



Page 1 – THE UNIVERSE IN BALANCE by Walt Trizna. The author writes, “I am a former scientist having spent 34 years in research and have been writing for 20 years. My publications include a novel, *New Moon Rising*, published by Mélange Books. This publisher also published my novella, *Elmo’s Sojourn*, as an eBook and in a print anthology. I have also had published numerous short stories.”

Page 5 – FILTER by Becky Neher. Ms Neher is published in *So Fi Zine*, *Friday Flash Fiction*, *365tomorrows*, *Idle Ink*, *Microfiction Monday Magazine*, *Scribes*MICRO*Fiction* and *Stupefying Stories*. “Filter” earned an honorable mention in *Allegory* (vol. 44/71).

Page 8 – WESTERN WOODS by Ryan Love. The author writes, “My writing has previously been published in [Alternate Route] Magazine. Currently, I work for an Austin, Texas based technology company, as well as hold public office in San Mateo County, California.”

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“THE UNIVERSE IN BALANCE”

by WALT TRIZNA

God does not play dice with the universe.

— Albert Einstein

God not only plays dice; he also sometimes throws the dice where they cannot be seen.

— Stephen Hawking

Prof. Maxwell Lowman sat in his MIT office deep in thought. It was mid-afternoon, the blinds were lowered and closed creating the setting he desired. The sole illumination a reading lamp on his desk, a desk littered with books, research papers and correspondence. His office, lined with bookshelves contained works reflecting his eclectic interests running from poetry to the latest volumes in astrophysics.

With his salt and pepper eyebrows and mane of unruly gray hair he looked every part of the college professor. Lowman was an expert on the ‘Big Bang’, as if anyone could claim that title, he often thought. An expert. Might as well be an expert on heaven. Another doctrine born of conjecture. He often mused, “Why did the ‘Big Bang’ take place? How did it give birth to the universe? Questions yet to be solved. And to some, the answers relying on faith. The same as the existence of heaven. But unlike heaven, there was proof, in theory, that the

‘Big Bang’ did take place but for what reason did the universe exist? The question of why the universe came into existence is unanswerable. How is a matter of conjecture.

Lowman’s mind continued on a journey he had come to enjoy. Where some unknown force, some would call God, held hands with science. How could the universe come into existence from nothing? He tried to imagine space before the ‘Big Bang’. Nothing existed. Time did not exist. Light did not exist. Before the ‘Big Bang’ did space exist. Some thought, before the ‘Big Bang’ space did not exist but then unfolded. Did anything come before the existence of nothing. He spent hours musing over these questions thinking, that perhaps, science could not and should not answer everything. Some mystery should remain.

Lowman was conducting his first graduate class of the semester covering the ‘Big Bang’. His lecture would be full of theory, but in reality, no answers. During the course of his lectures he encouraged questions. And these questions would determine the structure of his future lectures. And this year, with the important upcoming experiment, he wanted to introduce

the Higgs boson.

During his lecture, one of his favorite pupils from the past year, Joe Hess, raised his hand and asked, “The ‘Big Bang’ is a mystery to me.”

Lowman said, “Well, you are not alone.”

Hess continued, “We know it happened, or else we wouldn’t be here. But where did all the matter in the universe come from?”

Lowman anticipated this question for it was asked every year. He began pacing along the front of the lecture hall to organize his thoughts for opinions were constantly changing. He began, “Stephen Hawking has a relatively new theory that all matter in the universe was created by the ‘God Particle’. In 1964 Peter Higgs predicted the existence of the Higgs boson which, in a book written by Leon Lederman, was referred to as the ‘God Particle’. The boson is central to our understanding of the structure of all matter”.

Lowman anticipated Joe’s next question, “But where did the ‘God Particle’ come from?”

“That, young man, is the question which remains unanswered. The theory is that the ‘God Particle’ populated the entire universe in the smallest fraction of a second at a speed far beyond the speed of light. Of course, it is accepted that nothing can exceed the speed of light, but we must remember, that when this occurred light did not exist. Time did not exist, so anything is possible. When the ‘Big Bang’ occurred, it is theorized that the universe

consisted of equal parts of dark matter, which is now accepted to exist, and visible matter. For reasons unknown, the amount of visible matter surpassed the amount of dark matter. And that is the reason that the universe – stars, black holes and you and I – exist.

Lowman concluded his lecture by telling the class, “I am sure you are aware that tomorrow a unique experiment will be conducted. It will attempt to duplicate the material which existed immediately following the ‘Big Bang’. And perhaps create the particle which existed at the moment of the ‘Big Bang’, the ‘God Particle’. He concluded the lecture, and as the class exited the lecture hall, erased the white board of his lecture notes. One fact he saved for his future lecture was that the universe was expanding not contracting as was originally thought. So rather contracting to the point of, perhaps, another ‘Big Bang’ it will expand into single atoms wandering in space. Nature destroyed along with all the balance which once existed. It made no sense.

Lowman made his way to his office, excitement in his step. His anticipation of tomorrow’s experiment filled his mind with the possibilities it may contribute to understanding the birth of the universe. He would be counting the hours, the minutes until the experiment was initiated. Wondering at the knowledge to be revealed. It was an experiment in which MIT was a participant, along with a host of other prestigious institutions from all over the world. Prompted by his excitement, he

scheduled a meeting with Dr. Volachek, head of the Physics Department, to share his enthusiasm. With a few hours before the meeting was to take place, he returned to the solitude of his office to contemplate what tomorrow's experiment might reveal. Now he raised the blinds to the dismal gray of the winter's afternoon.

While sitting at his desk, his eyes wandered over the bookcases lining the walls of his office. He had a love for books since he was a child. During his youth they were his entertainment, and as he grew older, his source of knowledge. He enjoyed being among the thoughts and ideas of the great minds contained in these volumes. Now, with tomorrow's experiment, he may be witness to a great advancement in the understanding of the universe. The answers to questions great minds had pondered.

With the Hubble telescope and a host of great technologies being developed, questions were being answered and knowledge being gained more rapidly than ever before. The discovery of dark energy and dark matter, once radical concepts, have changed the science of physics. The question is, why does this mysterious dark matter and energy exist? Lowman sat in his office with the only sound the ticking of the old clock sitting on his bookshelf.

As the time of his meeting with Dr. Volchek drew close he donned his overcoat, and through the crisp winter afternoon, made his way to the dean's office. He had known Dr. Volchek for years. The dean was a good friend and knowledgeable

colleague. He entered the office and Dr. Volchek rose and welcomed him with a handshake. "Good to see you, Max. Glad to have someone with whom to share the excitement of tomorrow's experiment."

Lowman answered, "I just hope nothing goes wrong. It is an extremely complicated endeavor. This is an international effort with billions of dollars invested. Failure would be heartbreaking."

The dean replied, "With every experiment there is a risk. But even a failure can produce knowledge. Now relax. Just look forward to the progress we may make in understanding the mysteries of our universe. Tomorrow that device nicknamed, The Hand of God, with gold atoms racing into one another to achieve unbelievable temperatures, will hopefully cause protons and neutrons to break apart into quarks and the gluon particles which hold the quarks together. And then, we hope, the quark - gluon plasma will duplicate the densest material ever created. The material which existed at or immediately after the 'Big Bang'. Perhaps a Higgs boson. What a mighty contribution to physics that would be. Creating the material unknown to the universe for 18 billion years."

That night, at home, his mind was like a whirling dervish. At dinner Max's wife, Martha, could feel the excitement her husband generated. She said, "Max, calm down. You're going to make yourself sick. Indigestion will not help you appreciate tomorrow."

"You're right, Martha. You're right."

They finished dinner and spent the

remainder of the evening reading. Later, as Martha prepared for bed, Max lie there, his mind working furiously. Once Martha was in bed, she turned off the bedside lamp, kissed Max and said, "I love you." And he returned that thought. It was their bedtime ritual and meant a great deal to them both. In the darkened room Max turned onto his side. He knew it would take some time to fall asleep, feeling like a kid on Christmas Eve.

The next morning, having spent a fitful night of anticipation, Lowman prepared for work. Before leaving he kissed his wife on the cheek and softly said, "I love you. You make my life worth living." Martha slightly stirred and smiled.

The drive to campus seemed to take forever. Lowman had trouble maintaining the speed limit. His excitement transferred to his foot. He parked his car and entered one of the large lecture halls reserved to watch the experiment take place on closed - circuit television and hoped for some kind of immediate results. Dr. Volchek saw Lowman and motioned for him to come over and sit in the seat Volchek saved for him." The scientists at the 'Hand of God' began the introduction of those present at the site and relate a brief history of the journey which led to the experiment.

When that was completed, the experiment was initiated.

Lowman began to consider what knowledge might be discovered but that thought was never completed. In an instant Lowman no longer existed. The universe no longer existed. The balance of nature

was revealed. All Lowman's questions were answered and the answers would remain forever unknown.

Lowman had always been amazed how nature maintained balance. The balance also applied to the Higgs boson. And true to that balance, the experiment produced an anti - Higgs boson. In a thousandth of a trillionth of a second dark matter, using dark energy, compressed all the matter of the universe into the anti - Higgs boson. The entire mass of the universe was now compressed into a minute particle of unbelievable mass. This process had been repeated for an infinite number of times. For infinity. The anti - Higgs boson sat alone in the emptiness of space. And after billions upon billions of years would morph into a Higgs boson prepared to initiate another 'Big Bang'.

THE END

AND THE BEGINNING



“FILTER”

by BECKY NEHER

I pressed the blade against the cleanser module jutting from my stomach, just enough for the flesh to give a little, and held still. Around me lay the lifeless bodies of my fellow Awake, freed from their corporeal yolks, on their way to the True.

My gripper-limb quivered. Yellow fluid beaded at the blade’s tip. The gelatinous, pomfruit-sized module was currently in filter mode and wouldn’t migrate again for another ten or so minutes. Plenty of time to knife off the poisonous sac and disinfect my hewmon body: sacred mortal vessel, temporary storage.

Should’ve done it already. The blank stares of my real-kin seared into my chest. My throat constricted. They weren’t cowards like me. They felt their Truth stronger.

I shut my eyes. *Just do it.* I pressed harder. Warm liquid trickled over my belly, cooled, dried as cellules coagulated and sealed the wound. I exhaled, slackened. Waves of thick air rippled from each movement, hitting my real-kins’ rigid remains and languorously deflecting.

Mentally, I reviewed AwakeSociety’s video #84 (available on ShewTube): The filter was the perfect vehicle for ferrying the mind-control nanobots into the bloodstreams surrounding each muscle

compartment. From the bloodstreams, to the brain. From the brain, to the cadre of government slaves.

Our society’s video gave clear and convincing evidence that hewmonity’s elite, deep-state cabal carried out this operation by several means, including 1) state-run clinics providing hypodermic inoculation against Cleanser-Module Disease, a germ developed by CorpoLab with gov funding to drive inoculator sales; 2) “hewmon-friendly” crop pesticides, whose nanobot-carrying molecules passed through the module’s filtration system and initiated sophisticated bot-replicating mechanisms; 3) gov-run water treatment centers lacing the drinking supply; and 4) radio towers which transmitted electromagnetic waves through nanobot-saturated air at the precise speed and angle to drive the bots through hewmon dermis and, hence, into the filter, the blood, the brain.

As explained in video #85, none of these effects could be seen, felt, or otherwise sensed by the infected. But they were observable to others—who were Awake—as 1) iris dulling and pupil narrowing; 2) skin mottling, especially around muscle compartments; 3) ragged breathing; 4) putrid body odor; and 5) lateral-tooth elongation.

But was I infected yet? I stared hard at the translucent blob, filterites writhing in body fluid like grubs in syrup, nodules filling with liquid waste, ripening fatly, ready to be suckered to the tubules for offloading to the bladder.

It doesn't matter. The bots are everywhere. It's inevitable.

Only a few minutes now before the module would close off its current portal and migrate to a hind muscle compartment, latch in, mold a new opening. Too tricky to knife it back there. And too little time: the Trans-Dimensional Gateway would be closing soon. My cleansed, pure-consciousness kin were ready to be taken up into the True. If I didn't act now, we would be separated forever, and I'd transmogrify into a zombified gov minion.

I tightened my grip on the blade handle, hissed through clenched teeth, narrowed my eyes at the cleanser...

Do it!

The blade's point caught; liquid beaded, trickled, stanchd.

I let out a loud breath. *Weak.*

Then collected my thoughts: The Awake had a higher intelligence than the rest of hewmonity—we weren't susceptible to disinfo like the masses, were able to see Reality. AwakeSociety's science was airtight. My own research was impeccable.

So why couldn't I follow through?

A quick death, I reminded myself. Filtration halts, toxins grow to lethal levels, oxygen diminishes, the brain shuts down before the pain can be felt.

Kin-energy called out from the world that lay beyond this befouled, lie-ridden one. I *had* to extricate my authentic being—and fast. They were 13. With me, we would be one. Without me, the Gateway would be corrupted, the True closed off forever.

A tear of frustration slid down my cheek, fell onto the module. *The purified body releases the Awake subject.* I re-readied the blade, running my mind through more data.

Like: It was empirically verified in AwakeSociety videos #10-14 that, like the 14 muscle compartments in the hewmon body, there were 14 gov-funded scientific institutions churning out fake studies to confuse and overwhelm the populace, at an average interval of 14 minutes per study; 14 stars in the Gateway constellation; 14 minions in the footage showing the transportation and disposal of eight nanobot-resistant bodies plus six murdered fetuses for scientific research which equals 14; four stripes on the d'Earth-wide Regulatory Agency's insignia plus seven pens in the photo of the CorpoLab president's office plus three automotive models used by gov elites to carry out their various nefarious underground activities.

14 was everywhere, and *it all made sense.*

Sirens murmured, grew louder, screamed from the street outside our compound. *Who called the sheep-herders?* And immediately answered my own question: *They're everywhere, always watching, recording, storing, crushing every threat.*

Hurry idiot, less than a minute to go...

In a flush of anger, triumph, and fierce gratitude to the True, I jabbed the knife into the module and tore its sinews from my flesh. Fluid gushed over my supple walker-limbs, spilling squirming filterites over the compound's dirt floor, muddying my foot-pods, softening the ground. Onto which I collapsed, dizzy, chilled, catching my last glimpse of the Untrue: medic minions rushing on the scene, poison-transfusion bags in hand, slinging stethoscopes for transdermal nanobot

delivery, hefting confinement-beds and ultrasonic mind-number probes, compliancy-chemical-secreting bandages, bottles of liquid confusion-inducer...

Too late, I grinned feebly. Then laid back, relieved to have just missed mortal danger. ❖



“WESTERN WOODS”

by RYAN LOVE

The pills finally took the edge off. David closed his eyes and rocked back and forth in his chair as the numbness filled his body, leaving him relishing in the silence of the woods around him. They were less welcoming this time around. He was chased by constant feelings of condemnation for the entirety of his midday trek. He only finished half of his walk, failing to reach the cliffside that he dared not approach for years as a haunting echo that seemed to come straight from the trees grew louder and louder. He stopped at a thicket of kudzu and returned to the small cabin that shielded him from the shadows. When he finally landed on his rocking chair on the porch, he couldn't open the pill bottle he kept in his pocket at all times fast enough.

It had been five years since the hand-made cedar building he found solace in became solely his. Since then, David visited the cabin every spring—trying finding reprieve in the quiet it was built to preserve for its inhabitants. This year's trip was different. The quiet had been replaced with a doom that seeped through every crevice and lurked in every shadow. It followed him wherever he went—starting inside the house around the dining room table he made one day out of an oak he fell just a

stone's throw away from the front porch.

Ulrich loved the table at first. He was working on the roof the day David built it and was delighted at the new monument of craftsmanship that his friend produced from the trees. When they got it inside, Ulrich marveled, making David feel prouder than he ever had been in his entire life. Upon further inspection, Ulrich was quick to point out its imperfections—a joint that wasn't quite right or a section of grain whose pattern was just a touch off from the pattern around it.

David resented Ulrich after that. He thought about his defeat at the hands of his friend's judgment every time he walked into the house and laid eyes on the table. As David sat on the porch and peered out into the forest, he could still see the stump of the tree he cut down to make it stand out among the monoliths that surrounded it. He quickly looked away, as the guilt came surging back and began to gnaw at his gut.

After waking up on the porch the next morning, David took a half-rusted mechanical lawn mower out of the shed and tended the patch of grass around the cabin that he and Ulrich decided to keep short when they built the house. At first, Ulrich insisted that he would be the one to tend to the

landscaping around the cabin. It was easy maintenance when David first took over, but lately it seemed like the grass was growing faster, with tall blades edging right up to the side of the cabin nearly every other day.

After cutting the perimeter around a tree, the mower scraped over a rock and got stuck on something in the ground. David nearly fell over as the mower buckled underneath him. He knelt down to survey the damage. He found the frame bent, and the blade chipped and mangled beyond repair, and the rock that stopped the mower protruding out of the dirt without so much as a scratch.

Once the carcass of the mower was in the back of his pickup truck, David retired to the house, baffled at how a piece of iron that had endured the frigid winters gone by could crack with the slightest resistance from a rock. The cabin was cold when he walked in—the wood-burning stove in the corner of the living room full of dying, smoldering ash. A picture of the two of them was staring at him from its place on the wall next to the kitchen door. He felt its glare as soon as his foot stepped over the threshold. The picture was taken the day they picked up the first shipment of wooden beams that would soon become the frame of the house. They were so happy then, ready to create the paradise they talked about for years. The only thing that kept them alive through the two tours of duty through the fire-filled desert they endured together was the thought of one day creating an oasis away from the panic

and doom and noise that seemed to fill every corner of the world around them.

David ignored his own likeness when he looked at the frame—zeroing in on the only image of his old friend that he kept in the house. Ulrich was giddy as could be as he sat atop a pile of beams. David's gut lurched, and he bounded across the room and ripped the frame from the wall, throwing it in the garbage can next to his kitchen counter. He grinned at the sound of the glass shattering as it hit the bottom of the can. The spot where the frame hung laid bare, with the original tone of the wall's paint shining in the fluorescent light from above.

David stood in the middle of the cabin and looked around, examining every wall and doorframe and floorboard. He suffered through the long, difficult days building that cabin—filled with labor that almost rivaled the stress he endured overseas. Ulrich weathered it with ease, maintaining his sanity and adding an optimistic spring in his step. Although David was reluctant to show it, he applauded Ulrich's tenacity and vigor. His pride took over, and jealousy fueled for his desire to one-up Ulrich whenever possible. If Ulrich spent four hours working on the roof, David spent five hours working on the walls. If Ulrich spent all day running piping through the walls that David just built, David would spend a day and a half making sure the shingles on Ulrich's new roof were aligned to perfection.

The next morning, David woke from a sleep deeper than any he had in a long

time. His body was heavy—he hadn't moved a single inch since his eyes closed. The barren spot on the wall he made the previous night was still there, boring into him. As he walked through the house in a haze, the only thing on his mind was the coffee maker on the kitchen counter, waiting for him with the same faithful patience it had every morning. Thanks to the timer, there was a steaming mug of brew with a hand-painted picture of a hog on it, prepared to help him jolt away from his heavy sleep.

David knocked the mug against the side of a bread box and cracked it wide-open, sending hot coffee pouring all over his hand and onto the counter. He screamed, sending what was left of the mug shattering on the floor, and turned to the kitchen sink. While the frigid water from the mountains ran over his new burn, a tickle in the back of his mind could not help but remind him that the mug was in fact Ulrich's favorite.

Three more morsels from his pill bottle later, he descended into the cabin's basement to get burn ointment out of a first-aid kit he left down there just in case someone got hurt out in the woods. It was sitting atop a shelf on the wall above the washing machine that stopped working years ago - covered in dust. He reached up for the box, trying to find its handle, when he found something else sitting on top of it. Its fabric was brittle and familiar. David confirmed his suspicion when he brought the object down from its hidden perch on the shelf. It was the hat. The hat that he

hid down in this basement, too afraid to bury, but too afraid to look at every day. It had turned coarse from season after season of hot and cold, damp and dry. He brushed his hand over it, remembering the last time he saw it—under the shadows of the trees on that fateful day. It was exactly as he remembered it. Including the stains of blood and torn fabric on its side.

To get his mind off of his discovery, David took the rest of the day to go on another woods walk. They were weekly occurrences for David and Ulrich—starting in the morning just as the fog started to settle and the morning dew burned off the plants. David loved the fresh smell of a world renewed as a new day dawned over the cabin. Ulrich would scorn him to focus—they were on a mission, as the morning treks through the woods weren't really just walks to enjoy the fruits of the land around them. The two men would set out, rifles in hand, looking for the animal whose sacrifice would supply them with a season's full of food.

The first animal they killed was a twelve-point buck that David picked off from nearly a hundred yards. A single clean shot, straight to the heart that downed the animal in a crack of a second. David saw it fall through the scope and felt its life rush through his body. He loved the way it made him feel. The buck's meat supplied them for an entire spring, and then some. After his triumph, however, the woods kept calling to David. He yearned to be on the hunt again, and pestered Ulrich until he finally agreed to one more walk.

After the next kill, a doe, David was addicted, and snuck out of the house himself while Ulrich was down in the basement working on a project for the house. At the end of the spring, David could not count how many times he had journeyed out into the forest in search of the same euphoria.

So far, David heard not a single rustling of a bush, shaking of a tree branch, or impact of a hoof on the padded dirt. Rifle in hand, he walked due East—twice as far as he usually did—searching for a sign of life among infinite sea of towering trees and shadows. Just as he was about to give up, the crack of a stick on the ground startled David, sending him into an instinctual crouch as he searched around him for the source of the sound. On his left was a boar. A single boar sticking its head out from behind a bush as it rummaged on through the grass and dirt.

With the rifle raised, David peered into its scope and waited for his moment to take the shot. He would aim, just as he always did, right for its heart, and end the boar before it even knew he was there. It stepped out one pace, exposing the entirety of its neck from behind the bush. One more step and it was all his. Before David had his chance, the boar stopped and looked up, staring right at him through the scope. He jolted his head away. When he mustered up enough courage to peer back into the scope, the boar was still there, looking him right in the eyes. He trembled and fought to keep the rifle steady with every ounce of his strength as the hog held its stare, unfazed.

When he pulled the trigger, the rifle malfunctioned, and the gun slipped out of his hands, falling to the forest floor and firing by itself from the impact. The blast of the gunshot ricocheted through the forest, leaving his ears ringing. When he looked back, the hog disappeared from its spot, and David was left in the deep woods alone, without a trophy, and his spectacular failure pounding in his head.

David returned to the cabin still in shock, not even bothering to grab the rifle from the dirt floor as he turned and walked away from the scene. The sun had set by the time he made it back and his shaking hands managed to fit the key into the front door and open it. He slammed the door behind him and went to the kitchen. In a cabinet above the refrigerator was a bottle of whiskey that Ulrich bought from the back room of a roadside convenience store the day the final nail was hammered into the cabin.

He smelled the stench of the brew as soon as the cork came loose with a pop. The first sip he took once he sat down at the table was bitter, and strong. It was whiskey, but not the kind one would look for to celebrate anything other than a certain and impending death. He stared into the glass, spinning it in a circle, hoping the stale air in the cabin would make the harsh taste go away.

“Bit rough, eh?” said Ulrich. He was sitting at the table, across from David as he had a thousand times, looking off into an unknown distance with indifference as he had done a thousand times more.

"A little," said David.

"I figured as much," snorted Ulrich.

"You always know what buttons to push." David forced down another sip.

"Stop having such big buttons. You make it too easy."

"Bite me," said David. Another sip sizzled down. He couldn't bear to even look at Ulrich. The shame came over him in a wave and nearly made it impossible to move. The day it happened came back to him. The day his rage and anger turned to the shame that was drowning him right now. He felt Ulrich's skin underneath his fingers. He smelled his hot, tobacco-tinged. He felt the life leaving his friend's body all over again.

"I'm surprised you kept the place," said Ulrich. "I figured you wouldn't be able to stomach walking through here anymore."

David could not bring himself to respond.

"It was really always mine, wasn't it? I built it. The walls, the roof. All the beams. That was me. You couldn't even cut the damn lawn. This table is nice, though."

"You told me not to," whimpered David.

"What was that?"

"You told me not to cut the lawn."

"No, I told you that I bet you couldn't handle it. And from what happened today, it looks like I was right."

David clenched his fist.

"How long has it been now? Five years? Five years. Not a short amount of time."

"And you still won't leave," said David.

Ulrich laughed. "Leave? Where else

would I go? We did two tours together, bought this land. Built this house. Well, at least I did. After all the time we've put in, I'm not going anywhere, friend."

"I'm not your friend." Another sip.

"You're right, you're not. You were. Once. A long time ago. Before you snapped."

"I only snapped because of you."

"No, you snapped before that. I saw it in your eyes. The black. Empty. Nothing. You never left the desert."

"And you did?"

"Yeah, I did. Because I'm the strong one. Always was."

"Then how did I win that day?"

"Even the best can't stay on top forever. You learned that today out during your walk, didn't you? Once upon a time you were a crack shot."

"I still am."

"Then why aren't you out front cleaning a boar right now?"

"The rifle malfunctioned."

"You just cleaned that rifle yesterday, I saw you."

"No you didn't. You aren't really here."

"David, I'm everywhere."

David stood up and thrust the table on its side, shattering the bottle and sending moonshine all over the floor. His feet skipped steps on their own accord as he bounded up the stairs to his bedroom and slammed the door. He went to bed that night trying to act as if everything were normal, and the demons that caused trouble in the deepest parts of his head over the last five years were not waiting for him

downstairs. He lay in bed still, trying his hardest to hear any sound to confirm if his friend was still waiting for him to face what he had done. His terror turned to exhaustion, as he fell asleep without even feeling his consciousness slip away.

In the night, something landed on his bed. It landed with such force that it woke him as it began its assault. It tried to tear his sheets. It tried to reach around them and seize him from underneath. Although he couldn't see it, he fought back, screaming with every might of his energy to send it away. The two struggled, fighting one another as David tried to free his head from his sheets and reveal his attacker.

Finally, as the creature grabbed one of his wrists, he whisked the blanket away from his face and saw Ulrich, staring back at him just as he was on the day David took his life. Blood poured from his head. His jaw hung loose from its socket, and his right eye was popped out and dangling from the hole where it once was. He kicked his knees up and launched Ulrich across the room, leaving him on the floor covered in the sheet. He grabbed a knife from the drawer in his bedside table and ran over to the heap, ready to send his friend back to where he came. He reached over and pulled the sheet away, but Ulrich was gone.

David dashed through the dark forest, ridding himself of the prison of the cabin that was now ablaze. The fire destroyed the memory of his peace, and of the sins that took place in its walls. The darkness encompassed him as he ran further and further, passing thicket of kudzu he turned

back at during his failed woods walk.

When he reached the cliffside on the other side of the western woods, a pile of rocks and disheveled dirt protruded from the Earth, sitting as still and untouched as he had left them five years before. ❖

“REFUSING THE CALL”

by MICHAEL ROBERT

Apollo, god of the sun, medicine, music, and, like, just a ridiculous amount of other shit besides, stood in Sibyl Delphi’s kitchen. He glowed softly with a subcutaneous radiance as he towered over her, heedless of his nudity as the curls of his hair nearly touched the ceiling overhead. “Did you get all that?” he asked.

Sibyl stood in the same position she had been in when the Greek god had first appeared in her apartment with a burst of sunlight, the stirring spoon in her hand half-submerged in a boiling pot of pasta that was rapidly becoming overdone. “Uh,” she stammered. “Could you go over all that again?”

“I’m sure you’ll be fine,” Apollo said, brushing aside her bewilderment with a wave of his luminous hand. “Here, look, I’ll drop you a map pin to get started.” At his words, Sibyl’s phone pinged from its spot atop the microwave.

“Do I have time to finish making dinner?”

“Not if you want to save the world you don’t,” Apollo said, his voice stern. That was apparently the end of the conversation as far as he was concerned, because like a total dick he vanished just as suddenly as he had appeared without another word.

“Well shit,” Sibyl said, turning off the

stove burner and setting the pot aside. Picking up her phone, there was indeed a map location shared with her from one . There wasn’t much to go on, only a location with a label of “Kelly.”

Sibyl swallowed an uncomfortable lump in her throat. The visitation on its own she might have been able to chalk up to some sort of hallucinatory episode, but she was stone-cold sober and this did appear to be a legitimate map pin on her phone; no amount of closing and reopening the app or navigating away from it would make it disappear.

“Let me just grab my coat, then,” she said to no one in particular.

#

The address turned out to be a club called The Piledriver, and it had the sort of cutting-edge hip aesthetic and vibe that immediately made Sibyl feel uncomfortable. The world may never know how close it came to a cataclysmic end because she couldn’t bear to approach the front door of this place, find whoever this Kelly person was, and deliver Apollo’s message. Maybe it wasn’t her place to make such observations, but it seemed to Sibyl that the whole process could maybe be streamlined a bit if Apollo would just appear before whomever he wanted to rope into this rather than

sending her to do it. But he apparently spent his time with his glowing dick just swinging around, so who knew where his mind was at.

Screwing up her courage, Sibyl walked to the front door, readying her best arguments about why the bouncer should let her in to see whoever Kelly was rather than make her wait in the rather considerable line that wrapped around the building. Her best arguments were honestly pretty shit, though, which is why it was such a profound relief that she was able to just slip past the bouncer without a second glance. Indeed, no one seemed to pay her any mind as she wound her way past the bar and onto the dance floor. People just parted for her as she passed, her eyes on the screen phone as she tried to zero in on this Kelly person.

She found them tucked away in a booth at the very far reaches of the club. Sibyl knew she had found her target because Kelly was the first person to actually acknowledge her presence. Their eyes, ringed with thick eyeliner, went wide as Sibyl entered their presence. They brushed their blue and purple hair aside with a hand gloved in fishnets as they said, “You look like you’re here on a mission.”

“Uh . . . Apollo sent me, I guess? Told me I needed to assemble the demigods to stop the emergence of Typhon, Usurper of Zeus, from his prison beneath Mount Etna?”

Kelly put a cigarette to their mouth and lit it. The smoke smelled of cloves. “Hard pass,” they said.

“I don’t think you’re supposed to smoke in here.”

“Listen—what did you say your name was?”

“Sibyl. Sibyl Delphi.”

The cigarette nearly fell from Kelly’s coal-black lips. “You gotta be shitting me.”

“What? What’s wrong with my name?”

“‘Sibyl’ is another word for ‘oracle’. That makes you the Oracle of Delphi, speaker of Apollo’s prophecy. He’s always trying to be cute like that.”

“Oh. That would certainly explain some things about tonight.”

“Was he naked?” Kelly asked, sucking on their cigarette.

“Oh yeah.”

“Yeah, that tracks. They’re always naked, every one of them. Pack of sexual assailants.”

Kelly scootched over in the booth and patted the black vinyl seat next to them. “Have a seat.” When Sibyl had sat down next to them, they continued, “How much do you know about demigods?”

“Not a lot. I took a course on Greek mythology in college, I know there was Theseus, Bellerophon, Hercules—”

“Heracles,” Kelly interjected. “Hercules was the Roman name, and the Romans were douches.”

“Anyway, yeah, a lot of demigods in Greek myth were great heroes.”

Kelly chuckled and took another drag of the cigarette. “Well, the current generation isn’t so heroic,” they said. “Gods run on worship, and there’s not a lot of belief in the family going around these days.

They're still off fucking mortals, but there's not a lot of heroic power to imbue in the offspring. My dad's Eros, want to know what I inherited?"

"What?"

"I am the most amazing lay anyone will ever have. I know what gets 'em hard. I know what makes 'em wet. Everyone wants to fuck me and be fucked by me. I mean, look at you. I bet you want to fuck me."

"I mean . . . yeah, kinda."

"Well, too bad," Kelly said, taking a long drag on their cigarette for emphasis. "I'm ace."

"Oh," Sibyl replied, her words weighted with that particular species of disappointment born of being denied something that one hadn't even realized until that moment one had wanted in the first place. "Well, if you can't help me, do you know someone who can?"

"Can help? Yeah, I can introduce you to a couple of my relatives. Will help? That's a completely separate question. I'm telling you, you need to moderate your expectations. We are not a cohort of heroes, we are just a little rabble with big daddy issues."

"I appreciate it nonetheless."

Kelly nodded and gestured at Sibyl to pass them her phone. A moment later, they passed the phone back, their contact information added to Sibyl's list. "Meet me on the corner of 36th and State tomorrow morning around nine," they said. "I'd say wear something nice, but I don't think that's actually going to matter for you."

#

The corner of 36th and State turned out to be a Chase bank. Sibyl was there at the duly appointed hour and waited in the lobby for Kelly to arrive. At first, she was afraid that one of the tellers would call her to the counter when she did not actually have an account and had no idea what it was that she was supposed to be doing there with Kelly, but she breathed a sigh of relief that she was being ignored just as she had been at the club. It seemed that the supreme importance of Apollo's prophecy granted some aegis of anonymity so that no one could interfere with her mission.

At just about a quarter after the hour, Kelly strolled in, wearing the outfit with the fishnets they had been wearing the previous night, though their eye makeup was now a bit mussed and their lipstick faded. They took a moment to scan the milling customers before zeroing in on Sibyl with a smile on their face.

"Did you not go home last night?" Sibyl asked, taking in Kelly's appearance.

"I never go home. Come with me, you'll never get service on your own."

Taking Sibyl's arm in their own, Kelly marched straight up to the counter with a big-ass, shit-eating grin. "Hiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii," they said, drawing out the syllable and smothering it with honey. "I have an appointment with Erin this morning to talk about, like . . . fuck, I don't know, a mortgage? Can you just tell her that Kelly is here?"

"Um . . . sure," the teller said, clearly somewhat confused by the exchange. He left his post at the counter to go flag down

a woman with pin-straight raven hair and an aquiline nose dressed in a sky-blue blouse. Upon receiving the message, her eyes snapped upward in Kelly's direction, and, while Sibyl could not hear it from this distance, the woman visibly sighed. Like, a whole-body sigh. It was super rude, actually.

Erin ushered Kelly and Sibyl over to her desk and slumped into her office chair as the two petitioners sat in the considerably less comfortable client chairs opposite. "What the blessed blue fuck is this, Kelly?" Erin asked quietly.

"Erin, daughter of Hades," Kelly said by way of introduction, "This is Sibyl Delphi."

"Ah, fuck," Erin said, closing her eyes and tossing her head back. "Not oracle shit."

"Yeah, she's got a prophecy from your cousin."

"Well?" Erin said, fixing Sibyl with an unblinking stare. "What is it?"

"I, ah, need to assemble the demigods to stop the emergence of Typhon, Usurper of Zeus, from his prison beneath Mount Etna? I'm sorry, I don't even know where that is."

"Sicily," said Kelly.

"Usurper of Zeus," Erin said, her eyes looking toward the ceiling as she played with a Chase branded pen between the tips of her index fingers. "You know, not a lot of us are very big fans of ol' Zeusy. Guy is just a ridiculously huge dickbag."

"He really is," Kelly agreed.

"Might not be such a bad thing to see

him usurped," Erin continued.

"Isn't Typhon's whole thing that he's fell and cruel and hates humans as much as he hates the gods?" asked Sibyl. "That seems like a definite trade down."

Erin sighed and jabbed the pen back into the holder full of identical pens. "She kind of knows her shit," she confided to Kelly.

"She had a class in college."

"Okay," Erin admitted, turning to Sibyl once again, "you're not exactly wrong. But I don't know what we're supposed to do about it. Typhon was this whole *thing* with uncle Zeus and it took the combined might of the Olympians and Zeus's thunderbolt to defeat him. What are we supposed to do about it? Kelly just knows what gets people off. My father is the god of wealth, so of course I work in a bank."

"So you're, what, good at being rich?" asked Sibyl.

Erin shrugged in response. "Good at *being* rich isn't the same thing as good at *becoming* rich."

"That was more Zeke's thing," Kelly said, with only one foot in the conversation as they tapped furiously with their thumbs across the surface of their phone.

Sibyl looked to Erin. "Who's Zeke?"

Erin sank into her chair and nudged the cup of pens around with her index finger. "Son of Hermes," she said. "Fucker just keeps founding startups to create messenger apps and then bails with a huge payout when they get acquired by larger companies. Should have been me. He should have been one of those sad sacks whose life

peaked when he won a track meet in high school or something.”

“I hear he’s settled down and is, like, the product owner of iMessage at Apple or something,” Kelly said, nose still glued to the screen of their phone.

“Of course he is,” Erin grumbled.

“Look, this might be a weird time to mention this,” Sibyl said, “but I’m a licensed marriage and family therapist. If you want, I can give you guys a referral or something. Because I have to be honest, it sounds like your whole family has some deep-seated emotional trauma that you desperately need to work through.”

“I was thinking of taking her to see Art,” said Kelly.

“Who’s Art?” asked Sibyl.

“My nephew,” said Erin.

“My uncle,” said Kelly.

A moment of silence hung between the three of them. “Should . . . should I be taking notes?” asked Sibyl.

Ignoring her, Erin nodded slowly in Kelly’s direction. “Art might be marginally more useful than either of us, sure.”

“Would you be able to give us a lift to his house? I don’t have any money—”

“No surprise.”

“—and she’s not going to be able to be able to call an Uber so long as she’s all covered in Apollo’s ‘Ignore Me’ glamour.”

Erin heaved a sigh and did a slow spin in her Aeron chair by Herman Miller.

“Fine,” she acquiesced. “I’m off at four.”

#

Erin drove a navy-blue Honda CR-V hailing from a model year sometime after

the inclusion of USB ports, but before everything was a fucking touchscreen. Exactly the sort of vehicle you’d expect from the scion of the god of death who only cleared \$62K gross per year.

“It’s so convenient that you all live in the same town,” Sibyl said as she and Kelly piled into the bench backseat. “I thought I was going to have to travel the world and max out all my credit cards or something.”

“It’s not that remarkable,” Erin said, her voice distracted as she waited for her moment to pull into traffic. “There was a ‘gentleman’s club’ in town where Dionysus used to hold an annual fuck party, and eeeeeeeveryone was invited. Every few years, there’d be an addition to the family, and then we don’t tend to drift too far away because this is where the support network is. Who else is going to know what it’s like to have an absentee father that just happens to be a god other than this family, you know?”

“Except Zeke,” chimed in Kelly. “Zeke left.”

“Yeah, well, Zeke’s a fucking tool,” Erin said through gritted teeth.

“And it’s always your fathers?” asked Sibyl.

“Mostly, yeah,” confirmed Erin.

Kelly raised a hand. “Um, excuse me,” they said. “My grandma fucked around a lot.”

“Yeah, but she’s the goddess of love, it’d be weird if she weren’t horny on main. But she didn’t fuck a lot of mortals and birth any demigods, right?”

Kelly scratched their brightly colored

hair. "I think there were a couple dudes a few thousand years ago, but that might have been it."

"So yeah. Mostly our fathers."

"Who's Art's dad, then?" asked Sibyl.

"Art? Art's dad is Ares," replied Erin.

"What, the god of *war*?"

"Bless you for not thinking it was Kratos," sighed Kelly.

"Well, this is good, right?" asked Sibyl.

"This is directly applicable to the situation, isn't it?"

"He is legitimately a brilliant tactician and military mind," Erin admitted.

"Sounds like things might finally be going our way!" Sibyl smiled.

"Again," Kelly cautioned, "you need to be managing your expectations."

#

Art sat at the workbench in his garage, the rippling of his muscles visible across the broad expanse of his shoulders beneath his t-shirt as he hunched over his work. The implements of war were arrayed before him as he meticulously assembled his military might. "Blood for the blood god," he muttered under his breath as he held a fine detail brush that looked like a toothpick between his massive fingers. "Skulls for the skull throne."

With a trembling hand, he brought the fine tip of the brush dipped in metallic gold paint closer to the miniature figurine held beneath the magnifying lens. The soft bristles just barely caressed the surface, laying down a gilded trail along the trim of a crimson-colored greave as Art gently, ever so gently, just completely fucked the whole

thing up.

"Hell damn farts," he sighed, examining the wayward streak of gold paint cutting across the shin of his tiny armor-clad warrior fashioned in the finest space gothic grimdark aesthetics. With a sigh, he set the figurine aside on the workbench where it joined a motley crew of motley-painted space marines.

"Man, I'll never understand why you put yourself through this," Kelly said, having to stand on their tiptoes to even peak over Art's hulking shoulders.

"Tournament play requires that your whole army be battle ready," Art grumbled, carefully tweezing the head of the next figure between his unreasonably large fingers so that he could maneuver it into position beneath the magnifying lens. "That means each figure must be fully painted with at least three colors, and it has to be done in a good faith effort. So, no painting three dots on a pauldron and calling it good."

"Ask him how many tournaments he's won," Erin grinned at Sibyl.

"Do not ask me how many tournaments I've won," said Art.

"How many tournaments have you won?" asked Sibyl.

Art buried his face in his meaty palms. "None," he said quietly.

"I thought you were a brilliant tactician?"

"I *am*. I am completely undefeated in unranked friendly play. Any army, any faction, I will pull out the win. But all the local tourneys around here are organized by *Tobey*."

“Ask him about Tobey,” smirked Kelly.

“Do not ask me about Tobey,” said Art.

“Okay,” said Sibyl, “I won’t ask about—”

“Tobey is a giant jerked turkey,” Art lamented unprompted. “He used to be the dungeon master of our D&D group in high school, but he rage quit because no matter how hard he made an encounter, the party would come out on top so long as I was playing. Now here he is, a grown adult, and he’s still holding that against me as he finds every possible reason to disqualify me from play. He always kicks me because my paint job isn’t good enough, or does something weird like make the dress code for the event business casual because he knows I can’t find khakis my size.”

Sibyl picked up one of the sorry plastic warriors and turned it over gingerly in her hands. She didn’t know much about whatever game this was, but she could definitely see how people might want to not let Art’s creations see the light of day. “Couldn’t you just pay someone to paint them for you?” she asked.

“For a whole army? Do you have any idea how expensive that would be?” Art sighed. “I don’t have the money for that. I spent it all on these figures.”

Standing up from his stool to his full enormous height, Art stretched his arms and then arched his back with an audible cracking noise accompanied by a pained grunt of relief. “Not that I don’t love to talk shop with you all,” he said, “but is there a reason we’re holding an impromptu

family reunion in my garage?”

“Guess who this is,” Erin said, nudging Sibyl so hard with her elbow that Sibyl nearly fell over.

“I have no idea who that is,” Art said, removing his glasses and cleaning the lenses with the front of his t-shirt. “What, are you getting married or something?”

“What? Dude, Art, I’m straight.”

“Well, you know, this entire family is . . .” Art punctuated the sentence by extending his hand palm down and rotating it back and forth at the wrist.

“She’s the Oracle of Delphi,” Kelly said. “Got a genuine fucking prophecy and everything. Lay it on him, Sibyl.”

“Yeah, uh, hi,” Sibyl stammered.

“Sorry, I should have introduced myself earlier, I’m Sibyl. Like Kelly said. Right, anyway, Apollo told me I needed to assemble the demigods to stop the emergence of Typhon, Usurper of Zeus, from his prison beneath Mount Etna.”

Art’s eyes bulged as he started in shock. Looking between Erin and Kelly, he shouted, “And you both brought her to me? You dingleberries, we’ve just assembled the demigods!”

“Relax,” Kelly said, flipping their hand nonchalantly at the wrist as they scrolled their phone. “Zeke is hundreds of miles away in Cupertino or something. We wouldn’t actually *assemble* the demigods and fulfill the prophecy. Do you think we’re crazy?”

“Zeke? Zeke died two months ago! They found him face down in a pile of blow on his desk! Didn’t either of you get

my letter?"

"Wait, like an actual, physical letter?" asked Erin, her question followed by an ominous peal of thunder. "Does Kelly even have a mailing address?"

"Art, you asshole!" Kelly shrieked as the ground began to rumble beneath their feet. "Who the fuck sends a letter in this day and age?!"

"Do you not have a fucking *phone*!?" shouted Erin as she clung onto a support beam to steady herself.

"It's not really my place to pick a side," Sibyl yelled as the trembling rattled the siding of the garage, sending storage totes and yard tools tumbling to the ground from their places on shelving units and wall hooks. "But seriously, what the actual fuck, Art?"

"Oh noooooooooooooooooooooo," Art groaned, looking upward as the roof of the garage began to tear away and ascend a blood-red vortex overhead. Raging winds descended upon them as the garage and its contents were whipped away into the swirling clouds that rippled with bolts of black lightning. Blinded by the maelstrom, Sibyl felt Art's arms wrap around her in a protective embrace as he hunkered down over her, soon to be joined by Kelly and Erin as the quartet were buffeted by the winds of the unearthly storm.

When the gale died down, Sibyl opened her eyes. The dome of the night sky overhead stretched from horizon to horizon over the bowl of black basalt rock where they now stood. "Mount Etna!" she gasped.

"Isn't Mount Etna a volcano?" Art asked, releasing his hold and standing up straight.

In answer to Art's question, the ground shuddered beneath their feet and the air filled with the sound of a deafening boom as a cleft in the earth cracked wide and sent a gout of magma arcing through the air. Sibyl and the demigods scrambled backward from the otherworldly heat as a taloned hand, dripping with molten stone, emerged from the fissure and clawed at the ground. Inch by torturous inch, the monstrous Typhon emerged from his prison, the lava falling from his form and condensing into shards of obsidian on the ground as they cooled. His face was a cruel mockery of human features, and the heads of a hundred serpents writhed about his shoulders. He stood to his full enormous stature on legs that were the coiling bodies of snakes and roared at the heavens in challenge, "Zeus! I am free at last! Face me, and meet your unmaking!"

He remained staring at the sky for what seemed to Sibyl like a very long time. It was super awkward, actually. Like, at what point should she say something? Fortunately, his gaze turned earthward once more as he asked, "Am I just early? I thought this was going to be a whole . . . thing."

"Art!" Kelly whispered. "Art, what do we do!"

Art chewed on his lower lip. "I don't know," he confessed.

"Art!" Erin hissed. "It's like your whole thing to win battles!"

“A level one party going up against the BBEG is not a combat encounter!” Art hissed in return. “It’s a cutscene where we die!”

“Excuse me!” Sibyl said, stepping forward and shrugging off the attempts of the demigods to clutch at her and drag her back to their number. “Excuse me, Typhon?”

Eyes like smelted iron turned toward

her. “Are you a goddess?” he asked. “Where are the Olympians?”

“No, actually I’m a licensed therapist,” Sibyl shouted upwards. “Look, I know you have been holding on to some preconceived notions of how this was going to go for a long time, but I’m afraid that things have changed quite a bit since Zeus imprisoned you beneath the mountain. I understand that you were destined to be the



usurper of Zeus and wrest away his control of the cosmos, but the fact of the matter is that he doesn't control the cosmos anymore. The biggest thing he's got going on these days is that he was portrayed by Russell Crowe in a movie about Thor."

"You talk like I know who either of those people are," Typhon said, clearly peeved as he crossed his arms across his thickly muscled chest.

"The point I'm trying to make is that there's nothing to usurp anymore," Sibyl continued. "The Olympians faded to myth long before humans summited Mount Olympus and found nothing there, and even that was a hundred years ago. This," she said, gesturing to the demigods, "this is all that's left of their legacy. Just . . . regular people, living their lives. Sure, their lives are a little fucked up, but isn't everyone's life fucked up? That's the basis of my entire career: helping people unfuck their lives, at least just a little bit."

The thick cords of snake flesh that were Typhon's legs thrashed across the ground as he roared and shook his clawed fists at the heavens. The volcanic stone of the caldera was sundered beneath the blows of his titanic fists crashing against the earth, and the sky quaked as he howled his outrage to the legends of time writ in the constellations above. Sibyl and the demigods huddled together as far away from the rampage as they could manage until Typhon's ire seemed to wane. At last, he only stood there, his chiseled pectoral muscles heaving with labored breath.

"I never even wanted to rule the cos-

mos," he grumbled. "I just wanted to beat the shit out of Zeus. Guy is such a smug asshole."

"No argument here, big guy," Kelly shouted from a safe distance.

Typhon looked at his hands, clenching and unclenching his fists. "But now it wouldn't even be worth it, would it? All those thousands of years of hatred sustaining me, keeping me able, and meanwhile the object of all my fury has just wasted away to a footnote in history while I was gone. There's nothing to be gained from besting him if he can't truly fight back with all his might. That'd just be . . . sad."

Wrapping the coils of snake beneath him, Typhon sat upon the stone ground, chin resting in his hand. "Well shit," he said. "What the fuck am I supposed to do now?"

Art raised his hand. "I do tabletop miniature wargaming, mostly," he said.

"I pretty much do nothing but party and do molly 24/7," said Kelly.

"I dox queerphobes on social media all night," confessed Erin.

"Didn't you just tell us you were straight?" asked Kelly.

Erin just shrugged. "What, I can't be an ally?"

Typhon's molten gaze fell upon Sibyl. "What about you?" he asked. "What do you do to bring meaning into your petty little mortal life?"

"Well, that's more than a little belittling," Sibyl began, "but since you asked, on OnlyFans I'm @MistressDelphi, and people pay me money to be submissive lit-

tle piggies. That, and the therapy thing.”

Art blushed a shade of beet red while Erin let out a low whistle.

“I don’t think I quite know what that means,” said Typhon.

“It means that Sibyl is way more fun than I ever thought, holy shit!” grinned Kelly.

“Hold up for just a moment here,” Art said, making the customary timeout motion with his hands, “but just to confirm, the world is *not* in imminent danger of ending at present?”

Typhon unleashed a sigh that was the wind of ages. “No, not at present,” he muttered. “I think I just need to go somewhere and do some serious thinking and maybe find myself or something.”

Without a further word, he rose to his full height until it seemed as though his head would brush the stars before unfurling his ebon wings that were totally there the entire time, just not relevant or worth mentioning before. Sibyl and the demigods covered their faces and half crouched in the face of hurricane force winds as Typhon beat his wings and ascended into the sky until he was lost among the countless stars in the heavens.

The moon bathed Sibyl and the others in its silver light as it crested the rim of the volcano and spilled its luminance into the basin of the caldera. “Huh,” Art said, pushing his glasses up his nose, “that actually went pretty well.”

“Motherfucking extinction level event is really just gonna *Eat Pray Love* it out there, isn’t he?” Kelly said, their eyes still

skyward.

“So,” Erin said, sidling up next to Sibyl as she fished out a cigarette and Zippo from her pocket. “Tell me about this OnlyFans thing you’ve got going on.”

“Oh, for fuck’s—*you just said you were straight!* Twice!” Kelly cried.

“Hey!” Erin said, jabbing her lit cigarette in accusation. “You don’t get to define who I am.”

“I know, I know,” Kelly grouched, finding a suitable rock to sit down on and sulk. “I of all people know that.”

Sibyl and the others climbed to the top of the caldera rim, staring down upon the rustic Sicilian countryside spreading out before them until it abutted the twinkling lights of cities on the coastline. The Italian mainland lay beyond, separated by an ocean that shone of mercury in the light of the moon. It was truly some awe-inspiring, inspirational shit if not for one little thing.

“Hey guys?” asked Art. “Any of you know how we’re supposed to get home?”



“HANK MORASSUTI, TAXIDERMIST”

by SALVATORE DIFALCO

An acquaintance, Peter Polité, whom I knew from a café we used to frequent in Little Italy a few years back, recommended this guy who used to stuff some of the animals his father and uncles, big outdoorsmen, had hunted. “He did a nice job for my dad with a big lynx and a wolf,” he said, “and he did do a small black bear once for him that started rotting after a few weeks and that my dad had to take to the dumpster.”

The taxidermist’s name was Hank Morasutti and he lived on the outskirts of town in a log cabin he had built himself. “He’s quite a character,” Peter informed me with a chuckle. “Oh yeah, he is that.” It made sense he would be. I mean, who decides to become a taxidermist? What is the psychological profile of such a person? Is a taxidermist more like a mortician, or a veterinarian?

I wasn’t an outdoorsman or a hunter, but I needed Mr. Morasutti’s services. Hear me out. My German shepherd Dino had recently passed away. He was twelve years old and his kidneys had given out without warning. I loved that dog. And he loved me. And it seemed our bond had been broken prematurely. If not for the kidneys, he would have certainly lived a few more years. He was still playful and had plenty of

energy and seemed as sharp and vocal as ever. But the kidneys gave out and he went quickly, poor guy. So I know it sounds morbid, or perhaps perverse or even ridiculous—and I know a lot of you out there will give me a big thumbs down as some of my closest friends did when I proposed it to them—but I decided to get Dino expertly preserved and put him in my living room beside the green corduroy sofa-chair I’d occupy in the evenings when we’d watch Wheel of Fortune and then Jeopardy back to back. Dino loved those programs and would lie by the sofa-chair with his head resting on his crossed paws, watching intently.

I knew I wasn’t the only one to have thought of getting their pet preserved. There were many accounts online of people memorializing their pets in any number of ways, including taxidermy. It wasn’t that weird. And what’s weird these days? What isn’t weird, for fuck sake?

I drove out to Hank Morasutti’s log cabin at the edge of the woods. He disliked discussing business over the phone and insisted on meeting his clients face to face. He greeted me in a white silk bathrobe tied with a gold rope belt, hairless chest exposed, a pink cocktail in his hand. His hairless stick-legs abruptly concluded in a

pair of bear-paw slippers.

“How are ya?” he said drolly, his flaccid face crushed under a low thick forehead and a black slab of hair. When he smiled it was like opening a refrigerator door in the middle of the night. “What can I do you for?” he asked, gesturing for me to enter the cabin.

A sharp stink of urine and formaldehyde permeated the close, duskily-lit quarters. I experienced severe cognitive dissonance in trying to put together the man—who appeared he could’ve eased comfortably into a hot tub with Hugh Hefner and several bimbos—and the cabin. I expected more of Paul Bunyan or coureur de bois type.

“Can I get you a drink?” he offered. “I’m drinking a pink vodka lemonade cocktail *FYI*. Mixed a pitcher earlier. Have a seat.” He pointed to a red leather sofa.

I sat down and told him I couldn’t drink alcohol as I was driving and had no tolerance for it, but a glass of water would be great. He seemed disappointed and walked over to a roughly appointed wooden bar on one side of the cabin, sweeping his bathrobe behind him and muttering to himself.

It was only at that moment I noticed all the cats in the cabin, that is to say stuffed cats. At least I think they were all stuffed. Not one moved a muscle the whole time I was there. I counted about thirty of them, stationed in every corner of the place, and in every position, from lying down or curled up to sitting on haunches. All had realistic-looking eyes, unclouded

and glossy—and a little uncanny. Of course I wondered if these were pet cats he’d kept in the past, or cats offered by strangers—or, beneath their petrified domesticity, did they conceal a darker truth? I saw calicos and orange tabbies, Persian cats and a Siamese or two, a sinewy Tibetan cat, and even a Bengal cat that resembled a miniature leopard. I saw no other stuffed animals. It was fucked up any way you looked at it. But I don’t know what I expected. Hank returned with a plastic bottle of water for me. His cocktail looked refreshed.

“So what’ll it be, boyo?” he said. “Shot a deer or a bear or something? Or a pet passed you’d like to preserve? Dog, cat, gerbil? You see the work I’ve done with cats. I consider them a specialty of mine, cats. No one does them better. They’re easy to mess up, easy to distort and make ludicrous. I’ve done a superb job with my kitties, don’t you think?”

I nodded. “I’m not a hunter,” I said, “and I’ve never kept cats. But my dog Dino died a few days ago and I’d like to—”

Hank spluttered in a coughing fit, spraying pink fluid and gob everywhere, his hair bounding up and down, eyes rolling uglily. “Goddamn,” he said. “Went down the wrong pipe!” He wiped his mouth with his sleeve and shook his hair out. “So Dino,” he said. “Where is he now?”

I told Hank I had put Dino in my basement freezer.

“That’s good,” he said. “But he’ll have to thaw for a few days if he’s frozen solid,

see. It's preferable to work on a fresh corpse, but if he was frozen quickly after death, I can work with that, I can."

Okay, then, I thought. I'd brought five hundred dollars with me in the event he required a down payment. I suspected it would cost around two grand to do Dino—at least that's what I'd gathered online—depending on the process. "Tell me," I said, "are you using modern methods or still mounting the pelts with the original skull and leg bones and wood wool?"

Hank looked at me like I had just birthed a moose from my mouth.

"Dude," he said, "I consider myself more of an artist than a technician, see. I use a combination of traditional and cutting-edge methods to achieve my particular brand of pseudo-animate verisimilitude. In fact, I should get that term trademarked. Most people don't get it. They think I'm strange, kinky—I've been called a pervert, a monster. But people need my services for many reasons. Do I condone hunting animals for sport and then having them mummified for the purposes of bragging or bolstering a weak ego, or compensating for a tiny weenie? I do not. On the other hand, I'm not one to hector people into sharing my beliefs or my horrors. Everyone is entitled to their own ideology and path in life. But I do what I do with passionate intensity. Not everyone appreciates my efforts. Clients have complained that my work was too good, too aesthetically and technically perfect, that it beautified the beast beyond recognition. Haha. Imagine being critiqued for perfection? But it's all good. It's all

good, see. When I'm done with Dino's carcass, you'll think he came back to life."

Hank's words mollified any concerns or fears I harboured. I felt I was in competent hands—glancing at the cats, who could've very well been alive and in various states of repose. I sipped my water with satisfaction. Hank raised his glass and took a gulp.

"So when should I bring Dino by?" I asked.

"Today, if possible," Hank said, his eyes misting over as his mind drifted somewhere personal. A minute or so passed. Hank stood there with his cocktail glass half-raised.

I wondered if he was suffering a kind of ictus. "Hank," I whispered. Nothing. "Hank!"

He blinked and smiled. "My Lord," he said, "I was in South Beach for a sec there. I should slow down with the pink drinks but I will not haha. I will not because I'm an artist. We artists do whatever we want. That's why we're artists."

His eyes half-closed and his knees buckled. I thought he might keel over, but spreading his arms wide and rocking his shoulders, he kept upright. He shook his head and chuckled. I asked him how much the job would cost and he said we'd worry about that later, he couldn't deal with numbers at the moment.

"Do you require a down payment?" I asked.

"Sure," he said, twisting his lips, "why not. I wanna score some weed later. Buddy has some Cali kush coming in at thirty per-

cent, bruh! Make your eyes roll back in your head haha. I like to get baked when I'm working, see. Gets the creative juices flowing."

I hesitated, but handed him over five crisp hundred dollar bills. He didn't even look at the money and tossed it onto a pine table in the middle of the cabin massed with unopened mail, flyers, and pamphlets.

"Okay, then," I said.

"Righto," he said, "and time for you to skedaddle, boss. I might go for a walk in the woods, you know. Hunt for some mushrooms—hey, I am a hunter! How about that! And bring me Dino later today so I can do my magic."

I exited his place and sat in the car for a few minutes assessing what had just gone down. I felt both elated that Dino would be preserved, but also a little freaked out. I guess it's natural to feel that way when conducting this sort of business, and confronting the handiwork of someone who takes their bizarre vocation seriously—his results spoke for themselves, after all. The cats looked tremendous, convincing.

I started the car and as I was about to pull away I saw Hank exit his house, still in his robe but now wearing tall black Wellingtons. He didn't acknowledge me and loped into the woods behind his cabin with his arms raised and his head shaking, screaming like he was on fire.

Driving home, I wondered if I wasn't making a stupid mistake. I'd just handed a lunatic five hun to stuff my beloved but dead-as-frozen-turkey Dino. Was it wrong-

headed of me to pursue this possibly laughable and potentially grotesque attempt at fending off the vicissitudes of time? But I had to face the bitter reality that Dino would never again fetch a stick for me, or cuddle on the couch with me, or lick me awake at dawn. Then again, Dino was a beautiful dog, perfectly symmetrical, a pleasure to behold both at play and at rest. Would it be an abomination to preserve that beauty, even if only to perpetually delight the eye with a passing or more earnest glance? What would Dino think? Which begs the question, do dogs even have an afterlife?

These were the questions ping-ponging in my head when I pulled up to my place. I figured I needed to talk to someone. I called Peter Polité and delineated my doubts and issues about the whole thing.

"You saw Hank's handiwork," Peter said. "So you know he'll do a good job. Are you worried about appearances, say, to friends and family?"

"I don't care what they think," I admitted. That train had long ago left the station. Indeed, if it bothered them, I'd derive a modicum of pleasure from that. "But, tell me, Peter, when all is said and done, is it a creepy thing to do?"

"I wouldn't have turned you on to Hank if I thought it creepy. I had my Pomeranian Max fixed up five years ago and he's still going strong."

"You mean—"

"Yes. And there are others like me, you know."

I had assumed there were others. But

did they form a sort of club or alliance or something? Did they get together?

“We do gather,” Peter said, “with our pets. Joe Dougherty, a chiropractor who had his French poodle Brodie stuffed, has a big place up in Richmond Hill and he’s fixed up a makeshift dog park for us.”

Can’t say I found anything Peter said astonishing or even beyond the pale. I was living in times when events or the reporting and analyses of events had become increasingly unfathomable, when either befuddlement or utter numbness had become the default mode of being.

“Maybe when Hank completes Dino, you can join us,” Peter said.

I rang off, still at odds. I paced around my living room in a high state of agitation. What was the right thing to do? If I decided against it, would Hank refund my money? He had likely spent it already on drugs.

Let me be frank: I did not have the heart to get another dog, a living dog, which would have alleviated the conundrum and saved me money. I wasn’t ready for another dog, and I didn’t know if I ever would be. I missed Dino profoundly. My heart ached when I thought of him. I went down to the basement and opened the freezer. I had wrapped Dino in blue plastic and he was frozen stiff. I held my breath as I gently lifted him out of the freezer. He seemed to weigh more frozen, but this couldn’t have been true. I’m sorry, Dino, I whispered. It’s better this way.

I carried him out to the car. I should have worn gloves; by the time I lowered

him into the trunk of my car my hands were chilled. I shut the trunk lid and blew warmth into my hands. I climbed into the car and started it. My heart felt like an anvil as I drove away.

The Humber River flows into Lake Ontario. People fish it for salmon in the spring, as improbable as it sounds. I worked one summer many years ago as an attendant at Étienne Brûlé Park—a job I’d always regretted quitting—and often took Dino for walks along the picturesque Humber recreational trail of which it forms a small section. I parked in the public lot next to a bridge. I sat there and watched a few dog walkers and joggers do their thing. I switched on the radio. The jazz station played some Bill Evans, which soothed me. I must have drifted off. When I opened my eyes it was dusk and the parking lot and the path were deserted. I rubbed my eyes and straightened myself out.

I exited the car and walked around to the trunk. I opened it and lifted Dino out. He was still frozen solid. I walked down the Humber River, flowing like silver plates in the dark and gurgling black by the bank. I dropped Dino into the murk and heard the soft plash and hoped he wouldn’t sink and be stranded in the riverbed, but the surging current lifted the blue plastic away and rolled it over flashing silver into the inky void. I stood there for a minute. City lights burned in the backdrop. Distant barking erupted.

Next day I drove out to Hank’s again, to inform him I had decided against getting Dino stuffed and hoping perhaps to

retrieve all or most of my deposit. Hank answered the door in a state of rank dishevelment, his hair a schemata for chaos theory, white bathrobe splotted with pink and yellow stains. His eyes and cheeks looked strafed with birdshot. He tilted his head and squinted.

“Do I know you?” he asked, his words phlegm-fattened.

“I was here yesterday,” I said.

He continued squinting then fanned his arms out and fell back a step as if the floor beneath him had shifted.

“Peter’s friend.”

“Peter who?”

“Peter Polité. I came to talk to you about my dog, Dino. I gave you five hundred as a deposit. This was yesterday. I was going to come back in the evening, but I had a change of heart.”

Hank sank his hand into his black hair and buried it to the wrist bone. Then he pulled it out and studied it with a scowl. For a moment I thought a small animal quivered in his hand, but it was just a clump of hair.

“This is not good,” he said, glowering at the clump. “This is not good at all.” He opened his hand and the hair fell softly to his bare feet.

A sharp tang of Formaldehyde and cat urine wafting from inside the house tickled my nostrils and caused my eyes to water.

“I’m working,” he said. “You interrupted my work.”

Somehow I didn’t think he was working. “I need to get my money back,” I said, growing irritated with Hank’s antics and

manner.

“Money back? What money?”

“Five hundred bones. Remember? How’s that Cali kush?”

He turned his shoulders and weakly waved as if dismissing me and my concerns. He was about to shut the door in my face, but I planted a foot in the doorway and stopped him.

“Hey now,” he said. “You have to go. I want you off my property, okay.”

“I want my fucking money.”

He pointed at me. If there is one thing I detest is someone pointing at me, for whatever reason. I wanted to grab his finger and twist it off his hand, then kick the shit out of him. Five hundred dollars wasn’t a fortune, but it wasn’t nothing and why did he get to keep it? He had done no work for me. I wanted my fucking money. I think he gathered my rising temperature and gestured for me to step inside. I did so reluctantly.

“Look,” he said, “I understand how you’ve changed your mind. I get that. It happens. Not that often, but it does. And I’m not an unreasonable man. Please come in and make yourself comfortable. Let’s talk about this like two rational human beings.”

The presence of Hank’s stuffed cats, while arguably benign the day before, disquieted me on this day. I felt they had all turned their heads slightly to watch me plead my case to Hank. Meanwhile he had sat down on a wingback chair and leaned over the pine table to roll a spliff. When he was done, he lit it with a Zippo lighter

and puffed a blue-grey cloud around his head that obscured his facial features. He held out the burning spliff and offered me a hit.

“It’s radical,” he said.

Normally I would’ve declined a toké as over the years I’d lost my tolerance to THC, particularly the high dosages offered in contemporary cannabis products. But as I was feeling both anguished and weirded out by the staring cats, I decided to derange my senses a little and perhaps calm my anxieties. I took a good haul and immediately burst into a paroxysm of coughing. I could hear Hank chuckling behind the haze and was aware of the mute scrutiny of the cats.

“Just a warning,” Hank said. “You probably won’t be able to drive for a while. Have a seat and take a weight off.”

I sat on the sofa and felt a warm wave of euphoria wash over me while at the same time an inward finger of hysteria stroked my heart. Within minutes I was completely fucked up. My bones turned to rubber and I melted into the sofa. A grinning kabuki ogre mask had replaced Hank’s face and judging from the way my own face felt, the same must have happened to me.

I heard Bill Evans in the background and was going to ask about it, but I forgot what I was going to ask and stared at Hank for a moment before I burst out laughing. I laughed hard. I laughed until my abdomen seized up.

“I’m glad you find this amusing,” Hank said. “Quick thing. That money.

This weed. That money bought this weed. Look, look. I can hook you up with a few grams, yeah? And I’m sorry about the doggie. But in addition to this, this cannabis favolosa, I can offer you, say, Sylvester, or Count Basie.”

His words had reached my ears, but my brain took several beats to process their meaning. So, he was offering me a stuffed cat?

“Look, look, bruh. They, they make excellent pets. I mean, believe me. I wouldn’t shit you about this. Take Sylvester—although Count Basie’s cool, too—take Sylvester home and just hang with it for a while. You’ll see.”

My powers of speech pooled in an inaccessible recess of my brain. Unable to reach them, I moved my mouth without sound. The entire fabric of the moment was fraying at the edges. I had to plant my hands at my side to keep from toppling over. I wondered if Hank had laced the weed with something like angel dust or ketamine. He appeared to be fluttering behind a grey-blue curtain.

“You look, you look ...” he said without completing his thought.

I thought of screaming, of fleeing. Instead I watched him rise from the chair and walk over to one of the stuffed cats, a black and white one resting on the mantle over a rotisserie-style faux fireplace. He touched it then moved to another cat, a plump auburn one with four white mitts. Hank touched it and sighed. Then he returned to the black and white cat and lifted it off the mantle.

“I don’t think you’re ready for Count Basie,” Hank said. “He has special needs on account of his fur. But Sylvester here is top of the crop. Take him home. Take him home, man.”

Again, I was unable to articulate my resistance to this suggestion, although I engaged with mighty effort every muscle of my throat and face to do so. I watched as Hank took out what appeared to be a large black hatbox and with two hands lowered Sylvester into it. He also dropped a white linen napkin into the box and swaddled the stiff cat. He handed me the box and gently but firmly ushered me to the front door, spread-legged to prevent any attempted reentry.

“Take Sylvester home and begin the healing process,” Hank said.

I walked to my car with the box in my hands and my thoughts zigzagging randomly. I opened the trunk and set down the box. I stared at it for a moment. Then I got in the car and somehow drove home.

I may have died and been reborn on that trip back to my place but retain no memory of it. I wound up on my green

sofa-chair, the one Dino used to sit beside and watch the television programs we loved with me. It would never be the same of course. Wheel of Fortune would never again be as cheerful and bright, and Jeopardy never again as sharp and smart.

As for Sylvester, he rests on an arm-platform I have fashioned for him from a vintage snack table, where he can watch the television with an unobstructed view and from where I can reach him when I’m reclined on the sofa-chair. Yes, I pet Sylvester as one would any cat. His fur has coarsened over time. A faint odor of rot hangs in my living room. I don’t mind it. And no, Sylvester doesn’t purr when I pet him. He just stares at the television when it’s on and when it’s off he also stares at it.



END TRANSMISSION