



# Corner Bar Magazine

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Page 1 – **HARD TO SWALLOW** by Judith Sheppard. Ms Sheppard is a 24 year old poet and fiction writer from the St. Louis area. She is a Webster University graduate with a grueling love for Shakespearean sonnets.

Page 3 – **OF LOVE AND MONSTERS** by Kevin M. Casin. Kevin (he/they) is a gay, Latine fiction writer, and cardiovascular research scientist. His fiction work appears (or is forthcoming) in *Idle Ink*, *Medusa Tales Magazine*, *Pyre Magazine*, and more. He is E-i-C of *Tree And Stone*, an HWA/SFWA/Codex member, and First Reader for *Interstellar Flight Press*.

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Page 7 – **MURDER ON SPACE STATION FIVE** by K. A. Williams. The author has published in many magazines including *Corner Bar*, *Theme Of Absence*, *The Sirens Call*, *Mysterical-E*, and *View From Atlantis*, and has published several collections: “Limericks and Other Humorous Poems”, “Scifaiku and Haiku: A Poetry Collection”, “Androids and Aliens: A Short Story Collection”, “12 Science Fiction Short Stories”, “Crime Tales: A Short Story Collection”, and a mystery/crime novella “Question of Vendetta”. And under the name of A. Williams, has also published “Vampire Tales: A Short Story Collection” and two novels - “Vampires (Good and Evil) and Hunters” and crime thriller “Desired Quarry”. Apart from writing, the author enjoys rock music and word games.

Page 12 – **STRAIT IS THE GATE** by David Rudds. Dr. Rudd, 70+, is an emeritus professor of literature who turned out academic prose for some 40 years before allowing his imagination freer rein. His stories can be found in *Bandit Fiction*, *Horla*, *TigerShark*, *Black Cat Mystery Magazine*, *Literally Stories*, *Jerry Jazz Musician*, *The Blotter*, *Erotic Review*, *Scribble*, *The First Line*, and *Creative Webzine*, among others. He also enjoys performing folk/blues music on guitars, fiddles, harmonicas, etc., but this latter pastime is far more derivative.

Page 19 – **MOTHER, FEED ME** by Suzanne Halmi. Ms Halmi writes, “Some of my stories have appeared in *Subtropics*, *Southern Humanities Review*, and *Andromeda Spaceways*.” The author lives in Upper Montclair, NJ.



# “HARD TO SWALLOW”

by JUDITH SHEPPARD

Her name, unfortunately, was Edith, and she hated it enough to lie. The opportunity to lie about her name came up at coffee shops, when she got her hair cut by somebody new, and when men spoke to her on the train. “Edith” felt like a toad on her tongue, lumpy and brown. Prettier, simpler names like Jenny or Marissa or, when she felt really bold, Roxanne, felt smaller, lighter, more graceful. Little green frogs that sprung out of her mouth.

The last time Edith saw her ex-boyfriend was two summers ago. The weather was deeply unpleasant for summertime, threatening rain and burbling with indigestion. The two of them sat at a picnic table by the river, and Taylor smashed bugs beneath his thumb into the wood. Edith tried not to wince.

“Did you used to do this, when you were young?” Taylor asked in a way that presumed she would answer yes. She shook her head. He seemed taken aback. “We used to do it all the time,” he explained. “Because their guts are green, see?”

Edith was spared from having to respond by the hiss and roar of a train to their left. She turned away from it and looked at the river and cried. Her sobs were swallowed up by the train, and Taylor kept squishing bugs. That was their post-

mortem, and Edith had expected to have more to say to him. Their split had been like a cleaver taken to a worm, creating two ends that would now have to try to find their way individually.

The next summer overstayed its welcome so that she had to wear shorts much further into the semester than she wanted. Now that it was finally starting to cool, she started to see slugs trudging slowly, nobly across the sidewalks. She always stooped above them for a moment to watch them, and when she couldn’t resist she picked them up, and went to class with mucus making her fingers hard to pull apart.

College was far away from home. She had to take the train. No one in her classes had to know that she was toad-tongue Edith. Whatever name leaped out of her mouth on day one was the one she’d stick with in that class. It actually got quite hard to keep track of, but she didn’t mind. Whenever she was at school, she did not have to be at home, and she did not have to be Edith.

In biology, they dissected frogs. She stuck pins into the spleen, the gallbladder, the small intestine. The heart was more difficult to reach—it had to be practically disassembled, to reach the heart. When she

leaned far into the pan, studying the frog as close as she could, her hair fell into dark curtains around her.

Her Taylor, when he had been her Taylor, had golden hair and seagreen eyes. He had cheated, of course. Don't they all? The last she heard, he's working at the pharmacy, and he's bleached his hair straight white now.

Edith's apartment, when she returned to it at the end of the day, was small and still felt new even though she had moved into it two summers ago, when Taylor left. This era of her life felt new, Edith after Taylor. Jessica after Taylor. Karina after Taylor. The apartment crawled with green-gutted bugs and fat croaking toads. When she couldn't stand herself, she vomited worms into the sink.

It was more than just the seafoam eyes and the green bug guts and the gold that's been sucked from his hair. It was all of those things, wrapped up together—it was “We used to do this all the time,” and the realization that this ending wasn't at all like cleaver taken to a worm. The puzzled look on his face when she shook her head. A breathy, congested train. Edith was foolish to have ever believed them to be one being, two halves of a whole. The only thing worse than being Edith now was the knowledge that she was Edith before, too.

When she replays the scene in her head, she looks him in the eyes instead of averting her gaze to the river. She grabs his hand and slowly sucks the green guts from his thumb. She licks the mucus from her own fingers after swallowing down a slug.

She swallows all the frogs and toads alike, and they go down easy, covered in formalin. She vomits worms into her sink. She meets the eyes of her reflection and croaks her name. ❖

# “OF LOVE AND MONSTERS”

by KEVIN M. CASIN

“Bareth, please! You don’t have to do this,” I cry, my frosted birch staff trembling in my hand. “This won’t make you a man, whatever that means.”

“Go home, Gabriel. This is no place for a Druid,” you say. You slip on the steel helmet and hide your beautiful blue face.

I step between you and the mouth of the cave, arms stretched out, and say, “I can’t let you kill yourself. I know you think your wife won’t understand or your children, but there’s nothing wrong with us loving each other. You don’t have to prove anything. Come home! We’ll talk to them together.”

You’re quiet.

“Breathe deep, Bareth,” I say.

“Remember reason. Don’t do this.”

You huff and draw your sword.

“Threaten me all you want, Bareth. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Gabriel, move please,” you growl, soft and deep. “I have to do this.”

“No one can stop the Uncaren. You can’t break its hide with your sword. It’s a massive beast, who will tear you limb from limb like it has so many others. Don’t you want a life with me? Don’t you want that chance?”

I can’t see your eyes, those soulful, gray irises that always give your thoughts away,

but I know you’re considering it. I know you well enough. I’ve known you long enough.

“You can’t understand,” you say.

“Then help me. Talk to me. Don’t kill yourself.”

I set my hand on your helmet. I wish I could tear away the cold steel and take you in my warmth and tell you everything will be okay. I try, but you shrug me off. I don’t want to speak to this man, the rash warrior. I want Bareth, the great hero of our people, the one who would never take his life in vain. Let me see him.

“No one will look at me the same,” you say. “I’ve fought dragons, saved Armadan from a horde of graymen, defended the Queen from murderous elves, but you’ve heard what the other men say about people like us. The men of the North are not as kind as the wood elves of the South,” your steel gauntlet burns as it touches my brown skin, but I feel its love nonetheless. “No honors or valor will save me. Maybe this one will.”

Though I’ve lived in Armadan for many years, I still have yet to learn the logic of men in the North. They are brave, loyal, true, and will never disappoint another living being. They are stubborn. Their emotions get the best of them. They are

like elves in that sense, I suppose. And like us, in time, men will see that to love their fellow men is not evil. It is natural.

“If you have to do this, then I’ll help you see it done,” I say. “Best to die by your side, than live without you.” It’s the vow I made when I chose to love you.

Together, we walk and the darkness of the cave swallows us whole.

#

The Uncaren unfurls from its victim. Its obsidian claws, pearl-white fangs, gray fur all drip with the silver blood of a unicorn. In its amber eyes, murder and sorrow blend. And why shouldn’t a beast, cast from, and burdened with, the hate of a generation not feel pain?

I turn to Bareth. In one final plea, I ask, “can you end its life—one it didn’t ask to live as a monster?”

You don’t answer. Do you know the story, I wonder?

There’s no time to tell you how, during the reign of the Usurper Elebos, our fathers conjured it from their disdain for him; or how when the Uncaren killed Elebos, the men banished the beast, left it to die, or used for sport, in the tundra. There is no chance to convince you the Uncaren deserves as much of a right to live as you do. You launch at the beast.

You dance so beautifully with a blade. Each blow measured, precise, and lethal to any other creature. The Uncaren merely brushes away the steel and continues its defense. It leaps away, bounding around the humid walls, and you chase it.

“Stop chasing it!” I shout.

The Uncaren turns to me. I grip my staff, prepare to evade its attack, but Bareth rushes between us. You lunge again, strike its thigh, but still nothing. This can’t go on. You’ll tire soon. It’s how the victory of the Uncaren begins.

“Bareth! Your sword won’t do anything. Stop trying—you know better. I’ll show you what to do.”

Gray roots from my staff pierce the icy stone, siphoning the energy beneath the world. The tree, frail with frost, warms and crimson leaves sprout from uncoiling branches. It is a theory yet to be tested. The mages in Arcanheim College believe the key to defeating the Uncaren is magic. Perhaps they’re right. If Bareth will let me, maybe I can try it.

“The Uncaren’s death must be gentle,” I say as I will the roots to slither over the cave walls. “It has faced enough violence.”

“Gabriel, stop! This beast is mine,” you hiss. The glare in your eye cuts me more than your sword ever will.

“Let me help you! Don’t ignore me.”

The Uncaren is on the offensive now. It has you. It knows it.

“Steady yourself, Bareth. You move too wide,” I say. “Your sword isn’t working. There is nothing you can do. But I can. Just let me! Will you stop being so stubborn?”

I inch the roots closer. You’re too exhausted to wave me off, to even look at me. I should just do it. You’ll be made, but who cares—I might. But you’ll live. That’s all I want at this point.

The Uncaren picks you by your arm,

knocks you against the walls, cracking the stone, disarming you, and bending your hauberk. You can't possibly breathe with the metal sticking into your chest. Yes, take off the helmet. Take in the free air. This won't end well for you, but I can end it for all of us.

You'll be mad, but I don't care. Rest now. I will keep you safe. It's the vow I took when I chose to love you.

I bind the Uncaren. It rips away the tendrils from its body like wet leaves, but the tree keeps growing. It will make more limbs until the Uncaren is breathless, trapped. I won't hurt you anymore. I have it now. I will do this for you.

I force the beast to kneel, to lift up its face, and I take in its amber eyes. The Uncaren does not squirm or whimper. It is brave. I can see the war with the Usurper, the cries of a thousand men begging for freedom, for dignity, for life. I see the cruelty of men in its tears, the battles in enduring with the men it saved, the shame of being abandoned. It has suffered enough.

I call on the energy of the world once again, let it tingle through my bones, my nerves. I summon my happy memories—my first meeting with Bareth, our first kiss, our first night together, our laughs—and blend the energy and my emotions together.

"Uncaren," I say, soft and loving. "Be free from your curse. Cast aside the hate laid upon you. Be at peace!"

"Gabriel, no," you say weakly.

But I don't listen. The roots burrow into its chest.

"The roots know where to go," I explain as if you care—it's more for me. "They will find the nerves, numb it, and take its heart."

After a moment, the Uncaren's amber eyes close. Its face softens, claws droop, and, from its chest, the roots slice away the flesh, bone, and appear with the beating heart of the monster. They know what to do now too. Into the earth they will take it, seal it away. The roots even dissolve the stone beneath the beast and the corpse falls into the grave far from the hate in its heart and from the hate of men.

I draw the staff from the earth and let it sling over my back.

"Tell who you need that you killed the Uncaren," I say, looking down at the grave. "I'll lay the glory at your feet." I turn to you. "Come, my love. Let me help you. We can make our way—"

You swing your sword at me. You are lucky elves are spry.

"Lower your weapon, Bareth!" I say. "Would you kill me?"

"The monster was mine to kill, Gabriel!"

"I did this for you. You need peace. I see you toiling at night. Your fear, your shame weighs you down, binding you to reality. Your dreams can't even save you—not even the ones where you defeat the Uncaren."

I stand and slash at me. The tree still holds power. Its branches won't let you hurt me.

"Stop this, Bareth. Please!"

I see the pain scarred on your face, the

rage in your eyes. It's the same look you gave the Uncaren.

"Why did you kill it, Gabriel? I told you to leave! Always where you aren't wanted. I was fine before I met you," you say. "Loved and normal until you made me fall in love with you."

"You don't mean that," I say. I hold out my hand for him.

He rejects me. He sheathes his sword and heads toward the cave's entrance.

"Why do you have to be so stubborn?" I ask.

"Just leave me alone. You've done enough. I'm going home."

I follow you to the mouth and stand on

the cliff's edge. I watch you fade behind the mountain as you descend the slope. But I don't go with you. You may tell the world about the Uncaren—they will ask when you arrive—and you may deny that I ever meant anything to you, but I know the truth. I will carry it with me. I will not be left to hide in a cave.

I set the staff on the stone and I will the roots to form a bridge down to the basin. I return it to my back when it's finished. And I step toward the south and take a new vow.

"I choose to love myself," I say.

I hope one day, you will do the same.



# “MURDER ON SPACE STATION 5”

by K. A. WILLIAMS

Kayla looked around her uncle’s electronics shop in sector 2 on Space Station 5. Her best friend Skylar stood beside her. “I can’t believe he’s gone,” she said, as a tear rolled down her cheek.

Her uncle, Ted Spencer, had taken care of her after her parents were killed on the spaceliner *Capricorn* when it was attacked by pirates.

Now he too was dead.

Skylar said, “Let me know if there’s anything at all I can do for you.”

“You can help me investigate, I don’t think it was an accident. There’s no way Uncle Ted would have been that careless when he was installing a new security alarm,” she said. “My uncle was murdered and I know who did it.”

She rushed out of the shop. He closed the door, which locked automatically, and followed. She jumped into her tiny blue electric two-seater car that was the standard vehicle here. He heard her say “Police Station” and barely had time to get in with her before it drove off. The blue car maneuvered expertly around pedestrians and other cars.

Shops lined both sides of the street, they were built with their backs against the space station walls. Her car passed shops with neon signs over their entrance like the

Drink Bar, while others had plain lettering such as the Everything You Need Supermarket. Kayla looked in the Want A Pet Shop window as the car passed. A fluffy cat-like creature had its front paws on the glass as it watched the traffic.

The car blew its horn at two robot workers that were hauling trash away in a large hovercraft container. They moved obediently aside to let it pass.

The car continued on to the police station in sector 2 and parked itself in front. Detective Brown was seated behind a desk in the main room. He looked up when they entered. “I’m sorry about your uncle, Kayla.” He had delivered the bad news to her, after space patrol recovered the body. The funeral was held in the enclosed part of sector 2’s docking bay. Afterwards, Ted Spencer was cremated and his ashes scattered into space.

She said, “My uncle was murdered.”

The detective stopped working at his computer and gave her his full attention. “I’m listening.”

Kayla told Brown how Henry Garner had accused her uncle of supplying the security codes to thieves when his ship was stolen, just after her uncle had installed the new alarm system, and threatened to kill him for it. “And Uncle Ted would have



made certain that the outside airlock door on his new client Peterson's ship was closed and locked, before installing a security system on it. He would never have forgotten to do that. It was no accident. Why don't you question Henry Garner and find out where he was that day?"

"Okay," Detective Brown agreed. "I'll call him, it shouldn't take long." He tilted the screen so Kayla and Skylar could see it. "Elsa, get me Henry Garner of Garner Incorporated."

"Right away sir," said Elsa, the computer's AI.

Garner's face soon appeared.

"Mr. Garner, I am Detective Brown calling from the police station in sector 2. Some information has come to my attention recently regarding Ted Spencer's accident."

"Oh?" replied Garner.

"Yes, I understand that you accused Mr. Spencer of supplying the security codes of your ship's new alarm system to thieves, and after the ship was stolen, threatened to kill him."

"Oh, well, I see you've been talking to his niece, Kayla. I was angry, they were just words. I can understand how it might look to her. It was a coincidence that he died soon afterward, just like it was a coincidence that my ship was stolen right after he installed the alarm. These things happen."

"All the same, Mr. Garner, I would like to know where you were that day."

"What day was that?"

"August the third."

"August the third?" Garner paused, like he was thinking. "Oh yes, I was at the Sundown Casino here on sector 4 that whole day. I haven't been back to sector 2 since my ship was stolen."

"He's lying," Kayla said to Skylar.

Detective Brown ignored her interruption and said, "I'll need proof. Can you give me any names of witnesses I can contact?"

"I'll provide even better evidence - the Sundown Casino has recording cameras. You can call the police here and they will send you a copy of the video."

\*

"I will." Brown disconnected from Garner, and Elsa called the police at sector 4. He spoke to the man in charge who transmitted the video. Skylar and Kayla watched it over Brown's shoulder. It showed Garner winning at Sundown Casino.

"That's too bad, I thought we had a suspect. Maybe your uncle was just careless that day."

Kayla sniffed back her tears. He said, "I'm sorry."

Skylar and Kayla left the station and got into the electric car. It drove them back to her uncle's shop, and they went inside. "Thanks for believing me." She sighed. "But I guess it was an accident after all."

He seemed deep in thought, then snapped his fingers. "I've got the answer."

"You do?"

"Clone."

"But that's illegal now."

"It may be illegal, but it's still done."

Skylar sat down at her uncle's computer.  
"Do you mind?"

"No. Tracy, this is Kayla. Skylar has my permission to use this computer."

"Hello Skylar," said Tracy, the computer's AI.

"Hello Tracy. Please show me a list of scientists in the field of clones."

The computer light blinked a few times. A list appeared on the screen.

"That's a long list," said Kayla."

Skylar drummed his fingers on the computer stand for a minute, then asked, "Have any of these scientists written articles about research on clones after the 'No Clones' law was passed?"

Only one name popped up. Dr. Marvin Baynor: address - Space Station 5, sector 4, apartment 23.

"Show me all the articles he's written on clones and their dates."

Skylar and Kayla read the list of articles. "Look at this one," he said. It was about creating fully grown clones instead of embryos. "Notice the date."

"That was written after the law was passed," she said. "Tracy, print this one out please."

The printer whirred and spit out several sheets.

Kayla took the papers. "Leverage. I'm going to sector 4. Are you coming with me?"

"Of course I am."

\*

"I don't know anyone named Henry Garner," Dr. Baynor said.

Kayla knew he was lying. "Really?" She

waved the papers at him. "These articles were written after the 'No Clones' law was passed."

"Th-that was just hypothetical research."

"I'll send a copy to the authorities and let them decide," she said.

"Okay, I know him," Baynor confessed.

"Don't you mean them?"

Dr. Baynor wiped his face with a handkerchief. "I could get into a lot of trouble."

"You already are in a lot of trouble. Garner killed my uncle, or his clone did, and you created the clone. That makes you an accomplice to his murder."

"He gave me the money, I made him a clone. No questions asked. How was I supposed to know what he was going to do with it? What do you want?"

"We want to know where Garner is hiding the clone," she said.

Baynor hesitated. "I don't know where he is."

Kayla handed him one of her uncle's business cards. "Find out where Garner's clone is and call me at this number. If I don't hear from you by tonight, I will send copies of these articles to the authorities."

Garner slammed his door in their faces.

"Hurry!" Kayla grabbed Skylar's hand and pulled him with her. They ran to her blue electric car and got inside. It was parked behind a red one. "Crouch down," she said, bending over.

He followed her example. "Why are we doing this?"

“You’ll see.”

Baynor rushed out and jumped into the car in front of them. “Follow that red car,” she said, and their car pulled out behind. “Not that close, stay back a little.”

The red car dodged pedestrians as they followed. Both cars stopped to wait while a robot cop halted traffic, as children crossed the street to the school.

“I hope he’s not looking back to see if he’s being followed,” Skylar said, still humped down.

Kayla sat up a bit and peeked. “He’s not.”

Baynor went straight to a shop called Garner Incorporated. “That’s owned by Garner,” Skylar said.

“See, it worked. We need to get pictures of them together. Let’s go.” They got out of their car and walked swiftly by the glassed front entrance to the side of the store. “I hope no one saw us. Garner used to be a satisfied customer, this looks like one of my uncle’s security alarms. If he’s still using the same codes, I can get us in.” Kayla keyed in some numbers and the side door opened. “You brought your camera like I asked?”

“Yes.” He pulled something from his jacket pocket.

“That looks like a pen.”

“It’s a camera.”

“Okay, can you make it record and transmit the video straight to the police station here and on sector 2 to Detective Brown as well?”

“I sure can.” He tapped on the device and nodded.

They entered quietly and approached the voices coming from a room down the hall. The door was cracked open slightly. He tapped the device again and held it in the space.

Suddenly the door opened all the way. Big men grabbed Skylar and Kayla and pulled them into the room where Garner and Baynor were sitting.

“I told you they planned to follow you when you told me about their visit, didn’t I Baynor? Rex, I want you and Mitch to take our guests and throw them into the trash compactor.”

Skylar was trembling, but still holding his camera. “Smile, gentlemen,” Kayla said. “You’re on a live broadcast to the police station.”

Garner smirked. “Who cares. I own the police here.”

“How nice for you. Do you also own the ones on sector 2?”

“Why would I? They believed my alibi even though it was my clone that was in the casino that night. I can’t afford to own both sector 4 and sector 2 cops. The police here will hush up your disappearance and protect me when the sector 2 cops start asking questions.”

Kayla laughed.

Garner frowned. “What’s so funny?”

“You’ve just confessed your crimes to both sector 4 and sector 2 police stations.”

“Get that camera away from him you morons!”

The front door burst open and Detective Brown entered along with another detective.

“I believed you, Kayla, I just didn’t have any evidence,” said Brown. “I had my partner, Detective Paulson, put a tracer on your car while you were at your uncle’s shop, and then we kept track of your movements. When you entered sector 4, we hurried over here in our patrol car. Henry Garner, you are under arrest for the murder of Ted Spencer. Dr. Baynor, you are under arrest for illegal cloning. You both will be tried in the High Court. Where’s the clone?”

A door opened in the back of the room and an identical version of Henry Garner stepped out. “I was at the casino providing his alibi, am I to be arrested too?”

“Yes,” said Detective Paulson, “As an accomplice.”

“But I didn’t know he was going to kill someone.”

“Really? Then what did you think he was going to be doing while you were at the casino that day?” asked Paulson.

The clone shrugged.

“Henry Garner’s clone, you are under arrest for accessory to murder,” said Brown. “We’ll let the judge and jury decide your fate.”

\*

Skylar was inventorying Ted’s shop with Kayla. It now belonged to her. “You can have whatever you want here in exchange for helping me get Garner arrested for my uncle’s murder,” she said.

“Anything?”

“That’s right.”

He moved closer and kissed her. ❖

# “STRAIT IS THE GATE”

by DAVID RUDD

“Spaghetti Junction,” said Howard, picturing the cars as bits of mince trapped in an endless tangle of pasta.

He was making his way home after an exhausting week at the Bristol office. Spaghetti Junction swooped above and below him. The traffic was ridiculous, thought Howard; although, as his car doubled as his office, he felt more entitled to be on the road than most.

“What’s that, Mr Welby?” came a voice from his car speaker.

“Oh nothing, Mr Johnson,” spluttered Howard, suddenly remembering his boss was still connected. “Some obstruction on Spaghetti Junction.”

“Just make sure you’re back tomorrow, Welby. Good and early!” Johnson hung up.

“Yes, Mr Johnson.” Howard pulled a face in his rear-view mirror. “Why don’t I just go straight there now?” he asked his reflection.

There was a honking behind. Howard waved an acknowledging hand and moved up a car length. “Driverless cars,” he said, “that’s what we need. Put your feet up and read.”

As he left the Junction behind, overhead signs redundantly informed drivers that queues were likely and that vehicles should not travel faster than 30 mph.

“Some chance,” Howard remarked to his reflection. “Never used to talk to you, did I?”

At that moment, the traffic ahead sped off. A hire truck, which had been in the lane to his right, now gathered enough momentum to swing into the impossibly tight gap that had opened in front of Howard, the vehicle’s backend fishtailing menacingly. Howard, along with several other drivers, was forced to brake and swerve. Horns blared and tires screeched.

Howard found himself unharmed, crawling along the hard shoulder, his hands welded to the steering wheel. Up ahead, he spotted a gateway with a sign that read, “No Entry for Motorway Traffic”. Howard, reluctant to fight his way back onto the motorway, ignored the sign and slipped through the forbidden opening.

His car climbed over a gentle rise and descended into some scrubby woodland beyond. Immediately, he felt his stress levels subside. The noise of the motorway magically segued into birdsong and, as he slipped the car into neutral, he thought he could hear sheep bleating in the distance. The patchwork of fields that lay before him took him straight back to childhood: holidaying in remote farmhouses in North Wales, chasing lackadaisical streams to dis-

cover where they bubbled up, distinctively Welsh in their lilt.

Encountering a slight gradient, Howard slipped the car back into gear and, breasting the rise, a farmhouse came into view. He headed for it, though why this should be his destination, he had no idea.

As he drew closer to the farm, a man stepped onto the track. Howard recalled the “No Entry” sign. The man was dressed casually in corduroy trousers and a sports jacket.

“I think I must have taken a wrong turn,” Howard confessed through his open window.

“No bother,” replied the man, in an accent Howard couldn’t quite place. “Where you headed?”

“Far from the madding crowd,” said Howard. For no apparent reason, some lines from Gray’s *Elegy*, learned back in childhood, had sprung into his head.

“Then bide a while,” said the man. “Leave your car here.”

“That’s very decent of you,” Howard said, uncurling his hands from the steering wheel.

The man led him round the back of the farmhouse into an old-fashioned kitchen with a range on one side and cupboards and dressers occupying the other walls. A large oak table stood in the middle, at which a woman, about the same age as the man, was mixing something in a large bowl.

“Found this chap outside, Maggie. Thought he’d like a cuppa.”

“Why, of course, Albert,” she said,

dropping her wooden spoon into the bowl and moving across to the range, where a kettle steamed expectantly.

Soon all three of them were sitting round the table, as though Howard were a neighbour who had just popped in. Next to his mug of tea was a plate heaped with slices of fruit cake and slabs of crumbly white cheese. He hadn’t meant to have any, but it smelt so delicious, and his hosts were already tucking in.

Not only was the cake their own but so was the cheese, he learned. It melted in his mouth as soon as it touched his tongue. Howard was told that the family had been there for several generations, farming the area long before the combustion-engine ruled the land.

After the tea, Albert gave Howard a tour. Before he knew it, an hour had passed. Howard tried to ring Eileen, his wife, but could get no signal, and Albert and Maggie had no house phone.

The next minute, Albert and Maggie were standing on the porch, waving him goodbye. He must have driven like an automaton because, the next thing he knew, he was home, greeting Eileen.

“You’re whistling,” she noted. “Haven’t heard you whistle in years.”

“So I am,” he replied, “Welby by name ...”

“...and well-be by nature!” They laughed at their old joke.

Howard passed her a bunch of carnations—an unusual gift from him, considering it wasn’t her birthday—and told her about his adventures. He felt like a

schoolkid returning from playing in the park. But as he spoke, he realised he'd hardly asked Albert and Maggie anything about themselves.

From that day, life seemed to change for Howard. His boss, Mr Johnson, was soon to be sacked for bullying. Nothing to do with Howard, but he was the beneficiary, being promoted to Area Manager. Howard was a popular choice, too, though he maintained that anyone would have been popular after Johnson.

While Howard enjoyed his elevated status, he was surprised to discover how much he missed life on the road. Consequently, he and Eileen began to take a weekly drive on his day off, which they both enjoyed.

Their adult daughter, Katie, was more cynical about these trips, which, she said, were all about rediscovering "Maggie's Farm", as she called it (although Howard didn't approve). "Ridiculous man!" she always declared. "He'll have had some sort of TIA and ended up on the hard shoulder, concussed and dreaming."

Eileen didn't concern herself with the cause. She was simply grateful that Howard was so happy with life, which made her happy too.

Over time, Howard talked less about "Maggie's Farm", albeit it was still on his mind. He and Eileen enjoyed six peaceful years, which had been ushered in by Johnson's departure and then consolidated by Katie's marriage. Before he knew it, Howard's own retirement came and went. Unfortunately, it was only three years later that Eileen found she had a tumour, which

proved inoperable. Their time together was suddenly precious.

When Eileen became bedridden, Howard locked his car in the garage. This act was more symbolic than anything, for he regularly had to break it out to run errands: collecting medical supplies, taxiing relatives and friends.

Coming back from one such journey, Howard couldn't resist a detour via Spaghetti Junction. It always energised him, even though those years on the road had been frenzied, with Johnson incessantly barking in his ear. He now recalled them with affection.

When Howard shunted the vehicle in front, he was the first to admit he'd not been concentrating. Fortunately, the driver had been sympathetic, realising that Howard was a man preoccupied. As they shook hands, details exchanged, the man left Howard on the hard shoulder. Howard was meant to follow suit, but his car wouldn't start. He couldn't even open the bonnet to check why. The shunt had jammed it. He called the AA, who told him to retire behind the safety barrier and wait.

In need of a pee, Howard walked down the road to where he espied some cover. He rang Eileen, too, to let her know about his delay, but not about the shunt.

After he'd relieved himself, he was about to return when he spotted a gateway further along. This was not unusual. Gateways beckoned wherever he went, raising his hopes that he'd rediscovered Maggie's Farm, only to find himself disappointed. However, he had time to kill, so

thought he'd explore.

This time, Howard wasn't mistaken. Although in his late sixties and overweight, he broke into a run when he became convinced that this was the gateway to the fabled farm. Once more, he felt the noise of the motorway fade as the birdsong gained in volume. Tears obscured his vision. If only Eileen were here!

This time, no one met him on the drive. He went straight up to the house, making his way to the back door, where he knocked excitedly. There was no reply. "Albert? Maggie?" he called. But, apart from the country sounds—the birds, the sheep, and a gentle breeze—there was only silence.

He gingerly tried the handle. The door opened and, once again, he was in that familiar kitchen, so long imprinted on his mind. The range was humming, giving the kitchen that cosy, nostalgic warmth that he had craved for so long. He was tempted to explore further but, looking at the time, he realised he should be getting back to his car and, more importantly, to Eileen. Reluctantly, he drew the door shut and retraced his steps.

As he exited the gateway, he looked back and tried to fix the spot in his mind. He returned to his car and climbed in to wait, forgetting the advice he'd been given.

A tapping noise on his window woke him: the AA, of course. The patrolman gently expressed his concern about Howard still being in his vehicle. He made Howard stand behind the barrier while he fixed his car, which took the man only a matter of minutes.

Once home, Howard quickly pulled off his coat and shouted through to Eileen. She now had her bed in the lounge, bedecked with medical equipment.

"Sorry I'm late," he apologised. "Cup of tea and I'll tell you all about it."

They sat and talked for hours. At least, Howard talked. Eileen smiled, savouring his excitement, which was itself a tonic.

The doctors and nurses thought so too, expressing great surprise, but delight as well, at Eileen's dramatic remission. She was even allowed out again, so they resumed their car journeys.

Howard thought he was being subtle, that Eileen wouldn't notice how, wherever they went, from the Cotswolds to the Forest of Dean, every journey included a detour round Spaghetti Junction. But Eileen was just happy to be alive and active.

Their relatives, too, were delighted at this new lease of life, which, they had to concede, seemed to be driven by Howard's enthusiasm for this mythical farm. No one else believed in it but, as long as it delivered its magic, they didn't really care.

Katie was the only one who persisted in puncturing her father's dreams. She'd previously confronted him with Google Maps, to prove that there were no farms in that area of motorway. Now she berated him for not securing any photographic evidence. Howard kicked himself. He'd forgotten that his phone had a camera. And why, Katie had wanted to know, hadn't he used his sat nav to get a bearing on the place?

"Twenty-first century, Dad?" she'd snorted. "And didn't the AA man *wake* you



at the roadside?” Katie was very accomplished at undermining him. “Ridiculous man!” she added.

Howard held his tongue. He still maintained that Albert and Maggie’s farm was out there, somewhere, and that, one day, he would find it again. He only wished Katie would have more trust in him, would indulge him in his convictions. Life, for her, sounded so grey, especially since, after a scant six months, she and her husband had separated.

Eileen’s remission continued longer than anyone dared hope. She had eighteen months of good health before rapidly going downhill. It was for the best, Howard said at the funeral. He appeared remarkably sanguine about it, and everyone was impressed with his positive demeanour. Katie maintained that he’d been a different man following his promotion, although she knew full well that the main reason lay elsewhere.

After he was widowed, Howard set about redecorating the front room, and then worked his way round the rest of the house, clearing out unwanted clutter. Some thought he was simply keeping himself occupied; others, that he was preparing to put the house up for sale. “But where will he go?” neighbours and relations asked, looking pointedly at Katie.

“No chance!” she’d assert.

Howard still had his car and kept it immaculately polished. You couldn’t tell that it had been in a shunt. And he still liked to go for a drive, although the car felt dreadfully empty nowadays, despite all the solitary hours he’d spent in vehicles down

the years. He explored every direction the roads would permit, but he was still drawn, inevitably, to the environs of Spaghetti Junction, its twists and loops, its highs and lows, its stops and starts.

On this particular day there were roadworks around the Junction, and Howard found himself in a long queue, the cones funnelling the vehicles from one side of the motorway to the other. He couldn’t see anyone working, but that was the way, of course: cones first, repairs later.

As he sat there, he recalled his travelling days, when the heels of his shoes were always the first things to wear out. His car had been his mobile office then, its interior festooned with post-its and fast-food detritus. Crazy times!

Howard realised he hadn’t been paying close attention for, as he looked about him, the congestion seemed to have dispersed. The cars ahead had pulled away without his noticing.

It was then he saw it: the gateway, just the other side of a row of cones. Without considering the consequences, he swung his car through the plastic phalanx, sending cones flying in all directions. He headed for the opening, tears of joy obscuring his vision.

Once again, he experienced that magical transition as he left behind the world of the motorway. Howard slipped the car into neutral and let it glide through the farmland, listening as the birdsong took over. Sheep stopped grazing and looked up as he passed. Cows followed suit. And there, yes, there was Albert, surely, by the side of the

drive, dressed as Howard remembered him: corduroy trousers, check shirt, old sports jacket.

“Hello Howard,” the farmer greeted him. “Haven’t seen you in a while.”

“You remember me!”

“Course we do. We were expecting you.”

“Really?” Howard had to wipe the tears

from his face. He climbed out of his car and followed Albert round the back of the farmhouse and into the kitchen.

“You made it,” said Maggie, looking up from the dough that she was kneading. The kitchen was the same. “Cup of tea?” It was as though he’d been there only last week. “Your room’s ready. Show him, Albert. I need to get this in the oven.”



Howard tried to protest but, on reflection, realised that he had little to go home for, and he did so love it here. His bedroom clinched it. It was up in the eaves, with swallows swooping outside. Albert showed him round the farm again, demonstrating how things worked. And, before Howard knew it, the three of them were sitting down to dinner.

It was a steak-and-kidney pie with new potatoes, carrots and garden peas. The food was fresh and colourful, earthy with flavour. Each mouthful carried Howard further and further back into his childhood. He could still recall eating his very first meat pie: the crunch of the pastry before it dissolved on his tongue, the rich gravy oozing round his teeth.

Howard looked up at Albert and Maggie, who now reminded him of his own parents. Once he almost called Maggie "Mummy". At the end of the evening, she saw him up to his bedroom to say good-night.

He slept peacefully and awoke fully rested, at one with the world, listening to the fledglings in the eaves. The only thing that troubled him was the thought of having to leave and return to his empty house.

He dressed and went downstairs, the smell of a fried breakfast drawing him into the kitchen. He entered, ready to greet Maggie. Then he physically staggered, upsetting a nearby chair.

"Eileen!" he gasped. Was he still dreaming? "What are you doing here, you're ...?" he couldn't bring himself to say it. Besides which, he didn't want to destroy the magic

of this moment, even if it was only a dream.

"Albert and Maggie had to go away," said Eileen in a matter-of-fact way. "Long time since I've done this," she commented, loading two plates with bacon and eggs. "They asked if we'd look after the place."

"Of course," said Howard, in a daze. He would go along with anything, however bizarre. It was, after all, a dream come true. What could he say but, "You're looking well, Mrs Welby," and await her reply.

#

Katie, who had never reverted to her more propitious maiden name, seemed to take things quite calmly when the police told her about the accident. Her father's car, festooned in traffic cones, had been found, wedged halfway up the bank of the motorway's hard shoulder.

Katie told them that, since her mother's death, he had been putting his affairs in order, and she feared he might be planning something like this. "Ridiculous man!" she added.

But no sooner had she said this than her face crumpled. Her tears ran freely. The young PC looked on, embarrassed, and reached for the tissues he'd been advised to carry for such occasions. ❖

# “MOTHER, FEED ME”

by SUZANNE HALMI

Mother is feeding a group of travelers out of her caravan when the three horsemen ride up. They are dressed as gentlemen, in leather and silk: one, gorgeous in green; another, in red; the third, in white. The first, in green, calls out, “Hey, mother, we’ll have some of that!” and the other two laugh as the travelers with their bowls, some still empty, fall back lest the horses trample them into the earth from which they have come. They don’t make a sound, the travelers, mute and weary, wary of strangers. The ones with her stew in their bowls turn away to eat, quickly fading from the edges of the crowd as the glorious horsemen crowd in, and the horses prance and snort. A whip is raised in jest, and the gathering of travelers is gone. She is alone with the horsemen.

She takes out three bowls from her cabinet, fills them, and passes them one by one to each man who takes his eagerly. They eat ferociously, as if they haven’t eaten in days, weeks, years, and pass the bowls back quickly for more. They eat all the food she’d made for the travelers. They wipe their mouths with the backs of their beautiful gloves, and sigh, still on horseback, but never still. The horses seem to shimmer they move so much, and the men are animated, their faces alive and alight, their

eyes dancing, their mouths eating, smiling, talking.

“Ah, mother,” the one in red sighs.

“Mother,” the one in white says.

“My sons,” she says, shaking her head wryly, amused.

The one in green flies to the top of the caravan and shrieks his delight in his return. His feathers are sleek and green. His brother leaps from the back of the horse into the back of the caravan to curl up on a pillow at the head of her little bed, cleaning his red-orange fur. And the one in white slides awkwardly from the saddle, his paws scrabbling for purchase, to land with a thump and a woof. He comes to her and she fondles his canine ears, his soft brown eyes meeting hers with adoration. She speaks to him softly, lovingly, like the baby he once was, cradled in her arms.

She ties the horses to the rear of the caravan and sets off for the next town, a large one where she knows a man who will buy the horses from her without asking any questions. As she ties them, she uses a little spittle and her thumb on a fleck of blood here and there, splattered on the saddles. She and her sons wait a little, to see if any of the travelers will return, in any form, but after a while, they grow bored of waiting, and set out. It is only when they have been

on the road for a couple of hours that Bill, still perched on the roof, informs her that they have company.

It is a small doe, her eyes huge in her delicate face, her brown fur still spotted slightly with white, walking after them hesitantly, fearfully, worry in every step.

Mother Eidel smiles. "Here is your home, little one," she says as she climbs down and approaches the doe. "Your only home, your best home, your last home," she sings, carrying the soft rope. She knows her sons like venison, and won't this be the loveliest stew of all? A welcome home present for her boys.

But the doe seems to sense that Mother is not going to be helpful, and she backs up a little, her huge brown eyes fixed on Mother. She hesitates, obviously torn between Mother and her song, the promise of a home for a weary traveler, and the fear of a trap. Mother is amused, and shows it, and the deer, rightly interpreting Mother's amusement with a chill of foreboding, leaps toward the woods and bounds away with her tail high.

Mother and her sons laugh.

\*

The doe runs. Even with her heart pounding, she feels something for this new body. She runs fast, and there is a joy in how fleet she is, now that she is a deer.

Her husband sits where she left him, propped against a tree. He welcomes her back with a sigh and places a hand on her nose when she nudges him. He shakes his head. She nudges him again and again, trying to make him understand, but he only

shakes his head and pushes her gently away. He has not eaten in a very long time. He made her eat his bowl of stew. He is dying. She can smell it on him.

His heart was never strong, and he is much older than she is. Among their people, a young woman's first husband is an older man, just as young men's first wives are older women. Their lives are hard on the road and the old suffer, but not so much as they would if they had no one to care for them. It is their way of life, and the doe stands near her dying husband and feels in her heart the tears she can't shed.

When he is gone, she feels she is waiting for something, but there is nothing, and nothing she can do. She has no hands, no voice. She trembles with anger and fear. She must do something or go mad. It only takes a twitch of a muscle and she is off through the forest, her new body nearly flying as she remembers the way to the next town, a town her people had left in shame and sorrow, as hungry upon leaving as they'd been upon entering.

She pauses along the way to eat, feeling the irony of it: now that she is an animal, an animal her husband refused to eat to save his own life, there is food everywhere for her. She eats all sorts of lovely green plants and grasses. It is all delicious, and very satisfying. She feels better than she has in a long time.

Eating, she considers her position. She is a doe, and therefore, at risk. How at risk? Her ears seem ready at any moment for the whistle of an arrow through the air, plunging into her new flesh. Very much at risk.

It would be better, she thinks, to head into a deeper part of the forest, to find, perhaps, other deer, and take cover with them. Would they know—would they be able to tell?

But she is not so completely “deer” that she has forgotten her other self, weak and pale, drooping as they moved along the dusty roads, carrying the small bundle of blankets that was all they had of a home. They belonged to no place. Now, that bundle lies behind her husband’s back, and she has no need of blankets. She tries to harden her heart to that bundle...but her mind will not let her forget. She carries within her a baby, and the child cannot be born only to die.

She will not let her child be meat in someone’s stew.

She does not let herself think for one moment, not one, that the child might not be born human. Was not the child the child of the mother? In her heart and mind, she’s human. She did not carry a deer-child. Her mind revolted at the thought.

And so, carefully, she makes her way toward the town. She keeps off the road, formerly a small highway, and the abandoned metal caravans, glad to take advantage of her coloring for camouflage. There is a lot of garbage in the weeds and thickets, the small trees broken by storms that sweep fiercely into any open area and carry destruction in wide-open arms. She sees a skeleton, clearly visible in its makeshift, hardscrabble grave. She moves away from it to relieve herself, staring at the old bones.

There are stories she’s heard, about the wanderers before the begin-again, how they’d preyed on women and children, snatched them from their warm beds, and murdered them in the cold, dark night, leaving their poor, broken, half-eaten bodies in shallow graves anywhere. The tale-teller would pause in her tale, face alight from the flames of the hot fire around which they all sat, together and safe, and indicate the darkness beyond the heat and the light. Out there, she would say, the wanderers howl, looking for more victims.

The children, later, would lie in their blankets and whisper their questions to each other. They knew that no adult would answer directly. Were the wanderers human? Were there any more wanderers out there? And, truly, did they eat their prey?

The doe picks her way through the thickets and keeps a careful watch for any humans or animals. Who knows, now, if they might not be one and the same? She had not known there was such magic in the world. She had thought, they had all thought, when they grew older, the stories were untrue. But, of course, the hunger had been too great for caution. The woman, who had said to call her “mother,” had seemed like a mother, a gentle, caring soul who saw them as people...but that had been the real untruth.

Soon enough, too soon, perhaps, she starts to see people on the road, trudging soundlessly onward. They are not her people, but they are like her people. They have no caravans and no food. They carry all

they own on their backs, and it is not much. The town comes into view, first a few houses, and then the rows. She cannot be seen, and so she hangs back and begins to circle the edge of the town, looking for the places where trees and bushes grow up thickly enough to hide her. It takes her nearly until dusk to find some, and then she is so weary that she edges her way into the thicket, descends to the ground with her front and back legs tucked under her, and falls asleep. She is awake at the slightest sound, she stands and shifts and sleeps again, all through the night.

In the dawn's weak light, the doe stands in the crowded thicket, lowers her head, and breathes out heavily, making a slight whuffing noise. From her, it is a sigh, both of relief that she is still alive, and also one of sorrow. She is not a deer, she tells herself. Here she is, up in the light, not skulking about in the dark as real deer would, prey for everyone. She is human, and she misses her husband, and fears for her child. She moves through the thicket, eating what she can find, trying to think. It is hard to think when there is food lying about, waiting to be eaten, and she has been so hungry for so long. So hungry, she was surprised she could conceive a child. So hungry, that her husband had fed her at his own cost. So hungry, that he died.

But it is hard to be grateful, she thinks, when she is meant to be food.

She remembers the bright green caravan that Mother drove, and her sturdy brown pony with a blond mane. She can find them. Now that she is a deer, she can-

not see all the colors, but she can see green. Green is everywhere in this deer world, and she eats and eats green as she moves quietly about the thicket. It is hard to leave the thicket, when there is so much to eat. She thinks, I will stay here until I have finished it all. After all, it is better for the child.

\*

When she awakens, it is dark. She is lying on her stomach, with her legs and her arms folded under her. She feels pain in her limbs before she realizes what has happened to her.

She rolls over onto her side and then her back, stretching out, looking up through the branches at the night sky. There is a sliver of a pale moon overhead, and she stares at it, unblinking, until her eyes water. Then, she weeps into the crook of her elbow, lying there in the thicket, naked and alone.

\*

Mother is feeding her children. Her bird-son caws as he flies down and settles at the dish she's set out for him. Her cat-son rubs her legs as she bends to place his dish before him, and her dog-son's tail wags so hard that it feels as if he is whipping her legs in his delight. She sits down to watch them eat, pretending to eat herself. She doesn't like this food—she will almost never touch it—she is old enough that she remembers something better, the food from when she was a child.

Then, there were whole roasted chickens and turkeys, mashed potatoes and gravy, hamburgers and hotdogs, spaghetti and meatballs, tacos and General Tso's.

She was small, but her mother let her push the cart through the store and laughed when she saw the treats she'd sneaked into the basket. Sugar, sugar, sugar everywhere. So many flavors. Chocolate. Spices. And then so many of the crops struggled and died. Should the farmers feed the cattle or people? The products of the fields stayed close to home, to feed the local people. Now, there is some food, but it is very expensive. Too many people to feed, and not enough food. Has that not ever been the sorrow of the world?

Her sons stand up and pull on their clothes. They look sleepy. Bill, now dressed in green, says, "The sun will go down soon." He whips a blanket from the pile she keeps in the cupboard and heads upstairs to the attic with its broken window. He will not use the blanket; he only takes it from habit: she is losing him to his bird-ness. He will be up before dawn looking for his breakfast, changing into his bird form as quickly as he can so that he can take wing and seek out the food that now suits him best. She knows he will leave his brothers before long. Idly, she wonders if Felix, her cat-son, has thought much about his bird brother. It would not be odd, if something were to happen. She has seen what Felix does to mice.

Toby, her dog-son, starts to say something and it comes out as a woof. Felix laughs. "The night is young," he says, coming to wind his arms around her and rub his head against hers in an approximation of affection. "I'll be off, Mother."

"I know," she says, smiling. There is

something about Felix that bothers her, and she is glad when he leaves the small house, to seek whatever it is that his nature drives him to look for in the night. The door closes behind him and Toby says, "Good riddance."

Gathering up the dishes, she says, "He is your brother."

"He is my brother," Toby says, "but I do not want him to come home."

As she washes the dishes and Toby sits before the fire in the small hearth, thinking, no doubt, of what he could do to Felix were he to choose. She, herself, thinks about these boys. They are her sons, and they are not her sons. She fed them as children, from her caravan, but when they took animal forms, they were small—a tiny bird, a kitten, a puppy. She, who remembers so much, remembered herself as a child, and she gathered them in, and kept them. There is not much to eat in a small bird or a cat, and little more than that in a dog. The cost of feeding them while they grew was not worth what one would gain. And yet, she had gained. She likes the company. She likes the children.

But, now they're grown, she wearies of them. Toby is fine, yet, a nice boy, a young man, really, but Bill and Felix... She sometimes feels as if it would be better for them to go out into the world on their own, seek their own fortunes, as in the fairy tales her mother read to her so long ago. The two younger sons, setting out... Toby can stay. She touches his head, his soft brown hair, as she passes him, ready to curl up, man or dog, on the hearth rug, as she gets her own



bed ready for sleep. He is protection, too, when it might be needed.

She hears Toby's snarl at almost the same time she hears the soft clunk from the yard. She is awake in an instant, her heart pounding. One day, people will discover her secret. One day, they will take up torches and come for her. She throws back the covers and with shaking hands lights the lamp next to her bed. "Shush, Toby," she whispers, and the boy falls silent, tensed and ready to spring. "I'll go look. Maybe it's Felix."

She knows it isn't Felix. She pulls a sweater over her nightdress and moves the bar to open the door. The night is black and nearly moonless. Not a single star glimmers in the firmament. She moves down the steps and into the yard where her caravan stands beneath its tarp. Another soft clunk, and she knows where it comes from. Softly, she whistles, and Toby appears at her side. Together, they approach the caravan, halting as the tarp moves and a figure emerges, hardly distinguishable from the night, one moment creeping, the next, frozen, as it realizes it is not alone.

"Please," a girl's whisper moves through the night. "It was you, wasn't it? I've looked at so many caravans today. Yours is green. I'm so hungry..."

"Mother?" Toby asks quietly.

"Come into the house," she says.

Inside, she pokes the fire higher, and sets a dish of stew on the table. The girl hesitates and then slides into the chair, gulping the food down. When she is done, she stares into the empty bowl as if in

shame. "Will I...?"

Mother does not answer. She turns to tell Toby to secure the yard.

He is staring at the girl.

\*

At night, around the fire, the storytellers of the wanderers would start to speak. There were no young storytellers, only old. All the stories began the same way, "Fifty years ago..." And then they would tell a story about how it used to be, when the world was filled with food for people, all kinds of food. She would snuggle into her mother's arms, her father's jacket, her husband's body, for warmth and comfort as she listened to the old say the words that meant nothing to her: sugar cookies, chocolate cake, arugula salad, orange juice, avocado. She did not salivate, as many of the old did, without even noticing what they did. She listened and wondered, so used to hunger that until she felt weak, she did not even consider it a problem.

The child in her belly changed that. Creeping naked from the thicket on the edge of town at dawn, she hated her hunger. What could she do? She must feed herself and feed the baby. She stole a dress that was too small, and fled along the back alleys and broken sidewalks, searching everywhere, all day, for the green caravan. She would not let herself think, what if they were not here? Nor yet, what do I want from them?

It was long after dusk when she pushed open the gate left ajar and entered the yard with its covered caravan. She knew, even

without light, that here was the one she sought. But in the vehicle, itself, she found nothing. Some dried herbs, but no dried scrap of meat, no vial of poison created by the witch. She curled up on the mattress for some time, too tired to cry any tears. Finally, she got up, and climbed back down into the yard, where they found her.

Now, she is sated, her belly filled with meat. She feels a little sick. The young man stares at her, and the witch stares at him. He comes to where she sits at the table, and sits down on the floor next to her, looking up at her with soft brown eyes. She does not know what is expected of her; nervously, she places her hand on his head. He shuffles himself closer and lays his head on her lap. She is terrified. She is trapped.

The woman gives her a blanket and indicates the bed in the corner, and then she gently pushes the young man's head away and points to the rug on the hearth. He moves away from them to take a seat there, but he watches the girl silently, intently, as she climbs into the bed with the blanket and is joined by the woman who wraps herself in her own blanket and closes her eyes. The man extinguishes the lamp and settles himself in his own blanket on the rug by the fire.

She is awakened by a man with red hair. He sits on the end of the bed, watching her. At the stove, she can see the brown-haired man in serious discussion with the woman. She draws the blanket up, wishing she could flee, but already she smells the food cooking, and she cannot help herself.

The meal is stew again, and they watch her eat. The woman serves, and doesn't eat, but the men fall to, including the black-haired one who comes down the stairs with a graceful swoop into the small, hot kitchen.

She doesn't know when the change occurs, but she can suddenly smell everything, including the scent of fear.

\*

"You said she was a doe, Mother," Felix says, and then he is a cat again, jumping for the top of the table. Toby is whining softly with excitement, but Bill flies to the top of the door, and settles there, voicing his displeasure with her and their guest. The guest who is now a dog. She is a lovely dog, and Mother carefully approaches her, holding out her hand, taking a big chance that the bitch will not bite her. And she does not, so Mother caresses the silky fur of her head and ears, and the dog seems to like it. She huddles closer to Mother when Toby tries to move next to her.

Mother is not sure what to make of this situation. Perhaps she was wrong, and the girl is not the doe who followed them the day before. Bill, Felix, and Toby have taken the same form, aging as they aged, but not so much as their human form aged, since they were small children. This girl, how is she a dog today, a doe yesterday? Mother feels a surge of curiosity she hasn't known in a long time. She takes the dog's face in her hands and smiles down at her. The dog whines softly.

But Mother is afraid of what might happen if the bitch stays in the house, and

so she fills a bowl with stew and carries it out to the caravan, setting it inside, and so lures the bitch into her jail. The howls that follow Mother back to the house are filled with the bitterness of betrayal, and Toby looks at her reproachfully, but, faithful son, remains as obedient as ever.

Mother goes to sleep that night with the sound of the howls in her ears, although the doe-girl-bitch fell silent at least an hour before.

\*

When the girl awakens, she is human again. She stretches her limbs and sits on the edge of the mattress. The caravan is quite comfortable, and she looks around curiously while dressing in a combination of male and female garb. The dress is short, for the old woman is tiny, and the breeches are too large, but she makes them work, and pulls her hair back in a thick plait that lies over her shoulder. She's hungry, but she is willing to be patient. Mother surprised her the night before, but really, when she thinks about it, she should have known the old woman would lock her out of the house, what with the canine son.

The caravan is old, but the contents are neatly organized. Even in her distress at being locked up the night before she had not done anything to mess it up—she'd been careful to relieve herself on a pile of rags under the table, although now she regrets that. There is, in the small space, quite a lot: a bed, a table, a chair, a stove, pots and pans hanging from the ceiling along with dried herbs in canisters and other assorted ingredients that she does not

recognize. Can she eat any of it just as it is? She sighs. As a deer, she'd known instinctively what she could and could not eat, and food had been abundant. She plucks a tiny bit of fragrant dried greens from a canister with the figure of a man wearing winged sandals, and nibbles at it. It is so bitter. It is not worth the trouble, she decides, but she eats a little more before she closes the tin and replaces it on its shelf. There is writing on the tins, but, of course, she cannot read.

The old woman finally appears. She is allowed into the house, to the table in the kitchen set with food. She is so hungry that she feels faint, confronted with the meal. The young man is there, and the two others. She remembers them from the road, their arrogance on horseback, but she is here to eat, not talk, and she falls to her meal with a ferociousness that makes the family laugh at her.

When she is done, she asks, "What will I become this time?" for she is not afraid of the changes anymore.

Again, the family laughs at her. "We shall have to see," the old woman tells her. "Later."

And so, she must wait. The old woman puts her to work. She does all the washing up from breakfast, she sweeps the house, and mops up the floors, a kerchief over her hair as she cleans the one room upstairs that a bird has been roosting in. She is fed again at midday and again at supper, although midday is too little to keep her long and she asks the old woman for a crust of something. The old woman stares

at her but hands her a thick slice of bread and a knife to use on the butter in the crock. What riches this family has! she marvels, her mouth full of bread and butter. She has never tasted fresh butter, nor, very often, had fresh bread. But here there is everything anyone could want.

After dinner, she dozes off at the table, weary from her chores. When she awakens, she is lying on her side on the floor, near the warm hearth. She gets up and stretches. The family is staring at her, but she does not care. Her next thought is that she does not wish to spend the night in the caravan, and she leaps toward the open window and is gone in a flash, aware of a brief burst of sound from behind her as she runs for the fence and the small opening which seems to call to her feline nature. She is out on the streets in a matter of seconds, free.

Freedom, though, is a matter of opinion. Her freedom does not last long. The toms are out, too, and she spends an hour dodging them before she races for the fence hole again and is back in the yard. But there are no lights on in the house, and she is worried that a tom will soon come through the hole, or over the fence, after her. She circumnavigates the house and finds an old trellis, somewhat rotted, but covered with vines. A slight sound behind her startles her, and she climbs as if her life depends on it. At the top, she finds the window wide open, and jumps lightly to the floor. She knows this floor—she spent the day mopping it. The door, though, is closed, and her paws will not allow her to open it.

In the dark, she can see very well, and her sense of smell is so heightened she is glad that she cannot usually smell the world as it truly seems to be. Even though she thought she'd cleaned this room so well, so thoroughly, she can once again smell bird droppings, and the smell makes her angry...but also hungry. She looks everywhere, and finds the bird sleeping, his head beneath his wing, hidden on a rafter she can just reach if she jumps from the fireplace mantel.

After her meal, she cleans herself, sneezes out a single feather, and settles down to sleep on the cold hearth.

\*

When Mother comes looking for Bill, she finds only the girl and evidence of her deed. She beats the naked girl with her broom, and pulls her hair, until Felix and Toby pull her off. They are not very concerned with the loss, and they give the girl her clothes and some breakfast while Mother weeps in her bed. She had not thought she'd be so sorry, but here she is. She remembers, painfully, how he used to sit in her hand and take tiny worms from her fingers, his soft coos, his first joyful leap into the air, aloft at last. Bill...gone.

And in his place, this girl. She does not feel anything but anger for the girl and wishes she'd gotten rid of her when she had the chance. She fantasizes that she burned the caravan to the ground with the bitch inside. But she'd thought herself clever, and set the girl to cleaning the house for her meals. Old Mother, not clever at all.

She can hear the girl weeping, too, when she is told what she's done. But her sons talk her around, and when Mother emerges from her bed, Toby is eager for Mother to like the girl, while Felix watches them all lazily, hiding whatever it is he truly feels.

Mother wants the girl to go, but she sees it is too late. She must kill her or accept her. The girl, rejected, would bring the world down upon their heads, and now Mother thinks about protecting her sons.

She also thinks about how strange the girl's transformations have been, how they are not like any that Mother has ever known. She tells Toby and Felix to take the girl to the shops, buy her what she needs, and when they have gone, she goes down to the cellar.

She chose this house carefully, when first she came to this town, for its age, and now she smells the cold, packed soil of the alcove in the wall at the rear of the room, created to store potatoes and other food-stuffs needing the cold before there were refrigerators. Mother sits at the small table in the cellar, staring at her lantern, and allows herself a moment of the past intruding into this present.

In her mind, she is young, about fifteen, she is pretty, and healthy, and looking for a snack while her show on the television is paused between scenes. She remembers that she was always hungry. She walks through her parents' house to the kitchen, to the refrigerator, and opens the door, looking inside for something to eat, its harsh white light and low hum surrounding

her head. She touches the plastic containers, pulls the cream cheese out of its drawer, turns to the counter for a bagel, a knife from the block, the toaster... Mother opens her eyes and shakes her head. Food was simple for her, then. She was hungry, and she ate. If there were moral and ethical decisions to be made about food, she did not have to make them.

Now, Mother must make her own food from scratch. That's how she thinks about it, "from scratch." She does not consider what she does evil, and she tells herself that she does what she must to survive, and in doing so, she helps others to survive, too. She sells meat to the butchers, and she is a wonder to them at their backdoors.

However, they do not wish her to come in at the front.

Mother gets up and begins to mix her seasoning. A little of this, a little of that. Her secret ingredient. Oregano and thyme (hard to come by these days—she must grow them herself) for flavor. The man who taught her how to do this (who had saved her and used her—seemingly the same thing to him), had called himself a philosopher as well as a cook. He loved to talk, and at first, she had loved to listen. She thought later that he'd chosen her because she was so young, because she knew nothing, and he could talk and talk without her ever knowing anything with which to parry his statements. When some years had gone by, though, she found her voice, and he found another girl. But, with her voice, she'd found some agency, and they'd ended up pork and veal, those two.

His philosophy (so-called) had stayed with her, though. When everything had fallen apart, he told her, and so many had starved, those who had long denigrated science praised the famines that swept the globe and caused so much death and ruin. The end was upon them. Well, that had been true for many of them. But he survived, since he'd been a clever cook (and aren't most cooks clever? he'd ask her) and knew there was more to eat in the world than what you could find on a grocery store shelf. He'd foraged and stored and made it through the worst of the times. Of course, meat was hardest of all to come by, and so he'd set himself to the task at hand. If science had failed humanity, and so many said it had that it must be so, then humanity must need to turn to magic. After all, he didn't believe in any god. The same sleight of hand that had made him a wizard at everything from cassoulet to croissants now held him in good stead. He had no wand such as Circe had, when she'd made swine of Odysseus' greedy sailors, but he had the same kind of artistry and insight into human souls, and thus he'd made his recipe, and used it.

His first, he told her, (and one always remembered their first), was a man who came to his door on his own accord, looking to steal. Rather than drive him away, the cook had invited him in, fed him, conversed with him. But in the course of their meandering conversation, the cook found his new friend to be quite uncongenial, his political views scattered among the very worst of the conspiracy theorists, and so

when the man turned into a rabbit, he'd been surprised and gladdened. The second he recalled only because she'd made a lovely coq au vin.

After that, it was merely a matter of organization and getting the process right. It was he who'd set up the first caravan and gone out on the road, since it would hardly go unnoticed if his neighbors were to disappear, one after the other. But it was quite another to make a traveler disappear into a stock pot, a stew pot, a pot au feu. He'd never seen the same traveler more than once, although, if truth be told, he rarely looked at them as individuals. He thought, he told her, that he was doing something rather good for humanity. He fed the travelers, he fed the townspeople. He fed himself and he fed her. And, he said, smiling, a contented, self-satisfied man getting on in years, wasn't that what he'd become a cook for in the first place?

It was too bad, she thinks, that she'd made bacon of him, since she'd quite like to talk to him about this new problem, this girl, this...shape-shifter. For what else was she, other than some magical being, called into their lives through their deeds. Retribution seems at hand, Mother thinks, and Mother is an old hand at it. She goes to her shelves and begins to take down a bottle from this end, and a bottle from that, lost in contemplation of *\_philosophie de cuisine\_*.

\*

For her part, the girl is sad she ate the bird. She is still coughing up feathers and she feels slightly queasy when Mother

makes chicken and dumplings for dinner and bids her pluck the bird in the yard prior to dumping it into the pot over the fire. The girl knows the chicken has come from the butcher's. She is not so naive anymore. She brings the naked chicken into the kitchen and then takes up the broom, as if she could ever make up for what she'd done. She tells herself that she didn't know what she was doing, when she was a cat, when she was a dog, a doe.

But she is only fooling herself. Hadn't she known the bird would be there, since she'd had to clean his befouled nest that very day? And was Bill a man, or a bird? She can hear her husband's voice in her head, "Does form dictate content?" telling her about life-before, and all the mistakes everyone had made.

"You're very good at sweeping," Felix says, coming into the kitchen to sit at the table, all languor and amusement.

"She can do a lot," Toby agrees from his stool by the door, eager to praise her.

"She can set the table," Mother says, throwing the dumplings into the pot on top of the bubbling chicken.

Now that she can smell the chicken, she feels weak with hunger. She'd snuck into the caravan to eat some more dried herbs, but that was not enough to satisfy her. She puts out the bowl, the spoons, the cups that she fills with water from the jug. Felix tugs at her skirt each time she passes him, not enough for her to object, but enough to make his intentions clear.

"What will you change into tonight?" Toby asks, all avid interest, as they gather at

the table and Mother dishes the food into their bowls. "We've never seen another like you, you know," he says, even as Felix and Mother frown at him, freezing in their motions. "You're a marvel," Toby continues, unaware or uncaring of his family's disapproval.

A marvel. That was what her husband had called her. Marvel, my dear. He'd married her for her lovely eyes, he told her. No color, she'd said. All-colors, he'd replied. She'd loved him, but he refused to give her a child. We're alone in this world, he told her. One day, you'll find a child who needs a mother, and you'll be that mother. You'll be whoever you have to be. But I won't be part of inflicting this world on a baby. And even though she'd loved him, she'd left his bed and went into another's, and so got her baby without his help. He never even knew, she thought sadly, as she raises her spoon to her lips. He never knew what a marvel she really is.

She eats all the chicken in her bowl and takes another dumpling from the pot. She pats Toby's head, his soft silky fur beneath her fingers as she eats. Felix makes a sound half-way between a shriek and a laugh, and flees the house when Toby growls at him, real menace in it. The dog gives chase into the night.

The girl wonders what it was the old woman put into the food. She smells the cooking pot and dips her finger into the delicious mess that still clings inside. She tastes it carefully and considers. There are flavors here she can't identify, but she thinks that she might be able to, if she

tries. She sits down across from Mother. “I want to learn,” the girl tells her. “You’ll teach me.” If this food can make such astounding changes, and a new one is now coming upon her, her mouth is filled with sharp teeth, it must have other, less diaboli-

cal, powers yet to be found. She wants this to be true.

It cannot all be dog-eat-dog. ❖

**END TRANSMISSION**