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Egress

By: Sasha Krioutchkova

"So we meet again, my heartache."

"Hmph. Got serious fast, huh?" Steel dimples. Yours. One of which triangulates to the tilted eyebrow and a sideways, downward smirk. Also yours.

Well you are my ghoulish host. My carnival. "Yah. At least we're not in the Ukraine."

Should I tell you a bit about myself? They say I'm a quiet explosion, a self-contained burst of everything. A crooked smile — a kind of inner *lawl* at the bus stop where no one else knows.

We settle down into opposite tips of the lounge, a charcoal bean-bag chair each. Stay and rest and the pen ticks a full litter of time.

"So, what is going on down there, in the Ukraine?"

"Poetry is just as political." I strain through burbling tar.

The room quakes of insects shifting into delirium: you with a book and me à la laptop. Does lesbian romance make sense in the dust of a TV newsroom? It's not a Snickers bar you bite into for soap and useless pain and grit; but a presence of blue daisies with one rose, or maybe a million B&W sketched 3D flowers — hover close enough: tenderness. Possibly ours.

Quiver into sunlight: a white where the potentiality of flies and movement is negligible. Nothing fleeting and everything stuck into snow mould and asphalt matte. Billions of one-inch-wide pearl blue parachutes from the ceiling — miniature openness, floating remnants of the warm willow breeze into the window and the dress resting on the deltoid muscle and clavicle boulders. Slow-motion drops of the music icicles would make in a few months, touching and cracking.

You're posing. Admiring Mouré's theorized theories from behind the cover. "Have you noticed how much we're always constructing the world around us, through language?"

"Have you — ever fucked with clunky, political sweet-talk?" I roll each phrase. "Or loud and brash with cunts and cocks?" Puff the questions out like smoking rings from a Cuban cigar, and smirk beyond James Dean. Beyond Brian Kinney. "Of course we do." Purposeful.

"Wait. Are you —"

"Straight? Naw." *But if you wanna get me to gay, you should try anyway. Please try.* Bones jump out but tether, and the ratchety chains against the shiver of water's edge creak my viscera closed.

"Oh." You stare at the translation of Mouré into narrative.

Enough of hunching over a laptop, and I push back into the suave. "Her writing, eh? It's a process. A revolution."

"Writing's always a revolution." A quip. Still nose in book.

Eyes, snakes on the ready, I "nah."

You look up. You finally look up and the eyelashes open wide, trying for me through what I can only assume is a stale caffeine blur.

"It's always a revolution. *No one belongs here more than you.* [My' zuld] instead of [miss led']. Susan Holbrook. An English professor dying of cancer. Alone. You get to squat across Europe with punks and read graphic novels about rat dreamers —"

"OK. It can be that," I admit. Your tenor and skinny wrists bathe me; perspiration of summer roads nuzzles between us. And. "But so is sex. Sex is mind-boggling, seditious."

Your forehead grows more bumps than Lewis Carroll's caterpillar and you're sideways-down, again. "Iguessitcanbe."

Slick, sucking in my cheeks: bite inside, release and circle the tongue ring ball along the treacheries and dunes, tongue tip to rattles of the roof. "*It could be.*" I press myself, my gaze into the crown of your head and flip my knees up on the chair: hugging their soft shells, clasping my history paper between fingerpads — but looking at you blunt.

"How'd you get into TV?"

Vibrations glower from your bean bag chair. "Like Spiderman."

"Oh? You and George Clooney both."

"Yeh! Wait ..."

"Um. It's OK. I — stalked you a bit. Online, obviously, so it's not really stalking it's research."

"Notwithstanding how problematic that is —"

"I didn't even find anything. Well, nothing new."

You sit and stare, stay and stare. Hands frozen to both sides of your prostrating library treasure.

"Look. I just had to know. Whether you're gorgeous or a jackass, that is. Um, soul gorgeous. And soul jackass. I guess. It didn't really help."

A silence still. The parachutes haven't popped or landed. On every desk contracts and scripts, leaves waiting for something more important. Resolution or romance, goddess forbid.

I blink hard into my 2007 dumbphone. "Shit."

"What?"

"I'm late for class." Press silver to turn off laptop. Gather coats, mason jar chai, printer's vomit — and the extra bag with food. Shut down. Come on.

Rolling onto the balls of my feet, I watch the final message wince into reflection. On the bounce down to heels, sweep the screen closed and slip it into the pack ready to swallow whole.

Zip. Swing the straps onto my cranky lower back. Squeeze oversized possessions. Fragments of you flutter between motions. Keep eyes down. Turn away. Escape between the narrow couch and table to the door —

Yet. I hear autumn leaves, the crackle of oil, dry beans shimmering down my spine. Cold in the back of my neck transliterates me into a rainstick full of pebbles.

"Skip your class." You wait but fingers sharpen their hold on my fleshed C2–5 vertebrae.

The parachutes, rising, explode into citrine crystals. A hint of coral on the windowsill, echo of a setting sun.

You walk toward the newsroom's front door. Shut it, slow at the end. The tuck of wood. Turn to me and click yourself into the oak. "This isn't a staring contest."

Jerk. Just leave. I shake my head into awake, unburden from the multiple weights of academia. Walk straight toward you and stop half a metre from the door — just under a foot from the matter of things.

Feet shoulder width apart. Deep efforts in the chest and imagine the water glass filling up and down with each inhale, exhale. Move, at least, the lungs through the fog of enveloping body.

You shift from between my hips and the door without a single touch to share. Walk to the computer on the other end of our plywood box. "Let's do this properly."

The music slinks heavy cotton and raspberry tobacco vapour under this low ceiling. I would've preferred *Дороги Любви* or *Песню о далёкой Родине*. But I couldn't expect Canadian women to know Soviet soundtracks. Could I. Simone and Cohen would suffice. Birch sap is for homeland.

There is the hand offered and the spinning between sharp pillars and desks. *Rearrange my words. Fuck.*

Breaths short of cello and Tchaikovsky percussion. More than one body/our body/sticky clanged-chipped against the grey TV-DL walls. Four object/subject wrists held in multiples. Yelps rife with PolitBuro jargon. Second World War stubble played amidst nails

pinning into hanging fat

and nipples'n

sheltered bones. Yes.

After I cum and you don't, a whisper:

'ere is so much

street lampslump

ing urban blanke-

-X

tigress a decree

to the asphalt.

And I wish you could have been Juliana Spahr, that we had fed rivulets and streams and that there was nothing wrong with our bunkers. I wish the shed would shut and there would be pure; instead only the lock, the combination.

Excerpt
from: **The Thin Line**

By: Rateb Ahmed

Yesterday I found myself pondering a question that probably started many a serial killer off on their merry path: "Whom do I hate most?" Before you cast me amongst the reprobate, though, please know that I confronted this question not as a result of any murderous impulses, but due to a crude strategy suggested during a game of darts. Furthermore, you may dispel any concerns regarding potential mischief on my part in the knowledge that this question left me stymied. Sure there are people I dislike, some more than others. There's the 'friend' who stole my iPod during my freshman year. There's the fat guy at the gym who always tells me I need more muscle mass, especially if there are women nearby. There's my sister's boyfriend who, as I found out one unfortunate night, makes more noise than she does during sex. And my sister is far from noiseless herself whilst engaged in the act. Come to think of it, I am not overly fond of her either. But do I *hate* any of these people? Would the mental image of any of their faces superimposed upon a varicolored surface improve my aim? No, probably not. In all honesty, though, my lack of rancor towards anyone is probably more indicative of indolence than an admirable moral stature. For hating someone takes a certain emotional and psychological investment that would not appeal to me.

That is not to say I am incapable of fostering antipathy. Certain phenomena, abstract concepts and inanimate objects inspire a deep aversion within me. Here, off the top of my head, is a list of things I hate: fade-outs, the smell and/or the taste of sausages, stories and movies that include some version of the line "if this were a story/movie then so-and-so would happen..." and the sound of tomorrow turning into today.

1. Starting with fade-outs

It was a Wednesday afternoon. Luis had just beaten me at another game of pool in his garage — the dilapidated state of his table gives him an advantage, or so I like to maintain.

"So, guess who I've got a date with this Friday?" I asked as Luis racked the balls.

Luis frowned then drew back from the table and smiled. "Ah, so you finally agreed to go out with Pregnant Jack."

My neighbour, Darrell, often invites me to go clubbing with him. His unkempt appearance gives him a resemblance to one Jack Sparrow from the movies. Only, Darrell is far skinnier than this movie character and so Luis christened him Pregnant Jack. According to Luis this is an example of irony.

I ignored Luis's comment. "You remember one of the girls from Mark's party — Cecilia's friend, with a tattoo of a flaming torch on her arm?"

Luis raised an eyebrow at me. "That girl was hot, man." I smiled.

"Huh. Well done." Luis straightened from the edge of the table and frowned at me again. "There must have been four other guys hitting on her that night, including Tim. And you're the one who interested her?"

Women seem to find Tim more appealing than the average man. We believe this allure arises from some combination of his Irish accent and his slab-like chest.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," I said. "But ... we, uh, got to talking and found we shared certain interests."

"Really? You're not the boldest when it comes to approaching women." Luis tilted his head. "I know you wouldn't have asked her out with lots of people around. And that was a pretty crowded party. How'd you get her to yourself?"

"Well, uh, you guys were all playing beer pong. And after I'd whined somewhat about Mark's shitty music she and I agreed we needed some good, old-fashioned rock..."

Luis rolled his eyes — he tends to favor 'house music,' whatever that is.

"...So I put on Hendrix's 'Little Wing' which I assured her was the pinnacle of rock..."

The cue-ball clacked into the 10 ball sending the 10 into the far corner pocket before back-spinning to position itself behind the 14.

"...Then I told her the only thing I hated about the song was the way it faded out at the end just when the guitar solo kicks in which she agreed was woeful. So we, uh, went to Mark's laptop in his room and spent the next 20 minutes looking for the perfect live performance where the solo goes all the way to the end."

Luis chalked his cue and raised a mocking eyebrow. "Sounds romantic."

"Oh, screw you. I got a date with her, didn't I?"

Luis smiled. "Yes, yes. Kudos to you." He bent down to the table again. "So," he said as he readied another game-winning shot, "you got a date with this girl over Tim and the others cause you and she share certain weird opinions about songs?"

I shrugged.

Luis smiled. "How ironic."

Again, I refrained from commenting.

Luis knocked the last stripe into the corner pocket. "Oh, I heard this awesome joke the other day," he said, stretching up from the table. "So this guy is having sex with his wife, OK? He's thrusting back and forth, you know. Then he says to her, 'Honey, could you stretch your legs open a bit more?' So she does. Then he goes back to moving back and forth again for a minute or so. After which he says, 'Could you spread your legs apart a bit more?' His wife thinks this is a little strange, but she does so. Then he goes back to moving back and forward for a minute again before saying, 'Hun, could you spread your legs apart just a bit more, please?' Now his wife gets pissed. She yells, 'What's the matter with you?'"

In Adjectivabetical Order and Back Again

By: Blair Yoxall

Ivar Kreuger was **all-American** — **bolder** than his **childish** peers, all of whom he loved to swindle. He wore a **devilish** smirk with **exuberant** cheeks, which would curve after he'd sucker the funds from the **fruitless** follies at Monopoly High. Ivar had the idol's **green, hearty** eyes.

Ivar swaggered the **iguana** halls, overstepping the **jerky** lasses who smacked their tongues against **kissy** lips of **lovesick** companions. Ivar sneered down his **mousy** nose at the all the **nitpicky** bitches, the dweebs, the **pimpily-back** jocks in the halls. His loafers left a **quiet** clap on the **rugged** tile floor. He was **swift, tight** and **underachieved** — **virile** like carnivore on Wall Street.

"I got some'mm for you," Ivar said to Bernard. Bernard was busy sucking at a tootsie's face. Ivar licked his fingertips with his **wet** tongue. The hallway was **xeric** like a senior.

"What's that?" said Bernard through **yellow** lips.

"Got a bit of an investment."

"What kind of investment?"

"You know, Bernie, you're a **zealous** and **youthful** man, aren't you? You see, I got a friend who's making this cream for your skin. It'll take that **xanthous** tinge right off you. It's going to be the stuff of the future. I think it'll serve your wallet **well** to invest with me."

Bernard quivered his brow. "What do you think, Clara?" he said to the girl hanging from his hips, busy wiping spit off her **violet** chin. She's the teenager with the **ubiquitous** breasts half this **trendy-ass** school has seen.

"Don't be **stupid**, Bernie, think about it."

"How's it work?" Bernard asked.

"You know—" Ivar didn't know. He stalled, panicked. He slapped through his **ratty** memory, compartmentalizing, sorting, searching for the **quirkiest**, the **perfectest** lie to tell Bernard. "My business partner, Dona, the developer of the product, she's still working on it, but the stuff sinks into your skin and reverses the effects of sunlight and stuff. That's why we need your money, Bernie. We need to test it out a little before we sell it to you and your 'friend.' Then we'll both make lots of money, just like in the movies."

"I don't know, Bernie," said Clara. "What if it makes you all **orange**?"

"What if it doesn't work?"

"What if you don't make any money, Bernard?"

"How do I know it works?"

"What if it makes you **neurotic**?"

"We won't know any of that until you invest with Dona and me, and we get the capital for testing, Bernard. Just a \$100, that's all my partner and I need from you. Just a couple guys like you who give us \$100, and then we'll test the product. Then we'll all make money after this company gets bought out. Then, Bernie, then we're royals." Ivar was **mean, lawless, kingly** with his powers of persuasion. He was a god with money, with his **juvenile** investors.

"What the hell," said Bernard. Ivar felt **heroic**, wielding his accomplishments like a **giant** rapier from stone. Oh, the **fantastic** fortune that awaited him, he thought.

Bernard reached into his **elastic** wallet and placed five **dirty** \$20 notes in Ivar's hand.

"You've made a **capital** investment, my friend. Schoolhouse stocks are the future." Ivar clapped the money against the **back** side of his hand, smirking.

"Now which **astronomical** asshat is next?"

Excerpt
from: **Sing Quiet Voice**

By: Chris Kelly

The front door swung open and bounced against the wall behind, rattled as though kicked by an impatient foot. The stairs bore a cavalcade of footfall that terminated in a quick shuffle down the upstairs hall. The final slam of a door. Weight leapt off the floorboards, accepted readily by the old metal groan of Iris's bed frame.

Amelia stood at the sink in the kitchen and rested all her weight on the counter. Hands on opposite sides of the sink. Focused on the silky tickle of soap bubbles down her forearms. The hard ridge of the sink against her soft and wrinkled fingers. She put a hand on the tap, gripped and began to turn her wrist, but stopped before she loosed water.

She stepped back from the sink and wiped her hands on her threadbare shirt, soaked it through. Wiped her hands on her hips, on the thin film which covered her jeans. Wiped her forearms last. Took the strip of lace from her hair and wrapped it around her wrist. Turned away from the sink and looked down the hallway at the brightness let in.

The door still held faint traces of her mother's paint. Vestiges of an ill-conceived idea, born of a time that seemed harder than any other. The deep blue undercoat, the brash yellow of the five-pointed stars and crescent moon, the ghostly form of letters. Her mother's idea. She spent all that she could cobble together after rent on the paint, painted the door all day long. Amelia remembered her presentation, calling them all down the stairs to the door. Her sweeping arms, broad smile. Speckled with paint. *See, she said, now they'll all know.* Three words, descending vertically, marked the home. TAROT CARD PALM. Nestled within their simple night sky. How proud she was. How simple to drum up business she must have thought. Must have stared at the sunken eyes of her malnourished children and imagined them full, half-closed, drowsy even after over-large meals.

It took a week. A week before she spent the last of their money on paint thinner. A week of harassment, of names, of eggs and rocks thrown against the house. Of waking in the night, bolt through with terror, as the voices in the street laughed, kicked the door, called out. The neighbours of the other tenement, rife with the religion which demanded an end to occultists, would not stand such flagrance. It was no matter that they all knew, that some visited her mother for readings. They could not ignore the sign.

A week later her mother quietly brought home the thinner and applied it, her thick arms moved with purpose. But the thinner was of poor quality and reacted to the cheapness of the door. After drying in the mid-day sun the paint faded, but did not disappear, burned instead into the lower coat. This satiated the neighbours who strolled down for a look, perhaps even more than a whitewash. The remaining stars and moon stood eternal and burnished, and the house and its occupants would forever bear the mark.

Amelia traced her finger along the tail of a falling star. Tried to work a fingernail under the ridge of paint. She closed the door softly, darkened the house.

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Dirty said he didn't cry when he drew blood. Showed Slot and Jeremy in the morning, told them he didn't even make a noise. Held out his sausage forearm and turned his wrist upwards. Wiped the grin of satisfaction before they could look

back to his face. He said he burned the blade with a lighter he stole from his brother's dresser. Took a couple cigarettes too, for after.

Jeremy thought two of the cuts looked infected, and told this privately to Slot. When Carley later said the same thing to Dirty, Slot knew it to be true. Dirty's face snarled into a scowl after Carley spoke and he pushed Carley to the tenement's cracked concrete. Looked at Carley down there. Said he still had the lighter.

Slot swore off the lighter. His voice swollen at the point of pride. Checked around him and saw nothing but the blank arses of the tenements and their empty windows. Took out his own knife and held it aloft for a moment before he brought it down upon the meaty muscle at the top of his forearm. He was quick, barely breathed heavy. For a while after he stared at the strands of blood that tipped from the cuts as he opened and closed his hand, and he did not look as Jeremy took the knife from him.

Jeremy held the blade to his skin, tipped the weight from the tip to the haft and forced the knife into his skin with the sad motion of a single fiddler. One after another after another. He looked at Dirty, eager with the lighter, and allowed a sloppy cauterization, suffering twice so Slot could keep his pride.

Carley hesitated after Jeremy handed him the knife. He pressed the edge against the skin close to his wrist, then further up, on the outside of his arm, on the inside. Thought of the places and ways he saw on the rest of the boys in the gang. Too quickly Dirty let a stark nasal laugh, and waved his hand in dismissal. Leaned towards Carley, and looked at his face, waved his hand again. Laughed and claimed he knew it, knew it all along.

Dirty turned on his heel, turned his back to Carley, and casually glanced into the courtyard. He began to dance, shift his weight from hip to hip upon arched feet. Raised his voice to mock the tone of high society, much as he had a few days previous at the funeral procession. He pointed down the way to the advance of Old Miss Buttress Callaghan, making her way to Carley's house across from them. Dirty sashayed from side to side, held his hands wide, mimicked a looseness which was not in the dress that clung to her wide body. He bent to pick up a fallen chunk of brick and swore he'd knock that silly hat off. Hefted the brick in his palm eagerly. Slot and Jeremy stepped forward to watch, discussed angles and momentum.

Carley watched the old bat amble towards the front door. He could see her, cresting the steps, knocking on the door. Amelia on the other side. Amelia running down the stairs, collecting the old woman as she lay dazed, they both feeling about on the ground for her glasses and purse and hat. Amelia staring across the street. Seeing the knife. His hand. He saw her face, saw her hands.

He elected punishment instead, named the feeling as it ran flush through his body. He stared at the back of Dirty's head, raised his voice. Carley whimpered as the knife cut into his flesh.

Dirty spun. His eyes lit with malevolent glee. He cocked his head to the side and dropped the brick to the ground. Leered his wide and consuming smile towards Carley and blinked his eyes with an imagined coquettishness. Turned his voice upwards in a sing-song tone.

"Did you say something little girl?"

The Upside of Spilt Coffee

By: Dawn Muenchrath

It was shortly after 7:00 a.m. The sky started pink at the horizon, bleeding softly into grey overhead. Helen Dewey's tattered runners padded on the sidewalk as she walked through the sleepy neighbourhood. When she arrived at the bus stop for Route 22, she stopped. She stood by the sign with a backpack strapped over her shoulders and a paper cup clutched in her hand. Her breath materialized around her face in little white puffs.

Today was March 2. Today she turned 17.

It hit her suddenly as she took a window seat near the back of the bus, leaving her backpack to slump to the floor. Like the final adjustment of a lens, the unremarkable mediocrity of her life suddenly shifted into perfect focus. The seat felt harder than ever on her tailbone and its torn upholstery, revealing mustard yellow stuffing, had never been uglier. Even her mocha, sickeningly sweet, left the lingering bitterness of cheap coffee on her tongue.

The dullness of her reality was suddenly in unbearably sharp relief.

Today Helen turned 17 and not a single God-damn person cared.

As if the world was affirming this sentiment, the bus jolted to a stop presently, sloshing some of Helen's drink onto her jeans.

"Fuck," she said matter-of-factly.

And fuck you, old man, she added silently, watching the culprit as he hobbled down the aisle and had the nerve to sit beside her.

"Isn't it the job of the old and senile to spill on themselves?" he said, clasping his hands in his lap.

A rude remark was on the tip of Helen's tongue. But she stopped, and inexplicably her mouth twisted into something resembling a genuine smile.

With her finger she idly traced the brown continent-shaped spill on her pants. A genuine smile was playing at her lips. "The perpetually clumsy have licence to spill at any life stage," she said, catching his eye.

The old man chuckled. "Fair enough."

Helen looked away and there was a moment of silence, one that thickened as it stretched. Solidified. A polite interaction between two strangers on the bus had come to its close and Helen sensed the pair of them receding back into their respective worlds. The old man was a slight creature with tufty grey hair and large ears. His posture was hunched and he twiddled his thumbs in his lap, gazing absently in the direction of the driver. Helen appeared comparatively less relaxed, with her legs crossed and her right foot twitching incessantly. Still clasping the cursed drink, she was surreptitiously evaluating her new bus-mate out of the corner of her eye.

Then Helen heard herself speak, blurting out her first words a bit too loudly. "You know, I told him," she said, looking at the old man, "My boyfriend, I mean. I told him that this is exactly what would happen." She gestured to her pants, with a grin. "I told him it would spill. But he bought it for me anyway because today's my birthday, and he knows it's my favourite."

Strictly speaking, this was not true. First of all, Helen's boyfriend had not bought this beverage for her. She had, with her own money. Furthermore, she did not have a boyfriend.

"Ah, stubborn men." The old man smiled. "Well, Happy Birthday."

Helen reckoned this would be the most sincere thing she heard all day.

"What's the count?" he asked.

"Seventeen," she said. Adding after a moment: "My mom's been getting all sentimental lately that I'm not a kid anymore."

Her mother. She pictured her mother at Cameron's house and cringed. Admittedly, in the catalogue of her mother's lovers, there had been worse — far worse — than Cameron, but that still did not detract from the fact that he was a condescending prick. Helen imagined that he'd already left for work, but she pictured her mother still in his tacky bed, under his tacky sheets. She imagined her mother's long dark hair covering her face. She even imagined that her mother had left her hair like that because she was ashamed to be forty, vain and hopelessly vulnerable to the cheap lines of some jerk.

She said, "Every year, my mom makes me this great big chocolate layer cake, three layers, you know, with icing in between each. I expect she'll have it baking in the oven when I get home tonight."

Her mother might show up at home at 10 p.m. tonight with some compensatory KFC and the promise of a mother-daughter movie date that would never come to fruition.

The old man nodded, "Chocolate cake is good, but my favourite was always lemon meringue. That's what my wife would make for my birthdays, before ... well, before the doctor told me to get off the sweets."

Helen smiled. "That sounds nice. It takes talent to make a good meringue; I could never quite manage it. So where are you off to today?"

"Picking up some flowers. For my wife ... anniversary."

Edworthy Park shuddered past out the window. Helen watched the trees trembling like black skeletons in the breeze.

Then she stood up because it was her stop. "Well, she'll love them, I'm sure." She said, only just noticing that the old man's eyes were precisely the same shade of grey as the morning outside. "Have a good day."

The old man nodded, "Have a good birthday."

As Helen hopped onto the sidewalk, swinging her backpack back on her shoulder, her real life smugly returned to her. Her thoughts were already churning at the prospect of her math test at 9. She knew she wasn't prepared and the lovely, soulless Kellie Vance would surely beat her this time. Because as much as Helen wanted to think otherwise, *as much as she wanted to lie*, they were right. Helen Dewey was not an exception to the rule, not a math whiz, not a beloved daughter or girlfriend. She was poor and gawky with awful sneakers, and all she could hope for was to live up to the most modest of their expectations. To confirm the shallowest of their assumptions—

Ellie Cotter.

The name jumped into Helen's head, interrupting her thoughts. The Cotters, of course she remembered.

She remembered the funeral at the church across her street last March.

Today, March 2, would be the first-year anniversary.

Helen had stopped walking and people grumbled as they were forced to veer around her. After a moment, Helen checked her watch. She had about an hour. Maybe just long enough to learn how to solve second derivatives after all. Then she dug her hands into the pockets of her jacket, mentally adding up the change she felt there. She had about \$6.00.

Maybe just enough to buy a couple slices of lemon pie after that.

Excerpt
from: **The Quiet**

By: Ryan Drescher

He checked his wrist subconsciously. The small face set into his skin read 4:02 and 13 seconds. John tried to settle back into the rigid wooden chair provided as a courtesy to the staff of Time .Unltd. The plastic screen that hung on the grey cubicle wall in front of him flashed red once and issued an irritating beep. John returned his fingers to hover over the coloured squares that glowed on the surface of his desk. The light blinked again and he tapped the cyan square. The cursor jumped from one symmetrical icon to the next on the screen until the tip landed on the Calendar symbol.

He tapped the screen and the program sprang up. His finger found the file labelled Public Programming without his eyes pointing the icon out. Work schedules, lunch breaks, dinner hours and curfew were all in place — the important times for the next month. Occasionally a day was recorded as booked off. Jason Piraz from the Chinese place on the fourth level needed next Saturday off again. Third time in four months.

He highlighted the unprocessed request and a dialogue window popped up. He tapped the Deny box and the holiday booking disappeared. A text box trailed the dialogue box and he tapped autofill. A block of text filled the screen. He skimmed through the message, making sure the dates were correct and the computer-generated excuse would hold up, and then he sent the message.

The grey background of the cubicle wall melded with the screen, making the text more difficult to read than it should have been as he scanned the hundredth page of gridded schedules. He leaned in close, trying to double check one of the dates when a hand slammed onto his shoulder. He jolted in his seat.

Tom's deep laugh filled their section of the floor. A few heads poked out from their cubicles to investigate, their gazes boring holes through his body.

"You should've seen the look on your face, John! Best expression ever!" Tom's voice was even louder now, and a red bubble light on the ceiling clicked on. John watched one of the cameras rotate to face them.

"What do you want Tom? You are going to get us both in trouble with the Sleeper." As he said this, John cast his gaze at the blinding white wall opposite his cubicle. Behind an square, inset section of wall, the Sleeper was watching.

"Who gives a tit about the Sleeper? She can't do anything but give you a scolding."

"Yea, but that looks bad on your Weekly Report. A bad Weekly Report could mean..."

"Dick all. You need to loosen up a little, seriously. You could be shit ton of fun if you pulled that stick out of your ass."

John settled back into his chair, turning to face the screen, which beeped at him again. Before he managed to get back to work, the buzzer turned off and an equally annoying voice echoed through the white room. "Station 11094 and Station 11864, report to the Floor Office, 11094 and 11864, to the Floor Office."

John groaned and hauled himself out of the chair. Heads gophered over the tops of cubicle walls. Beady eyes trailed their path through the white maze. Screens starting beeping across the office, and one by one the gopher-heads went back to their work.

At the base of the far wall, John and Tom stepped onto a platform hovering an inch off the ground. The panel they stood on hissed and crept upwards, stopping level with, and right of, the inset square. A section of the wall slid open. Beyond, fake-oak panelled walls lined a hallway floored with red carpet. Wall lamps modelled after 19th-century oil lamps cast a dim glow in the space. A small plasti-wood table held an elegant pitcher that contained filtered water at the end of the hall.

John's socked feet sunk into the carpet. Almost quicksand was the only thought he concocted. The two men walked to the end of the hall and took the ninety degree corner, stopped by a wooden door. As they halted, a small light clicked on, scanning them before the door retreated into the wall.

The room beyond was even more dimly lit than the hallway. In one corner, a circular fluid-bed jiggled. Over top of the bed, a square patterned series of monitors observed every square nanometer of the Floor. Oak frames held images of the old mountains; the blue sky and white clouds stark against the rock's peak. A large wooden desk hulked in the middle of the floor facing them, the chair peeking over the top. The one-way window

behind the desk let in little of the white glow from the floor beyond, enough to cause faint white corona around the Sleeper's frame. A long ponytail of blond hair hung at shoulder length.

"I'm surprised at you 11094. I've never had to summon you to my office before."

"I apologize, ma'am. I was minding my own business when 11864 approached me. He tried to..."

"I saw what happened, 11094. You were distracted as much as 11864 provided a distraction."

John hung his head. Beside him, he could hear Tom rolling his eyes.

"11094, you've disappointed me. Please return to your station and resume your work. I expect all of the Calendars for your period coded, encrypted and posted by 4:45. That will leave you 15 minutes to review your account for the meeting tomorrow afternoon."

"The Smith Account, ma'am?"

"Yes. Now return to your desk, I must speak with 11864."

John performed a smooth bow and turned on his heel. The platform slid down to the Floor smoothly and John scurried through the labyrinth of cubicles. He settled himself into his chair and re-entered the Calendar. He dove into his work, moving swiftly through schedules and into the Events files; balls, galas, concerts and work schedules for every business on Level 4 and Level 6, Section H-3. He cast a glance at his wrist as he finished. It took him thirty-three minutes and forty-two seconds. His record time. He rubbed his fingers absently against the plastic protector that sat flush to his skin, cleaning off an imaginary patch of smudge on the hour number as he read over the final details for the main Events. Once he was satisfied, he closed the Calendar and opened up his personal files. Eight minutes and ten seconds ahead of schedule. He read through the Smith Account twice before his wrist ticked a warning. Five o'clock.

The pane of glass in front of him emitted a dull hum and the image John was staring at faded. His flat grey eyes and frame of brown hair stared back at him from the surface. John rose, and hundreds of heads popped up over the top of the polyester maze with him. He hadn't seen Tom return from the Floor Office. John weaved his way through the twisting pathways and stepped into the elevator. He stood patiently as the other half of the office joined him on the massive platform. Once the two gates, the height of John's knees, closed, the platform rose. Lines of steel piping and wiring streaked downwards, and occasionally a bright flash of orange from the maintenance lights blinded John. His shoulders bounced back and forth between the people around him.

The brakes slammed abruptly, and one of the new employees lost his footing. The herd moved off of the platform as a unit, silently stepping on each other's feet. The group entered a massive concrete garage. It had been designed to house the personal vehicles of Time's employee's, but since the War, the employees had moved into on-site housing. A hand gripped John's shoulder from behind, and Tom's body squeezed through the mob after his appendage.

"Hell of a day, eh?"

"Yes. What did the Sleeper say to you?"

"Nothing overly important. I closed the Ferguson account earlier, eh? Poor bastard decided to take a Surface-walk and the Brotherhood got him."

"What about the rest of the family?"

"Irrelevant. They don't have a Premium Account, so now that he is gone, they've been removed from the list."

"That is unfortunate. I hope they can make their way in the Calendar all right. Seriously, what did she say to you? You were up there quite a long time."

"You remember the day the power went down in the entire complex?"

"Of course."

"Remember what she said then?"

John watched the ground as he moved through the massive concrete room.

"The war changed a lot of things, John. Time isn't what it used to be."

John didn't respond; just cast his gaze forward as the steel blast door at the end of the garage clawed its disproportionate weight off the ground, retreating into the hole above the entryway.