardo does not answer to authority, he is the authority, bah!” Marisol waved her suggestions away in disgust, “And where is your World Heavyweight Title now? Where is your crown of crowns, ah? Shows how well they treat you. All this suffering for nothing! Sure Senior Gringo is an honest man. He cares about you, he wants you to succeed,” she crossed her arms over her chest defensively. The family resemblance is obvious, he pictures his mother in her movements.

Eduardo ignores her and smiles at his nephew, “You should have heard that crowd tonight! Every one of them, alive yelling, “Bodecka! Bodecka! Bodecka!” It’s still ringing in my ear. Come close, child, maybe you can hear it,” Jose chuckled leaning in close to his uncle’s ear as expectantly as you would a conch shell.

This act only enraged Marisol further, “Yes, go right ahead. That cheering is just about the only thing going on up there,” she pointed to the side of her head sarcastically.

“Marisol, I believe you would be thinking a bit differently if it was your name they were cheering,” he teased.

“The only man I want chanting my name is my husband,” she retorted narrowing her eyebrows.

“Not in front of the child!” Eduardo imitated her favorite saying placing his hands over Jose’s ears.

Jose laughed pulling away from him playfully, “I’m not a child. I’m going to be eleven next week.”



“Eleven next week! Why you’re practically fifteen! What are we going to do to honor your manhood, eh?”

“He’s not fifteen yet,” scolded his mother.

“He’s a man just the same. Soon you’ll be taller than me. Then I’ll have to knock you down a peg, ah?” he ruffled the boy’s hair affectionately. “We’ll set up the old ring in your mother’s yard. I’ll teach you how to hold your own like a real man.”

“Really?” Jose’s eyes sparkled with excitement, for a moment he’s the spitting image of his uncle.

“No!” shouted Marisol shoving an orange colored tabby named Taco Dashing from resting on her lap. She glared at her brother, “No, absolutely not! Jose, a real man handles his problems by bettering himself. You’re going to study hard, get a solid education, and a respectable career. Then you won’t need a sibling to come untie your shoes for you like a little child.”

Eduardo frowned, “Must you always be so cruel?”

She stuck her nose in the air, “I thought you were a big strong man. What’s my opinion matter compared to millions of screaming fans?”

He lowered his head in shame, “It matters to me.”

“Humph, it would be good to know we’re not completely forgotten as you forgot the family reunion last year.”

“A show came up last minute, but look I’m here now,” he spread his hands out in front of him to emphasize his point.

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“Yes, when you’re wanting you’re always right here,” Marisol rolled her eyes, “When we need you is another story.”

“I can’t help my schedule you know that.”

“You can always say no, Eduardo.”

“No, I can’t.”

“There you have it! You just said no,” she smirked spitefully.

Eduardo sighed trying to conceal his temper, “I take care of myself, hermana. Look at all I’ve accomplished. I have very nice things because of my career.”

“Yes, all these nice things hiding under a thick layer of cat hair and vomit. Mangy beasts!” she kicked lightly at Chalupa the Korat who hissed back at her vengefully.

“You leave my beasts alone!” shouted Eduardo visibly seething. His face had turned a bright shade of red.

“Uncle?” started Jose.

Marisol interrupted him rising and gathering their things, “Leave him, Jose! Clearly your uncle has more pressing matters to deal with than us. Get your things, child.”

“Mom, I don’t”

“I said get them,” she opened her eyes threateningly wide. Reluctantly, Jose began pulling on his boots.

“Why must we always battle when you’re here?” replied Eduardo feebly.

“It’s just a reflection of the way you make it,” bit back Marisol. She shoved Jose out the door and slammed it closed after her.

Eduardo was alone. He patted his lap gently. Senior Guapo his most prized Persian cat hopped into his lap purring with



adoration. “We don’t need them,” he whispered conspiratorially into his ear, “you’re all I need my little chinchilla,” the cat meowed in a way to indicate chinchillas were in fact below him and Eduardo chuckled, “I know, I know.”

He could feel the pain in his back a hot sensation of pain; muscle worked into tight balls of pressure jabbing against his spine. He took a glance at his gym bag nearby and bit the bullet of agony to reach for the mixed bag of pills. He popped two or three into his mouth and chomped down on them eagerly, in a few minutes he wouldn’t be able to feel anything.

In his dreams he imagined them, those extraterrestrial creatures that had robbed him of normality and his height! He could picture the damnable green light, brighter than the LED’s that made up his entrance video. He could feel it pulling at him again, that tugging sensation he could never be rid of would sometimes wake him even out of his deepest sleep. It felt as though his body were metallic, dragged against his will by some ancient invisible magnet. He could picture their strange cylindrical heads, their eyes like insects as they inspected him thoroughly under the bright white examination light on some foreign gurney. He’d picture their tools, if you could call them tools. They seemed more like torture instruments, tiny saws and strange drills. Then he’d awaken to the sounds of his own screaming drenched in a cold sweat, his heart pounding violently against his ribcage, trapped within him like a caged tiger. The scar on his arm was burning again. He needed to get out. Slipping a few more pills into his open mouth he prepared himself for the day.

The streets of Pesadumbre, Mexico were bustling with the usual procession of bodies’ merchants, farmers, laborers, and tourists all mixing seamlessly with the occasional cutpurse. Tall pale clay-worked buildings lurked along the sidewalks swallowing the passersby with grave indifference. Mariachi music carried on the wind while traders shouted their wares amongst the chattering populace in the hopes of drawing them in. A short muscular man wearing a light blue Guayabera shirt, a pair of khaki seersucker pants, and a tan panama hat decorated with a dark blue ribbon slips through the scene clutching his hat tightly. Here Eduardo Sanchez is just another man on a busy street.

His cell phone rings his theme song, betraying his anonymity, he answers quickly, it’s the promoter. Kato loved the crowd reaction, he’s asking for a rematch World Heavyweight Title on the line next week. Bodecka agrees instantly. He’s already hopped a plane to Mexico city; he’s seated in first class sipping Mojitos with Mexico’s finest, snorting white crystalline powder with rock stars, lawyers, and politicians alike. A stewardess gives him the eye, she wants to join the mile high club with Mexico’s finest. Yes, Bodecka Extremidad is on top of the world. It’s only after he hangs up the phone that Eduardo realizes his rematch falls on Jose’s birthday.

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Artwork by Krasimir Momchilov Title: The Banermanl, Medium: pen

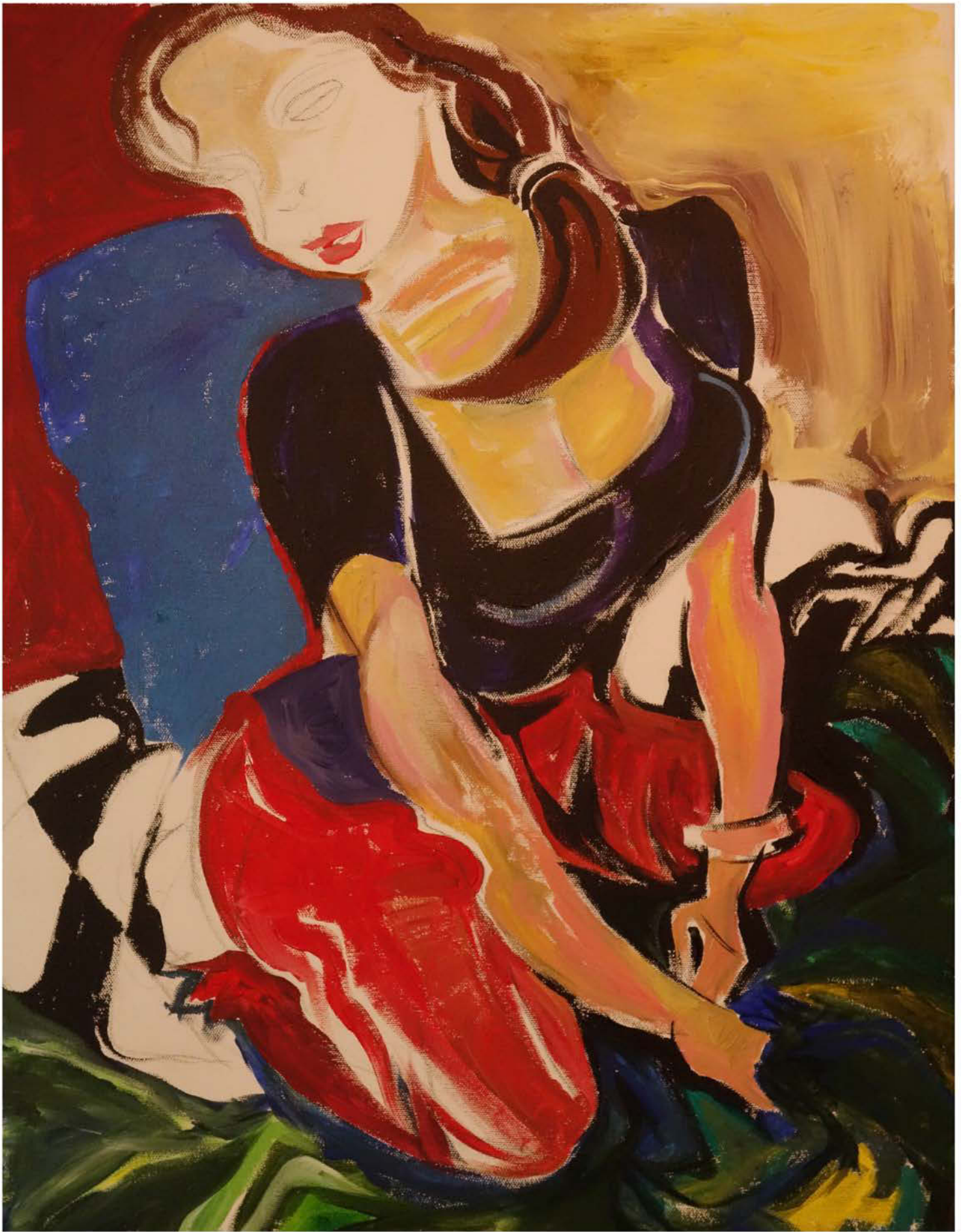




Basia Coulter,
A fantasy character illustration done in Photoshop.

Adison Cook
Title: Untitled, Medium: Oil



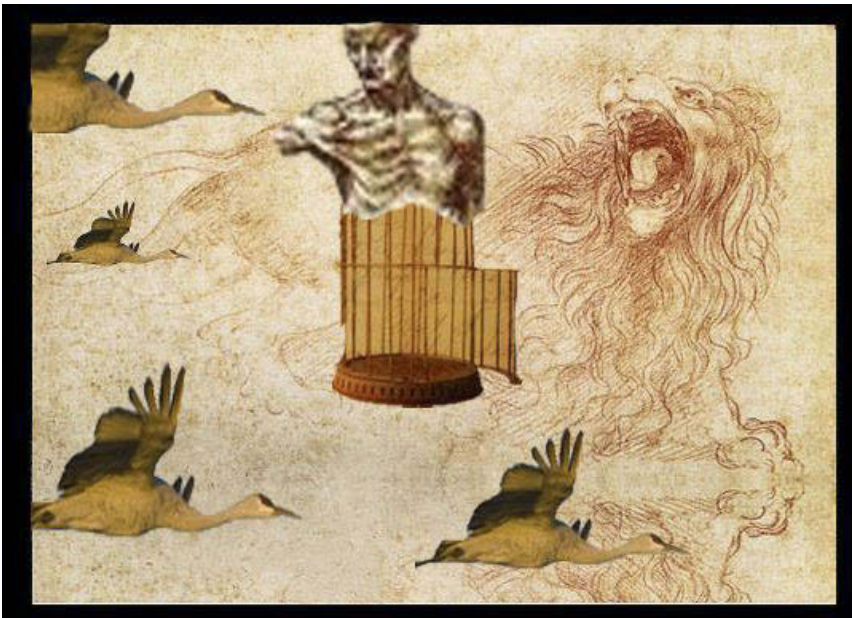




Digital Art by Jacquelyn Smith

He ducks into a nearby church to escape the chaos of the city. He places a hesitant call to his sister who answers with glowering disinterest and then refuses to allow a word in edgewise as she berates him for his attitude. When Eduardo finally confides his situation, Marisol is beside herself hovering on the edge of psychotic. A string of profanity and accusations fill the air of this holy environment contaminating it... the paint is peeling on the walls, the pews are shaking with the force of her rage, even the statute of the Virgin Mary seems to be eyeing him distastefully. Eduardo takes a deep breath and forces a small to a passing nun. He waits for her to run out of steam ironically thinking, "This too shall pass," the thought of the proverb here makes him smirk smugly.

Digital Art by David Mathews



Finally, the moment he's been waiting for where his sister takes a breath, "This is my responsibility, it's my career. I owe it to the company to be there. Our last match was nominated for match of the year! No one gives a beating to Kato, but I did!" A nun glances at him suspiciously, he crosses himself in a symbol of good faith and walks back out onto the street. He can barely make out his sister's voice. He interprets the rest of her words as if reciting her monologue, "I know, I have a responsibility to the family too... Yes, I know I missed father's funeral and you'll never forgive me... I know I've been a burden on all of you. I'm a selfish idiota who'd be better off alone. All I'm good for is entertaining people who don't even know - or care about the real me, yes I'm aware..." He slips his key into the front entryway of his apartment and with a



Photography by Leah Kalp

grimace of pain begins climbing the stairs of his apartment.

Her voice returns a shrieking furious shout, “That’s not what I said!”

“Oh,” Eduardo is genuinely surprised, “What did you say then?”

“I was asking how you managed to get your boots on today, but if that’s how you really feel, then maybe you really should be alone! You know Jose adores you. You promised you would come, now I have to be the one to tell him.”

“The boy has a father!” he stops for a moment scowling as he grips the railing of the stairway. He pulls out his bag and removes two pills that seem interesting to him, he shoves them in his maw with a loud chomp, “Look, I know I’m set to win here! I can get you front row tickets! Even a meet and greet before the show. I’ll dedicate my match in Jose’s honor, he’ll love it!”

“Jose doesn’t need to be exposed to any more violence and he doesn’t need you telling him this fantasy world you’re living in is okay. You’re getting old, Eduardo. It’s time you start thinking about what’s really important. My boy is going to make something of himself one day, not die an old man alone in a clowder of cats. How many do you have now? Twelve?”

He closes the cell phone on itself and pockets the device. “I have eight cats,” he says to no one.

A rain cloud follows him up the steps, into his apartment, not even the tiny kitten meow of Atole his ocicat can bring a smile to his face. Chupacabra his psycho Siamese dashes through the room batting at a paper bag. Eduardo shouts at the creature cursing and stomping his feet until it dashes out of the room. He lifts a roach from the ashtray and smells it, definitely blunt not a cigar, just what he was looking for. His cell phone rings but he shuts it off. It’s time to get calm.

Another sleepless night passes. It’s nothing of a surprise to Eduardo. His sister will tell you, he’s always been troubled. All he ever had was his stories. She’d say he had never been abducted by aliens, that he was just high and

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wandered onto a farm one night, burned himself with a cattle prod and that's how he got that scar. Eduardo was happy for the separation of himself and his persona. Bodecka would not cower! He'd tell her what he really felt. At least his audience wanted to hear what he had to say.

The week went passed quickly until suddenly it was time for the big night. The masked Bodecka arrived in style from first class airline seats to a limousine ride, all to prove a point that even internationally that Mexico cared about their wrestlers, or at least that's how the promoter pitched it as he arrived. He smiled just as broadly as the day they met, "There you are my favorite feline! Re-Ow!" he clawed the air snickering and snorting, "Tonight's the big night! I know you're ready! Kato wants to have a word with you before the match. Plan things out a little better than last time," he eyed him from behind his dark sunglasses, studying his temper.

Bodecka gave him a small nod of recognition and walked the busy hall to Kato's room. He knocked on the door and Kato yelled at him to enter. He found Kato deeply relaxed on a plush leather sofa. Before him sat a large glass coffee table covered with a slew of narcotics spread out and ready for use. He cast Bodecka a cheeky grin, a needle couldn't fit through the dilation of his pupils, "Bodecka!" he shouted merrily, "Mexico City! We're really in the big leagues now!" He scooted over making room and motioned for him to have a seat. Bodecka reluctantly joined him eyeing the table like a compulsive eater at a buffet, drooling mentally.

Kato smirked, "Can I get you anything?" He handed him a plastic straw.

Bodecka shook his head, "I thought you wanted to prepare for our match."

"We are preparing, this is how we prepare. We have to be there mentally as well as physically, right? Now, I heard through the grapevine they're going to give you this title tonight," he pulled the golden belt out of his gym bag and stared at it completely enamored by it's sheen. He glanced at Bodecka with an unreadable expression, "Maybe it's to be. Can't live in the spotlight forever, right? I mean, unless you're you, HA!" He gave a loud laugh, "They just eat you up, your little abduction story, your cat ears. I guess that makes you special. It certainly makes you unique, but what am I? Just another punk ass kid trying to make it somewhere. I'm yesterday's news already," he scowled and leaned forward sucking in a large line through his tiny straw piece.

Bodecka wasn't sure how to handle this, "Look, Kato-"

He straightened up, "I don't need an explanation. I know how this business works. Please, join me in my celebration, my last night as champion... I even cut some up for you," he pointed.

With a sigh of defeat Bodecka joined him. The two managed to clean most of the table, but something wasn't sitting right with Bodecka. His eyes were zoning in and out of focus, his heart was racing, he was sweating profusely. Things were beginning to swirl, he couldn't see straight. He excused himself. Stumbling to the bathroom he evacuated the contents of his stomach. He held his head close to the cool surface of the toilet and closed his eyes, but that only brought more disturbing visions, the ones from his nightmares.

The door opened, there was a bright light, someone was shouting violently, spitting his name from behind dark sunglasses... He remembered cheering - he was in the spotlight! Then there was that searing pain from deep within his neck. He felt paralyzed. Things turned foggy.... There was booing, hissing, the faces of the audience members blended into an angry horde. He was showered in a sticky substance that smelled of hops and soda pop. There was someone leaning over him, shouting at him, blocking the spotlight... Bodecka closed his eyes.

Eduardo was on the streets; unable to remember how he came to stand here. In the electronics' store window a stack of televisions ruthlessly explain, "Kato defeats Bodecka live in Mexico City! Bodecka put on the most embarrassing performance I have ever seen! To show up to the most important match of the year in that kind of condition only proves

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John Mattern Title: Medium: Pastel

he is a blemish on our company's image," Eduardo draws near leaning groggily against the glass window he sees the orange skinned promoters' leering smile, "For those of you that missed it Kato ripped off Bodecka's mask like a vengeful beast, and I can assure you Bodecka Extremidad will never work for us again. We can't keep living in the past anymore. It's time to get some new blood in the business and Kato is the real deal." They begin playing the footage, it's clear from the start that Bodecka is in no condition to wrestle. He stumbles out with the help of a ring attendant. Kato takes everything out of him, beating him senselessly; busting his lip open. Mid way though the match Kato drops him viciously on his neck.

Eduardo closes his eyes there's pins and needles in his fingers as he reaches into the pocket of his jacket. There's a little bag with a note from Kato, "Thanks for the pep talk." Smug little asshole, disaster from the moment he arrived. Nothing left to do, he pops a few pills into his mouth. He misses Jose, he stifles tears, I missed his birthday, I failed him...

Something falls over him, a heavy cloud of calm. Doors draw open, he can see the bright lights of his next abduction now. A woman welcomes him inside with open arms, she speaks of love from the heavens and offers him the alter of forgiveness. He's no fool. There is no forgiveness. There is no love from the skies. He wants no key to heaven; the men from above bring only a suffering hell.

He can picture their faces in hers. The men who came for him - who come for him every night in his dreams. Bodecka Extremidad is gone and with him his stories, his very essence and being. There is no one left to love Eduardo now. He closes his eyes on the glow from above. Before he loses consciousness one thought penetrates his mind... "This too shall pass." He smiles to himself wishing it were true.



Photography by Taylor Clinger



Numb Dream

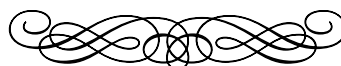
The amorphous feather floated down onto my pillow as
if it was a benevolent sign.

My hallow breath blows the purple balloon towards the
iridescent shimmer of light from my window.

Shy whispers send my mind to a mellow phantom of
dark and beautiful night.

A lurid figure in my doorway lingers with the smell of
lilac. A warm feeling crawls up my back.

A sweet kiss from another's lips dwells on mine, as I
wake in my own bed with no one but myself.





Alexandra Stachelrodt,
Title: Sound Waves, Medium: Water Colour

**John
 Mattern**



Medium: Ink on paper



Kissed By Fire

“Just another night at the Clam Trap,” I say to myself, as I leave the stage. Sweat is pouring down my face as I head backstage to freshen up. The bills are slimy, but I don’t dare leave them out to dry here. Instead, I wad them up and stick ’em in the inside pocket of my leather. I’ve rigged it so I can attach a little lock through the zipper, and attach it to the inside of my jacket. Before I leave the dressing room, everything will go into my locker, and I’ll put a lock on that too. I saw a couple of twenties in there, so I’m guessing it was a good night.

The girls working the Clam tonight are decent enough, but you can never be too safe when it comes to money. Most of them are here ‘cause they got habits to support. Occasionally, ya get some single mom’s, trying to do the best for their kids, but they don’t stick around long. At two years, I have the honor of being here the longest.

You’d think the scumbags that ran the joint would put in a shower for the girls, but you’d be wrong. I do quick wash up with baby wipes; they work best for getting the Vaseline off. Oh, you’re probably thinking all sorts of weird shit right now, sicko. It’s just part of the act; I incorporate a little fire into my dance. Yep, I smear a bunch of Vaseline on my crotch and chest, put a lighter to it, and voila, I’m a flaming stripper. The upstanding citizens who frequent this place love it, and they show their love with slimy bills.

When I was little, Thorin always said I was kissed by fire. Of course, he was talking about my hair, and never considered we would be working at a strip club in the near future. I’m about as clean as I’m getting until I reach a shower. Time to fix the makeup, as I sit down in front of the mirror, I say a silent prayer of thanks to who ever invented waterproof eyeliner and mascara. With a quick swipe of a magical baby wipe, a little eye shadow, fresh lipstick, and I’m almost ready to work the floor.

Our current boss, Tony, came up with that brilliant plan: fire the serving girls, and have the dancers work the floor between sets. So, I slip into a black thong, a matching bra that enhances what little I got, a red skirt that barely covers half my ass and some ridiculous red heels that could double as a weapon if need be. I wouldn’t be caught dead in an outfit like this anywhere else, but a girl’s gotta make her money.

I pass a couple of girl’s as I walk out of the dressing room. They’ll be getting ready to head home, or wherever they go when they leave here.

I give them a nod, and say, “Night ladies, stay safe.”

“You too, Rose,” replies the blonde, also known as Cat.

Starla returns my nod, and adds, “Stay Safe.”

We’ve had too many girls disappear around here, only to find out they’ve met with a bad end. That’s why we remind each other to be safe when we leave here. Nobody uses their real names around here, either. There are a few reasons for that, can ya guess? I go by Rose, which is actually part of my name. My I.D. says Matilda Rose Storm McCormick, but my friends call me Tilly. Of course, the I.D. is a fake. It’s kind of hard to get a real I.D. when ya don’t have a birth certificate.

I head to the bar; Thorin’s wiping out glasses and looking over the meager customers who remain. Hmm, he looks a little more tense than usual. Poor guy, I know this isn’t the life he expected for us, but it’s not a half bad one from where I’m standing.

Things were different when I was little. We lived out in the country with a nice couple. The McCormick’s raised me like a true born daughter, and I thought I was until right before my fifteenth birthday. The story went that Thorin was a foster child they had taken in, and I was a surprise. I grew up thinking of him as an older brother, and he was always my greatest ally. The real surprise came about a week before my birthday. Thorin took me out on a camping trip, and laid the whole truth on me. He told me that the McCormick’s weren’t my parents, and that I was a foster child. He told me about how he had brought me to them when I was a baby, and how they had

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agreed to take us in. Seems there was an old alliance between our families. Well, mine anyhow. The McCormick's didn't have much choice really, not if they wanted to stay in the good graces of the Fae. Yep, you heard right, Thorin and I are escapees from the land of fairies.

The way he tells the story, my parents were both pretty high up in the aristocracy; only from different sides of the game. My mother is a princess of the Seelie Court. Those are the ones that befriended the Humans, and protected them from the Unseelie Court. They're considered the good guys, but fairies don't play by the same rules as Humans. Dear old Dad is a prince from the Unseelie Court, AKA: the bad guys. As it turns out, Mom wasn't all that good, and Dad wasn't all that bad. The two met by chance, and chemistry, or love, took over. When they realized I was coming, they convinced themselves that my birth would unite the two courts. Yeah, they were wrong.

When things got dicey, they sent me into hiding with their most trusted guard. Yep, Thorin. They decided that the safest place to hide me was in the Human world. They still believed that I could be used as a uniting force between the two courts, and being raised in the Human world would only strengthen my claim. See, technically, I'm heir to both courts.

Not that it matters much; we never got the call to come back to the Fae. Thorin did receive a message warning us to leave the McCormick's, and that's how we wound up in the flats of Cragsmoor. We traveled here by foot, mainly because prolonged time spent in any iron box will give us horrible migraines. Thorin also used the time to teach me about some of the cooler parts about being Fae. We're stronger than we look; both of us are small by human standards. I'm 5'1" and tip the scales at a whopping 93 pounds, and Thorin is 5'6" and weighs in at about 130. We eat about six meals a day, as our super-fast metabolisms keep us constantly hungry. We actually have to be careful not to move too fast. Our reflexes can go into hyper-drive in the blink of a Human eye.

We have some magic abilities, but how much is all dependent on our proximity to the land of Fae. Good ol' Cragsmoor is right on the cusp of a gateway, with the Flats being nearest. This creates a sort of vortex around the whole town. Of course, the further up the hill ya get, the less it's felt. That's just fine by me. The Flats may be poorer, but what they lack

Ricardo Castro Title: Coat, Medium Charcoal



in money is made up for in character. Our magic abilities are pretty reliable, as long as we keep 'em simple. We can do some glamour's, which provide slight changes in our appearance. Like, I can control how many freckles I have. This drives the girl's at work crazy, but they just think I'm a make-up whiz. Thorin can do some cooler stuff with enchantments and setting wards. We never have to worry about our house getting broken into. That's enough of that hard luck story; I swear the walls of the Clam Trap are just crawling with them.

Thorin looks my way as I approach the bar, his eyebrows rise slightly at the sight of my outfit. His black hair cascades down to his shoulders, and falls to the tops of his brooding, blue eyes. The eyebrows are back to their normal dwelling, as he pushes his hair back with one hand. With the other hand, he pulls a plate of sliced fruit from below the bar and places it before me. Mmm, looks like mango, papaya, and pears tonight. I love that he knows my favorite foods, and thinks to keep them on hand for me.

"Thanks Thorin, you're my hero once again."



And then I proceed to devour the food. Between bites, I manage to give him a smile and ask, “Why so glum, chum?”

The baby blues make another scan of the room as he replies, “There’s something off, or more likely, someone.” That’s one of the problems of working in a place with so many charged emotions; it can be hard to get a direct read on who’s emitting what. We’re both highly intuitive, but Thorin’s had time to perfect the skill. I casually turn in my chair, and take in the nights offerings. At 2 am, there’s a bigger crowd than usual, but that’s not saying much. Dutch, the bouncer, is sitting on his stool by the door. He’s positioned so that he can see the bar, the stage, and the booths. At 6’3” and 290 plus pounds, he’s no one you want to mess with. He’s got just as big a heart, and he’ll always protect “his” girls. At the end of the bar is Fred, and he’s the least threatening of anyone who comes in here. He’s a regular, and an alcoholic. That’s why he’s here; he could care less about the girls. He just wants a warm place to drink his cheap whiskey, which he keeps in an inside pocket of an old trench coat. Thorin gives him cups of

Coke, and pretends not to see him add to it. Marcus is another regular, and tonight he’s entertaining a heavy set, middle aged guy. Marcus is one of our local gangsters, and his hands are dirty with a little bit of everything. If you want drugs, girls, guns, or an occasional bet, then he’s the man to see. His thugs are sitting at the table across from him and his guest. They can give off some bad vibes, but it’s more from their erratic natures than anything dangerous to us. Hey, ya don’t shit where ya sleep, right? Besides, Marcus and his crew always order off the top shelf. So, that leaves us with a few unfamiliar faces spread about the room. Guess it’s time to get off my ass and sell some drinks.

“All right, let’s see what we got going on in here.” As the words leave my mouth, Thorin is setting my tray on the bar. Another one of the boss’s bright ideas: have the girls walk around with a bottle of Champagne and some glasses on a tray. I have to admit that we do sell more bottles than I would have thought possible. I start working the floor with the

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tables first. There's not much going on there; a small group of guys are getting ready to leave, a guy at another table orders a Gin and Tonic, then someone else wants a Jack and Coke. I take their orders and head over to the booths, with my big smile and the Champagne. I start closest to the door, and that guy is leaving too. Next, there's a tall, dark, and greasy looking dude. As I approach, he gets this weird smile; it doesn't reach his eyes. Hmm, his eyes are kind of funny, too.

My smile doesn't falter, "Hey there, big guy, what can I getcha tonight?"

"How about you?" The creepy smile spreads further across his face.

"Ahh, honey, let's stick to some realistic goals here. I can getcha a drink if you want, sell ya a bottle of Champagne, or even call ya a Taxi. So, what'll it be?"

"And what about a private dance? That is a realistic expectation in this sort of establishment, is it not?" His tone is sardonic, but his eyes are intent.

"Nope, not tonight. The boss says that we can't entertain privately after he's left for the night, and he don't stick around after 1:00 am on a week night." My

patience is tiring, and this guy is giving me the creeps.

"Well then, this is indeed a sad occasion. How much for the champagne?"

"100 bucks. I don't price it, the bar does." There, if he has anymore snide remarks, he can take them up with Thorin.

He reaches into the inside pocket of what appears to be a cheap knock off of a more expensive suit, pulls out two, one hundred dollar bills, and tosses them onto the table.

"I'll take the champagne, and there's a little extra for you. If you were to change your mind about the dance, well, it could be rather lucrative for you." The sleaze is just pouring out now.

I fix my smile, "I'll be sure to think about it."

I'm feeling more like myself now that I'm back in my street clothes. My standard outfit consists of my black leather jacket, an old pair of jeans, my combat boots, and whatever t-shirt was available. Tonight, it

happens to be a Pogues shirt, which is also one of my favorite bands. Thorin is ready to go and is chatting with Dutch while he waits for me. He looks so small standing next to the bouncer, but I know that he is stronger and faster than Dutch can ever hope to be. Thorin is a bit more conservative in his attire and is wearing a wool pea coat, over his standard black outfit, and his sturdy logger boots.

“Hey guys, let’s get the hell outta here.” I announce, as I descend upon them. I also slip Dutch a fifty dollar tip, before he opens the door.

“Thanks, Rose. You two get home safe.” Replies Dutch.

Thorin reaches out to shake his hand, and replies, “You do the same, old man.”

Dutch laughs, and Thorin smiles at their corny little joke. It’s just after 4 a.m., as we begin our trek home. The air is crisp, and the moon is but a sliver cutting through the night sky. We head up Colton Ave., until it meets MLK Boulevard. Once there, we

hang a left and will follow this road most of the way home. We walk in a comfortable silence for several blocks, before we share a glance. Seems we both have an uneasy feeling.

“What are you thinking?” I ask.

“That we’re being followed.” Thorin replies in all seriousness.

“Hmm, probably just some junkie, desperate for money to get another fix.” I suggest.

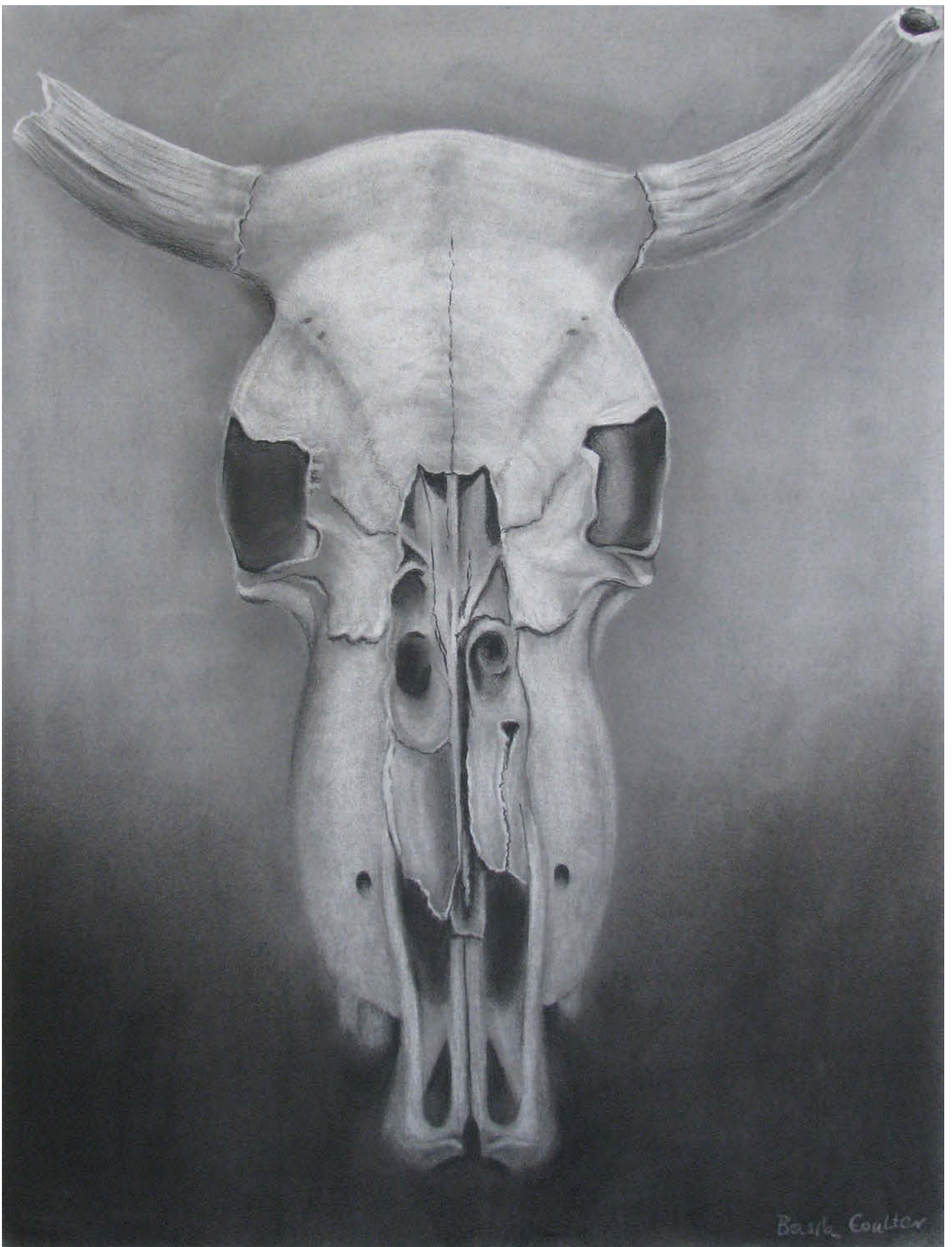
“Perhaps, but even a desperate junkie can be dangerous. Shall this be a training exercise?” He asks.

It doesn’t take me long to decide, “Sounds good to me, what’s the plan?”

“At the corner, I’ll cross the street and head to the alley. I’ll take the alley up two blocks, and then cut back across. You do the same on this side of the street, and we’ll meet in the middle.” Thorin shoots at me with a tone reminiscent of his military training.

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Artwork by Basia Coulter Title: Bovine Skull, Medium: Charcoal

I respond with a nod, and we reach the corner in question within a minute. I'm in the alley in less than 30 seconds, and I count out my steps in my head. I'm 45 steps in, or about halfway through the alley, when I sense movement to my right. I stop and survey the surroundings. There are dumpsters alternately lining the walls, which create a dozen places to hide. From the smell, I'm guessing the one ahead of me belongs to the Chinese restaurant. The pavement before it wears an all too familiar sheen of grease. This is a good place for a standoff: if I go any further, I risk getting grabbed from behind. Although that wouldn't be an impossible situation, I'd rather face my attacker head on. I can't see Thorin, but I can feel him. He'll be watching. The street lights on either end of the alley provide just enough light to cast shadows. And that's what I see first, and then I hear the nearly silent footfall. Oh, lo and behold, it's tall, dark, and greasy from the club. Some guys just can't take no for an answer, and this one's gonna pay.

"You should have accepted my proposal earlier. I would have been gentle with you." He proclaims, as he steps out of the shadows.

This is one cocky bastard, and the fool is wearing sunglasses, without there even being a hint of light in the sky. What the hell is wrong with him? "Maybe you should have accepted my answer; I was being gentle when I said 'no'." I reply.

"I found that to be an unacceptable answer. Where is your little friend?" He retorts.

"No need to worry about him, he's home by now. It's just you and me." My answer seems to satisfy him. My adrenaline is strumming through my veins, and I'm done with all this talking. I watch him as he reaches up to remove his sunglasses, he looks down momentarily, as he places them in the inside pocket of his cheap suit jacket.

"I know what you are, cunt," his voice is filled with venom as speaks, "and you are very valuable. Well, a part of you anyhow."

I shudder involuntarily at the innuendo, but that's nothing compared to what comes next. His eyes rise to look at me, and they're green. Not regular green, but a glowing green. They are lit up in the dark alley, almost like cat's eyes. Whoa, this is no Human. "What the hell..." I start to say, but the words

die in my mouth, as he lunges. They turn to a growl as I meet him in a violent embrace. He's strong, and I can't dislodge myself with my arms alone. I bring my combat boot down on the arch of his foot and hear a crack in response. His grip releases me, and I stumble into a roll to the left. It doesn't take him long to recover, and he lunges again. I feint to the right, and then slide the left, as I kick out my right leg. I make contact, and he falls to his knee. He springs right back up. This guy is giving me a run for my money, and it's time for this to end. I put my back to the dumpster and use my fingertips to feel for the space behind me. He buys it and thinks he has me cornered. As he closes in on me, I reach into the right pocket of my leather and grasp one of my favorite tools of the trade. I wait until he's almost within an arm's reach of me, and then I jerk my right arm up. I uncap the tube of body glitter on the way up, and the contents fly into the fucker's eyes. His hands cover his face, and he yells out in agony. I kick out with my right leg and make contact with the side of his knee. The grease from the dumpster aids his descent, and he's left sprawled on the ground. I quickly step behind him and wrap my left arm around his neck. I grasp his hair with my right hand, and pull him back, until my feet find purchase on the pavement. Twist. Snap. Drop. Over.

My adrenaline surges; victory washes over me. I give his lifeless body a swift kick in the ribs, just for pissing me off. Thorin steps from the shadows and approaches me with a shit-eating grin on his face.

"That was a worthy opponent. You dispatched him well, Tilly." Thorin says in a most formal manner.

"Dispatch...Really?" I just shake my head, knowing that he will not dignify my sarcasm. "Thorin, what the hell was that? His eyes were glowing green..."

Thorin looks at me as he responds, "Warlock." Warlock. Well, there goes the neighborhood.

Fryer Education: The Utility of Various College Majors in the New Economy

Music Major: “Doobie doobie doo you want fries with that?”

English Major: “Would you like crisp potato spears dusted with Indian sea-salt and essence of rosemary, served with a side of garlic-sage aioli with that?”

History Major: “Eventually, everyone gets fries with that.”

Art Major: “C’est n’est pas une frite.”

Sociology Major: “Do you want a genetically-modified, leading cause of obesity, indicator of low-socio-economic status and major contributor to the pharmaceutical domination of our healthcare system with that?”

International Studies Major: “Do you want chips with that?”

Psychology Major: “Your mother would want you to have fries with that.”

Business Major: “If you super-size your fries, the additional 10% investment will yield a 30% increase in consumable returns for you, while the contribution of your surplus cash will create wealth for the proprietors of this establishment, who will then invest and expand their business, creating jobs and stimulating economic growth. At the end of the day everybody wins. Reagan loved fries.”

Education Major: “Do you want fries with that?”

Philosophy Major: “It really doesn’t matter if you get the fries or not.”

Science/Technology/Math Major: “Sure, I’ll have a small fries. Weren’t you in my English class?”

College Dropout: “If you want fries with that, I built an app that identifies the fries closest to your location, ranks them based on price and taste, lists their ingredients and nutritional information, and indicates when the last batch was cooked and the precise temperature of the oil.”



Artwork by John Mattern Title: Medium: Pastel

Love and spilt coffee

You're not supposed to fall in love at work. It's bad for office politics. Luckily, I don't work in an office, and lucky for you, it's not that kind of love story. It doesn't end with a happy couple riding off into the sunset, middle fingers held high, while professing their undying love to each other. In fact, there won't be a happy ending, but we're not there... yet.

One thing that we need to get straight is that I do not love my job. Most days it's quite the contrary. I arrived here by accident, with no prior experience. It was the solution to a desperate case of unemployment. I told myself it would be a temporary gig. After five years and four houses, I can't really think of it as temporary anymore.

Where I currently work is the best house I've been at, which is not to say it's perfect. The good news is, it's all women. The bad news is, it's ALL

women. It's a regular hen house, with a constant clacking of gossip and complaints. Six women live at Smith, named after the street the house is located on. It's a unique residence within the agency. The house is only ten years old, and was built with the ladies who live here in mind. This is fortunate for everyone, as it came into being after people started to think cramming two or three people into a room is not a good idea.

Before they came to live together, all the women were cared for at home. Their families provided for their daily needs, until they physically couldn't anymore. This is a rarity with this population. See, all these women have been diagnosed with developmental disabilities. Along with that comes a myriad of medical problems, physical restrictions, and frustration. These women were born during a time when institutionalization was encouraged as a way to reduce a families "burden".

The keen difference between the ladies



Jewelry by Adison Cook



Jewelry by Alexandra Stachelrodt

at Smith and elsewhere is that they know love. They have felt it since they were born and were welcomed into their families. They learned to give it as they grew up. They miss it when it's gone, and have a difficult time comprehending that it has gone to heaven.

Love can be sneaky, too. It snuck up on me, and took hold before I knew what was happening. My first encounter with Ms. Sherri was not notable, as she sat quietly at the kitchen table, coloring and drinking her coffee. As I began to participate in her daily activities, our relationship blossomed. It started with her coffee. Being a coffee lover myself, I took a special interest in finding out how to make a perfect cup for her. Through trial and error, I've discovered she likes it light, with no sugar. Part of this is a survival tactic, as she will throw it if it does not meet her standards. She throws a lot of things, like crayons, her plate of food, and she has very good aim.

This behavior sends most of the staff into a tizzy, but it's what I love about her. Not the action itself, I don't like to clean coffee off the floor, or pureed lima beans out of my hair any more than the

next person. The girl's got spunk. She is a four foot, ball of spitfire with a heart of gold. She has her own ideas about how things should be, and when her expectations aren't matched, watch out.

I try to put myself in her shoes, and I can't comprehend the frustration she feels. She cannot speak. Instead, she has her own language of grunts and gestures. When she is unable to get her point across that way, she throws food at you, and the point is taken. Our relationship went to another level when I began studying ASL (American Sign Language) in school. I accidentally discovered that she has a lot of receptive knowledge of the language.

Sign language has opened a new way for us to communicate, but it is not the primary language we speak. Instead, I listen to her with my heart, and she speaks to me with cuddles on the couch. I give her my love with a kiss planted on the top of her head, and she reciprocates by letting me hold her stuffed animal. Small bits of kindness and an attempt to understand her turns her into the most loving being I've ever met. She is my hero.

PEACE

