



# SHIRLEY

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# THE OCTOBER BED

BY VALERIE ALEXANDER

The sun was setting over the woods and Carol had just put lasagna noodles on the stove to boil when she saw her daughter outside in the field. Emily was standing in the dried-out weeds and Queen Anne's lace that reached up to her waist, concealing her jeans. Her flannel jacket was dirty and from this distance, Carol could see that her daughter's brown hair was clotted with soil and burrs. She was staring at the house.

Carol's heart began to hammer. She had the presence of mind to turn the stove burner down before heading into the chilly October twilight.

"Hi, Mom," Emily said. "Happy Halloween."

It was a few days before Halloween but Emily had long ago disregarded the specifics of dates and calendars.

"Hi, honey," Carol said and wished she could hug her daughter, or rather, that she could hug Emily and Emily would smell like shampoo and feel reasonably warm like she used to, instead of being cold and stiff.

"I got here last night," Emily said. "Late. I didn't want to wake you" and she smiled the crooked smirk she had mastered sometime in college, years before she died.

Carol saw the temporary bed she had dug herself, the hard soil and pebbles scattered around the gap in the ground. "You could have slept in the basement, you know. You're welcome anytime." She had to stop herself from saying, *I don't want you sleeping in the cold ground* because Emily might say something disturbing about where she slept on other nights. And she couldn't say that Emily could have slept in her old bedroom, because that involved a surprise she wanted to approach the right way.

"No thanks," Emily said. "Sleep surrounded by Dad's tennis rackets and the dripping water heater and the boxes of my old Barbies? Creepy." She mock-shuddered and smiled at Carol, as if daring her mother to defend her invitation. Once she had been good at that, goading Carol into tirades that criticized her late nights, her cruel sarcasm toward her brother, her refusal to befriend unpopular Jenna Morton who lived around the corner.

“As it happens, I cleaned out the basement this summer,” Carol said. “I wanted to mail all of Jason’s old Hot Wheels out to California, I thought his kids might want them.”

“How grandmotherly of you. But I’m still not sleeping down there where anyone could get at me.” Emily’s eyes shone just a moment. The darkening dusk, the shadows of the woods behind her, was making her look less dirty and sick and more undead.

“You know I would never let anyone go down there.”

“Oh, wouldn’t you.”

“Emily, I think I’ve earned some trust at this point.”

“Well, I think I’ve earned some acceptance at this point,” Emily said. “But you’ve never been good at accepting change, Mom. Not when Dad had his girlfriend, not when I got sick. Look at you still working at the insurance agency all these years because you’re too chickenshit to take a risk.”

“I was let go last winter.”

That seemed to take Emily aback. But then she said, “Please tell me you got another job. I can’t stand to think of you sitting around watching those stupid, bitchy talk shows by yourself all day.”

“Emily, I’m sixty-four. No one wants to hire me. You won’t come inside?”

Emily’s back straightened and she looked to the west where the sun was sinking over the field, where the upstairs lights were turning on in the Mortons’ house. She seemed to be listening for something. “Wouldn’t that make it worse, Mom? Seeing me like this—” She gestured to her dirty jeans, her teeth “- next to my first grade picture? That picture you framed where I’m in my prom gown by the tulips?”

“I just thought you’d want to come home for a minute.”

Emily looked at the back of the house in the dusk. “Sometimes I do,” she said. “But not right now.”

Her head cocked and her eyes went alive in that way Carol had seen many times, like a wolf sniffing the wind for prey. It was night now and she knew her daughter was seeing a world that was both banquet and playground.

Out on the road, a truck slowed and turned into the driveway, spraying gravel. Gary Veerhoven from across the street, dropping off the cooler he had borrowed, probably.

“Time for fun,” Emily said and she was gone.

After Carol stowed the cooler in the garage, she went inside and turned up the heat under the lasagna noodles. The house was getting chilly and she went upstairs to put on another sweater. Though she didn’t often allow herself, she opened the door to her daughter’s bedroom. The lavender room had the same high school photos tucked into the bureau’s heart-shaped mirror, the same duvet on the bed featuring Baxter, the stuffed white bear Emily had refused to take to college with her. Carol still remembered buying Baxter in the hospital gift shop when Emily had her appendix out and how Emily slept with him every night in the hospital.

But the twin bed and dresser were now dwarfed by the enormous rosewood casket covering the carpet. It had cost almost as much as a small used car and paying the delivery men to bring it up here had involved a convoluted explanation; she wanted to make sure they weren’t local, didn’t know her as Carol Bearden who’d lost her daughter to kidney disease eight years ago. The casket was carved with roses on each end, lined with pale blue satin and airtight. No sunlight. Emily could sleep safely in it all day.

She had intended to show her on this visit. Emily always came by in autumn because she had a group of friends that held an annual reunion in the area. Were they the vampires who turned her, did they travel together sometimes — Carol didn't know. She only knew her daughter stopped by each October or November on her way to see them.

She traced the rosebuds carved into the wood. If Jason ever brought his family to visit, which he hadn't in years, she would tell him the casket was for herself. That a local funeral home had gone out of business and sold their inventory at slashed prices and she had bought this to lighten the burden on him later, when her time came. He was the only one left to take care of such arrangements after all, with his father dead and Emily buried in the family plot, as far as he knew. When she died, he'd be entirely alone. Not that it seemed to bother him.

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The smell woke her up. Not the lights and the noise, that still signified family to her subconscious: that her husband had come home in a rage from work and was ruffling through his home office files, that Emily had stumbled over a pile of laundry on the stairs trying to tiptoe in past curfew. But the stench hanging in her bedroom woke her up, the sheets cold on top of her.

Emily was kneeling on the carpet of the home office, dropping dark green folders on the floor and pulling apart the filing cabinet. All of the lights were blazing and when she looked up there was nothing human about her — eyes shining, fangs extended. Her hair was orderly, Carol noticed. She had met some of her friends tonight, groomed herself for them.

“Where is it? The deed to the cottage? Or just give me the address.”

“Grandma's cottage at the lake? Emily, I sold that years ago.”

“Goddammit!” Emily bellowed and brought her fist down on the metal drawer, bringing the filing cabinet toppling over onto the floor.

Then she made a visible effort to calm herself. “We were going to stay there for a few nights,” she said to her mother with great impatience and condescension. “Why the fuck would you sell it?”

“Because this family's barbecue and waterskiing days are long gone,” Carol snapped.

Emily grinned. She liked sarcasm, Carol had noticed. “Oh. I thought maybe Jason and his crotchfruit still used it in the summer.”

“Jason's in San Diego, Emily. He hasn't been to visit in four years.”

Emily stared at her. She's going to kill me one night, Carol thought. It won't be in rage or hunger, just detachment. “I guess it's hard to keep up with time.”

She got up in one of those fluid motions that Carol flinched from, like a person turned into animation for just a motion. “Well, I'm home. Aren't you happy, Mom? That I'm *in the house*?”

“I am,” Carol said measuredly. “It's nice. I know it doesn't matter to you, but I like it.”

She wasn't going to show her the casket. Not now. Emily would just snort or feel suffocated or accuse her of hiding a priest and a vial of holy water.

“Mom,” Emily said. “Oh, Mom. Look at the world outside. Come here.”

She walked to the window and Carol followed, trying to stand at a natural distance

from her daughter that didn't indicate repulsion or terror.

"Look at the world," Emily said, lifting her chin at the barren elm tree, the shape of Gary Veerhoven's farmhouse across the road, the thin curve of gibbous moon. "Remember when you were young? You and Dad grew up here. There were what, Halloween dances to walk home from. Jumping in leaf piles. Shit, I don't know what you did. But there's something out there haunting the streets tonight and you know what it is? It's you. The ghost of the girl you used to be. When you were actually something that could be called alive."

Carol took her daughter in, didn't avoid it this time. The rotting fungus odor of her, the fetid smell of her mouth, the shining eyes. She didn't look down but she knew there was dirt caked under Emily's fingernails and damp stains of earth on her jeans.

"Well, *that's* a facial expression I'll always remember," Emily said. "Shit. You know, Mom — sometimes I'm not sure if you love me anymore." She began to laugh, a laugh that disappeared on the wind as she vanished out the window and into the night.

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Carol brought her gluten-free raisin toast and coffee to the couch and picked up a cooking magazine. Her neighbor Gary's wife had had the subscription and ever since she died of lung cancer last spring, Gary would drop the magazines in her mailbox. Carol liked looking at them and the domestic heaven they invoked. *From farm to table dinner parties. A holiday brunch your family will never forget. Weeknight cooking for when they'll be home late from the office and soccer practice.* This issue had frosted green cupcakes with bat wings and ghost cookies for Halloween. He hadn't brought over the November issue yet.

It's only been eight years, she thought, flipping to a layout on brunch frittatas. She didn't know how vampires changed as time went on. How they felt about the world and their friends as the years passed and nothing was new anymore. Emily hadn't had a truly pressing reason to come by twice yesterday. She wanted to. That might happen more and more as the years went by. She might even spend Christmas Eve here some year.

Carol put her coffee cup in the sink, slid on a wool cardigan and walked through the field to the spot Emily had stood yesterday. A pungent smell lingered in the mud and weeds her daughter slept in, a smell that was both gamy animal and rotting death.

It was a clear bright day. The ground was dry, unstained. Nervously she walked to the treeline and looked around. In late October, the oaks and hawthorn trees were past their scarlet and yellow glory and turning barren. A crow cawed at her, alarmingly close. Her heart jumped but she forced herself to walk into the trees.

She found the remains twenty feet away, a lump on the forest floor. Her heartbeat accelerated and then relief flooded her as she saw grayish fur and a muzzle. The coyote's rib cage had been pulled apart by two strong arms, nothing like animal predation. And deer season began in a few days. Emily should have hidden it but hunters would find some kind of explanation for it.

She crossed the field quickly back to the house. The phone was ringing. Sue Morton from around the corner, who she drove to their book club with every month. Carol muted the TV.

"Oh god, did you hear?" Sue was breathing hard. "There was another one, just like

last Halloween. I can't believe it."

"Another what?" Carol asked, although she knew.

"It was out at the lake. Don Schreppel went out there to winterize his cottage this morning and he could tell the Davisons' cottage had been broken into — and they were on the kitchen floor, butchered, he said it looked like they had been *eaten* — "

"What? Like an animal got in?"

"I don't know. I just can't believe it happened again."

"The people they found last year were out in the Black Hills area. I'm sure there's no connection."

"How could there not be?"

"The police will figure it out. Look, how's Jenna recovering from her C-section?"

"Oh — pretty good. The baby's been so easy too. But Carol, there's more. I don't even want to tell you this part. But you know how Gary across the street is up at night. He thought he saw someone breaking into your house last night. I could kill him for not calling the police."

"Well, I'm glad he didn't," Carol said. "That was my niece. She was coming home from a Halloween party and — "

"No, he saw someone climbing up the side of your house like a spider."

Carol laughed. "I think Gary's insomnia is getting to him. I'll bake him some zucchini bread. I know he's been having a hard time."

*Monster* was such a distorted word, Carol thought as she put a pot of water on to hard-boil eggs for lunch. She thought of Jenna Morton and her two-month-old son, how Sue Morton would probably start babysitting every day when Jenna went back to work. It could be said the infant was a monster, breaking its way through its mother's body to consume and howl and destroy. A cry of life could be a war cry, a statement that said *I am going to conquer you*. You never knew what you were going to give birth to or what it could become or how one day it would feel about you.

The boiling eggs were rattling against the stainless steel pot. Carol took them off, emptied the water and let them cool. The owl-shaped kitchen clock began to chime. She smiled with relief; she had made it until noon before eating lunch. It had been hard this past year to fill the daytime hours and it just didn't take long enough to prepare meals now that it was only her.

She stood with the oven mitt in her hand, aware suddenly of the muted television, the silence of the house. Emily was out there somewhere sleeping off her meal, maybe in the basement of an abandoned building. In a few hours the autumn sun would set and she would awaken. Carol let herself imagine she was present in that silence and solitude, that she would be there, invited, at the moment when her daughter's eyes opened and shone in the dark.

*Valerie Alexander's stories have been published in a number of anthologies from Cleis Press, Samhain Publishing, Running Press and others, as well as magazines like LampLight, Cafe Irreal, and Dark Moon Digest.*



# RIVER

BY DANIEL ALLEN SOLOMON

The dead man steps down into the river. Something under his arm — a paper sack bound in packing tape — is soaked through with red juice, and sopping in his hand, which can't quite grasp the package for its bent fingers and missing nails. But the dead man clings to the package and walks unsteadily into the brown water. It soaks into his torn white shirt, stains it, and he keeps going. He sinks a little more as he finds that his foothold is deeper than expected, and then even deeper as he sinks into the muddy bottom. The water licks at the package in his arm, and some of that red juice seeps through the seams of the sack and onto the surface of the water, where it spreads like oil and then disperses into the river.

Deeper now, up to his chest in the water, he makes no effort to spare the package from the silt. Leaning into the current to secure himself against its pull, he takes the package in both hands and begins to unroll it. The water has soaked the paper by now, and there is no hope of tearing the tape off cleanly, so he pushes his nails into the pulp and peels the bag away layer by layer. He removes each layer daintily and drops it into the current like he is undressing in a burlesque, or like he is pulling off layers of his own shedding skin. The river receives it gently. The paper swirls, sinks, disappears, until there is only a bare pill of raw flesh left behind, a cigar shaped body about the size of a robust eggplant. No fur, nothing to indicate what kind of animal it is, but surely something that was once alive.

He holds the cigar-shaped body in his two hands, above the water where he can see it. The current laps at the object, washing mud and silt over it. He lifts it up again. The water runs off in rivulets where the animal's stiff limbs are folded tightly into its abdomen. Then he lowers it one more time, sets it to float on the surface of the water, fails, and watches it sink into the brown.

It's gonna take forever like this, says the other man, the living one, from the near bank. Personally, I think you're stalling.

The already dead man is facing away from the man on the bank. He shrugs deeply and spreads his arms widely for effect. He doesn't turn around when he says, This is the way I've always intended to do it. I have been meaning to get this done for a long time now. And I appreciate your indulgence. Slowly, he begins to trudge up the soft bank. A shower of mud and water clatters into the water as he rises from it.

The living man is dressed in a dark, solid colored suit, red tie, shiny patent leather shoes. Slick, short hair, and a trim beard. He complains, I shouldn't have agreed to this. I'm a sucker for a sob story, though. And this one was just too poignant to overlook. The way you got smashed up. You're a weirdo, my friend.

The dead man, with his off-kilter arm and his doubly bent leg, and his busted jaw, mumbles, What's so weird about this? A person has got responsibilities.

The living man replies, You're dead! You've got nothing to be responsible for here. It's just that I'm a religious sort and you've got a good story. Collecting all those critters for so long.

The dead man fixes his good eye, the one that wasn't halfway knocked from his skull, the one that isn't bulging, on the living man. Couldn't stand the waste, he says. They get run over, and then comes another car and another one until they're just stiff pancakes, just fur and gristle. And then the crows come and the coyotes come and the possums, and they all get mangled up in the same way. Who can eat all that road leather? It's a waste, he repeats. Couldn't stand it. I'm trying to be a good Samaritan.

Good Samaritans pause for those in need. Those critters didn't need anything. You don't need anything. Your number is up, your goose is cooked! How many more of them you got in that freezer?

A fox. A fawn. Two coons. Maybe a dozen squirrels after this one. A lotta little birds, and three owls — at least.

Sir, I'll say it again, I think you are stalling. They'll be fine in the freezer, why don't you let them go?

My sister will come and she will be disgusted and she will just pay someone to throw them into the dumpster.

And what does that matter? asks the living man.

Same thing. I can't abide the waste. She might at least eat the big ones.



The whole thing is sick, I don't mind saying. But, fine, if this is your unfinished business, then least I can do is help you resolve this. It doesn't pay to have unfulfilled spirits walking the land. But, warns the living man, It also doesn't pay to have ambulatory corpses baptizing roadkill or whatever you think you are doing. Just work this out real quick for me so we can get along to the good part.

The dead man huffs wetly through his unevenly sealed lips. Don't know how else to go about it.

Can't we we just shove the whole freezer into the water? Get it all done with at once? Then we can just float the critters out onto the river, let them drift downstream.

I suppose. I'm afraid I'm not quite as strong as I was just a few minutes ago, and maybe it's better that we hurry. My sister will be along this evening. I guess I should be good and at peace before she shows up.

The living man cheers, That's the spirit! He removes his jacket and hangs it on a dogwood, rolls up his sleeves. Let's get up there and push that sucker out right now! You get the hand truck and I'll start working it out of the corner.

In an hour and some, they had pushed the freezer out of the basement, through the sliding doors, down the drive, across the yard, across the road and past the living man's parked car, through the field on the other side of the road, and up to the water. The living man worked the hand truck, and the dead man steadied the load. When they got to the river, the living man lowered the freezer with a hoo-wee. It hit the mud and immediately begin to sink into the bank.

It's gonna get stuck! the dead man cried.

No matter, said the living, We'll just shovel your critters out from here. So, one by one, they unwrapped the owls, and the songbirds, and the squirrels. They unwrapped the fox, the raccoons, the opossums, the fawn, and a forgotten skunk, and set each of them into the water with a silent prayer. Each of the thawing animal corpses floated momentarily, took on water, and sunk into the brown.

Now that that's finished, began the living man, but the dead man interrupted him, What about the freezer? We can't just leave this junk here.

I'm afraid it's gonna be here for a while, because we've got no time, and your sister is about to arrive. It's time for you to get in place. We've got to act fast. Get up there!

The dead man knew that the living man was probably right, so he left the freezer there, and went with him into the road to the car.

The living man said, Now you just get over there and lay down, and I'll do my part here.

The dead man nodded. He walked to front of the living man's car, saluted him and lay down in the road. He rested his face against the front tire on the passenger side just as his sister pulled up.

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# MISBEHAVING SCREWS

BY ANDREW MARTIN

Winnie pulled on the plastic bag too hard and all the little furniture screws pattered onto the tile floor of our kitchen like a hard rain. She started saying how it wasn't her fault, and why didn't they make those bags with zippers or seals or something to prevent this nonsense from happening, but Agatha said look and we all did. And we watched as the little metal bits started spinning and rearranging themselves on our kitchen floor. All by themselves. They rattled themselves into an arrow shape, then spun, dissolved, collapsed, and reformed into what was unmistakably a frowny face. And then a smiley face, and then a drunken face. We watched, and Mother said quietly to nobody to go get Father. Nobody did.

Then the screws started changing themselves into religious symbols. A cross. A Star of David. Like it was trying them on. We pulled up chairs and watched the screws until Father came in, his cut-off grey sweatshirt dark in the chest from mowing the lawn.

Thank you all for your hard work out there, he started saying, but then stopped because he saw it too. And that kind of acknowledged that it was real, that it was important, because someone had come in from outside and seen it too. And that someone being Father was significant, because Father was irritated by fantasies. He once threw our camping tent in the dumpster in the alley because he thought we were telling ghost stories inside of it.

And he did his best to ruin this too, by explaining it, like maybe it was magnetic currents under the earth, and wasn't today the vernal equinox or something. Winnie said it might be a pil-pul-poltergeist. Father frowned and Mother said to hush, we were frightening Agatha, and she pulled Agatha in close to her chest. Agatha didn't look scared though. She looked like someone had told a joke she didn't get.

Then the screws started spelling out words in cursive, like I had learned to do in school earlier that year. But the screws didn't seem interested in communication. Just in how words felt to write. DISARRAY. COMBOBULATE. RHETORIC. IGNATIOUS. PLUM.

Mother wondered if it was God. Agatha said no, it was screws.

It got dark and Mother put a leftover casserole in the oven, stepping carefully around the dancing screws like she was afraid they'd crawl up her pant leg. We draped a blanket over the dining room chairs and laid on sleeping bags underneath. Father sat under there with us, which felt special. He wouldn't do things like that, on a normal day. The screws frittered from one corner of the room to another. They vibrated on the perimeter of the kitchen, all in unison, then scurried away to another corner. They reminded me of the golden retriever puppies my teacher had brought into class last year. They didn't have a plan. They just wanted to sniff around. They were just excited to be alive.

When Mother went to pull the casserole out, the screws jittered up real close to her socks all sudden-like, and she screamed and dropped the dish and our dinner splatted hotly against the floor. Then the screws swarmed the gooey mess. We all heard a gurgling sound, and when the screws scattered, the casserole was gone.

They were hungry, Winnie said, like a question.

So Mother laid out sliced ham and the screws gobbled it up too, yum yum. At first the screws were skittish but the more meat Mother laid out, the bolder they got, until eventually they were tickling at her fingers, waiting for her to flip the container over. Winnie asked if she could feed them, and Agatha immediately said she wanted to as well. We all fed the screws, and the screws only whined for more.

Each time we fed them, they got closer and closer, until eventually they would climb up each of our arms. The vibrating felt funny. It felt exactly how you would think it would feel like. They wrapped up and around Winnie's arm, then moved to Agatha's, then moved to mine, like they were trying us on, too.

Eventually it got too late for Mother and Father to allow us to stay downstairs any longer. So we said goodnight to them and goodnight to the screws and goodnight to the rest of our house, which we wondered now if might also be alive, and we went to our bedrooms, whispering to each other about what this meant and how this would change our lives. Would we take care of the screws? Would we build a screw house in the backyard for the screws to live in? Would we bring them inside when it got cold in the winter, or when it thundered in the summer? We didn't want the screws to rust. Never mind the bookshelf. We could buy another bookshelf. The screws were family now.

But when we woke up, the bookshelf was assembled, and Father was reading the newspaper and drinking coffee, and Mother was putting ham sandwiches in plastic bags at the counter and sniffing. And the screws were all in their holes, holding up Mother's cookbooks, like they were originally intended to do.

Father said he and Mother had gone to bed shortly after us, and this was just how they'd found things when they woke up. We cried and shouted that that wasn't true, that Father had done this, like he always did when anything special happened. He said that was unfair and said we could walk to school ourselves that day, even though the sky was dark and the air felt wet. And we left, and it did rain, and the drops pounded our heads painfully, reminding us of the family we wished we had but didn't.

*Andrew Martin is a writer living in Indianapolis, Indiana. His work has appeared in McSweeney's Internet Tendency, Bright Wall/Dark Room, Reductress, and elsewhere.*



# SONYA

## BY CONOR BARNES

When her boyfriend shows up at the bowling alley he is drunk and has brought his mates. 80s pop is pounding in the background, reverberating across the alley into mush. He fake-whispers over it at her: “Sonya, spare lane for me and the lads?” She says quietly: “It’ll be ten dollars each.” He glowers at her but his friends are circling him and he pulls out a crumpled fifty and pushes it at Sonya. She blushes and unfolds it. Meanwhile, her boyfriend stares up the new girl in charge of the shoes. She is covered in tattoos like Sonya but she’s younger.

When they descend the stairs she turns to the shoe girl and apologizes. Before she can stop herself, she makes a tiny wish.

When his mates miss a pin he cackles and when he does he swears. When children gutter ball in the lane beside him he laughs at them. “Wanna roll one, baby?” he roars. She pretends to mishear him and waves. The beat of a drum machine rises in the background.

Three turns in his fingers get stuck.

He is pinned like a prisoner to his swirly green bowling ball. It shouldn’t be possible but there you have it. He can feel it pulling hungrily against his knuckles. He yells: “help me, hurry, hurry, hurry up, help me.” Around here it happens maybe once a week and it could just be a coincidence. Sonya isn’t hurrying. She is watching.

His mates are circling him again. “Sonya, get this fucking thing off me.” He tries to lift it but it is like lead. He yanks and it comes out of the dispenser but it only pulls him to the ground. The music is still playing and absurd snatches of vocals about love and comfort

surface above the noise of the bowlers, who are just now stopping to watch. The girl next to Sonya walks slowly to the manager's office. The manager is trying to write next week's schedule. Usually he gets Sonya to do it but tonight he feels ambitious.

Sonya thinks it is good that there is a soundtrack to what is happening below her but does not know why she thinks that. She feels a feeling she has never felt before when she hears the wood crack under the leaden stone. Her boyfriend yelps. It sinks further into the wood and Sonya realizes it is getting heavier by the minute. This makes sense to her.

The manager takes one look then goes back into his office to call the fire department. The friends are pulling the boyfriend. He is yelling at them to get off, stop, he'll lose his fingers. One part of Sonya thinks it is unreasonable for him to hope to retain his fingers. His hand is through the wood, up to his wrist. It sinks very gradually and he screams. The wooden splinters are dragging against his palm and wrist and she sees blood jump out of the hole onto the glossy wood.

Then the bowling ball stops. It has hit the concrete.

Sonya thinks about it and concludes that once it breaks through the concrete the bowling ball will move quickly through the black earth underneath, and she isn't sure what will happen to her boyfriend after that. This is when she walks down to their lane, and squats next to him.

His eyes narrow. "You did something."

Sonya shakes her head. "I just wished you'd go away." She sees how splotchy-red his entire forearm has become with the pressure.

"Well wish it to stop."

Sonya shrugs. Around them she can hear the squish and tap of bowling ball shoes running as parents rush their children out of the building.

"Look, I know I'm an asshole sometimes. But if I lose my hand, you're worse."

The friends nod.

One friend: It is true. Vengeance distorts the soul.

Another friend: Yes. And mercy redeems it.

Sonya: I'm telling you. I'm not doing this.

There is a dreadful sound from below like nails on a chalkboard yet so low they can only feel it in their chests.

Sonya: Why are we even talking about my soul? How am I the problem?

The friends: You should be grateful. The chance to transform is a beautiful opportunity.

Sonya: And if I refuse?

The friends: You will transform one way or another.

Somebody mercifully turns off the music. Sonya turns to survey the silent bowling alley. Her manager is outside to welcome the fire department. The remaining families are huddled together on the far wall, holding each other, watching. The girl in charge of the shoes is staring like a mask.

Sonya: No.

Sonya: Wish it yourself.

She walks out. When she gets in her car she starts to shake. The night sky is a dead blue. She drives towards her apartment but then she keeps going. She drives until she falls asleep, around seven in the morning. When she wakes up she decides to go a little farther. She crosses the border easily. It will be years before the border guards do anything other than wave people through. A day later, she arrives at a little Canadian town. She gets a job as a cleaner at a motel. Around that time the bowling ball reaches the earth's core. It is the heaviest thing on the planet. It will never melt. When Sonya closes her eyes, she can see it glowing below her, a tiny white dot, screaming.

*Conor Barnes is a Canadian writer living in Halifax. His fiction has been published in White Wall Review, Potato Soup Journal, and Literally Stories. His poetry has been published in Modern Haiku, Frogpond, and Puddles of Sky Press.*



# THE COMMUTER

BY LATOYA JORDAN

That morning Johnna had one goal: ace the interview. She had a reasonable explanation for the one-year resume gap: “I took a brief break for my family, but I’m excited to focus on my career again.” All week she practiced saying it to the mirror after brushing her teeth. Before she left the apartment, she nursed Ella and pumped her other side so she wouldn’t be distracted by engorged breasts during the interview. She prepped a backup subway route in case the trains were a mess. She had a wrinkle-free shirt in her briefcase purse for a quick change if she got too sweaty. But she never planned on getting stuck in a tunnel.

Five minutes after the train jolted to a stop, only garbled words from the conductor. Ten minutes in, train windows were opened in search of cooling relief, but tunnel air was just as humid. A three-piece suited man stood on a seat with his phone out the window in search of a magical bar of service. She wondered how late she’d be. She couldn’t be late.

At the 15-minute mark, shouting and shoving matches erupted over a teenager lying across two seats, musty armpits pressing into faces, loud music booming out of headphones. Two guys pushed each other because one guy’s fixie wheel kept bumping the other’s leg. Foreheads dripped, faces flushed, shirts clung to backs. Spittle and sweat flew. A chorus of curses, teeth sucks, and complaints became a buzz growing louder with every expletive. *Shit*, she thought. The cushion time she’d built into her commute was gone. Her chance for a triumphant return to work dwindled with every minute of the delay. It took 20 applications before she was invited to an interview. She stared out the door windows. The reflections of her fellow straphangers’ distorted, snarled faces stared back. Would she make it off the train in one piece? She closed her eyes and took deep breaths, trying to not let their anger infect her.

A subway preacher held his Bible in the air and screamed, “Sheep without a shepherd! Believe in Jesus Christ and you’ll be saved.”

A sprinkle of amens and shut ups; he kept shouting. Thirty minutes into the delay, two men wearing orange vests and hardhats clipped to their backpacks took bandannas



out of their pockets and wrapped one around the preacher's mouth, the other around his wrists, and sat him on the floor against the doors.

"Hallelujah, bitch," the construction worker with the ponytail said. Scattered applause and laughter rang out. The preacher didn't put up a fight; he read the small Bible in his hands without a word.

The buzzing voices returned to a lull. Then a baby started crying. For 10 minutes the baby screamed blood curdling give-me-food-right-now cries while its mother shushed and rocked it up and down. Johnna's right breast leaked into the nursing pad.

"Lady, shut your fucking baby up!" someone yelled.

Mmhms echoed in agreement. The passengers surrounding the young mother were circling vultures, waiting to tear her apart. Johnna *excuse me, excuse me'd* her way through until she got to the mother. "Do you have formula or food for the baby?" she asked.

Before the train stopped, the woman walked through the car speaking broken English, holding an empty coffee cup out for money, "Please, my baby." She'd smooth flyaways from her disheveled dark ponytail as people shoved coins and crumpled dollar bills into the cup.

"I'm his aunt," the woman leaned in to whisper in perfect English. "I babysit him, but sometimes I bring him out to make a few extra bucks. I forgot his milk."

Johnna wanted to text her babysitter. Could she be on a different train line, hustling Ella's one-year-old cuteness for cash?

"I'm so sorry," the aunt whispered as she gave Johnna her seat and handed her the baby. She only offered to nurse him to prevent a riot. "I didn't think we'd be on the train this long. My sister is going to murder me."

Johnna smiled down at the baby, his long eyelashes wet with tears. He was five or six months old; his body light in her arms compared to Ella's. Her heart didn't warm burst like he was hers, but her breasts strained against her bra like a plant reaching for the sun. As the baby wrapped his pink mouth around her areola, the contrast of olive skin against brown made her feel like a modern-day wet nurse. She hoped she wasn't offending her ancestors.

She usually watched Ella, TV, or scrolled social media while nursing but with a strange baby her brain took the opportunity to berate her: *You're not ready to rejoin the working world. You're not ready to leave Ella. You guys have money. You're on a budget. Stop being selfish. You took a year off and you've gone soft. You shouldn't try to move up the ladder. Why do you think you can be a director? You're better suited to manage a home, not a department of 45.*

She read subway ads to distract herself and spotted a familiar black and white postcard tucked into the ad holder. *Layana, Spiritual Consultant. One Free Question by Phone.* What would she ask Layana? She whispered questions to the baby's brown curls: *Should I go back to work? Will I be a good director? Can I juggle being a mom and having a demanding job? Should I find a 9 to 5 with no demands outside those hours?* The baby whimpered in response.

Once sated, he fell asleep. Johnna tucked a finger inside the corner of his mouth to break the seal. She handed him back to his aunt.

"He looks so peaceful now. Thank you so much. I think you saved my life," the aunt said as she strapped the baby into the carrier. "I'm in college. Studying acting. School's

so expensive. I figure this subway thing gets me acting experience plus money. My sister pays shit to babysit.”

The aunt spoke like they were in a confessional and she expected Johnna to give her penance. “What kind of person uses their nephew to make money? I’m a bad aunt, a bad sister, and a con.”

Johnna wrapped an arm around her. Warm teardrops on her breast made her realize she hadn’t re-buttoned her blouse. Without thinking, she tipped the aunt’s head down. The aunt looked confused and shook her head no. “Drink,” Johnna said again and the aunt leaned down to her breast. When the tingling let-down sensation began and her milk flowed, the aunt sighed against her.

Johnna’s only thought was how content Ella and the train baby were after nursing. She bet her milk could provide the forgiveness the aunt hungered for. During her breastfeeding class, Johnna learned how breast milk adapted to babies’ needs: when they were sick it changed to fight infection, when they had growth spurts, it provided more calories.

A tall man with long braids standing nearby said, “Yoooooo, we got moms gone wild on this train,” and started recording them. The straphangers immediately surrounding them gawked, though a few shrugged and checked their phones for bars. Some passengers craned their necks but couldn’t catch a glimpse through the crowd. The aunt drank until absolution filled her. Johnna leaned her sleeping body against the seat.

Two of the responsibilities for the Director of Training & Development job she was supposed to be interviewing for were “building and maintaining relationships” and “creative thinking.” Though the position was a stretch from previously managing new employee trainings, Johnna knew she could oversee the individual and collective needs of her team if given the opportunity. She considered this a real-world test. Her team was pissed off, sweaty New Yorkers crammed in a car with broken A/C and no cell service. She would be the “out of the box thinker” the company was looking for and her milk would provide each rider with what they needed. She’d always produced an abundance of milk and had even donated extra to moms in her neighborhood Facebook group. She felt like she could feed an army.

She one-arm hugged the girl hyperventilating about missing a Consumer Behavior final. “Drink.” The girl drank herself to stillness. Johnna knew when the girl woke up, she’d get off the train, go straight to her advisor, and change her major. She’d chosen marketing to rebel against her parents’ lifelong demand for pre-med but her secret desire was to be a psychiatrist.

The tall man with the long braids yelled, “That lady got some magic titties!”

Maybe it was magic, Johnna thought, or maybe it was showing initiative and managing a crisis. As she approached the subway preacher, he tried to scoot away but there was nowhere to go with his back against the doors. She untied the bandanna over his mouth and he yelled, “Jezebel!” But as she untied his wrists, the overhead lighting created a soft glow around her head. He whispered, “And Mary said, ‘Behold, I am the servant of the Lord.’” She cradled him as he put his lips to her breast.

Passengers lined up. Johnna was in tune with her team and understood each of their cries. They were on the verge of exploding; they were seeking relief from the rat race and anxiety of being trapped. They wanted to suckle, to be held, to dream again. She held them in her arms, comforted them, supported them. The suited manspreader had a

vision of his body, warm and tightly wrapped in a muslin blanket. The man with glazed donut crumbs on his chin saw himself apologizing to his ex. The woman wearing slacks and sneakers needed the confidence to quit working as a secretary for the douchebag accountant and his grabby-handed partner and grow her part-time virtual assistant business. When they were done feeding, she'd rest them in seats, hook her arms under their armpits and lie them down on the floor or against doors and poles.

The tall man with the braids went last but asked for a selfie together first. He kneeled in front of her to feed. For him, her milk became permission to rest from the hustle of making mixtapes, YouTube, and TikTok videos. She pushed his body back gently and he landed on a soft pile of sleeping bodies. She grabbed his phone from his pocket and deleted the photos and videos he took of her, not wanting to end up in the local tabloids with headlines like, *Milked!* or *Boob-tube*. She'd look him up a few months later to discover he was living out his original dream of internet comedy and no longer making clickbait.

By the end of the 1.5-hour delay, Johnna nursed 157 souls. She buttoned her blouse to the sounds of coos and snores. Was it mass hysteria? No, it was good leadership. Leading a team of 45 would be a piece of cake.

A transit employee opened the door between cars, almost tripping over a cuddle of people on the floor. "The fuck happened here?" he said.

Johnna smoothed her shirt and shrugged, "They fell asleep waiting for help."

"Lady, you don't gotta lie. The fuck kinda drugs y'all taking?" he said loudly. Then quieter, "You a dealer?" She shrugged again.

"Ok, lady. You gotta walk through the train and exit through the first car in the station. Go ahead, I gotta stay and try to get these fools up." To his walkie talkie he said, "We gotta situation here, get EMS, get NYPD."

As she walked through the empty cars, Johnna swung from pole to pole, like she did as a child pretending to be an acrobat. She wasn't worried about the missed interview. She knew they'd grant her another and she'd shine. The breeze from her body caused a black and white paper to flutter down. She stepped on it. She had no more questions for Layana.

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