

New Fiction from Kirsten Eve Beachy: “Soft Target”



For Sallie.

By Picture Day in November, Sophie had perfected the downward stab and counting to twenty. She clenched her soft fingers around her rainbow pony pencil, raised her fist high, and then smashed it down on the practice balloons, barely wincing when they popped, scolding when they escaped. The other children rallied to bounce stray balloons back to her desk. She got *thirteen*, *fourteen* at last, and from there it was an obstacle-free trip to *twenty* with her peers chanting along. She hadn't yet mastered our *Go* protocol for intruders, but neither had a handful of the general education students. However, Caleb could shout *Go* instantly and often got to the Rubber Man first, tackling its knees to disable the joints. Jazzmyn was the most formidable of all the students; when the Rubber Man

dropped from the ceiling, she'd grab my scissors on the way and disembowel it in two slashes.

Picture Day is tense for second-graders, with the boys trussed up in buttoned shirts, the girls eyeing each other's frilly dresses, and the lunch cart loaded with chocolate pudding and meatballs with marinara. Caleb endlessly adjusted his bowtie and Jazzmyn fretted over a smudge on her yellow pantsuit. But Sophie was thrilled with her rustling crinoline and the biggest blue bow that anyone had ever seen. When they lined up for their scheduled foray to the library for pictures, she sashayed to the end of the line, tossing her cascade of red curls and humming softly, off-key. Todd was the only one left at his desk, digging out torn pages and broken pencils—looking for one of the pocket treasures I pretended not to notice, his tiny plastic dinosaurs. Sophie called out, "Todd, we go now!" and jabbed her finger at the spot in line behind her, right beneath our Superstar of the Week bulletin board where a large-as-life photo of Sophie scowled at flashcards, surrounded by an array of exploding stars.

Todd pretended not to hear her. They used to be the best of friends, building tiny dinosaur colonies in the sandbox and sharing their turns to feed our guinea pig, but then his mother met Sophie at the Food Culture Festival last week, and he had ignored her ever since.

"Come on, Todd!"

He turned from his desk at last and jostled into the line in front of Sophie, muttering something that I didn't catch.

It must have been bad, because Jazzmyn decked him. Fist to his cheekbone, she sprawled him right out on the floor, then loomed over him with her fists on her hips, her face resplendent with fury. "We don't use that word in this class," she shouted. "We don't use that word ever!"

"Jazzmyn!" I swooped in to inspect the damage. No nosebleed,

and his eye was intact.

Jazzmyn burst into tears when she saw my expression, then collected herself enough to run to the sink and wet a paper towel for Todd's swelling face. Ms. Jackson, my morning aide, logged into our classroom portal to open an incident ticket.

By this time, Sophie had flung herself to the floor beside him in a swirl of yellow and white skirts. "Todd, you okay? You okay?"

Todd finally caught enough breath to begin howling.

"He'll be fine," I told her. "Go with Ms. Jackson so I can take care of him."

Ms. Jackson gathered up Sophie and guided the children down to the library for the scheduled pictures, and then I buzzed the office for security clearance to walk Todd to the nurse. He still whimpered and clutched the towel to his eye. Jazzmyn came, too—she'd be wanted at the principal's office.

We escorted Todd to the clinic, and then I steered her toward the main office. She stopped me outside Melkan's door with a hand on my sleeve. "I had to do it," she said between sobbing breaths, and then leaned in to whisper, "He called Sophie a *tard*."

That word, in all its forms, is banned in my classroom.

"Jazzie," I said. "You can't hit another student, ever. Not even when they say something horrible. It's your job to protect each other."

Jazzmyn nodded once, quickly, her lips pressed together. My policy is to not have favorites, but I loved Jazzmyn for the meticulous care she took of everything: wiping the crumbs from her bento boxes with a paper towel, coloring every millimeter of the day's vocabulary coloring page with crayons—even the bubble letters and the background spaces—and persisting with

practice drills until her form was perfect.

“Will they call the cops?” she asked, almost keeping the quaver out of her voice.

“No.” She may be Black, but she’s only seven years old.

“Will I get suspended?”

If Todd’s mother raised hell, Jazzmyn could get expelled, but I didn’t tell her that. “Let me talk to Mr. Melkan first,” I said.

“If I get suspended,” said Jazzmyn, “I will never get into Wellesley.”

Melkan buzzed me in then, so I was spared the need to answer. I entered his lair while Jazzmyn perched in the center of a chair in the reception area, fists tucked together in her lap.

Melkan liked to carry gallon-sized promotional mugs from gas stations. That day he stirred half a dozen scoops of protein powder into his 64 ounces of coffee while I explained the situation.

“She’s out,” he said.

“Please,” I said. “Todd used a slur against Sophie, and Jazzmyn responded instinctively. She won’t do it again, now she knows what she’s capable of. Review the surveillance tape. Her aim was perfect. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“We shouldn’t give her the chance to do it again,” said Melkan, but he was already clicking through the surveillance queue, intrigued. The walls of his small office were lined with large-screened monitors, barely leaving room for his collection of ultra-marathon numbers, the plaque declaring Stoney Creek Elementary last year’s Hardened Target Regional Winner, and the AR-15 hanging over his office door.

“Plus, her first quarter grades are off the charts. We need her here next week for standards testing,” I said.

“You need a genius around to offset Sophie Clark. That child can’t even count to ten. You chose her for your class. You worry about the test scores.”

I kept quiet and let him watch the video. He winced when the punch, replayed in slow motion, sent Todd flying in a smooth arc to land on the floor, where he bounced gently—one, two, three times. Melkan looped the video and leaned in closer.

At last he turned back to me. “Her aim is flawless.”

“They’re the best group I’ve had. Jazzmyn is so good—have you looked at the Rubber Man logs? They took him out in 12 seconds last week.”

He looked impressed, then doubtful. “That’s impossible. Just number two pencils?”

“Jazzmyn had my scissors. She punctured all the vital pockets single-handedly.”

“You started second graders on teacher scissors?”

“Just the ones who can handle it, if they want to stay in from recess to work. Just Jazzmyn and Caleb.”

He swiped through the logs, comparing our performance to the other second grade classrooms. We were leagues ahead of the others.

“Sure you aren’t inflating the reports a bit?”

“No, sir. You know it’s automated.”

Melkan leaned back in his chair, hands behind his head, and nodded to himself. I hated it when he looked thoughtful. Hated it. Something new, something ill-considered, something downright stupid was likely to result. With lots of fanfare.

But he just buzzed the nurse and asked her, "You examined the Lawrence boy?"

"He's here now, sir."

"His eye okay?"

"No permanent damage."

He rang off. "We're done here, Campbell. Send Jazzmyn in. I'll talk to her. No recess for the rest of the quarter, but keep training her on the scissors."

It was much better than I expected.

"But if the Lawrence boy's mother complains..." he warned.

"I know. But I hope we can avoid a suspension. It would break her heart."

"We'll see."

He actually smiled as he waved me out. I almost felt neutral about him as I left the office and gave Jazzmyn a departing pat on the shoulder, but then I remembered what he said about the test scores, and Sophie.

Sophie, short, round, and wise-eyed, had established herself as the small Mayor of Stoney Creek Elementary by the end of first grade, high-fiving everyone all the way down the hallway with her soft hands. However, she was in danger of becoming a mascot. She'd been pushed out of her class for longer portions of the day as the year went by, and by the end of the year was brought out of the resource room only for feel-good forays into the mainstream classroom. Melkan gave her a nominal placement in my class, but insisted she would do better spending most of second grade "in a more supported environment," especially given the rigors of the new

programming. I argued that there was no better support for her than the examples of her own peers. Her parents agreed, and they had a lawyer.

She became, as I hoped, the heart of our class; she would applaud when we finished with the subtraction workbook activity for the day, and the rest of the class got into the habit, too. They also caught on to her victory dance each time they vanquished the Rubber Man, with lots of stomping and fierce whoops and high-fives. The children competed for the chance to help her with her counting bears and sight words, and sharpened their own reflexes as we drilled again and again with her, *Danger, Danger, Go!*

Parents, however, were thrown off by Sophie. Inclusion was still new. When we were growing up, the special kids were always kept in a special room, ketchup counted as a vegetable, and anyone could walk right through the front doors of the school.

The week before Picture Day, two mothers took me aside at the Food Culture Festival, each to whisper that her son called Sophie his best friend, but she hadn't realized until just tonight who Sophie was. "I mean, Leroy hadn't said anything about how she was different," said the first, over her Crock-pot of Mac 'n Weenies.

I could see the story writing itself behind Leroy's mother's shining eyes, how her son had befriended a little Downs girl, and wasn't he such a big-hearted hero?

"It's such a good thing for Leroy that Sophie took him under her wing, isn't it? He's too timid for almost eight. She's really helped him to break out of his shell." And it was true. I explained how Sophie coaxed him to scale the peak of the climbing structure in our reinforced play yard. I doubted that Leroy even ranked in Sophie's top five friends, but I was glad she made him feel at home. "She's quite socially

advanced," I said.

But Todd's mother, one of the West Coast refugees, reeled me in over her quinoa tabbouleh (labeled free of gluten, genetic modification, dairy, and cruelty) and asked me to encourage her son to play with different children: "It's sweet that she likes him, and I'm glad he doesn't mind playing with a girl, but now I see that she's not the best playmate for him. You know we don't want to stunt his social development while he's adjusting to his new life. He needs strong children he can look up to."

I wound up to give her six different pieces of my mind, but by the time I had organized and prioritized them, she had already pulled Todd out of the circle of kids gathered around Sophie for an impromptu *Danger, Danger, Go!* drill and was steering him over to Caleb's parents to arrange an advantageous playdate.

Maybe Todd's mom wasn't always like that. I heard she escaped the Siege of San Francisco in a pontoon boat, in the bloody days after the Repeal Riots, telling Todd they were going on a picnic. I heard her husband didn't make it out, and she told Todd they got a divorce. You hear a lot of rumors these days. It's hard to know what's true.

After the Food Culture Festival, Todd stopped playing with Sophie or even high-fiving her. He took the long way around the room to get to his desk each morning. Her eyes followed him, but she didn't say anything.

When I rejoined my class at the library, picture-taking was almost over. The students were making faces at the photographer, well over the initial wariness they have of strangers in the school. We often remind them that people with visitor's badges have been screened for safety, but then we tell them they need to be alert to the behavior of every

adult, even the trusted ones, because madness has no method.

Sophie clambered up onto the photographer's stool, but instead of giving her signature crooked-toothed grin for the camera, she just stared. Her face was still bloated from crying.

"Come on down, Sophie," I said, and let her initiate a hug so that I could wrap my arms around her. "Now what is it?"

"Miss Campbell," she snuffled, "Todd okay? Todd hurt bad?" She rubbed her snot-nose on my sweater.

"He'll be okay," I said. "The nurse is taking good care of him."

I had her wipe her eyes and nose and convinced her to try one more smile for the photo—then told the photographer we would hold out for the make-up day. When the line of students entered the hallway to our classroom, Sophie waved and took off in the opposite direction, towards the clinic.

"I go see Todd," she said.

"No, Sophie. You don't have safety clearance. Time to go back to class." I took her arm.

She narrowed her eyes and shrugged away from me. I hadn't seen that look before. Sophie's first grade teacher had complained to me that she was unmanageable, "a real handful," a dropper. I'd never had trouble; I got to know Sophie, so I knew what she needed: warnings about transitions, a clear routine, and as much praise as the other children. Sophie had never dropped to the floor to resist my suggestions, but now, watching her stubborn face, I had an inkling of how that might happen.

"Miss Campbell, I really need to go see Todd." A nine word construction. I'd tell Speech later.

I got clearance for an unscheduled trip down the hall, and Ms. Jackson took the class to Bathroom Access to prepare for

lunch.

Sophie greeted the nurse with her usual high-five, then tiptoed to peer around the curtain that divided Todd's cot from the rest of the room. "Todd, you okay?"

I followed her. Todd was sitting up, holding a cold pack to his eye. He looked at Sophie, opened his mouth, closed it, and then rolled over to face the wall, drawing up his knees in a fetal position. I would talk to him about what he called Sophie later. That wasn't the Todd I knew. I loved how Todd chatted all through the morning gathering with Sophie, and giggled over his pocket treasures and armpit farts with her, and how he remembered to check the guinea pig's water every morning—until this week. Avoiding Sophie had made him downright sullen.

Sophie confronted the nurse. "Where's Todd mom? He need his mom."

"Can she come for him?" I asked.

"I left a message. He'll be fine. No lasting damage, but that eye might not be back to normal for awhile."

"Make-up day for photos is Monday."

"His face is going to be a lot of interesting colors by then."

Todd's mom would love that.

"Well, send him back to class if he gets bored," I said. "Or if you need space."

"It's quiet so far. But rumor has it Melkan's bringing in a gator this afternoon. I might need to clear the beds."

"So early in the year? Are the fourth-graders ready?"

"Maybe just a rumor."

Sophie just gazed at Todd's forlorn back. She didn't care about the gator, maybe didn't even know what the Gator Drill was. This is what Sophie cared about: The colony of salvaged pencil stubs in the back of her desk. Being ready to dance when the music started. Salisbury Steak day. Laughing at Todd's fart jokes.

"Time to go, Sophie," I said, and buzzed for clearance to enter the hallway.

She bent over the cot and tucked something orange into the fold of Todd's pinstriped elbow. "Todd, come back soon."

"He okay," she told me confidently, watching for the green light above the door.

Todd peered around the curtain at her, but she didn't notice.

Jazzmyn returned in time to be kept in from recess, and Caleb opted to stay in for practice. She drew me aside while he practiced switching grips on the teacher scissors, and whispered accusingly, "You said they wouldn't suspend me!"

"I didn't know." Todd's mom must have called at last. "How long?"

"Two whole *days*. Mom was supposed to pick me up right away, but she couldn't because there's no one to watch Grandma, and Mr. Melkan said he was busy this afternoon, and his assistant said she couldn't have me crying in her office all afternoon and they sent me back here. *Without even a safety escort.*"

If I would have had the chance, I would have explained to her how lightly she'd gotten off, and how Mr. Melkan and I were impressed with her work and doing our best for her. She was a rational child, and that could have been the end of it for

her, but I didn't have the chance, because the nurse buzzed Todd into our room. Apparently, Mrs. Lawrence could give Melkan an earful about Jazzmyn, but didn't want to pick up her son off schedule.

Jazzmyn had the grace to look embarrassed at his entrance, as did he. Then she shrugged. He made a half-hearted fart sound with his armpit.

"Come on, Todd," said Caleb, hailing him over to my desk.

"Okay," said Todd, and pulled out his newest treasure to show Caleb. "Check this out! An orange pachycephalosaur!"

Caleb gave an appreciative dinosaur roar, Todd made T-rex hands, Caleb made his own, and they sparred ineffectually with their shortened arms. Then Todd asked, "Whatcha doing in here?"

"We're gonna practice with the teacher scissors." Caleb swiped them from my desk and demonstrated a slash hold. "Ms. Campbell, can Todd do it, too?"

"Why not?" I said. "I think you're ready, Todd." He had made astonishing progress in his few months at our school. This would give him something to feel good about. I would pull him aside later to talk about Sophie. "Now, remember, these stay on my desk at all times, except—"

"I know," said Todd, reaching for them.

"Start with the downward stab," I said. "Just like you do with your number two pencil, but you hold it like this." Caleb helped him adjust his fingers.

Jazzmyn stared at us for a moment, then slouched over to her desk.

"Do you want to help, Jazzie?" I asked.

"I'm not supposed to be here," she hissed at me, then put her head down on her desk.

She was still glowering that afternoon after story time, when we took a break to practice Go reflexes, my own innovation on the usual training. In case of an event, I wanted each one to be confident enough to shout "Go!" Jazzmyn is usually the first one to shout "Danger!" when I pull a colored ball out of the practice basket, but she watched stonily as I lifted the green one into sight.

"Danger!" shouted Adam.

"Danger!" chorused a dozen other voices in response. Not Jazzmyn's.

The children held their breaths, ready.

I threw the green ball to Leroy. "Go!" he shouted, before it even touched his fingers.

"Excellent response time!" I surveyed the class, looking each student in the eyes in turn. "That's what I want from each one of you. Remember, if you are the one closest to the threat, everyone else will get ready, but they will wait for your signal. We'll lose precious seconds if you aren't ready to yell 'Go!' Remember Peoria."

I pulled out a purple ball. "Danger!" they all shouted, then giggled when there was no answering call.

Natasha recovered first. "Danger!"

Most of them hovered over their seats, their hands eager to catch the ball. Sophie, in the front row, was bouncing up and down. I dropped the ball on her desk. Sophie loved to holler a good, clear, "Go!" Still, it took her about five seconds to register that this ball had landed on her desk, to wind up,

grab it, thrust it into the air, and shout "Go!"

The other children clapped politely, because they loved Sophie, but we all knew we would have been dead by now in the case of an event.

"I'll come back to you in a few minutes, Sophie," I said. "Be ready."

I turned to the rest of the class. "You've seen the news. We all believe that we'll be the lucky ones, that it can't happen here. Well, it can. And if bad luck comes our way, it's up to us to make good luck. Good reflexes make good luck."

I passed the orange ball to Todd.

Blue to Casey.

Pink to Jazzmyn, who couldn't help but catch it and shout "Go!" Her reflexes are too good to sulk.

I pulled out the yellow one.

"Danger!"

"Danger!"

I slammed it down on Sophie's desk. Her eyes went wide, and after barely a beat, she shouted, "Go!"

The room erupted in cheers. Even Todd joined in. "Go, go, go!" Sophie chanted, for good measure, waving the yellow ball above her head.

"Okay, balls away! That's enough for today." I passed the ball basket. "Check your pencils, and make sure they're sharp. The Rubber Man hasn't dropped today, and you never know when you'll need to be ready."

"Or where he'll fall," added Caleb, testing his pencil point.

"That's right," I said. "He might fall right next to you. We'll be depending on you to shout Go!"

Half a dozen children glanced apprehensively up at the ceiling, then lined up at the pencil sharpener. Jazzmyn stalked to the end of the line. "Miss Campbell?" she snapped, raising her hand.

"Yes?"

"When will we get to have a real intruder?"

"Never, I hope, but if you're prepared, you don't have to be afraid."

"Will they have a gun?" asked Todd.

"They don't have to. They just have to pose a danger. That's why you have to look. That's why you have to agree as a group that they are dangerous."

"But most of them have guns. All of them I've seen on the news," Todd persisted.

"Why can't we have guns?" Caleb asked.

"Guns are for grown-ups," I explained.

"Who decides that?" asked Jazzmyn, resharpening her pencil until the tip gleamed. "Oh, right. Grown-ups."

"Yeah," said Todd. "Why can't we just get rid of guns?"

I said, per my contract: "People want to be able to choose to have their guns, children. It's what we call a fundamental right."

Jazzmyn turned from the pencil sharpener to stare at me calmly. "Grown-ups are the real danger. All of them." She pointed straight at me. "Danger!"

Like a kid in a pool, answering “Polo” to her “Marco”, Caleb sang out a confirmation, “Danger!” and reached into his desk.

The children balanced at the edge of their seats, gripping their school supplies, unsure. I was standing right next to Sophie’s desk. She took it all in, looked at me, almost past me, and then her eyes widened and she shouted with glee, with pure delight, “Go! Go, go, go, go, go!”

And the children swarmed, pencils raised.

It was a gator. It took me far too long to realize that Melkan had deactivated the locks in our classroom door and ushered in a gator behind me. Gators are primeval and scaly and horrible, and they do not belong in a second-grade classroom. There’s a reason that they’re the only large animal approved for child defense drills. No one feels sorry for them. As it twined past my desk and then, when the wave of children broke upon it, scabbled across the carpet in a desperate bid to escape, I just stood and watched. In my defense, they didn’t train second-grade teachers for the gator drill at the time. It wasn’t expected. By the time I remembered that I should be using my greater body weight to incapacitate its thrashing midsection, the children had neutralized it. It wasn’t dead yet, but pinned and winded, and twitching as the children caught the rhythm of the stabbing. Sophie finally found her own sharp stub of a pencil and stood at the periphery, pencil raised, looking for an opening. Jazzmyn darted in and out between the other children, stabbing, testing methodically for weak spots. McKenzie anchored the end of its nose. Caleb, pinning the gator down at the base of the tail, shouted, “Someone go for the eyes! Go deep! Get the teacher scissors!” Todd had already snagged them from my desk and was gouging the gator’s flank.

“Get the eyes! Get the eyes!” the other children hollered at

Todd, making way at the head. With the lateral thrust we had just practiced at recess, Todd blinded the gator in one eye.

Sophie shrieked and applauded. "Go, Todd! Go, go, go!"

Todd turned, grinning, to see her teetering at the edge of the melee, the only child without something to do, and waved her in. "Get in here, Sophie!" he shouted, and wrapped her fist around the teacher scissors.

"How?"

"Down, like your pencil, right at the eye." The other kids leaned further away from the head. A broad stain of blood was spreading across the carpet, and the gator was barely twitching anymore. "Sophie! Sophie!" shouted the children as she raised the teacher scissors.

Her first blow bounced off the bony socket and tore down the gator's cheek, but she was already raising the scissors and got it square in the eye on the second blow. She kept going.

"Sophie! Sophie! Sophie!"

Eventually it dawned on them that the gator was dead, and they fell easily into the Rubber Man victory dance, stomping and whooping. Sophie flung the scissors up in victory, and the wicked points of them lodged in the ceiling tiles, where they stayed, and she slapped Todd so hard on the back that he stumbled across the gator's body.

The children giggled and shouted, giddy with victory. Everyone high-fived Sophie. Sophie high-fived everyone. But one by one they fell silent, looking at what was left of the gator. Not much, really. "I thought it was bigger," said Caleb. I had, too. It looked shrunken, there in the spreading pool of blood, its scales torn. The only formidable thing about it was the stench of blood and feces. With its clipped claws and the duct-tape muzzle around its jaws, it had never been much of a

threat. Hardly six feet long, it couldn't have weighed much more than I did.

"Did it hurt?" asked Todd, finally.

I found it hard to answer.

Jazzmyn said, "It was going to die anyway. It was a nuisance and was going to be culled. My sister is in fifth grade, and she says they give the gators drugs so they don't feel pain." She wiped her bloody hands on the lapels of her yellow jacket. The hems of her pants had soaked up four inches of red, and the rest of the suit was splattered with gore.

Bruce from maintenance buzzed in to clear up the remains, and I ushered the class down the hall to Bathroom Access, where they took turns silently signing in to wash their hands. There was nothing to be done about their Picture Day clothes, hanging in bloody tatters of khaki and tulle. The nurse came by to apply butterfly strips to the deepest scratches. And then the children gathered around me in the authorized holding area to hear what I had to say about the drill. Our stats: 3:07 from release to probable death, twelve broken pencils, four cuts requiring bandaging, one pencil puncture wound.

For a second there, when Sophie gave the signal, I actually thought—no, I won't say it. It was a foolish thought. The children would never. At least, not to me. What we were doing was a good thing. They knew it. We were giving them a way to protect themselves. A chance to fight back.

When I was sure my voice wouldn't shake, I congratulated them. "Pretty good work. That gator bled out in under three minutes. But you'll have to do better. If it had an AR-15, at least fourteen of you would be dead by now."

They nodded soberly, but in the back Jazzmyn whispered, "My

big sister's class finished the Gator Drill in five minutes, and they were best in the school."

I made myself smile then. I would wait until later to remind them that they could have flipped the gator over to quickly access its vitals. "You're right, Jazzie. This class is good. This class is the best. I am going to have that gator made into a purse."

And I did, although there wasn't enough skin left on the gator to make a purse bigger than this little coin clutch. I keep it in my pocket still, and in it, right here, is the stub of a rainbow pony pencil that Sophie gave me the day she was promoted up to the middle school, ecstatic and resplendent in another blue bow.

"For luck, Ms. Campbell," she said, patting my cheek with one soft, gentle hand.

"We make our own luck, Sophie," I said. "You of all people should know that."

You see how sharp it is?

**New Fiction from Andrew
Snover: Dana and the
Pretzelman**



The Pretzelman died yesterday. He was shot on his corner half a block from his home, and if he has family they'll pile stuffed animals, and one of his boys will spray-paint *RIP*, and someone will take his corner. Old ladies will sometimes mention him, but that will die out as well, and the neighborhood's memory of him will fade like the colors of the teddy bears' fur and the sharpness of the letters *RIP* and the

print of the newspaper clipping in its vinyl sleeve stapled to the telephone pole.

Dana knew the Pretzelman. She was a fifteen-year-old girl from up the block. She knew of the Pretzelman before he had the corner, because her eldest brother had fucked the Pretzelman's cousin for a few months, but the two of them never met until the Pretzelman took the corner and began to make himself known.

He stayed on the corner all day, unlike the men who owned neighboring blocks and took breaks on the hot days to drive around in their cars with their music and air-conditioning blasting, just to make themselves seen. He just walked down in the mornings and stayed there all day, every day. He and his boys would talk to each other, and stare down cars whose drivers they didn't recognize, and sell to those who bought.

Dana first met him one morning when her grandmother sent her out for a forty of Olde English. It was a hot Sunday, and her grandmother's favorite treatment for the brutal heat of their home was to drink something cold. The house smelled of death from the time that a great-aunt had declined and passed in the living room. Because the family had no money to keep her in a hospital, and because her bed couldn't fit up the stairs, for six months she had been in the center of all activity in the house. The stench of her sheets and her disease had slowly permeated everything, and then she had died. Dana liked being sent to the store for forties and half gallons of milk and packs of Newport 100s because it got her out of the smell.

She walked down the street, looking out for any of her friends who might be awake and out on their stoops. She didn't see anyone as she walked the block, so she crossed diagonally through the Pretzelman's intersection toward the store that stood on the corner where he usually stood with his friends. The small white awning read, "Complete Grocery and Deli," and there was a sign that said, "Hoagies Snacks Cigarettes We

Appreciate Your Business.”

Dana knew enough to know what groups of boys said to girls walking alone, and she knew that her age was no longer a protection now that her body had changed. That day there were three others besides the Pretzelman. As she walked up to them, and they looked at her flip-flops and her shorts and her beater and her purple bra underneath, she prepared herself to deliver an insulting reply to their comments, but no one said anything. The Pretzelman smiled at her, and she passed through them into the store.

She walked up to the glass, spoke loudly, “Olde E,” to the distorted image of the lady on the other side, passed through the slot the five-dollar bill her grandmother had given her, waited for her change and the brown bag to spin on the carousel to her side, and left. As she passed back through the group, the Pretzelman said, “Have a good day now,” and she didn’t say anything.

That day the heat endured, so Dana was sent back to the store two more times on the same errand, and by the last trip, she had smiled at the Pretzelman. He told her to have a good night.

The Pretzelman lived in an abandoned house around the corner that he and his boys had fixed up a little bit. He said hello to the old ladies. He threw his trash in the can, at least when he was on his corner. Dana wasn’t sure if he made his boys do the same, but there wasn’t much trash on his corner compared with the other three of that intersection, so she thought that he did.

He got a puppy from a man he knew who bred pits. It was a brown-and-white dog with a light nose and light eyes. He walked it on a leash down to his corner in the mornings, and then he tied it to the stop sign, and it stayed with him and

his boys. They fed it chips and water ice and other things that they bought from the store. The old ladies sometimes would stop and pet it.

Dana loved dogs, and she asked the Pretzelman one day if she could pet it, and he said, "Of course," so she petted it and talked to it. After that, on trips for Newports and chips and hug juices, she would always kneel down quickly and whisper in the dog's ear, "Good pup," or "I love you." The Pretzelman would smile down at her, and she would tug on the dog's ear and then run in and finish her errand. One day as she knelt down to pet it, she looked over at a parked car and she saw a pistol sitting on top of the rear passenger side tire.

She got more comfortable around the Pretzelman through her relationship with the puppy. She asked him one day if she could see his gun. He chuckled and he said, "That stuff isn't for girls like you," but when she asked again a few weeks later, he reached into the wheel well and picked it up. He did something to it that make it rasp and click, then handed it to her. The weight of it frightened her, and she stared at it in her hand, thinking in a haze that it must weigh more than the puppy. She put her finger to the trigger, and the gun was so big that only the tip of her finger could reach around. She stood up and pointed the gun at the Pretzelman, and she heard her own voice say, "What now," and she saw the Pretzelman's face drain.

Her hand shook and her knees shook, and the Pretzelman took one step forward and snatched the gun from her hand and slapped her in the face. She didn't cry out, but she shuddered and cried a few tears and said, "I'm sorry, I don't like that." She had scared herself as much as she scared him, and the Pretzelman saw this, and he said, "This ain't no joke. Why you think I said guns aren't for girls like you."

She talked to him a lot about guns after that. They sat on the stoop of the house next to the store, and he told her that

most boys held their left arm over their face while they shot with their right because they didn't want to see what the bullets did. He said that only the crazy ones or the liars said they didn't cover their face. She asked him if he covered his face, and he didn't answer for a minute. Then he said, "Not the first time."

He took her behind his house to shoot the gun, because she asked him if she could try it. They walked through the high nettles and the broken glass and the needles, and he said, "Watch out for dog shit." He made her stop and then walked ten feet and set a bottle on the back of a chair and came back and handed her the gun and said, "Here." She pointed the gun at the bottle, and her body jerked, and her ears rang, and the smell made her eyes burn. She looked at him after the first shot, and he said, "Try again, but hurry up 'cause they'll call the cops."

She shot six more times and hit the bottle with one of the shots, but she couldn't tell which one because the cracks and the flashes didn't match up. The wall behind the bottle was soft quarried stone with lots of mica, and the divots and craters where her bullets hit were a fresher shade of gray than the rest, and they sparkled in the light. She thought through the roaring in her ears that if someone were to shoot the whole house, it would look newer than it did.

She told people about the Pretzelman because she was proud to know him. She told her friends about him and introduced a few of them to him. One Saturday night she had her friend Kiana sleep over, and they whispered about boys until late. "He don't say anything ignorant to you, and he's even nice to the old ladies," Dana said. Kiana rolled her eyes.

"You know he's too old for you. You wouldn't even know what to do when he started to try out that nasty shit."

Dana shrieked and rolled over onto her belly. Then she said,

“I would too know what to do. I would too.”

That night after the girls had fallen asleep, they were awoken by a string of gunshots and then tires squealing. When it ended they ran to the windows and looked up and down the block, but they didn't see anyone. Kiana fell back asleep soon after, and Dana lay there for a long time listening to her steady breathing, thinking about situations that could be, and in them what she would do.

On her way to the bus the next morning at seven, Dana walked past the poppy store and saw the Pretzelman in his normal spot. He nodded to her, and she ducked her head. She felt a quickness in her chest and heard a buzzing in her ears. When she got on the bus, she tried to close her eyes and take a nap like she usually did on the way to school, but she couldn't find a comfortable position in her seat.

In English class that day, Dana's teacher talked about how the best characters always seem very real, yet a little too large for life. Dana raised her hand and said, “I know someone like that. He's got the corner on my block, and he has this nice dog. They call him the Pretzelman because his skin color is like the pretzel part, and that stuff he sell is white like the salt.”

“He sounds like an interesting character,” said the teacher. “I would enjoy reading a story about the Pretzelman.”

After that Dana couldn't help but think of the Pretzelman as a character. Everything he did was covered with a thin gauze of fantasy. One of the boys on the block wanted to work for him, but they already had a lookout and the boy was too young for any of the other jobs, so they sent him on little errands. One of these errands was to take the bus to Target and buy sheets, because the Pretzelman was tired of sleeping on a bare mattress. Or at least tired of hearing his girls complain

about it. The boy took the hundred dollars he was given and rode the bus for thirty-five minutes and went into Target and bought the sheets. The Pretzelman had said to him, "I don't need no change, understand?" The boy knew that the change was to be his payment for the errand, but in order to avoid looking like he was trying to profit too much, he bought the most expensive set he could find. He brought back a set of king-size sheets and proudly presented them to the Pretzelman, but they didn't fit the twin-size mattress. According to Dana, the Pretzelman didn't make the boy go back to Target and exchange them because the mistake had been his to not give the boy more specific orders. They made fun of the boy and called him King Size, and the Pretzelman slept on a twin-size mattress with sheets for a king. Dana looked at sheets the next time she was in Target, and she saw that the most expensive sheets sold there had a thread count of six hundred and cost \$89.99, plus tax.

Another time Dana walked down to the poppy store and came upon the peak of an argument between the Pretzelman and one of his girls. She was standing in the street screaming at him and making motions with her arms like she was throwing something at him. The motion was like a Frisbee, and the girl did it over and over again with each hand, and sometimes with both. But the Pretzelman, like a character in a different movie, was just standing against the wall of the store. He wasn't looking at the girl, and he wasn't looking away from her, and it looked to Dana like he hadn't noticed that there was anyone else there at all.

There was a certain face that the Pretzelman used when he was out on the corner, but this one was different. His normal stern-faced grill would crack sometimes. The corners of his eyes would crinkle up if he caught her spitting or stopping to adjust her belt or her shorts. His eyes would crinkle, and she would know he had watched her the whole time.

This face wasn't crinkling at all, no matter what the girl

screamed about his shithole house and his dirty, grubbing life. Suddenly Dana saw him in the same pose, leaning with his shoulders against the wall and his feet planted, but the vista had changed. The tan car in front of him and the picket fence across the street with its peeling paint were gone, and instead he was at the edge of an enormous, planted field, looking out at the work he had done and the work yet to do. Or he was at the top of a rocky hill, and he was looking down at the river below, at the cattle or the buffalo. Or he was on the balcony of a high-rise, looking past the skyscrapers toward the lower buildings, the row homes, and the narrow streets that he owned. Or he was in the tunnel at an arena, waiting to be introduced over the loudspeakers. Waiting for the roar of the crowd. The girl in the street was still yelling, her hair and her cheeks shaking with rage. He could have been made of stone.

Dana tried to talk to the Pretzelman about how she saw him, what she thought about him. Every time she tried it, her words ran into the obstacle of his eyes on her, the smile starting to play in the corner of his mouth. One time she made it as far as telling him, "You know, you're nice. Really nice." She wanted to continue, but she could tell he was making fun of her when he replied, "Well, some people think so. I'm glad you think so."

In English class her teacher made the class do a writing exercise called "What everyone knows vs. What I know." Dana continued the first sentence. "What everyone knows about the Pretzelman is his puppy, and his nickname." She quickly wrote a full page in her looping script, smiling as she pictured his eyes, his hands.

She was still going when the teacher said it was time to begin the second part. She wrote, "But what only I know is that he..."

She stopped writing then, and thought about what would happen if she wrote what she knew—really knew—about the Pretzelman. Or if she told it to him out loud. How would his eyes look if she wrote it—all of it—and then handed this letter to him, rather than turning it in to the teacher? When the class ended, her ellipsis was still open, waiting to be filled with what she knew.

Before long the Pretzelman died, and here's how it happened. He woke up on his mattress on the floor between the sheets he got by sending his boy on the bus to Target. He grabbed his gun from the floor next to his bed. He put the leash on the dog, and he hollered to the others to get up. He let himself out the back, which is what they always did so that the front could stay boarded up and keep its abandoned look. He walked around to the front of the house. He didn't carry the dog over the broken glass, as he had done when it was a smaller puppy. He might have waved hello to an old lady. He might have stopped to wait while the dog took a shit.

As he walked down the street, he heard the engine of the car roaring, and he looked up to see why someone was going that fast. He saw clearly the face behind the wheel, and then the tires screeched, and he saw clearly the other face in the back seat, before the bright flashes. He went for his gun, but the bullets spun him around and knocked him onto his belly, and his arm and the gun got pinned under his body. The dog ran off. The Pretzelman bled out onto the sidewalk while one of the old ladies called 911, and his boys came out and saw what had happened and they ran off. Dana left her house to catch the bus and saw the cops taping off an area around a body that was covered with a heavy sheet too small for the whole creeping stain. She didn't know it was the Pretzelman until she came home that afternoon and her friends told her.

As she lay in bed that night, she thought about the dark red

color and feared that she might never be able to think about anything else. She searched her feelings, wondering distantly if she was going to cry. She fell asleep thinking, but she slept well. It rained that night and the whole day after, so the stain was gone. The Pretzelman's mother placed the news clipping of his shooting inside a plastic sleeve and stapled it on the telephone pole, with a note about a reward for evidence leading to the killers. Before long the corner belonged to someone else, and there was a colorful cairn of stuffed animals piled against the fence where he'd lain, and one of the walls nearby read *RIP*. Dana noticed these things when she walked out to the store or the bus stop, and she passed them again whenever she walked back home.

**New Fiction from Lucas
Randolph: "Boys Play Dress
Up"**



When visiting

a friend's grandpa, the Boy learned that the grandpa liked watching football games on the weekends instead of the black and white western movies. His favorite football team was the Kansas City Chiefs. Their team colors were—red, white, and yellow. Some of the fans had feathers on their head and they chanted and made a chopping motion with one of their hands when the game started. Sometimes a man who was dressed up in a pretend costume would beat on a giant drum. The grandpa said it was tradition and traditions were good. The Boy asked the friends grandpa if he ever watched western movies, but he said those were all fake and weren't worth the copper they were printed on. That's why he liked watching football. Real men. Real blood. Real consequences.

None of that fake cowboy horseshit.

Sometimes, though, if it was late at night, the friend's grandpa said he liked to watch military documentaries, but only if everyone was already asleep. The Boy didn't ask why. The grandpa had an American flag that hung from the front porch of his house—red, white, and blue. The Boy's own grandpa didn't have one. Neither did the Boy's father.

Were you in the War too?

No, my parents wanted me to go to college. The same college my daddy went too. In fact, we even played ball for the same team. That's my old jersey there.

The friend's grandpa pointed to the wall. Two framed black and white photos with wooden frames that bent and curved all fancy like hung next to each other. The Boy knew one photo was older because it had a football team where they all had leather helmets on, and the image was faded. There was also a framed football jersey on the wall with the same last name that his friend had with stitched together letters on the back of it. The team colors were—green, gold, and black.

I almost volunteered for the military. I wanted too—hell, they almost got me in the draft! Maybe I wish they would have. Just wasn't in the playbook, I guess. Your grandfather was in the service? World War II?

Yes sir. Well—no, he fought in Korea. My dad too. Air force. He didn't fight in any War, though.

That's okay son, you should be damn proud. We all have our role to play. That's what my old man used to say.

I'm going to join too—when I'm old enough, anyway.

The grandpa smiled and put a hand on the Boy's shoulder.

That's a good boy.

The grandpa reached over and grabbed an old football that sat

on a wooden mantle with some sports memorabilia underneath the old photos and the jersey. He held it in front of the Boy's face close enough for him to smell the aged pigskin leather, letting his eyes wander over the scars from the field of battle. When the Boy's hands moved to touch the football, the grandpa reached back in an old-school football pose like the quarterback does and threw the ball across the room to his grandson who caught it above his head with both hands.

Nice one! Just like your old man!

He lost

his favorite coffee mug. The Old Man poured dark roast into a short glass mason jar mixing it with the golden liquid already left waiting at the bottom. It wasn't meant for hot liquids and the Old Man reached for a red trimmed potholder with a green and yellow wildflower pattern to hold it with. He sat down into his favorite corduroy rocking chair, one hand against his lower back for support. He smiled with the jar between his legs letting the glass cool, the steam from the roasted beans rising to his nose. Smells of earth and sweet honey warmed the room. The sting of diesel was nearly absent.

Please, just one-story Grandpa. I promise I won't ask for more. Please—

Well shit, you're old enough by now. I promised your dad I wouldn't, but hell in my day you could drive a tractor at ten, and you're nearly that. It can be our little secret. What do you want to know?

About the War, about—Korea. Like, what kind of gun did you use?

A few, but mostly the ole Browning M1919. I bet you don't even

know what that is, do you?

The Boy shook his head no.

It's a light machine gun. L.M.G. It took two of us to shoot and two more to carry everything. It was a real son-of-a-bitch to get around.

Did you have to shoot it a lot?

I never shot it once, to tell you the truth, not at anyone anyway. See, I just fed the ammo to keep it firing. Do you know what that means, to feed the ammo?

The Old Man didn't wait for the Boy to answer.

I was what they called an assistant gunner. Corporal did all of the shooting and stuff for us. He liked that kind of thing.

The Old Man grabbed the hot mason jar from between his legs and took a long drag of his coffee. The rounded glass edge burned against the crease of his lips, but he drank it anyway. He remembered the Corporal well. They grew matching mustaches; they all did. The lieutenant dubbed them his "Mustache Maniacs," which later got shortened to just "M&M's." It was a real hoot with the men. The Old Man shaved it shortly before returning home. He felt stupid with it by himself. It didn't feel right without Corporal Lopez and the rest. He wouldn't tell that story today, though.

They didn't deserve it, the people. Not too different from us you know—some of the best God-damned people I've ever met, actually. They fought side by side with us. Those Koreans, real God-damn patriots. We suffered together; I remember how hungry they were. How hungry we were—and cold, for shit's sake was it cold. Colder than a well digger's ass, if you ask me. You have to understand, it's a different kind of cold they have there in Korea. It's all any of us thought about most of the time. We weren't ready for any of it. It was a terrible

War.

Why were you fighting then Grandpa? If they weren't bad?

It wasn't them we were fighting; it was those god-damned Reds! You see, retreat was never part of the plan, hell, War was never part of the plan—we just killed that other bastard five years earlier! You have to imagine, when they first came over them mountain tops, millions of 'em, I swear to God, the God-damned ground disappeared. I don't know if they shot back, or hell, if they even had guns. Corporal [REDACTED] just kept firing. There was so much smoke you couldn't see more than a few feet in front of you. I loaded until my hands charred like wood. We could hear them breathing they was so close. A wave of glowing lead to the left. A wave of glowing lead to the right.

The Old Man's arms followed waves of bullets from one side of his body to the other in a repeating pattern. The aged wood from underneath his corduroy rocking chair snapped with the weight of his story. Liquid from the mason jar in one of his hands splashed over the rim.

The Boy breathed hard, too afraid to look away.

We screamed for the runners to bring more ammo; I don't remember when they stopped coming. The Reds didn't. They never stopped. When they were right God-damned on top of us, Corporal [REDACTED] handed me his pistol, a Colt 1911. Just a small little thing. He picked up that son-of-a-bitch Browning with his bare hands and we fired until we both had nothing left. And then, we ran. We all ran. Everyone did. And we kept running. When the order finally came to stand fast; we already made it to the God-damned ocean.

The Old Man drank from his mason jar again, the amber glow of liquid not able to hide behind his lost porcelain coffee mug. He nearly spit it out when he started laughing from somewhere deep down in his belly. He had to use his free hand to cover the top of the jar to keep the liquid from spilling

everywhere.

You know, when we finally did stop, there were these two supply crates, just sitting there waiting for us. One had ammo, one had food. We hadn't had a single round of ammunition to fire in over a week and no one had eaten in at least double that amount of time, probably longer. But wouldn't you God-damn believe it, I was the only shit-stick dumb enough to go for the ammo first. I was more scared of those god-damned Reds than I was of starving to death. Go for the ammo first, that's what Corporal ██████ would have done, so that's what I did. He always knew what to do.

Invitation to a Gunfighter, starring Yul Brynner and George Segal, played at a low volume in the background on a black and white television screen. The film ends after the hero takes a shotgun blast to the chest and one bullet through the stomach. The hero manages to jump from his horse in a dramatic roll before single-handedly disarming the bad guys in one swift motion. An entire town watches from the side. The hero then spends the next two minutes and thirty-four seconds forcing the bad guys to apologize in front of all the town's folk for their crimes against their own neighbors. Eventually, the hero succumbs to the injuries and the people carry him away on their shoulders. The Old Man and the Boy sat in silence until the credits finished and the screen turned to black.

The Boy wasn't sure what was meant to be funny about the ending to his grandpa's story. He waited for the rest of the story to finish, but it never came.

The Sheriff

first met the Boy when he was still just a boy. The Sheriff took the Old Man away but said he could come back home once he

was feeling better. The Old Man said it was the bitch's fault. The Sheriff also gave the Boy a pack of Colorado Rocky baseball trading cards and a golden sheriff's sticker that he could put on the outside of his shirt. The Boy wore it to school the next Monday and everybody wanted to know where he got it from but he told them it was a secret.

New Fiction by L.W. Smolen: "Dirty-Rotten"



Where mom and dad and me used to live in the Haight, from the brush in the empty lot across his street, with a BB gun, I

shot a big, scary German Shepherd guard dog – right in his gonats. Wasn't my gun. Was a big-kids' dare. The oldest one told me, "You're just a dweeb fourth-grader. His tail's always in the way. Only time you can get him's when he lifts his leg to pee. You'll get two, three seconds and that's it." So I held my fire. I waited for the Shepherd to pee, and I got him! One shot. They went, "Jeeze! The kid did it!"

I don't know what I thought would happen when I shot the Shepherd. It yiped and yiped and skidded all around on its rear. I dropped the gun and I ran. Could hear the dog blocks away. It was awful. The big kids knew where I lived and they told my mom. Said I stole their gun.

They took 'em both – the Shepherd's owners did – both his gonats. The Shepherd never charged his fence or growled or barked after that – just wagged and smiled and let me pet him sweet – like he never knew it was me shot him. Like he never knew at all – just smiled and wagged, but always wanted me in particular to pet him and let him lick my hand. Nobody else. Just me. He never acted like he knew what hit him, but it was like forgiveness anyhow – forgiveness I never deserved on the dark side of the moon.

Later, coupla times, I brought the Shepherd special gizzard treats and he used to go nuts and spring his front paws up on top of his fence double-happy and smile to see me just like he knew the way how dogs know and do things, like he knew how my heart was hurting – like he knew all along I shot him.

After a while, I couldn't stand it. Couldn't look him in the eye. Couldn't stand – didn't deserve his happy dog-love – my false, trigger-happy truth stuck festering inside me.

Finally, I quit going even down that street. The big kids said I was a jerk for taking the dare and called me a dirty rotten, little gonat-snatcher twirp and worse – and it's all true.

New Fiction from John P. Palmer: “Lasting Impacts”

Johnny felt the oak floor tilt sharply below him. He had no idea what was happening or why, and he was frightened.

The tilt was steep, so steep that he felt himself sliding, then falling. He wanted to cry, but he was so terrified that he couldn't make a sound. Suddenly he fell right off the floor and landed on the next oak floor right below the one he was falling from.

As he was landing on it, that floor tilted in the opposite direction, and he began sliding again, uncontrollably in that direction.

He fell again, to another floor, and that floor tilted back. His fear intensified. Finally he was able to cry out, but the see-saw tilting and sliding wouldn't stop! Worse, the room began to spin, and Johnny was totally disoriented. The falling and sliding and spinning sensations were new to him; he wasn't hurt, but he was more terrified than he had ever been. He couldn't stop crying.



As he slid downward from level to level across the tilting, sloping floors, Johnny looked up and saw his father laughing, and that frightened him even more. This man was his father; he wasn't supposed to be a man who made floors tilt and who made Johnny fall from one tilted floor to another. But there he was: Johnny was falling from sloped floor to sloped floor, and his dad was laughing while Johnny was crying.

*

The memory of this trauma haunted Johnny for years. When he was a toddler, he woke up after having nightmares that his crib was tilting and he was sliding back and forth on it.

When he was six years old, Johnny woke up at 4AM from a completely different nightmare. In this one, his dad was grinning at him. That was all – it was just a grin, but in his dream Johnny saw it as menacing, and he couldn't get back to sleep. It rekindled the old nightmares from his infancy.

When his mother woke up, she saw his bedroom light on. "Johnny," she asked, "Why do you have your bedroom light on, and what are you doing up so early? What happened?"

Johnny knew his mom loved his dad, and so he didn't feel free to say anything. He knew she would pooh-pooh the nightmare. After some hesitation, he mumbled, "I had a nightmare."

"What happened?" she asked again.

Johnny wouldn't tell her.

*

Johnny's dad died at the age of 43; John was only 15.

John missed his dad, but not a whole lot. They had never been close. His dad was a respected man in the community, and he did many of the usual fatherly things with John, but there was always a barrier between them. John had always been a little

afraid of him. John didn't think about the nightmares of his infancy or childhood very often, if at all, but they had affected him.

One day shortly after John turned thirty, he spent an entire day closeted in his office at work. He didn't answer knocks on the door, he wouldn't answer the telephone, and he didn't go to lunch with his co-workers. He just sat at his desk all day, talking with his dad, trying to imagine a day-long visit and conversation. It wasn't until then that he realized his dad had grown up the middle boy in his own family, not particularly well-loved and maybe even half-rejected by the rest of his family. Only then did he begin to understand that his dad was shy about showing emotions and had never learned how to give or show love to his son. And John realized, finally, that his dad had loved him deeply but didn't know how to do it. He felt at peace with his dad.

At least he thought he did.

Many years later, his older sister and he were talking among some friends when she mentioned that alcohol had been banned from their house as they were growing up. She and John laughed about the religious conservatives in their neighborhood, but his sister added, "No, there was another reason. Dad had some men over one night and they all got drunk. Mother threatened to leave him and said he was never allowed to have alcohol in the house again."

That night John understood. And felt sad. And missed his dad... again.

He understood that during that drunken party, his dad had been tossing him in the air and laughing with his drunken friends. John's nightmare of sliding on tilting, sloping floors wasn't a nightmare at all; it had been real. Up and down, up and down, and around and around. The world really had been spinning and falling away from him.

John tried to talk to his dad again that night. He tried to forgive his dad, "I know it wasn't malicious, Dad. I know."

And he wept silently.

New Fiction from Moe Hashemi: "Javid"

We buried Javid on a gloomy Friday morning in late December, shortly before Ali was gassed on the battlefield. All the guys from the eleventh grade attended the funeral, most of the teachers too.

Later that day at the mosque, Javid's dad, a well-groomed, bearded, middle-aged man who sold rosaries and prayer stones to pilgrims, stood at the podium with an Abrahamic disposition and gave a speech about how proud he felt as a father to offer a martyr to God and to the Supreme Leader of the Revolution and how much Javid cared about both.

*

I had known Javid ever since the second grade. I still remember our first conversation when he approached me timidly and asked why my old eraser was so unusually white and clean.

"My baby sister grabs it whenever I'm not looking and she licks it clean."

"Wow!" he said and walked off pensively looking at his dirty eraser.

The next day he came to class with his eraser all nice and clean:

“Look what my baby sister did to my eraser!”

He didn't have a baby sister. I could picture him licking his eraser for hours.

*

No matter how hard Javid tried to blend in, he stood out like a bad stitch in a Persian rug. He was too scrawny for his age and always wore a buzz cut and clothes that were either too small for him or too large. One year, he became the butt of jokes when he showed up to school in early September in ugly blue winter rubber boots with conspicuous large white dots. The boots were a bit too big for him and made loud farting noises with every step he took. He pulled his pant legs as far down as he could to cover the boots and walked like a geisha to diminish the noise, but this just made him look even more awkward.

*

Javid was an easy target for bullies. They called him Oliver Twist, played pranks on him, locked him in the school bathroom, hounded him on his way home and pummelled him hard. But, the bruises he received from the bullies were nothing compared to the ones he brought from home; he never complained or talked about his bruises. He seemed to be able to take all insults and injuries with a rueful smile and move on.

*

His undoing though was his unfeigned innocence. Mr. Nezami, aka “Mr. Psycho,” was our disgruntled science teacher. He was a vicious, paranoid man in his early forties who thought the world was after him, so he went after his students.

“Javid! Read out the passage! Page 45, Plants.”

Javid opened his book and started reading.

“Although plants can respond to certain stimuli such as light by turning towards it or by opening their petals and leaves, they do not have nerves or any equivalent system to feel or respond to stimuli such as pain.”

At this point Javid fell silent and looked kind of lost.

“Why did you stop? Go on,” snapped Mr. Psycho.

“Sir! Does this mean that if people kick trees and break off their branches, the trees don’t cry inside?”



The whole class burst into laughter at this; Mr. Psycho strode menacingly toward Javid.

“Are you mocking me, kid?”

He twisted Javid’s arm and pulled him off the bench, then slapped him hard a couple of times on the back of his shaved head, and kicked him out of the classroom.

*

Once we got into comic books, Javid found a passion. He didn't own any comics, but he managed to borrow some from the few friends that he had. At first, he became infatuated with Captain America and drew the superhero's pictures on all his notebook covers, but Captain America lost some of his glory once Javid became acquainted with Rambo.

*

In those days, the Iran-Iraq war was at a stalemate. The two sides had lost lots of manpower and they were desperate for recruits. Iran's Revolutionary Guards would visit high schools and show action movies like *First Blood*, tell tales of valour and glory on the battlefield, and then try to sign up as many kids as they could. As long as you were fifteen or older, all you needed to join was a consent letter from your father or your legal guardian.

*

Ali, who was the oldest kid in our class, as he had failed and repeated a grade, was the first to sign up. His older brother had joined the Basij paramilitary militia before him and had been dispatched to the battlefield, so Ali's father was reluctant to let his second child join. Ali forged his dad's signature, and then taught Javid how to do it as well. Ali was hoping to go to seminary school after graduation and he was a true believer in martyrdom and going to paradise. Javid, on the other hand, signed up for the love of guns. He wanted to get a big machine gun and kick ass like John Rambo. Perhaps, he fantasized about taking all that pent up rage inside him and blasting it at enemy soldiers.

*

I visited Ali at the hospital a few months after Javid's funeral. He had been poisoned with mustard gas during the Battle of Faw Peninsula. He had hideous blisters all over his body, was blinded in both eyes and had irreversible lung

damage. There was a breathing tube taped to his nose. He asked about school. I told him about our classmates and the pranks we played on teachers. I also told him how Mr. Psycho had ended up dislocating a kid's elbow, and had been fired; he had eventually locked himself in a hotel room, swallowed all his meds and died.

"Lucky bastard! I wish I could go that easy," He wheezed.

"You'll be fine," I lied and tried to change the subject, *"Tell me about Javid."*

"We took our intensive training course together. Javid had a real talent for marksmanship. He finished at the top of our class. The night before we were sent to the front, he was so excited that he couldn't sleep." Ali burst into a fit of coughing. He continued talking after a long pause, "We were taken to the front in a military truck. Javid was among the first to get off. An Iraqi sniper was waiting in ambush and started shooting at us right away. Javid took a bullet in the chest and was gone, just like that! He took the blow and moved on to paradise. That's the way I'd imagined I'd go."

He paused again, breathless, his sightless eyes staring up at invisible entities beyond the ceiling.

"In a way, I also feel sorry for him," Ali murmured, *"after all, he didn't get to fire a single bullet at the enemy."*

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Ali died the next June after a hard battle with cancer right around the time we were graduating from high school. He was buried in the same plot of the cemetery as Javid, among the throngs of other fallen soldiers.

I visited both their graves one last time before I was drafted. I placed a small picture of Rambo on Javid's grave and one of a blind angel on Ali's. I left the cemetery

wondering what others would put on my grave.

**New Poetry from Hannah Jane
Weber: “My Childhood Smelled
Like,” “Surprise Dawn”**



FROSTED WITH MOONLIGHT / *image by Amalie Flynn*

MY CHILDHOOD SMELLED LIKE

cabbage, salted tomatoes, and cracklings.

the flume of dust I awakened when my fingers
untangled the shag carpet's red mane.

crayons I melted against the wood stove,
our terrier's feet, with that same scent of fire.

night crawlers, shad, algae, and lake,
blanketing our boat after a morning of fishing.

Dad's scrapyard, fragrant with hot tar
and smoke from his brown cigarettes,
acres of rust and grease, a twisting maze
leading to one abandoned refrigerator after another,
each filled with jars and jars of ancient rot.

fireworks and muddy gravel roads,
leadplant, elderberries, horsemint.

Grandma's lilac bushes,
reeking of booze from the bar next door,
their purple bunches lighting up the dark
with neon liquor perfume.

SURPRISE DAWN

rows of cedars push through slats of slain brothers
dense boughs gushing berries
frosted with moonlight

my bike light skims twilight from creamy sidewalks
a premature dawn blaring from the flashing bulb
illuminating the wind's fabric
in rustling leaves

I lean far from the sweep of branches
but my jacket catches the emerald froth
and propels me into the flustered chatter of birds awakened
and tossed about by my helmet's pillage of their feathered
hearth