

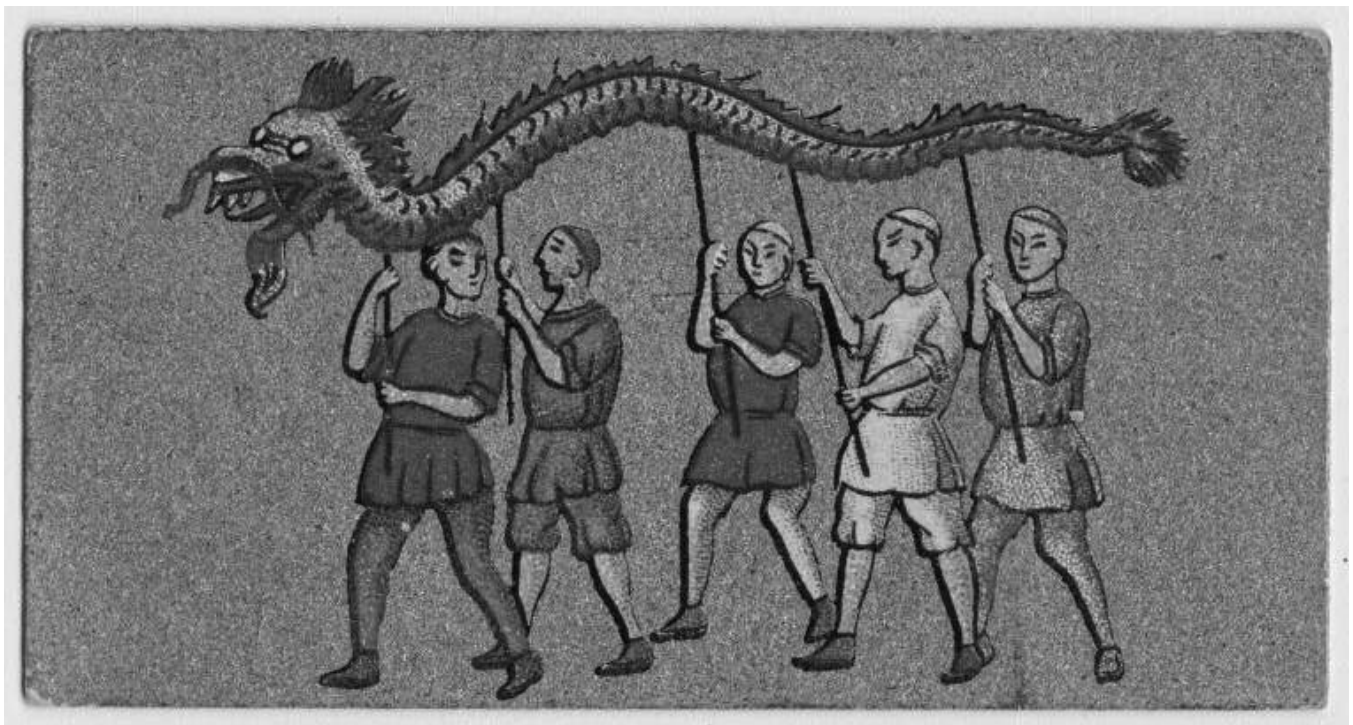
Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 5 Number 2

Page 1 – TRASH THE MYTH by Joseph Villers. Mr. Villers writes, “For what it’s worth, the first story I’ve written since my college days. I get my *Blotter* (our sister mag!) from the Reader’s Corner on Hillsborough. The last issue inspired me to give it another shot.” Ed. Note: keep it up, it’s working!

Page 6 – BUDAPEST VAMPIRE by Abhirup Dutta. Mr. Dutta was born in India and currently resides in California. When he doesn’t code, he blogs about solo-travel (<https://earlygrekick.com>), participates in Toastmasters, and events promoting children’s protection, immigration rights and neurodiversity. He is currently writing a longer pan-Asian medieval saga with themes of war-ptsd & lgbt-rights.

Page 14 – A BRIEF AND INCONSEQUENTIAL THREAD OF MULTIVERSE by Zack Carlstrom. Mr. Carlstrom writes, “I’m a queer writer living in New York City, but I’m originally from Illinois. A story of mine recently appeared on The NoSleep Podcast.”



“TRASH THE MYTH”

by JOSEPH VILLERS

“Would you please save your scraps for me?”

Blanca nodded, feeling annoyed. Peter did this almost every day they worded together. He wedged a bucket into her trashcan, wide mouth hungry for melon guts, carrot tops, egg shells, potato peels, moldy lettuce, so on, ad infinitum. Peter was tall and slight, but carried himself like a short, fat man. Permanently hunched, humble to a fault, he asked for garbage with eyes downcast. Mongolito, she thought, returning her attention to the cutting of Brussels Sprouts.

Peter returned to his work, his heart a smile; the worm population had trebled in a month. He had dutifully divided his bins and dug another pit in his off-time. His eyes were always open for leaf piles along the curbs, bags of grass clippings on Monday mornings. He dreamed of one day affording a mulching machine, which would open his world to the piles of fallen branches he always encountered, impotently.

One day, he thought, pushing another rack into the conveyer.

The haul was about average for a normal work day, perhaps thirty pounds in several buckets. I’ll feed them in a few days, he thought, the scraps will keep if I put them

in the shade.

He checked several of his worm bins, an after-work ritual which gave him great pleasure. Peter removed the lid of the Rubbermaid and gently peeled back the top layer of leaves. Manure worms writhed over partially digested strawberry tops and coffee grounds, tiny pink intestines pulsating with life. Peter replaced the leaves and sprinkled them with water from his can. Replacing the top, his mind turned to the new pit. He had dug it next to the shed, where the soil was very thin skin over hard red clay, interspersed with the metal trash and potsherds of a century. This soil needs my help, he had thought, the feeling like his heart exhaling a too-long held breath. Peter walked toward the pit now, his shoes off, as they almost always were when home, carefully watching his feet to avoid any yellow jackets returning to their sod holes for the evening.

Peter was twenty feet away when he glanced up at his destination and realized that something was wrong. Peter had dug the pit only yesterday, on a model he had read about: 3’ x 3’, a course of blocks below and two above. To start he had simply added a wheelbarrow of partially rotted fall leaves and several gallons of water from the well. From twenty feet he could see that the

leaves weren't there. There was only blackness.

Something was very wrong.

His feet started to run before he realized what his body was doing and he almost tripped. Coming up to the pit, Peter stared dumbly at 3' x 3' of fine, black loam. He had layered leaves here a foot deep. He couldn't see a single leaf. He got down on his knees and, trembling, sifted back the top inch. It was cool and moist to his fingertips and stuck to his skin like pure worm castings. But he could see no worms.

What did this?

Not willing to believe it, Peter decided upon an experiment. He gathered an armful of fallen sticks from beneath the pin oak nearby and sunk them into the pit, leveling the black mixture over the sticks until the surface was smooth.

Walking back to his bungalow, he stepped on a yellow jacket. It was as though the sting registered only with his foot, never reaching his brain.

His next day of work went by like a pleasant dream. His body did the work instinctively, his mind hovered somewhere far above the drop-ceiling.

Blanca brought a cart loaded with pots pans and utensils into the dish-pit, ready to be scrubbed. Peter, not speaking, eyes typically lowered, despoiled the cart silently and efficiently. There was a vacant look to Peter today, even more so than usual. She caught his eyes and noticed with a mild shock that they were smiling.

"You okay today, Peter?" she asked, looking concerned.

But Peter didn't hear. It must be a microbe, something I've never seen before. Something the world has never seen. An eater, a super-composter, light years faster than the diligent group effort of thousands of worms.

Slow down there, Peter, he thought. Wait to see the effect on those sticks.

After a pause of several moments, Blanca, insulted, imperiously pushed her cart from the pit. *Poor mongolito*, she thought. *He don't know nothing*.

Peter's hands handled the dishes with the effortless expertise of years of repetition. If the sticks are gone, we'll need an even bigger test, he thought, in awe of the thought of sticks composted in a single day. They were gone alright. Wherever he sifted, it was the same; the finest and blackest soil he had ever seen. All afternoon his mind had worked at what would be the right kind of test. He settled on something impossible. Next to the pit he had brought a bucket of trash from work, a motley assortment of plastics, Styrofoam cups, aluminum cans and sticky rubber gloves. On an impulse he had added a couple D batteries from his junk drawer. Peter sifted back the smooth top inch and spread the trash, delicately, reverently. It looked absurd, he thought. No way this could work. Peter brushed the soil over the trash until its shiny glint disappeared. He added more leaves and gave it a good watering, three or so gallons. What a joke, he told himself, but didn't laugh.

That night he hardly slept. If the impossible happened... but the impossible

can't happen. Still, if it did....

Who would he tell? Peter would have to tell somebody. Such a wonder-bug would change the world.

Around 3 am, Peter left the bed. It was useless. He felt perfectly rested. Energy flowed along his limbs and seemed to gather up and shoot out at the extremities. An unsummoned thought stopped him cold and a chill ran along the nape of his neck. What if the trash was gone?

His flashlight was already in his hand and he knew that six hours was not enough time but he was already under the pin oak, shivering in the warm summer's night air. His flashlight had glanced the pit from there and he stopped, feeling the world tilt from its base, his breath shallow and useless, the beginnings of a panic attack... The light had glanced off a smooth blankness. There were no leaves. Somehow he knew there would be no trash either.

Drawing courage from the old tree by his side, Peter began walking, confidently for him, toward the pit, though being careful not to point the light directly at his destination.

Peter was on his knees, the light from his little flashlight seemed to be swallowed by an immense, bottomless, toothless mouth. Had he discovered Hell?

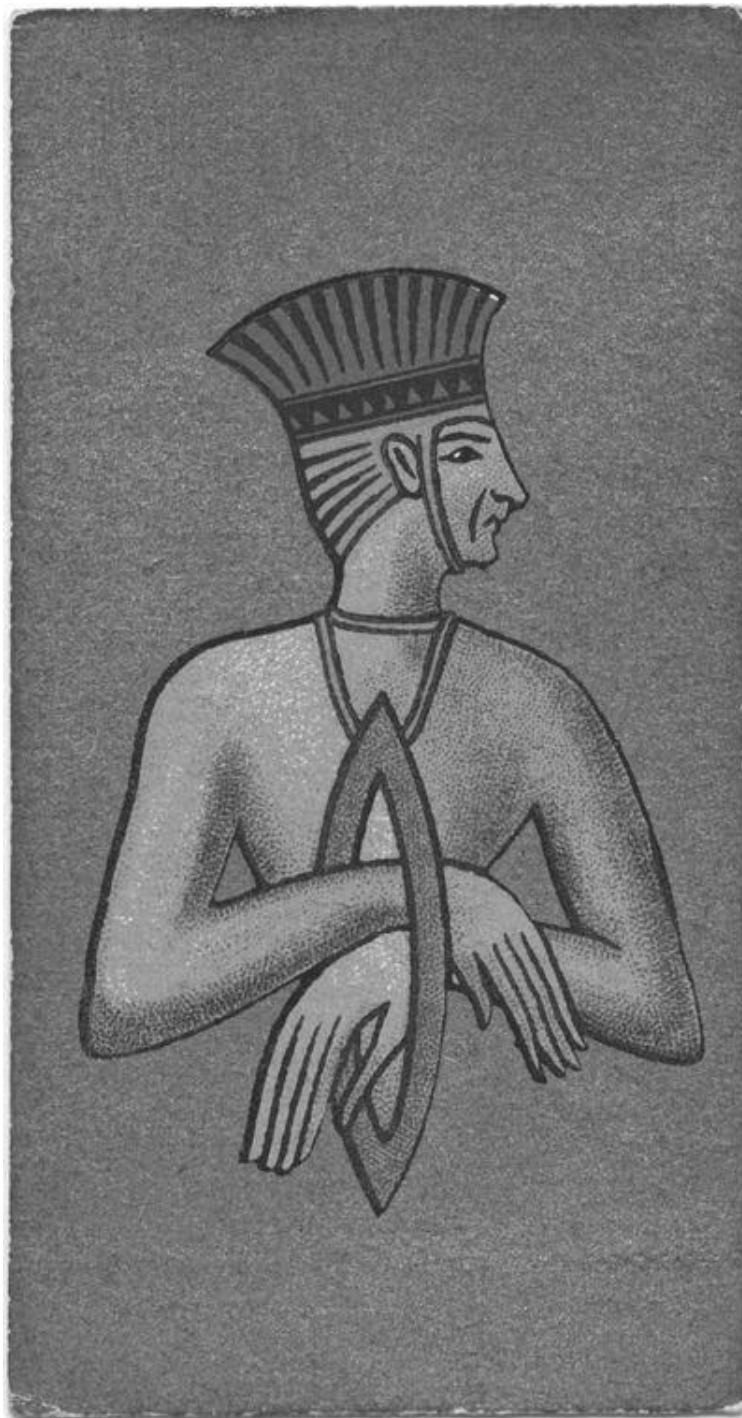
Peter forced himself to take a deep breath, from the belly. This time, his hand didn't tremble as he sifted, then dug, his fingers touching nothing but smoothness, utter blankness. Another test... what more could he expect than this? But as he had this thought, he noticed with a disembod-

ied, horrible curiosity that his fingers had closed over a clump of the stuff. They expertly rolled the clump back and forth across the palm, until it was rounded. Like a meatball, he thought dimly, and then the hand turned, palm-up toward his face, seeking his mouth.... Peter almost screamed, but couldn't, because he was chewing, thoughtfully, more rolling the ball back and forth across his tongue, and it seemed to quickly melt, smaller and smaller, and when he gulped it had already vanished. What did it taste like? Like the heavy, cloying scent of the pine forest's floor right after a rain. Delicious!

What have I done?

It's only another test, he forced himself to think, soberly. No scientist would involve himself in his own experiment, he counseled himself harshly, and he got up, chastened, brushing nonexistent dirt off his clean night shirt. On the walk back to the house, Peter broke a low-hanging dead branch from the oak. He began chewing slowly, his mind racing.

The next morning, he felt as though he had never had such a fine night's sleep. The feeling of an almost overpowering energy which demanded expression. He thought about frying some eggs, but just now they didn't sound too appealing. Now, a juicy stick on the other hand... Go through with the test, he told himself. He opened a fresh packet of cigarettes from off the top of the fridge and, before his smoke, carefully chewed down the plastic wrapper. It seemed to melt in his mouth and vanish before he could swallow.



Peter took a deep drag and held it pensively. Eat whatever you like, he told himself.

On the way to work Peter ate a good-sized stick from beneath the pecan tree and could almost taste the sweet meat of a fresh Fall nut. At work he turned down the communal lunch but furtively snatched several

foam plates and, out of sight of his coworkers, ate them with relish. When he got home his bowels knew it, as they always did, and demanded relief.

Peter looked with a vague terror at the smooth, black contents of the bowl. Peter pulled the dusty phone book off the

top of the fridge and searched under 'Ag' until he found what he wanted.

"Franklin County Ag" a disinterested, grey voice said on the other end.

Peter hung up. His mind was going over all the films he had seen over the years depicting man against the world. Whenever something new and important was discovered and the naïve heroine tried to share it, black helicopters swooped down to steal it, sometimes the heroine too.

What am I going to do?!

Another test, the last, he thought with finality.

Peter walked out of the house, his mind settled on a buried pecan, left by a conscientious squirrel. It seemed as though he sniffed it out, for the first hole he dug turned up the nut. Pecan farmers, he thought with an inner smirk.

On the short walk to the pit he snapped a low, dead branch from the oak, and as he chewed the last of it down, contentment welled up like a rising sun from his belly.

Peter got to his knees and looked at the nut. It still had some green to its leathery skin, and the heavy firmness of a living thing. Without further thought he pressed the nut into the center of the mouth and closed the hole. Peter got to his feet and began to turn but noticed something which wasn't there before, in the corner of his eye. Two leaves reaching up, green and oblong, like triumphant arms.

Mother of God!

Peter watched the nut become a yearling in the space of a minute. He listened

to its growth, a sighing, stretching, relieved sound. In a sudden panic, Peter grabbed the tree by its strong base and pulled until he could feel it coming reluctantly free. He sat down next to the pit and made a lunch of it, deep in thought. It converts death to life, rapidly. Converts the never-living, impossibly, to life, and life to more life, rapidly.

He couldn't with justice keep the secret and he couldn't with propriety tell anybody. He had to share it and protect it at the same time. It was a paradox.

Johnny Appleseed, Peter thought.

The next day was his day off. Peter had fed the pit the previous night with perhaps a hundred pounds of scraps gathered from work, and all the dead branches he could find, all his meager supply of trash, and a can full of leaves and five gallons of water. The pit was full to halfway up the final course of blocks, looking like an over-baked, burnt muffin. Peter filled all of his trashcans with the stuff and dragged them to his rusty truck. In his pocket was a list of addresses: all the landfills in a roughly hundred-mile radius. Each would get some of the stuff, but the secret would be kept. He realized that for the first time in seven years of working the same job, Peter would volunteer to make lunch. Some kind of pasta, the sauce a dark, earthy marinara, spiced with a special, secret spice.

Peter gave it a little gas and turned the key and the truck's engine coughed resentfully to life. He put out his cigarette in the ashtray, then popped it into his mouth like a delicacy. ❖

“BUDAPEST VAMPIRE”

by ABHIRUP DUTTA

Zsofi never imagined she could be a victim. Nobody does.

It was a crisp Monday morning, and Zsofi was showing around a tour group of elderly American couples in straw hats and cargo shorts, a gang of British lads pretending to be of age, an extended Chinese family. The tour had ended on the shores of river Danube lined up with shoes.

She had a new job as a tour guide and was financially stable. Her father was in the police. Her coworker Fani and her boss Erzebeth were well-connected. She knew Krav Maga and could kick down a man.

And yet, it was not a man - not a mortal human.

Zsofi grew up in the Magyar country of castles overlooking the lush-green countryside, ornate cathedrals towering over cobbled streets and lores of saints and demons from the antiquities retold by puppeteers and folk-dancers. But Hungary, Romania and Serbia held secrets too - of the dead rising from their graves and feasting upon the life-force of the living. Being abused by something otherworldly meant a long lonely battle where you grew weaker and weaker until you were finally consumed.

Rubbing her eyes, fighting to keep off her exhaustion, she said, “Please don’t take

happy selfies. These shoes belong to the dead. People were forced to drown in the Danube, but not before they were humiliated. You will find more memorials of the Holocaust in the Jewish quarters but that will be a separate tour in the evening. Thank you all for choosing this tour with me. You will be emailed a satisfaction survey. Mention the guide’s name as Zsofi Jozsef. I need all the 5-stars and tips I can get. So please, please, please, show me some love.”

“Tonight I will come”, she heard a voice growl from inside her, a voice which no one else could hear. And no one believed when she told them.

Zsofi caught the subway near the State Opera and went back to her apartment crying. In the past few weeks, she tried garlics, coins, talismans of saints, evil-eye lockets and several knick-knacks she picked up from the Budapest Gypsy Antique Shop on the Buda hills. She had received only 2 stars and a threatening letter from her boss.

She tried to get as much sleep as possible in the afternoon before she would have to yield to her vampire.

Then, when night fell, he came.

It was a lucid dream. Zsofi found herself leaving her sleeping body behind and gliding to the windows where a red-



haired man awaited her - his hands outstretched, floating in air.

“No garlics, prayers or cheap trinkets today?”, he asked, “I’m glad you’ve overcome your usual stubbornness and have embraced adventure. I’ve planned a wonderful night for us. Make most of what no mortal man can give you.”

Zsofi thought about protesting, but knew she was powerless. She quietly allowed him to fold his fingers around her wrist and together they flew over the Jewish Quarters, repurposed into a nightlife district with music and chatter booming to the sky above.

He smiled and glided carefully over the Szechenyi Bridge guarded by giant lions on its towers and reached the Buda side of the city - the previous home of royalty and aristocracy who, from the fortified hills looked over on Pest side across the river - the flat side for the commoners.

“Speak, my love”, the vampire commanded, “Silence and introversion is not a virtue.”

“I didn’t mean to be rude”, Zsofi found herself justifying, “I was just appreciating the view.”

“Do you know what I like?” The vampire said, “I love what’s underneath all of this beauty. Do you know what’s below this castle and the towers and the cathedral?”

“What?”

“The Atom Bunker. The evacuation space if America had decided to vaporize this city.”

“That’s...that’s horrible.”

“Funny you should say that, I’m quite attached to it, for it speaks to me. All of these beauty around us - do you know why you humans do it? It is to be immortal in some way - to leave something behind. All art comes from one place deep within the soul - fear. Fear of being left behind, abandonment, aging, decay and death, with nothing and no one to be remembered by. When you peel away the skin, deep down, creatures of the day are the same as creatures of the night - we all fear the inevitable - underneath the cafes and wineries and gardens, we all have an atom bunker. That is our true home.”

The sun rose and Zsofi found herself on her bed, having lost a lot of time and having only hazy memories of it.

The past few days Zsofi was aggressively keeping an online journal, lest the Vampire took away her memories. Vampires possessed powerful magic, but they would be useless against modern marvels like computers.

Zsofi remembered how it all started. She kept Skyping her boyfriend with the usual promises of long-distance for the first few days, and then, after the calls became less frequent, she began to record them, and listen to them before sleeping. Soon, she began to have lucid dreams and felt his presence in the space between sleep and wake.

Her dreams became more concrete, as she began to see him sitting on the chair

next to her, smiling at her with love in his eyes, kissing her feet, squeezing the back of her neck and running his fingers over her back just like she liked it. It didn't matter that she felt drained of energy and life by the day, she needed this at night.

It had already been a few months when she realized that the creature that was visiting her, despite looking exactly like him down to every spec of red hair on his beard and every freckle on his cheek, was not really him. It was someone else, deceiving her with his form.

Zsofi led another tour group through the wine-tasting inside medieval cellars, tasting stalls with elderly women rolling dough over a spitfire and topping them with nutmeg and honey, and cable cars running through pastel neighborhoods beneath criss-crossed wires.

After that, she didn't remember anything until the point the Vampire was sitting next to her at night.

He said, "I love you, because I am bonded to you, and because you belong to me, right here" he said pointing at his chest, "And people who love each other never abandon."

Zsofi tried to move away from him but her body couldn't move.

"Abandon? I am not going to abandon you", she said, attempting to placate a rising anger in him.

"Of course you are, you are thinking of it. I've read your messages on the

automaton you use. You are thinking of abandoning me, the same way your lover abandoned you."

"He did not abandon me"

"He did, because it is in his nature. You creatures of the day are fickle. We creatures of the night know what eternal love means. Eternity is in our nature while abandonment is in yours."

"If you are above him, then why do you take his form?"

"I do not", the Vampire hissed, "I appear like him to you."

"Really?", Zosfi said, "And you appear just like other people's love when they see you?"

"That is how our creator made me."

"What do you see when you look into the mirror?" Zsofi asked, waiting for any hint which might bring her close to his true nature, and find a way to beat him.

"What do I see when I look into the mirror? I see nothing. In the mirror, I don't exist. I only exist with you, in your heart and spirit. That is why you must not abandon me, and if you do, I will make sure you don't exist either. It is only fair, don't you think?"

Zsofi even began to distrust her online journals, and they no longer resembled her writing style. Either the vampire hacked into her accounts or she was gradually losing her own essence to him.

Zsofi found several fake emails from her account - to her father asking him not

to contact her again, to Fani saying to her their friendship was over, and to her boss Erzsebeth saying she was quitting her job.

After work, Fani, concerned by the hacking of Zsofi's account, took her out for drinks. They went to a Ruin Pub which was made by spreading tarp over the remains of a bomb-shelled building and attaching surround-sound systems that boomed the latest EuroPunk hits.

Fani led Zsofi by her arm through the crowd between discarded dolls and teddy-bears that once belonged to children now hanging from the room and up to the bar and ordered two glasses of Bull's Blood - a melange of finest reds of Hungary.

After they clinked glasses, Fani opened the leather pouch and pulled out a medieval book - *Traité sur les a les Revenans*. Fani explained it was a book written by a French monk who travelled east to Moravia and Hungaria to round up False Prophets, Specters and Revenant Dead. The styles of burying the dead recommended by him were still followed today in Hungary, Romania and Serbia until such traditions were banned to create a better national image during the bid to join the EU.

When the rituals stopped to court the modern sensibilities of Western Europe, Vampires flourished even more and deaths and disappearances increased, which were attributed to Turks or "Gypsies" instead.

"Zsofi listen, yeah?" Fani said, "The only way to kill a vampire is to go to where

he is buried and face him directly, and stall him till sunrise."

Zsofi glanced at Fani in fear. Where did she know about this? Did she let something slip? Was she conspiring with the vampire? Or was Zsofi losing her mind?

"Haunted tour!" Fani said, "They have it in Prague and Vienna. We must do one here too. How about a Vampire theme?"

"Oh yes, of course, but Fani, I want to tell you something", Zsofi said, "I am leaving the country."

"What?"

"Yes, I have a cousin in America. I have been saving up for a flight. It's tomorrow."

"How come nobody knows?" Fani said. "Sudden, yes?"

"I didn't want anyone to find out", Zsofi said.

Fani gave her a long hard look as the music changed to trance, and said, "You are in some trouble. I understand. No questions."

Zsofi held the train ticket in her hand - a MAV ticket with reservations which would carry her from Budapest Keleti Station to Vienna HauptBahnhof, where her flight to JFK was scheduled.

The Keleti Station was one of the most beautiful stations in Europe. With ornate pillars and gargoyles, statues of angels and saints and a giant archway entrance, one could easily mistake it for an Opera House, if it weren't for a giant old clock at the center of the arch.

As she entered the station, the scene was different from what she expected. Under the light of exquisite chandeliers, lined up in every platform were several hundred men, women and children, laying on flattened cardboard boxes with the police patrolling around them. Zsofi walked up to a pony-tailed blonde policewoman carrying a cardboard box with supplies.

Zsofi smiled at her. She nodded in acknowledgement and came forward. She eyed the people on the floor and said, "Syrians. Came this morning from Serbia. We have no instructions on what to do. Such confusion."

"I'm sorry to hear that Ma'am, anyways, I have a ticket and seat reservation for the train to Vienna", Zsofi said showing her ticket, "Which platform should I go? I'm in a hurry, I have to catch a flight from there."

The officer laughed. She said, "Today is - very bad day for you. All trains to Austria cancelled. Border Control. Austria is asking us to register a minimum number of refugees before opening the border."

Zsofi was shocked. She didn't know what to say. After all these efforts, she was slapped in the face by fate. She felt anger surging through her veins. They were interrupted by the wailing of a toddler next to his mother. The policewoman walked up to them and handed them an old discarded teddy bear from the cardboard box and a water-pouch.

The officer turned back and said, "You seem like a nice girl. I have a sister that

looks like you. Do you have a copy of your flight tickets? I can talk to my superiors and see if anything can be done - maybe a flight directly from Budapest Airport, or maybe some government convoy allowed to Austria?"

Zsofi handed her the tickets and rested herself on the floor. She felt a chill up her spine as the last rays of the setting sun entered through the giant glass clocks and turned the whole station red with shadows of the ticking hands. She could feel His presence rising within her - the feeling of a predator watching - coming from a deep primitive reptilian part of her mind.

The sound of sirens outside and vrooms of several vehicles brought Zsofi back to this world. The policewoman came back to her, panting, and said, "Sorry. You have to leave the station. Go home, right now."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"You don't understand, silly girl. Something terrible happened. ISIS released a video about forced conversion followed by beheading of a Hungarian woman. There is chaos. We received reports of a Nationalist Rally coming towards this station. It is obvious why!", she said waving a hand at the tired Syrian people on the floor, "We have to protect them. You need to get out."

At the front, a motorcade of Budapest Police formed on their bikes. Then another group came in with riot shields and formed a circle defending the entrance to the Keleti Station.

Zsofi found herself walking away from the station taking random turns at

alleyways without any awareness. Tears streamed down her eyes. Through the gap between the buildings to the street parallel to her, she saw several young men - bulked and broad-shouldered - chanting slogans and marching forward. They all wore Hungarian Football T-shirts as if it were their military uniform. They were headed to the Keleti Station. "Defend Europe from Turks", they were screaming, "Expel the Ottomans".

Zsofi said a prayer for the Syrian woman who had sat next to her, but God did not answer her back, instead something else did. It was Him and his voice appeared in her ears.

"The creatures of battle - such music they make. The Crusades between the East and the West are upon us again. I have never felt stronger. The longer I wait, the more you try to run away. Tonight I shall claim you as my bride."

Zsofi was in the underground Atom Bunker, along with a Roma family and some Chinese tourists who were hiding from the commotion above ground. Zsofi looked at the weather app on the phone which said she had 20 minutes until sunset.

Fani was right. It was time to take the battle to him. Zsofi had already done her research - the fallback plan if escaping the country doesn't work - slay the vampire.

Zsofi left them behind and crawled deeper into older parts through a labyrinth

of medieval tunnels, which still had remains - old utensils, shoe soles or towels - from noblemen who hid there when the villagers revolted. She refused to use the flashlight on her phone to conserve battery, but felt quite at home with darkness, like a beast herself.

The casket had several latches around it. Zsofi unlatched them one by one and the clicks echoed in the hollow room. She had to bend over to avoid the low ceiling. She finally opened the casket and peered inside.

The lid open, he stared into a skeleton and the skeleton stared back at her through its hollow eyes. She couldn't see its jaws as they were covered with a brank-bridle - a metallic device to lock the mouth in place so it cannot open.

On the skull's forehead in the center above the eyes was etched the sign of the cross and the words - *Nyugodjbékében. Tobbe ne Edbredj* - "Rest in Peace. Do not rise."

She noticed the rib cage was broken. There was also a piece of dried flesh with a rusted nail through it - the heart.

She looked up from the casket. Staring at her was her boyfriend - red hair, lining of red beard. Except one thing - there was no face, just flat pale skin, where eyes, nose or mouth should be.

Zsofi tried to remember her boyfriend's face but couldn't. It felt like an ancient dream now. The man stepped up and touched his forehead to hers, such that their eyes would be locking if he had any eyes. Zsofi instead was forced to gaze at the blank skin.

A voice emanated from the mouthless face - "Forgive me, Zsofi, I have to do it tonight, now that you've chosen to run away at the first chance. You have placed very few options before me. Tell me, do you want the Vampire's kiss to be pleasantly numb, or do you want it to be painfully memorable for the rest of your life? If you wish the former, invite me in voluntarily."

Although Zsofi couldn't move, she could still think. But could she think rationally? She tried counting - what was 729 multiplied by 64? She could count. She tried listing all the stops on her tour - Fisherman's Bastion, Terror House Museum, Heroes' Square, Cafe Ruszwurm, Memorial of shoes.

If she could still be herself, all she needed to do was to stall him.

"Why? Why are you after me? After women? I don't love you, never did."

"We children of this land - human and Strigoi are bonded. You humans lived off my lands and I lived off your daughters. A man owns lands and shares its fruits. A woman shares herself in exchange. Those are the rules of love and they serve us well. But in this era, you change the rules. Does that serve you well?"

No, it does not, Zsofi thought, here she was broke, without love, without any friends, and wasted her last savings on a flight that she would never catch. She was a nobody, a no-face, just like the creature before her, hiding from a medieval crusade that was repeating itself above ground.

"You will not find anything within" the Vampire said, "except the crevice of

nothingness that we all slip into in our nightmares - the eternal sewer that both man and monster came from and will be discharged into. Give me your heart. Wed me. Become my host and let me crawl inside you. Let me devour you and grind your bones with my teeth. Become the compost from which harvest will abound, and spring shall come upon my lands. Be worthy of something."

The faceless face of the vampire morphed into the mouth of a giant lamprey, with concentric circles of tiny teeth and suckers. Tormented howls of hundreds of young women came from within it. The mouth of the lamprey lunged towards her bosom, and the buzzer on the phone beeped.

"Sunrise - Budapest - 4:52 am". ❖

“A BRIEF AND INCONSEQUENTIAL THREAD OF MULTIVERSE”

by ZACK CARLSTROM

Jasper’s got three holes in his head, but he isn’t dead yet. To the question of ‘*why?*’ he’d have to answer that he’s got no freakin’ idea. Which is cool, really. The nature of the thing. Sort of.

“Your head looks super gnarly, babe.”

“You’re the one with a gnarly head.”

“Good one,” says Swanlake, wiping blood off the muzzle of her dad’s Beretta. Her fingers are hella graceful, even when she’s cleaning up gore with a paper towel. Dancer movements. Practiced and totally sexy. You can take a chick outta the Boston Ballet, but you can’t take the Boston Ballet outta the way her hands move or whatever.

Jasper reaches up and wiggles a pinky inside one of his headwounds until he finds an actual bullet tunnel. He shoves the finger in all the way to his knuckle. It’s squishy and pretty rad. But does it hurt? Naw man, not at all. Because of the nature of the thing. Because two roads diverged in a wood and he shot himself while he was walking down both roads, and now there’s another road—somewhere, maybe, theoretically—where he’s totally dead.

Except times all that by three, right? Three bullets. Three headwounds. Six paths? Does he have the math right. It’s hard to say...his brain feels a little off.

“The reality is this is a pretty shit death

pact, so far,” says Swanlake, setting the Beretta down on the couch in a super bored way. Rolling her eyes at nothing in particular, she lifts a smoldering fatty out of the jade ashtray Jasper stole during his semester in Beijing. She sucks on the joint, turning the lit tip into a tiny, dying sun.

When she’s done, Jasper puts an arm around her and takes the fatty. Inhales deep. Holds it. Hooooolds it.

“Whoaaaaa, babe—you’re like a chimney.”

Jasper spits out a gray cloud, coughing. “What?”

“There’s smoke coming outta all your head holes. It’s super rad. Here—look at your big dumb self.” She opens the camera on her phone, switches it to selfie mode, and holds the screen up in front of him so he can watch himself. “Now inhale again.”

“I’m crazy high, though.”

“This’ll be your last hit, then, babe. I’m telling you, it’s dope.”

Jasper gazes at himself in the screen. His beard’s dirty and tangled, and the circles under his eyes look way purple. Most of the swooping black curls orbiting his head are matted with blood. He looks a lot more busted than usual. Which is saying something. Why a knockout like Swanlake would spend free-time with him is unknow-

able. Cosmic mystery of the universe. Also, maybe pheromones. Plus, she's a bored chick who blew out her knee and stopped pursuing, like, the only thing she ever cared about. And her weed dealer happened to be single and a bit older and just as sad.

Puff, puff, passsssssssss.

Sure enough, the entry and exit holes on either side of his skull turn into the cranial equivalents of volcanic vents. It's like he's a human hookah. Six people with a high tolerance for gore/pot/quantum physics could totally put their mouths over each of his brand-new head orifices and huff themselves high for sure.

"Told you it was tight."

"Never doubted you," Jasper hands her the phone and kisses her on the cheek.

Swanlake giggles and maneuvers to make out with his mouth. She likes to kiss more than she likes to have sex, but that's pretty common when it comes to nineteen-year-old women. In Jasper's not-so-limited experience.

She pulls away, grinning at him from beneath her thick curtain of black bangs. "Should we do me, now?"

Jasper shakes his head and immediately feels dizzy. Too much weed? Too much blood loss? Too much bullets? All of the above?

Stoner thought: if he walked outside right now, would there be an outside? Would there be garbage trucks and dogs pissing and men in suits going places quickly? Is there anybody left in this old brownstone except him and Swanlake? When they fire the next bullet, will anybody hear it? Is

he already dead?

Anyway...

"I don't want to do you before me," says Jasper. "Once I'm good and dead, you take care of yourself. Or, like, eat a sandwich or something. You don't have to go through with this if you don't want."

"You keep saying that."

"Well, I *like* you, you know?"

Swanlake cocks her head. Super precise twist of her skull. Jasper's never seen a movement like it. Somewhere between the most graceful thing imaginable and an automaton. "How much do you *like* me?" she asks.

"A lot."

"Quantify it. Give it to me in math terms."

Jasper sighs. "Don't be dumb."

She smirks. "I'm not being dumb. I just want you to be smart."

Shrugging, Jasper glances at the Breaking Bad poster on the wall behind her. Walter White. Heisenberg. "Well, liking someone is a chemical reaction."

"I said math not chemistry."

"Chemistry is math. Everything's connected. The universe is ordered chaos. Love is—"

She cuts him off, eyebrows raised so high they tuck under her bangs. "*Love?*"

He swallows. "Well...just since we're being theoretical, yeah...we can say *love*."

Swanlake shoots him a look but lets him continue.

"If we're talking in terms of love," he says, "then we're talking in terms of infinity. In terms of, like, the absolute limit I can

feel things for a person.”

“You mean *me*?”

Jasper can't help blushing. The rush of blood sends a stream of wet warmth down the left side of his head. “Sure, yeah, theoretically *you*...” He takes a breath and looks away at literally anything else to avoid her reaction. Even though, why is he ashamed to say it? Why is it so totally hard to live inside his own body?

“Anyway,” he murmurs, “love is sort of infinite since it's pretty unquantifiable. Conceptually, it goes up and up forever. As a chemical reaction, though, it's like very, very volatile in relation to how long your life is. Love surges. Peaks and plummets. They say the chemical reaction you get from love is really similar to an intense drug high—”

“And would you say you know something about that, Professor?” She reaches up and pulls the glasses off his head. There's a squishy sound as they slide through his sideburns. In the same motion, she places the glasses on her face. The round, silver lenses look great hanging over her angular cheeks. Her arm swoops through space and time—that crazy dancer's grace again—and settles under her chin like Rodin sculpted her. Moody and introspective. A pretty solid mockery of his general demeanor or whatever.

“You asked.” He frowns.

“And I want to hear it. Just loosen up, babe.”

He takes another, deeper breath and lets it out slower this time. “Sure. Sorry. Anyway, yeah, there's the drug high thing.

Which tells you something about how the chemicals work, right? What goes high must go low.”

She nods, taking off the glasses and rubbing her eyes. He chuckles. His prescription is pretty intense.

He continues, “So, if we know love goes up and down over time—and we know the upper limit is infinity—then we know love can be forever absolute if you eliminate time from the equation. If you arrive at a moment your love is peaking and you freeze that moment with, say, a bullet...you could argue it stays infinity forever.”

“No, babe.” She shakes her head, bangs flailing. “That doesn't work. Because it never actually hits infinity. That's just a fake upper limit, right? It's like you said, it goes high till it goes low. And since love is pretty hard to measure, you can't really know if you're on the way up or down.”

He smiles at her. “I'm pretty sure I'm not on the way down.”

Swanlake swoons into his arms, parodying some romantic moment in a dance number she might have actually danced before. He holds her awhile. The clock across the room says 11:39. He shot himself the first time at exactly 11, since he always liked 11 best. A prime number. Also, symmetrical. Now, time's slipping away. Might as well try again before midnight.

He leans past Swanlake and snatches up the Barretta with his best movie star panache. De Niro in *Goodfellas*. Swanlake flinches away from him.

“Already?” she asks.

“You say that like we haven't done this



a few times, now.”

“I’m enjoying this part. The after. I was just thinking about how I wish you hadn’t dropped out. You’re smart with this stuff.”

He swallows and looks away from her. Dropped out? Expelled? What’s the difference? It all works out in the end. Apparently unemployed burnout stoners get all the girls. Whatever anybody wants to

say about Jasper, Swanlake’s totally a byproduct of his *burnoutness*. Don’t knock it till you tried it, man.

“One thing leads to another...” he mutters, not quite sure what he means. He hefts the gun and presses it to a spot on his head he hasn’t shot yet.

“Can you count it down, this time?” Swanlake asks, sounding childish. Like a lit-

tle kid asking if mom will read her a bed-time story.

“Sure.”

She scoots even closer to him, squishing her head up against the side of his. “If I stay like this, you can do us both at the same time.”

He snorts and pulls his head away, causing a suction noise that’s sorta disconcerting. “No, babe, cause my head will slow the bullet down, and then it might not kill you.”

“Clearly, it might not kill me either way,” she points out, obliging him and moving off the couch. She glides, glides, glides to the wooden chair on the other side of the cardboard Ikea box Jasper uses as a coffee table and sits down. There’s a dark, weirdo look in her eyes. A familiar one. The kinda look that kinda brought them here and now.

“No, babe, it’ll kill you for sure. You just might not be there when it does.”

She rolls her eyes. This time, it’s clear what’s she’s rolling them at.

“Alright, we doing this?” asks Jasper. His arm’s getting a little tired holding the pistol.

Swanlake’s eyes look wet. “Fine. You start counting, and I’ll just concentrate on *liking* you as much as possible before you pull that trigger.”

“Hey...”

“Hey *what?*” she snaps.

“I mean...” he sighs. “You want me to

say it?”

“I only want you to say it if you mean it.”

He nods, looking at the carpet. Spotted with ash and Cheetos and stains from every carbonated liquid in existence. “Of course I mean it.”

“Mean what?” she’s speaking softer now.

“That I love you. I *love* you. I wouldn’t be doing this with you if I didn’t.”

She laughs. “I can’t believe it took you three tries.”

“Technically, this is number four.”

“Whatever. I love you, too. And I’m glad we’re doing this together.”

He looks up into her face. Sharp but frail. Black tears roll down her cheeks, leaving behind greasy streaks.

“One,” he says.

“I love you.”

“Two,” he says.

“I love you more.”

“There.” He reaches across the table to grab her hand. “I’m probably as close to infinity as anybody ever gets.”

She squeezes his hand as he squeezes the trigger. A fourth big bang blows through Jasper’s skull, and time goes spinning off in two more directions. Two more worlds.

Or more.

It’s hard to tell, exactly.

Swanlake might know. ❖

END TRANSMISSION