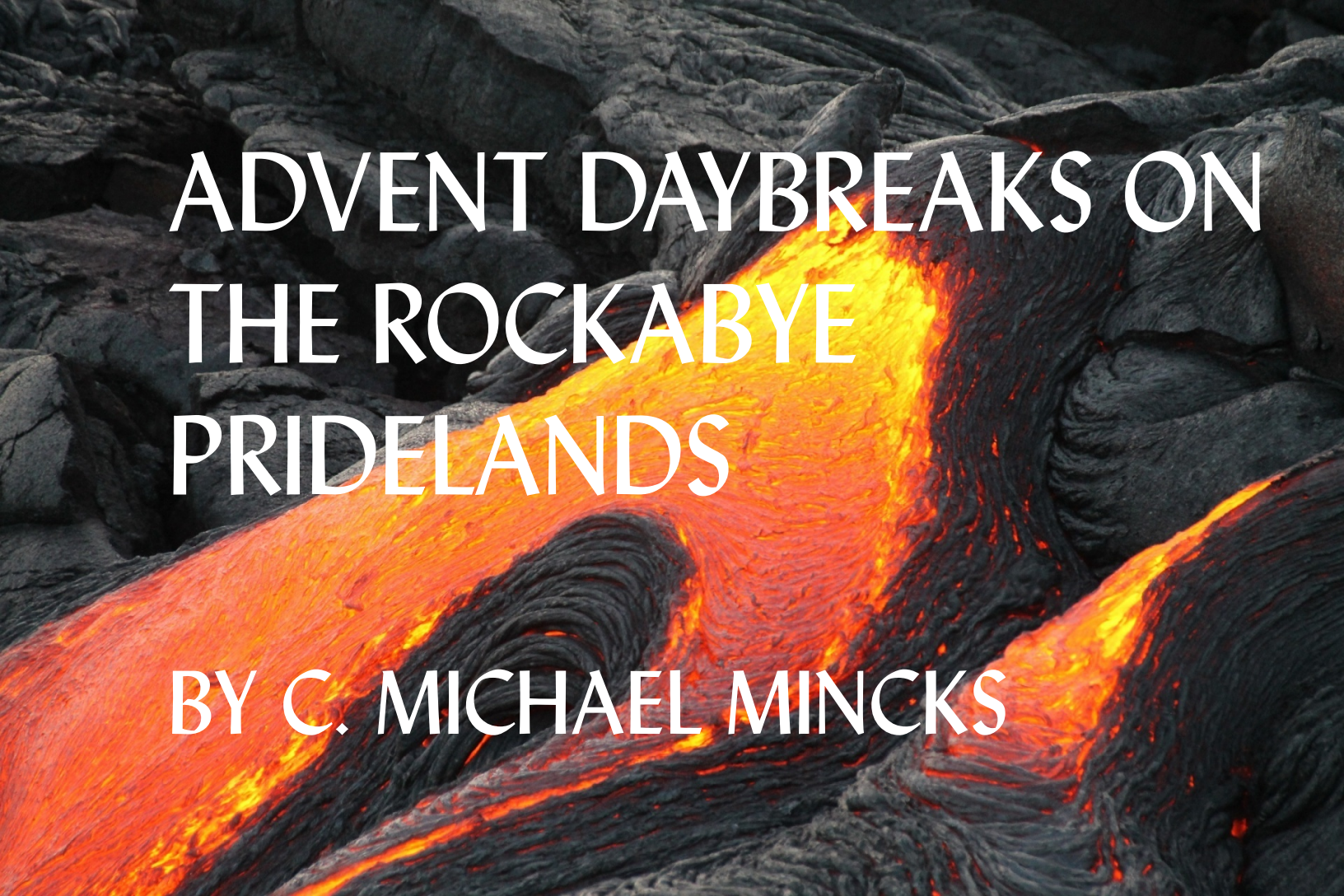




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ADVENT DAYBREAKS ON THE ROCKABYE PRIDELANDS

BY C. MICHAEL MINCKS

We honeymooned on the Sun. The shuttle that brought us there did not land so much as it melted around us. Like a foil candy wrapper peeled away. We found footing on a floor of photons, their constant bombardment a waterbed of nails undulating under our sandals. We held hands with interlocked fingers and crab-walked so not to puncture the surface tension of that non-Newtonian solar pudding. Our hands got sunburns, or maybe at that point it was fair to just call them burns. All the water in our bodies sweated out until we shrank like sponges and felt the blood in our veins dry up into red pigment powder. When we reached the sunspot upon which sat Sol's Hostel, the valet scooped us up with a snow shovel. I said, "Get much snow out here?" And he said no.

#

On the Sun, all the floors are concave glass, and all the ceilings are solar panels. It's altogether different when natural light comes from beneath instead of overhead. People can't bend their heads low, because they'll burn out their retinas. They can only walk with their heads held high. It changes their attitude. Appreciate the potted plants bolted upside-down above them, how the ferns photosynthesize fresh light nanoseconds from the source, not the eight-minute-aged shine they receive back home, old, cold, like something store-bought then placed in the vacuum-sealed refrigerator of the solar

system. The Sun is the Santa of space. It comes down the carbon-choked chimney of the atmosphere and leaves its gifts.

#

When we got to the room, we saw that the hands we'd been holding had been grafted together by the heat. At 27 million degrees, humans turn to glabrous glue. It's one of those things that should have been obvious. Once, after seven months of dating, we went for a beach weekend and forgot towels. How does someone forget they'll be wet at the ocean? Moreover, how do two people forget? This time, we brought what we thought necessary. Tubs of sunblock to bathe in. Sunglasses to wear at night. Nothing to establish boundaries between selves, though. So we stood over the sink with a pair of clippers looking for the thinnest sections of epidermis to snip without nicking veins. We managed to separate the palms, but it wasn't until we got to the digits that we realized our ring fingers had blended together absolutely. Our wedding rings, too, had sunk into the flesh. Only their sizable diamonds poked out from under the knuckle. One of us, I think it was you, did not mind this state of affairs: two became one, was that not the vow we made? Yet the other thought, *spiritually, yes, but spiritually!* And if I remember thinking it, then it must have been me. Except we both know now that's not necessarily the case.

#

The morning was the noon was the night. The concierge taught us to tell time by what continent was visible on Earth through the telescope. We went to a yoga class. The instructor guided us through their modified sun salutation: a simple toe touch. We went to brunch. The cook came out of the kitchen balancing an egg on a spoon. He tripped and it cracked on our plate where it instantly cooked itself sunny-side-up. The cook smiled: just a hoot they played on the newcomers.

#

Another thing about eggs: remember how the travel agent called in an OB-GYN before we signed all the waivers? She gave a demonstration. She showed us a handful of sparrow eggs. She opened a big plastic casket shaped like a uterus and put one inside. Then she lit a Bunsen burner underneath and looked at her wristwatch for time. After some time passed, she killed the gas and opened the womb. She pulled the egg out and pinched it between her fingers until crushed yellow-white slime spurted out the sides. We nodded. Then she traced a line up the fallopian tubes from the uterus to two pouches on either side. She unzipped them and put the rest of the eggs inside. She lit the burner again. After some time, she turned the nozzle off again, opened the pouches, placed all the eggs on the table, and slammed them with her clipboard. When she lifted it up, shell parts fell away from meaty yolk curdles. We nodded again. They brought out the waivers to sign.

#

We made sun angels over a particularly lambent acre of plasma. We imagined the way that our bodies blocked the light. Maybe somewhere on Earth there was a shadow the size of a country in our shapes, so vast you could only maybe see it from an airplane or a satellite. We thought about the people we cast in darkness. Our bodies took the blue out of their sky. With each swipe of the arms we painted it back then thinned it away again.

#

When we grew bored of that, we tried to gather fluffy balls of miasma and roll them around to make a sunman. It didn't quite work. Orbs we packed flashed and blasted like soupcon supernovae. Which naturally led us to the conclusion that we should have a sunball fight. But we couldn't, because we were still fused at the hand. We could juggle. Badly. Besides, the diamonds had by then dribbled down into our skeletons and reinforced the bones to be nearly unbreakable even if we wanted the operation. Assuming there was an operation for this kind of thing. It would probably be like snapping a wishbone: you could separate it, but only one person would end up with the big side — the wish. We argued, but we could not go separate ways to cool off. Before we left Earth, one of our fathers, either yours or mine, had advised us, "Don't let the Sun go down on your anger." At the time it was funny.

#

A gondolier in a fiberglass flak jacket rowed us through the canal of a coronal hole. Solar wind picked up from below and buoyed the boat spaceward. By now our arms had fused up to the shoulder, and we could both feel the magnetic fields around us trafficking the iron in our blood up and down veins and capillaries like forgetful mice in mazes. Ferric filings piped into the vena amoris of our shared ring finger as into a metallurgist's mold, and we acted like it didn't matter. I flipped through the pamphlet the concierge gave us.

"Says here, the Sun's a yellow dwarf star. Think it gets picked on by bigger stars?"

You flicked me on the nose with your free hand. Your finger came away with a stretchy, melted part of my nose. "I don't think stars are sizeist. Or colorist." You looked over our shared shoulder and pointed out a blurb on the next page about binary star systems. "Look at that. Even stars shack up together."

And I thought it was so absolvent of you to say that, to believe that we were astrometrically wed and our barycenter was in the funnels of our fingerprint whorlpools, that I didn't tell you about the part where one star can reach into the other's lobe, pick at it like hors d'oeuvres, and fling the clean, trash toothpicks away.

#

We slalomed down a solar flare in a bobsleigh shaped like a parasol. Its prominence arced a thousand miles into space and then splashed back into the burning surface. It was a pulsing neuron, a pimple, a picture of a mountain at dawn with the mountain snipped out. Waves rippled up its rib, waves you could surf if you had a board. But we rode the ski lift to the top. We looked through spectroscopic ski goggles at all the blazing loops over the landscape.

In the lift, you sketched the sunscape. “I know I seem calm right now, but I’m shitting myself. Because everything we can see from here is literally bigger than 500 Earths. People are always talking about how small they feel in the universe but right now I feel supermassive.”

“Like a black hole?”

“Like I’m part of the Sun now, or the Sun is gum stuck to my shoe, and if I started walking around, I’d drag it around behind me and smear it across the cosmos.”

“Maybe something I’d do is — well you see how all these flares look like loops? — well I’d wrap my arms around them.”

“Hug the Sun.”

“I’d just swing it around, all sling, all David and Goliath, and just — well I’d throw it at the Earth. Burn it up.”

“That’s good, that’s killer. You should wait until the planets are aligned...”

“Bowl them over.”

“Yeah.”

“In a row.”

“Yeah.”

You started crying. I bit my tongue. I bit *through* my tongue, it was so soft, like fondue. The lift operator ushered us out and fit us one on top of the other in the sled. They pushed us over the edge.

#

On the last night, we went to a water vineyard. It looked the same as the inner tubing of a flugelhorn, all pipes and tubes and sliders and valves that vacuumed in distorted orange-flavored quarks. An enormous glass bulb rested atop the structure like an onion. The sort of thing somebody might imagine if they pictured a supervillain's lair on the Sun. The tubes harvested hydrogen and oxygen through their bell-ends and circulated them into the glass chamber, where they collided and ignited and exploded like fireworks. And we stood beneath the bulb and watched as the flames became molecules, turning from fire into the clearest rain, like shiny mica flakes. The droplets poured down from the cloud of fire and gathered in a basin. The demonstrator first pressed the tongue of a water cooler to fill two paper cones. A thousand dollars a cup. Supply and demand. Then they asked if we wanted to shower in the water and we said yes. They guided us into a crammed stall and asked us to remove our clothes. We had to use scissors to remove the sleeve of our shared arm. Then they started the flow. We knew it was scalding, hundreds of thousands of degrees, and yet it felt like ice. I watched as it matted your hair to your skin. I tried to brush it out of your eyes but it sank into your skin and swirled itself in like marble cake. You did the same to me, and we fingerpainted each other into new forms. We stretched flesh and compressed it. We chiseled and touched-up and shaded. We drew mustaches and boogers and goofy glasses on one another. We giggled like kids in art class. The demonstrator throttled the water supply and told us to get out. In the limo back to the BnB, we locked eyes and knew that night we would be doing the one thing they told us to do under no circumstances.

#

Breasts swelled like microwaved marshmallows between our squashing graham cracker bodies. One gelatinous genital poured into another in the way a custard fills a pastry. When we kissed, our lips melted into a waxy seal so no air entered or escaped. We thrust and gyrated. It wasn't even sex, not really. It wasn't pleasurable or romantic. It was what we wanted and what everyone wants. It was a kneading, a complete integration of the doughs of our flesh. We were a loaf; we were aloof. We wondered what would be left. If our bodies would still function or if room service would find a six-foot log of blood, bone, hair, and meat when they came to evict us. We scrubbed our foreheads together until the skin was shredded and our skulls were ground to dust. We plunged our brains into each other. Grey matter trickled from one body into another up the creviced wrinkles. Nodes and synapses overlapped. Neural networks cast their tangled netting over each other. Words we'd never seen or heard and memories we'd never experienced took up habitation. We started to forget which of us was the husband and which was the wife. Our emotions bonded covalently such that we felt the love from the other as innately as we felt the love for the other. We formed a proton-proton chain reaction. We were children of the Sun, formed from a zodiacal cloud of extraterrestrial excrement that once upon a time clumped and made a planet with people who made people who made us. This was us gravitating back to the source so that we might become the mother and father of planets. Or not.

#

Just for one last moment, before we're inextricable, let me hold onto this. This final spark in the grossness. There is something especially effusive about being separate. It means I can tell you, you are the most incredible, the most wonderful, the most oh-my-god-how-can-you-be-real person. It means I can still tell you something you don't know. That we'd have to stay here a month in Earth days to experience one Sun day. That our stay here was only a snack break in the Sun's schedule. That in 5 billion years, when it has slurped up every last drop of its hydrogen milkshake, it will slide right along to the helium malt and grow until everything we've ever known is taken back into its embrace. That I'd love you for eternity despite all this. It means I can dream up something pretentiously poetic to say to you and surprise you with it: *You are my synodic cynosure*. Ah — that's it. I can feel your heart racing.

C. Michael Mincks is an emerging fabulist writer from Richmond, Virginia, where they play in the indie rock band Judge Grumble. Other oddities have been published in Taco Bell Quarterly and Great Ape Journal. Find them on Twitter @KerfMerf



BEACH FESTIVAL

BY LAURA VINCENT

Beach Festival said the newspaper ad. My sister ran her finger over the list of acts and prodded my upper arm.

“We simply have to go,” she said. I agreed, rubbing the sore spot where she’d jabbed me. Summer arrived like a pan of water boiled dry, leaving only a scorch mark. The sun made us startled and prickling for a fight, but too tired and woozy from sweating out our final electrolytes to act on it. A horrid combination. Limp yet bristling, and ineffectual either way.

Beach Festival, said the gleaming corflute sign, *right this way*. The tide approached the shore with cautious licks. We saw the festival in the distance, its loose edges, the hot air muffling the noise of bodies moving against each other.

My sister told me to open my mouth. She pressed a pinch of dust against my tongue with her fingers. Metallic and gritty.

“It’s actually sand.” She cracked up, licking her palm. She kept lifting the neon pink elastic waistband of her bike shorts away from her skin without noticing she was doing it, a red indent left below on her belly. The iridescent plastic peak of her visor cast a variegated glow over her face. My dark blue sundress looked cool when my sister wore

it, and boring on me. I liked the way its sunflower-printed fabric swung around without touching my body, allowing me to exist secretly underneath it. Our General Admission lanyards bounced against our chests.

“I can’t wait to see h o l y w a v e,” said my sister, digging her fingers into my wrist and pulling me further into the crowd. “I can’t wait to see PAAAAARKs, I can’t wait to see TVMBL3W33D, I can’t wait to see Slender Veins, I can’t wait to see Tiny Tiny Tiny Pussy, you know, those farmers from Taurangaruru who went viral when they dropped that drum and bass track featuring samples of the cattle noises.” I could no longer hear the words over the noise of the people but I could tell she was inventing these names as she went along. She always got this look on her face when she was about to make a stupid joke that went on forever — a giddy smile, eye contact skating around the room.

A tall woman leaving the crowd bumped into me, my head hitting her shoulder and our lanyards tangling as mine looped through hers. My sister pulled me away and I shook my wrist to loosen her grip, the cord chafing my neck.

“I’m sorry, my bad.” My forehead throbbed but you have to say sorry first in these situations, whether or not it’s your fault.

The woman was older than me with a strong nose and light green eyes beneath heavy brows, the sort of intense features that make everything you do seem interesting.

“It’s like when I was a kid, and we went fishing on a school trip, and me and this boy in my class both got our hooks in the same catfish, and there’s a photo of us both holding it, which is so weird, like, why would a bunch of five year olds go fishing on a school trip, right?”

Our fingers met to unwind the lanyards, our bodies bumped closer to each other by the crowd. I wanted to stand there, leaning on her cool bare arms, as though she was a window I could press my hot forehead against, a wet stone in my mouth. A man stood behind her, watching us.

“I’m going to take it off,” she said at last, laughter cracking her voice, my catfish story no longer hanging unclaimed.

“C’mon.” The man behind her tapped her shoulder.

“Come ON,” echoed my sister, hopping from one foot to the other beside me. The woman ducked her head out from her lanyard and eased the two apart.

“I’m sorry too.” She handed me back my lanyard. “Enjoyyyy the Beach Festival!” She said the last two words in a high pitched, croaky voice, her eyes rolling from side to side, as if she didn’t even want to be here and assumed I felt the same.

The man with her stared at me in a way I couldn't place. Motivated and appraising, yet also looking past me.

"Enjoyyy the Beach Festival!" I tried to match her tone of voice so she knew I'd heard and understood. My sister tugged me away, the tangled lanyard forgotten, weaving us closer to the stage.

"Her lanyard said something different to ours," I said. "General Access instead of General Admission."

"Whatever." My sister didn't care if people glared at her as she guided us around their bodies. I kept my eyes down low, avoiding their displeasure.

"Maybe she's in one of those bands, y'know...Glass...Pig?"

"Good try," my sister said. "But leave the humour to me, yeah."

"Beach Festival!" boomed the man on stage into his microphone. He wore a straw hat and a t-shirt with a picture of a mustache on it.

"Beach Festival!" we yelled in response.

"Fuck me." My sister pointed at the band walking on stage. "It's that girl you got tangled with." So it was. Their music was twinkly and distorted and it washed over me, kneading the crowd like bread dough, lifting and crushing, surging forwards and ebbing back. The woman with the light green eyes was staring right at me as she murmured into the microphone. The man with her in the crowd was on stage with her, lurching over a guitar, smacking his head against the amp over and over as the audience cheered him on.

Beach Festival toilets this way said another gleaming corflute sign. The sun was high and mean and I needed to run cold water over my wrists.

"Look," said my sister. "VIP entrance over here. Let's sneak in and use their bathrooms, I bet they're way nicer. We might run into someone from Dove Bidet. Or GLVVMS. Or Baby Valium. Or Gnarl's Manson. Or Wax Anus."

"Enough, I get it, you're funny." I beckoned her towards the regular-person bathrooms.

The fence cordoning off the VIP area was hip height, and easily moved to allow us to sidle in.

“We look like VIPs,” reasoned my sister. “Well, I do, and we deserve to piss just as much as the upper class.” With no apparent security presence, our break-in went unnoticed.

“Fuck me! There's the lead singer of George Clooney Sobbing In An Airplane Terminal As World Hunger Mounts Ever Higher! I don't need to use the bathroom anymore, I'm gonna go see if I can talk to him. Maybe convince him to be my boyfriend.” My sister ran towards a lanky young man in dungarees squinting in confusion, perhaps at the sun, perhaps at everything in general.

“Beach Festival! Beach Festival!” The crowd's chanting grew faint as I entered the corridor to the VIP bathrooms. I leaned my face against the cold tiled wall. The darkness was a relief. A place where the temperature couldn't find me.

Sweat glued my forehead to the wall and left a shiny mark and two handprints when I pushed myself away. The long dark corridor ended with a slash of light creeping out from underneath a door.

I pushed the door and there, on the blue tiled floor, was the green-eyed woman and the lurching man.

Both naked from the waist down. Fucking.

“We're Wax Anus and we're delighted to be here,” was the last thing I heard over the loudspeaker before the door swung shut and the sound faded altogether.

The woman straddled the man, holding his torso in place with her long hands, hips sliding wetly back and forth, head thrown towards the ceiling.

She lowered her head and met my eyes. Her mouth was covered in blood. Dark and thick and smeared across her chin, like a child's finger painting, like stucco, like impasto.

Blood coated her hands.

The man was dead.

Guileless and friendly, the woman smiled at me. As though I couldn't see his deceased cock still disappearing inside her. As though she were about to inform me that the hand-dryer was out of order, or the third cubicle didn't lock properly.

She rose to one knee and then stood with a bony click. My knees crack too. The man lolled sideways between her legs on the ground, bled out and no longer useful.

The woman smoothed her skirt back over her hips, over the parts of her more naked in their quick flash of visibility than her entire bare arms or shins or ankles had been all day.

Ready and calm, she walked towards me.

I was stuck. Forcibly paused by the horror of it all. Unable to swivel and leave, or to move forwards with intent. Her bloody fingers appeared around my neck with impressive deliberacy.

"I want to kill you, and fuck your dead body," she rasped.

My mind raced, weird and blank, and out of polite habit I almost thanked her for being honest and direct. What's so bad about fucking a dead body anyway? It's already dead. Would I, myself, be above it? Who am I to stand in the way? She frowned at me.

"Where did you go?" The fluorescent light made the blood on her chin appear indigo. "What are you thinking about? Why aren't you fighting back?"

Because it didn't occur to me?

Perhaps what she's offering stacks up compared to what I've got planned?

"Beach Festival! Beach Festival! Beach Fucking Festival!" chanted my sister, kicking open the door into the bathroom, swinging her lanyard around her wrist, greeting the tableau of myself, the green-eyed woman choking me, and the dead, half-naked man on the floor.

"Fuck me!" said my sister, and without pausing she bullwhipped the green-eyed woman with her lanyard. I swear the woman looked like she was holding back laughter at my sister's farcical swatting.

A buzzing noise in my head increased with every passing second of the woman's fingers pressing on my soft throat. My sister's cheeks glowed with sweat. The pair of us, like

stuffed roast pigs at a buffet. It hurt too much to look at my sister while the woman was treating me like this, and I didn't have anything clever to try and communicate with her.

"Maybe I'm going to die." I spat the words out, short and serrated.

"To think, I really enjoyed your set," said my sister.

I dropped my head back, exposing my neck further. My body sagged against the woman's grip. I couldn't place what it was I saw in her eyes as she sunk out of view — bewilderment? Irritation? Fear?

"Hey! Look at me! Focus!" the woman snapped her fingers in front of my nose, the release in pressure allowing me to gulp in the thick recycled bathroom air.

My sister clasped her lanyard in both hands and hooked it under the green-eyed woman's chin, pulling her hard, choking her, drawing the ends across each other tight, straining, hauling the life out of this woman who wanted to do the same to me. Strangely, the woman didn't fight my sister. Her green eyes bulged, still looking at me, shot with red veins, and her clicking knees buckled, and when my sister released the lanyard she slumped across the man on the floor.

"Beach Festival, Beach Festival" chanted the crowd in the distance.

Beach Festival, said the ad. Back at our house, my sister ran her finger over the newspaper.

"We Will Kill You And Fuck Your Corpse. Fuck me, it's right there. I thought it was a band name. I told all my friends I was looking forward to them." She looked at me, and wiped at the blood on her chin with her hand. It didn't budge.

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BLOOM

BY RICHARD HELMLING

The bed had cost nearly three thousand dollars. And, as he had watched the delivery service assemble the enormous drawered understructure, he'd felt completely vindicated in his objection that if they ever had to move it, it would be a nightmare.

But Jonie had loved it. She loved, at eight, being so far off the ground, with the under-mattress storage propping the bed up so high that she had to scramble up the side of the thing, using drawer handles as steps.

He remembered having told her during her teenage years, several times, that she was stuck with it — even though she'd never actually said she wanted to replace it.

Now, of course, she hardly ever used it. She spent most of the year away at school and, with grad school just around the corner, it probably wouldn't even feel like her bed any longer.

The thought got him a little misty eyed as he swept the room. She'd just left the day before, back to California for summer classes. As he clanked the dustpan against the

baseboards, he noticed that the line wasn't straight. One of his wife's counters to his "immovable object" complaints had been that the bed was modular and if they ever had to, they could move it in parts. Now it seemed like the drawers on the right side had gotten pushed in about an inch too far on one end. They weren't really attached and just slid into place under the base support for the mattress, so it was easy enough to fix — once you got the mattress itself out of the way and could reach inside.

He really wondered if that inch difference at the base of the bed was worth the trouble, but, sighing, he decided to fix it.

He huffed as he flipped the mattress up and off to the side so he could reach down in and push the back of the drawer assembly out a bit.

One of the things about the bed, though, was that in the center, between the two drawer assemblies, there was a hollow. A large empty space for dust bunnies with just a few slats above it to brace the mattress.

It was — or always had been — wasted space. But now something was in there. Something quite large.

It took him quite a while to process what he was seeing. The object was oblong, over five feet in length, and wrapped in thick plastic. It made the shapes and colors inside a bit hard to identify. But slowly, in improbable and discreet revelations, he started to piece it together. A smudge of dark brown was dried blood. A gelatinous blob was a swollen eye. The blue bunting was a shirt. And the whole thing was a human body.

Still too shocked to begin to wonder where or how this had come to be here, he leaned in to study it more closely. He couldn't really tell if the body had belonged to a man or a woman. The clothing, discolored and obscured by the plastic, really didn't give it away, and the face was distended and bloated to be sure. The plastic seemed not to be just wrapped around the body, but vacuum sealed to it.

Academically, he wondered for a moment about its decomposition. There certainly was no odor, so the plastic seal must be very soundly airtight. But didn't bodies release a lot of gas after death? Wouldn't that swell this industrial shrink wrap up like a balloon? Or did whoever had put the body there drain the fluids or otherwise prepare the body for disposal like this?

Whoever? he thought again and stood up straight.

He looked around his daughter's childhood room. There was still a pony statue on one book shelf and another was filled with awards from science fairs and dance recitals.

How long had this body been in this room? She'd spent two weeks back home with them. Was *she* responsible for it being here?

He stepped around the question about whether the body had been murdered, as that raised other, even more uncomfortable questions.

If it wasn't his daughter...then who? His wife? He didn't think she had enough unaccounted-for time to have been able to smuggle this body into the house. His daughter, though, had spent a lot of evenings out with "friends" during her visit, doing "stuff." The "stuff" had sometimes stretched into the night long after he and his wife had gone to bed. Could the "stuff" have led to...this?

He tried to imagine that he had put it there. Tried to talk himself into believing he'd had some psychotic break and just couldn't remember. But that didn't work. And he doubted the police would accept it.

He stood staring at it for several moments more. There was an unsteady feeling to his pulse. He couldn't name it, the feeling.

In the end, he pushed the drawer assembly, lining it up perfectly with the bed frame (but trying not to actually touch the plastic mass) and then pulled the mattress back into place and tidied up the sheets.

He finished sweeping and, on his way out, closed the door carefully, gently behind him.

Richard Helmling is a teacher and writer living and working in El Paso, Texas. His work has been featured in Corner Club Press, Black Heart Magazine, Arsenic Lobster, the Rio Grande Review, The Drabble, and Fiction Brigade. Visit him at www.helmling.com.



TOSCANINI IN THE PLAGUE YEAR

BY JESSICA HATCH

The palm fronds that lined the drive to House Chanfrau looked like decapitations. Viola startled awake at the sight, her first clear image of Argentina since landing, but she tamped down her misgivings. It wasn't every December, much less during a pandemic, that she got to travel somewhere warm to assistant-conduct a music festival.

COVID had not been good to symphony conductors. With no orchestras to corral, a precarious industry grew ever more topsy-turvy. So Viola had done her due diligence after her agent booked the festival — lobotomy by cotton swab, negative results, quarantine in the apartment she shared with her partner, Nina, before heading out. She would get what she needed from Argentina if it killed her.

Being managed meant Viola didn't have to organize her schedule. She showed up when and where her agent told her to, focused solely on conducting the way a puppeteer manipulated strings, pulling music from the bows and reeds of a great, human instrument.

She was grateful. Classical music was a brutal business even before you threw in a plague. It was who you knew more than what, and a festival could get her apprenticed to a big-name conductor. Nina didn't like her traveling during the pandemic, but

opportunities like Fiesta Músical didn't come around often. "It's for my art," Viola had said, which felt stupid then and now, but was true.

As she pulled up to the mansion, she saw a man in his fifties standing under a portico: Herr Maestro Chanfrau. He was dashing enough, with mischievous eyes and a birthmark blotched across one cheek. Its lopsidedness was endearing.

It must have been jetlag, the heads in trees, that lowered Viola's guard. "But — how?" she blurted out before apologizing. "My agent said you studied under Toscanini. You're so young; he must've been mistaken."

"Oh," Chanfrau said. "I'm a vampire."

He stared so matter-of-factly she almost believed him. Then he led her in a great gust of laughter. "Won't you come in — Fraulein Stephenson, was it?" He placed a hand on the small of her back. "I'm pleased to have you here. The first two nights of my salon will be chamber music; you'll conduct our finale on Thursday."

"Hopefully my festival schedule won't conflict with your program."

He paused. "My dear, you don't know? It's canceled! Another casualty of this pandemic. But you'd come so far I agreed to keep you on here for private concerts."

Viola tried not to look surprised. She'd have a talk with her agent later, but a wealthy patron, private audiences with the industry's upper crust... This was how careers were made. She swallowed, adapted.

"That would be lovely, I'm sure."

Chanfrau beamed. "My servants will deposit your bags in your room. Get cleaned up and join the party."

At six o'clock, travel fug washed from her skin, Viola joined Chanfrau's guests for cocktails. She felt admittedly uncomfortable. More people than she'd seen in a year amassed in the shoebox of a room, and she was the only one wearing a mask.

"Why do you have that on?" said a beering countess. When Viola answered, she grew visibly bored. "Bah. Seen one plague, seen 'em all. I'm glad you're staying in the house, though, where it's safe. The city philharmonic's conductor fell sick just before opera season. *Aïda*, you know it?"

“Of course.”

“Stick around long enough, maybe you can step in as understudy.”

At the end of the hall that held her room was a tall door, behind which she would conduct Thursday’s program. Viola considered the monolith, and did her best not to think of Bluebeard. After unearthing her laptop, she Zoomed with Nina from her bed.

“How’s Buenos Aires?” Nina asked. “How’s this, what’d you say his name was? Goebbels?”

“Not funny. I haven’t seen much of the city, and my host’s name is Chanfrau. Not Goebbels.”

“You know those bloodsuckers absconded to South America after the war. It’s historical fact.”

“I hardly think my host is a hundred-year-old Nazi.”

“Yeah, but neo-Nazis? The White House is full of them.”

Viola was forming her rebuttal when there was a thump outside, as if a pair of heavy feet had stopped at her door. Her pulse jumped into her throat. “Hello?” she called. “This room is occupied.”

Nina asked what was going on, and Viola muted her so she could think straight. There was only silence from the hall — then a slow, keening scrape, a rustling at the knob. Viola told Nina she would have to call her back and gave her love before signing off. She could not bring herself to peek into the hallway. With a view of the door and the lamp left on, her fear eventually fell away, and Viola slept.

In Chanfrau’s office the following morning, Viola explained the program she had constructed for the festival. He said little, but when she finished, he collected the Bartok score, the most European of the lot, and dropped it in his wastebasket.

“Music is an absolute art,” he said. “A god in its own right. Wouldn’t you agree that Bach, Beethoven, Wagner cannot be topped by mongrel riffraff?”

“With respect, maestro, people are questioning the Eurocentricity of classical music. If more young people see themselves —”

He slid Wagner’s *Siegfried Idyll* onto the desk. “Be that as it may, equality in music muddies the beauty of the divine. My friends — including philharmonic board members — would appreciate it if you performed their requested program.”

A ball gag of anger jammed into her throat. Eventually she remembered how to breathe around it, and responded to his indulgent grin. “I’ll think about it.”

She then stormed to her room to call her agent, though she hung up before they could connect. She was being nonsensical. Star conductors worked with patrons they disagreed with; that was show business. Her agent had set this up, and Chanfrau was generous to let her stay in his home. She’d conduct his Wagnerian dirges, and when he spring-boarded her onto the world stage, she’d present a program that actually resembled its audience.

Her phone pinged. Nina. *You never called back. Hope everything’s okay.*

Then: *I did some digging: Chanfrau’s opa? Come home!!* Attached was a screenshot of a middle-aged man shaking hands with a colleague. Imperial eagles flew on tapestries behind them, and swastikas glared from their arms. Though hard to make out in black and white, a birthmark spilled across the first man’s cheek.

Viola tried to focus on her rehearsal, but, like a rat in a box with a python, she could feel Chanfrau’s eyes boring into the mammal-soft nape of her neck.

“*Sehr gut*, Fraulein,” he said afterward. “You have natural talent.”

“I don’t get it,” she feigned ignorance, hoping the world abided by the same rules as always. “Why focus on German music? It feels uncomfortably like the Third Reich, and that ended about eighty years ago.”

“Indeed, it was some time ago. I was not then as I am now.”

Her mind boggled at the facts presented so casually to her, ones about preternaturally long life going to those who deserved it least. She wondered if the philharmonic’s conductor wasn’t languishing behind the Bluebeard door.

“Don’t take it so hard, *liebschen*,” he said. “I plan to offer you something similar, despite our differences, if you go through with tomorrow. So, I hope we can forgive new friends their old weaknesses.”

He pawed for her hand, and the gorge rose in her throat.

At six o’clock that evening, Viola learned a horrible truth.

“Have you seen any other concerts?” a guest asked her. “I believe there’s one more night of the Fiesta Músical if not.”

The room lurched, and Viola’s cognac tasted violently of copper and salt. She had tolerated these bigots under the presumption there was no festival, no way besides hobnobbing with them to climb the ladder. She’d been so desperate for their approval that she hadn’t confirmed the truth. Or — she thought of Chanfrau’s jokes — what they told the truth about.

She hurtled, meteoric, to her room. This time she did call her agent, demanding answers. He must have scored quite a paycheck to sell her out. The signal dropped, without warning, into grave silence. She shrieked in frustration and tried again. The call could not be completed as dialed.

Her call to Nina didn’t go through either, but she hoped her message would vibrate across the equator. “I’ve been so stupid,” she whispered. “I ignored my better judgments because they didn’t make sense. I ignored your misgivings, and now it’s too late.”

Viola expected her door to be locked, but she was able to slip downstairs with her carry-on. She did not look out the town car’s rearview mirror, hoped she never saw House Chanfrau again. The silent driver took her past venue after outdoor concert venue, the sounds of tangos and mazurkas, of socially distanced crowds chanting along. She wept at her willful stupidity.

At the airport, her credit cards were declined, even the one for emergencies; her passport case was empty. As the cards turned to so much worthless plastic and she struggled to ignore the gate agent’s pulse, which pounded in their hand, Viola realized some webs are woven greater than we imagine.

She could not fly home. She knew no one in this city besides Chanfrau, and he had closed the iron maiden of her options slowly around her. She was a dreadful, entitled girl who had wanted to be promoted by a white supremacist, then to defy him. Perhaps

she still could. But if she agreed, what would be left? An eternity of self-loathing — “for my art,” she’d say, and feel just as wretched as she had weeks ago.

But it was an eternity in which she could take care of Nina. Amassing wealth, Viola eventually wouldn’t need scum like Chanfrau; she could be alone with her music. She rolled down the window, numb, and watched as her last sunset kissed her forearm.

Chanfrau was waiting when she returned. At her pale-green nod, he ushered her upstairs, to the Bluebeard door and in.

With her head full of vampires and war criminals, a conductor’s stand looked maddeningly normal. The phrase *fresh meat* sprang to mind as Chanfrau led her to the altar — no, podium — and two dozen audience nostrils flared at her scent.

“We’ll welcome you if you wish it,” Chanfrau said. “This is your way of answering our invitation.”

When she took the baton, Viola felt as though puppet strings cinched her wrists, screwed like a wine key into her skull to shake it *yes* or *no* at the behest of demons who lived and died and walked among her. She resisted as long as her rabbit heart could, yet the strings tugged her arms, raising them aloft. The first down beat destroyed her. Someone not-Viola caressed the opening swell of the *Siegfried Idyll*. A polite cough behind; then ice-cold hands lifted her from the plinth, into the air, the orchestra playing without her help, and though she struggled and kicked and screamed, the teeth of first one and then many greeted her.

The festival had been a success. Not as grand as past years, but it would survive. Shame they’d had to replace the assistant conductor last minute. Her agent had had no answers, only apologies.

The evening after the festival, a man removed letters from a marquis and applied new ones advertising Verdi’s *Aïda*.

He did not see the woman watch him from a café across the plaza. She saw his heart beat in his neck, and her stomach roiled in self-revulsion.

A camarero came to take her order, but she declined a menu. She looked up at the final letter sliding into place. Her chest sucked in useless air, trembled her shoulders

and corpse-cold hands until the orchestra of her body was sawing in motion, and she had to call the waiter back to aid in lighting her cigarette.

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