

Five Dials



NUMBER 25

The Big Corking Fiction Issue – Part I

FEATURING NEW SHORT STORIES FROM

LYDIA DAVIS

D.W. WILSON

KEVIN BARRY

MIKE MCCORMACK

... plus orphans from Zsuzsi Gartner, poetry from Joe Dunthorne, and obviously much more ...



CONTRIBUTORS

KEVIN BARRY is the author of the short-story collections *Dark Lies the Island* and *There are Little Kingdoms*, and the novel *City of Bohane*. He recently won the Sunday Times EFG Short Story Prize. He has been awarded the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature and was shortlisted for the Costa First Novel Prize. His stories have appeared in the *New Yorker*, *Best European Fiction* and the *Granta Book of the Irish Short Story*. He lives in County Sligo, Ireland.

PATRICK COTTER lives in Cork where he works for the Munster Literature Centre. He has published two full collections of poetry, a number of chapbooks and a verse novella. Recent work has appeared in *Riddle Fence*, *The Shop* and *Poetry Ireland Review*.

LYDIA DAVIS is the author of six collections of stories and one novel, *The End of the Story*, and most recently *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis*. Among many other honours, she was named a Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters by the French government in 1999 and was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship in 2003. She currently teaches at SUNY Albany and New York University.

JOE DUNTHORNE was born and brought up in Cork's sister city, Swansea. His debut novel, *Submarine*, was translated into fifteen languages and adapted into an award-winning film. He was shortlisted for the Sunday Times EFG Short Story Award and has been a judge for the BBC National Short Story Award. His second novel, *Wild Abandon*, is out now.

ZSUZSI GARTNER is the author of the short fiction collections *Better Living Through Plastic Explosives* and *All the Anxious Girls on Earth*, and the editor of *Darwin's Bastards: Astounding Tales from Tomorrow*. Her stories have been widely anthologized, and broadcast on CBC and NPR's Selected Shorts. *Better Living Through Plastic Explosives* was shortlisted for the 2011 Giller Prize.

MIKE MCCORMACK comes from the west of Ireland. He is the author of two collections of short stories, *Getting It in the Head* and *Forensic Songs*, and two novels *Crowe's Requiem* and *Notes from a Coma*. Awarded the Rooney Prize for Literature in 1996, *Getting It in the Head* was also chosen as a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year. In 2006 *Notes from a Coma* was shortlisted for the Irish Book of the Year Award. He was awarded a Civitella Ranieri Fellowship in 2007. He lives in Galway.

NUALA NÍ CHONCHÚIR was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1970 and lives in Galway. She is a short-story writer, novelist and poet. Her fourth short story collection, *Mother America*, was published this year. She has won many awards for her short fiction, including the Jane Geske Award, the RTÉ Francis MacManus Award and the Cecil Day Lewis Award. She was also shortlisted for the European Prize for Literature.

JEANNIE PHAN is a Toronto-based illustrator who works in acrylic gouache and ink. Her work includes the Brazilian cover of the Slavoj Žižek book, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*. Her website can be found at jeanniephan.com.

D. W. WILSON was born and raised in British Columbia, Canada. He is the recipient of the University of East Anglia's inaugural Man Booker Prize Scholarship. He won the BBC National Short Story Award in 2011 and his debut collection of stories, *Once You Break a Knuckle*, was published this year on both sides of the Atlantic.

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Editor: CRAIG TAYLOR

Publisher: SIMON PROSSER

Assistant Editor: ANNA KELLY

Five Dials Staffers: NOEL O'REGAN, MARISSA CHEN, SAM BUCHAN WATTS,
JAMIE FEWERY, JAKOB VON BAEYER, KAREN BRYDEN, CAROLINE PRETTY, ELLIE SMITH

Designed by: DEAN ALLEN

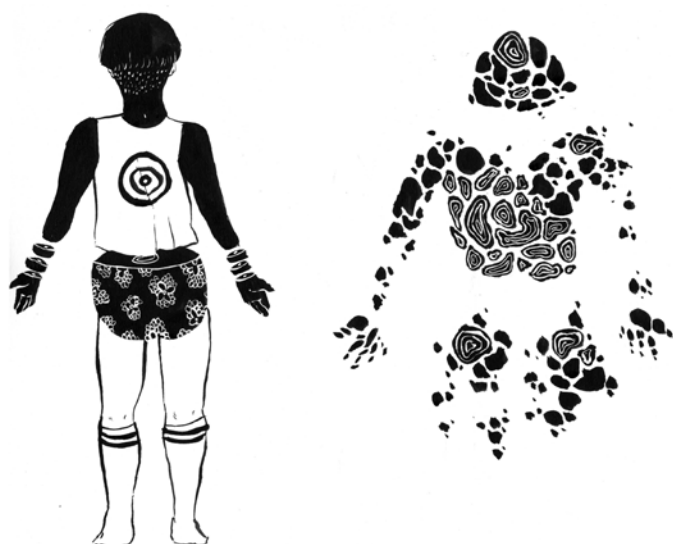
Illustration: JEANNIE PHAN

On Orphans and Cork

More than once we've received emails from readers who ask 'Why don't you print more short stories' and we're like: 'We print all sorts of short stories?' And they're like: 'We'd like to read more.' So here's an issue packed full of short stories. I'll get our short fiction editor, Noel O'Regan, to explain further in a moment, but first it's important to introduce the contest you'll come across in a page or two. Actually, it might be a stretch to call it a contest. It's more like we're a literary orphanage trying to find safe homes for lost children. The children, in this case, are a collection of beginnings by Vancouver-based short-story writer Zsuzsi Gartner. I've known Zsuzsi for years – she helped me get my first job – and I can still remember reading her first collection on the ferry ride I regularly had to take to get to the mainland. *All the Anxious Girls on Earth* was, for me, a demonstration of the elastic properties of the short story. Her stories are stuffed, rich, flavourful, intense. (I've started to sound like a Vancouver fusion cuisine menu.) A while ago, we implored her to send in a new story for the issue. Instead, she offered up something better, both for us and for you. After this letter you'll find a list of beginning to Zsuzsi stories – and, trust me, 'Zsuzsi stories' are a genre unto themselves. The scenarios come from her imagination – there's no doubt about that – but the middles and flourishes and endings will have to come from yours. These are, after all, orphans, and they deserve a good life somewhere in the world, even if it's far from their place of origin. Zsuzsi included her mailing address at the end of the fragments. I've been told she's off email these days, so aspiring writers will have to send a postcard instead. Each fragment is free for adoption by one concerned parent. The caveat: we'd like to see

the resulting stories. Send Zsuzsi a postcard telling her which beginning you've chosen and she'll send you an adoption certificate. Write the thing and send it to us. Who knows? We may include it in the next short fiction issue, nestled amidst names like Frank O'Connor and Lydia Davis and D.W. Wilson.

I mentioned Frank. You won't find his short stories in this particular PDF because we've had to break the fiction issue in two. Don't feel cheated: the next instalment will be with you shortly, and remember this is a free magazine, so you won't be shelling out. This isn't a ploy to take your money. We just have a lot of fiction to



share, as we're including work by writers who are in attendance at the 2012 Cork Short-Story Festival. To tell you more about Frank and the Cork festival, here is Noel O'Regan, who handles the short stories around these parts:

'For me, it started with Frank O'Connor,' he wrote to me in a recent email. 'I remember walking down Patrick Street in Cork one September afternoon, university books bunched under my arm, when I noticed his name on a banner overhead: *Frank O'Connor International Short-Story Festival*. I tracked down a brochure, still half-convinced that I had misread it. After all, no one cared about the short story any more, right? I was often labelled odd for

being such a voracious reader of the form. It was dying, hadn't I heard?

'But the short story has always felt alive to me. If anything, it was the authors that seemed fictitious. I couldn't imagine them existing in my world; it was through attending the festival they came alive. I bumped into Yiyun Li wandering along North Main Street, staring down the old alleyways. I was introduced to Edna O'Brien in The Metropole Hotel and wasn't sure whether or not to bow. I was offered a free drink voucher by Philip O'Ceallaigh upstairs in The Long Valley. (I took it.) There has always been an openness to the festival, a warmth and accessibility that is, undoubtedly, inspired by Cork and its people, but also, I think, by the fact that everyone has travelled to the festival with the same exceptional intention – to support the short story.

'The now renamed Cork International Short-Story Festival is a celebration of the form and its most talented practitioners. While helping to put this issue together, I was fortunate to read submissions from some of the best contemporary short-story writers, and to discover their eagerness to appear in the Cork issue. It reinforces my belief that Cork has established a festival of significance – with a hefty prize to go along with it. It's this sense of importance that once had me skipping lectures to attend all the readings and seminars; that later still had me leave work early, and now has me writing this. It is also why, year after year, the finest writers flock to Cork. By the River Lee, there seems to be a stubborn insistence in the form's continued good health.'

Enjoy the fiction. There are five – count 'em five – new short stories from Lydia Davis coming up. Watch out for part two, which features, among others, Christine Dwyer Hickey, John F. Deane, Tania Hershman, Fiona Kidman, Joyce Russell, Lysley Tenorio, and Witi Ihimara, whose 1987 novel was made into a film called *Whale Rider*. And, of course, Frank O'Connor himself. And Nathan Englander. That guy won the Frank O'Connor prize this year.

—CRAIG TAYLOR

Eleven Orphaned Short-Story Openings (circa 1996–2012) Looking for a Loving Home

by Zsuzsi Gartner

The Time I Tried: Then there was the time I tried to get my life made into a television series but failed. Everything ordinary happened to be in great demand. ‘Let’s hear what the ordinary people have to say,’ that anchorman, the one everyone trusted, would say.

Karl: You would think they’d talk about money all the time. That’s what you’d think. All the time, endlessly, like a broken record, non-stop, ad nauseam, *infinitus spiritus* amen. But they don’t. They talk about anything but. You have to make them sometimes. Get them to confront the incredible magnitude of their good fortune. Shove their faces into the enormity of it. But gently.

That’s Karl’s job.

Sperm Donor: The first time he saw the child he was startled that the boy looked nothing like him.

My son.

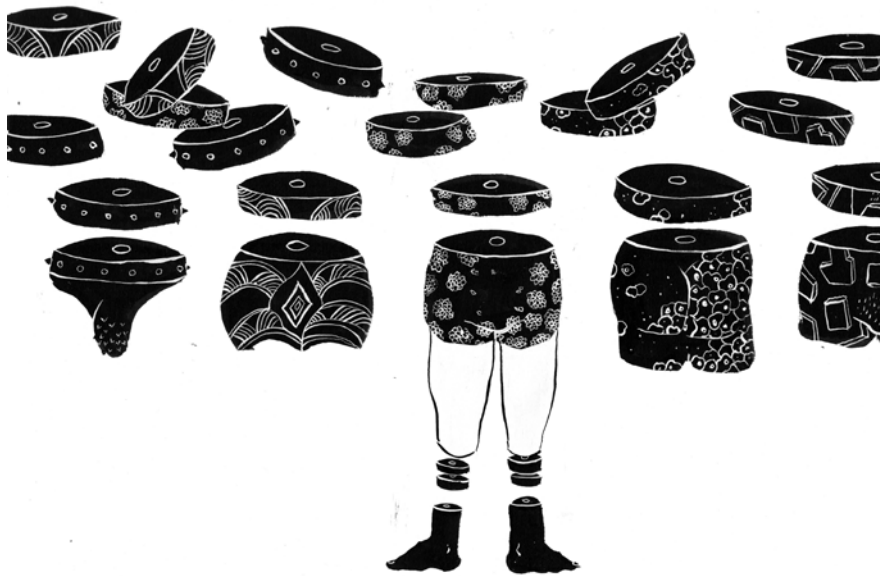
Corner Office: Things were supposed to be different with Corner Office, brudder. Just wait ‘til Corner Office, I kept telling Twyla as her tears dripped on to the suction line offa l’il Felix’s shunt (every-so-often the generator goes and then it’s DIY), everything will be better when I get to Corner Office. If you could see l’il Felix now, with his flappy hands and cruxifying smile, oh your heart would surely urk.

Chastity: Sometimes they appear in great bunches, streaming down the street like a circus parade. Sometimes just out of the corner of your eye, when you’re

not thinking about anything much. The women and their wild beasts. Can’t they give it a rest?

The nuns are the worst.

The Third Sister I: The barbarians are chewing. Chew chew chew all summer long. Blood pools on their plates, just the way they like it. The mothers wear halter tops; the fathers take off their watches; we run barefoot in the street, a thick seam of tar bubbles in the centre of the road and sticks to our feet. There are



no boys on this block, except for spindly Johnny Falconi who hides his shovel teeth behind his mother’s orange curtains. Girls run rampant, no boy could survive here. We run low to the ground, knees bent, hands dragging like monkey paws so that they don’t see us. They are the barbarians. We see them through their haze of cigarettes and BBQ smoke and choked laughter. We watch our backs.

After Almodóvar: What grown man can say that he married his own mother, and

that although heartbreak was involved, no one disapproved?

St Elizabeth of the Miracle of the Roses: Anastasia Nagy is on a rampage. The boy, honestly he’s just a boy, they’ve chosen to play Zoltan is horribly unsuitable. It’s like casting Macaulay Culkin to play Heathcliff. She claims she can see the peach fuzz still gleaming on his cheeks. She writes fire and they give her green fruit! She burns up the telephone lines and is truly inconsolable.

The BBQ Nun: She came to us from Kansas City with smoke in her habit, shorn hair glinting copper. She came with her guitar and her firm belief in penance and her expertise in all things eschatological, although the latter was more of a private preoccupation than a part of her duties at Sacred Heart. She came with

her talk of judgement, but there was always a kind of smile on her face and she even made the idea of Hellfire seem like fun.

The Third Sister II: The third sister with her bare skull like a crystal ball, but milky blue. When Betty and Lydia want to touch it she makes them pay. Sometime in pennies, in blood.

Lawn Boy: They say that if a house is on fire and a woman has to choose between her child and another

– her husband, her lover – she will choose the child.

What if I told you I would choose differently?

What do you think of me now?

For adoption papers write to (and please specify which opening/s):

Zsuzsi Gartner

c/o 1424 Commercial Dr.

PO Box 21513 LITTLE ITALY

VANCOUVER, BC V5L 3X0/V5L 5G2

CANADA

The Lovely Miss What's-Her-Face

by Kevin Barry

Of course, you can't get the pork these days. The beef is not so bad. The beef I will grant you. But the pork? You might as well eat the bloody mattress. And I would worry, frankly, about the integrity of our English pig. But then I worry about a lot of things. Still. They are not the pigs they were, are they? Or at least it seems to me. I mean, you'd expect a bit of a sizzle when the pork mince goes in, wouldn't you? You want the fat, you want the marbling, but nowadays?

Oh and I'm afraid so, yes – I have come to the point in my life where I find myself using the term 'nowadays'. A great deal.

Chop the garlic, nice and thin. Oh and up she comes, that nice garlicky waft, the Mediterranean. I could be in – I don't know – Sardinia, couldn't I? But of course I'm not. I'm in Crumpsall still. Infernal bloody Crumpsall. Thirty-four years and counting.

Chop an onion, have a little weep. The area has changed. Garlic's softening, I'll bung the chopped onion in after. Most will say first with the onions, you sweat them, and then the garlic, but that's not my way. I go garlic first and the onions after. Life's a bloody riot around here.

Nineteen eighty-three? I was mostly working in Third Party Fire and Theft. Which wasn't without its excitements. I remember the night the band hall burned down. Now there was a mischief. Kids, I have no doubt. Never caught neither. Anyhow. She was in the typing pool. When there still was a typing pool. I found I was hanging about there most days, even if I hadn't cause. The reams of A4 and the blue carbons and the chance of a little flirt, down by stationary supplies, you're going through the Tippex this weather, Miss ...

The fact that I can't remember her name is bizarre. I have no doubt my psychiatrist would have something to say about it. But this is not an area that Mr Molesworth and I delve into, typically. My love life, or lack of. She was my last date – which is hard to believe. Thirty years since. Pitiful. My last ... involvement.

Now in we go with the pork mince, which is bloody dreadful stuff really, and the beef mince, which is better. I would have no fears about our English cattle. See them in a field of high yellowing summer grass, and so forth, ad-lib to fade. Now I must insist on the mix of pork and beef for your proper bolognese. I mean to say? What gets itself called a spag bol nowadays? Disgraceful. I go puce. I mean to say? I'd a bowlful in motorway services the other week and you could have put up tiles with the stuff. An orangey goo.

I'll brown the meat. Which kills a few minutes. There's the sizzle of the beef fat, at least, and that's the taste is what that is. Is the fat.

Fun Boy Three. Is what comes to mind when I think of Miss What's-Her-Face. They had a song out that was current had the Fun Boy Three. 'The Lunatics Have Taken Over the Asylum'. They'd had another with Bananarama, hadn't they, earlier? And I'd fancied one of Bananarama, actually, her with the rah-rah skirt. Karen? Or was it Keren? Me and bloody names. But. Anyhow. It's the long hot summer. It's 1983. I'm in short sleeves in the office. I'm whistling Fun Boy Three. I'm feeling positively jaunty. Which isn't typical. I'm along by the typing pool. I halfways throw a glance her way. But I keep it casual, and she's ... I mean, it's not just that she's looking back at me? She's bloody well smiling at me.

Now, she wasn't a small girl. No. And she isn't a small woman by any means. She is not. I mean, I've seen her about. Oh and she's about – another Crumpsall lifer is Miss What's-Her-Face. Or Missus, now, I suppose. I don't know if she doesn't recognize me – I mean, there is the situation with my hair, or lack of ... And with the psoriasis ... Or maybe she does recognize me and just blanks me? On account of ... Well.

But I do see her. Down the park. By the obelisk. With the family. She was always the sort who'd pop out the kiddies handy enough. Powerful hips. I saw that in her. Wouldn't knock a stitch out of the

girl, a kiddie. A fool could have seen that.

Now, you'll not top a tinned tomato in my opinion. The rubbish you get off the stalls! The supposedly fresh? Oh. What they mean was fresh in Venezuela sixteen months ago and in the cooler trucks since. Liars and cheats is what you get operating the stalls. No, you're as well with tinned when it comes to tomatoes. Any Italian brand will do. Because they do know a tomato, the Italians. Of course, my father knew his tomatoes. He was as happy up the allotment as he was ever. But then he was a miserable bugger the rest of the time. Sat there. On his special cushion. On account of the piles.

In with the tomatoes, and now a slow, sloooow, sloooooow ... glug-glug-glug ... is what you're after. You need to listen to your cooking to get it right. A dash of wine. I've long since opened the Chianti, I've let it breathe. Mind you, given it was four quid, the breathing isn't going to do it a whole heap of good, but even so. If you're going to drink cheap, drink Italian. That's what I always say. I'll have a little sip, chef's treat. Life-saver, that.

Now, the way it happened, she gives me the flirty little look, and I'm in my short-sleeved shirt, and I'm whistling Fun Boy Three, and I felt a rush of ... courage, you could only call it. Bloody youth! I was feeling that hard and that bloody suave I went and spoke to her even. I'm not saying she was an oil painting. But pleasant-faced, certainly, in a particular light. I said, so what are you doing the Friday? I was that smooth it was like I was possessed. I didn't even flush or stammer. It was like some sharp-talking young Charlie had crawled inside my reedy chest, my dried-out skin. And she says, well, nothin' much.

Glug-glug-glug ... Listen? Lovely. And now have a little sniff? Yes. I think I've got the garlic just right. You don't want to go mad. And now a teaspoon of white sugar for the toms, just to bring out their sweetness. Taste? Ah. Lovely. Little nip of Chianti. Chef's privilege.

I should have moved out of here years ago. I don't mean Crumpsall. I accept that Crumpsall is a life sentence. The walks in the park, the Sundays, the head down, the bloody papers, the dogshit. No, I don't mean Crumpsall – there's no way of checking out of Crumpsall. I mean this nasty little bedsit. Though it is home.

Thirty-four years in a bedsitter? It is home. I wouldn't be ... I wouldn't know myself someplace else. But not necessarily in a good way.

I said, we could go to a disco? Down Manchester? She said, I'm not much of a one for discos. I said, what about a picture then, we could go to the pictures; she said, I never liked the pictures. I said, well, a walk? A walk, she said, hmmm. Then an insane notion came to me. I said, well, if you like, you could call around mine, I'll rustle us up a bit of tea? Fine, she said, and my legs nearly gave out from under.

I had three days to prepare for the date. Neurotic wasn't the word. Sectionable was the bloody word. I mean ... I wanted to make a statement with this tea. Because food? It says a lot about a man. I wasn't going to serve her up an egg and chip, was I? That would be uncouth. Of course, uncouth mightn't have been a bad idea, for a finish. For a while I was thinking of having a go at a Hungarian goulash, but sense got the better part of valour, thank the stars. I hardly slept! Next I was thinking curry but then I thought no, it's high summer, and on the warm side still in the evenings. Curry, and we'd be sweating like bulls.

I thought about what to wear, at great length, and went in the finish for a white T-shirt, white jeans. You may laugh. But it was the style, then, wasn't it? I had a haircut and got some highlights in. I was Crumpsall's answer to George bloody Michael. I bought flowers. I had a panic attack of middling-to-high intensity, definitely a seven, or higher again. But then I thought about the look on her face when I'd halfway thrown a glance her way. And I settled a bit.

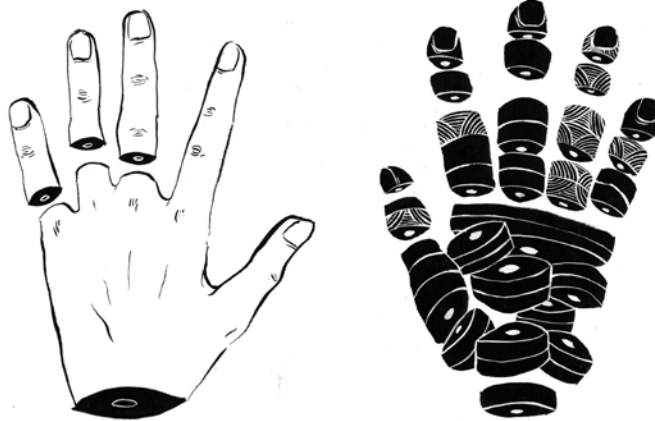
It looks after itself, after a time, does a bolognese. It's the slow minutes give the flavour, it's patience gives the flavour. Hang about, a dash of cream won't hurt. Oh. Now that is lovely. Have a taste? Oh. Sip of Chianti? Don't mind if I do, Captain!

So. The Friday arrives. I have the bedsitter like a palace, the flowers in a vase. And it's come to me, in a flash, the night before, like a revelation – spaghetti bolognese! It had just the right balance

for the occasion: not too fancy, but very tasty, and might it not suggest to the lass there was something about me of ... well, Italian vigour?

I thought it'd be awkward as hell at first, but no. At least, not on her part. She's come straight into the bedsitter and she's all yap and giggles. She ignores the chairs I've arranged just so by the folding table, and she plonks herself down on my bed, which is a single, and she's not a small girl. Kicks her shoes off. Folds up her legs beneath. She's in a rah-rah like Keren – is it Karen? – out of Bananarama and she accepts a glass gladly, Chianti, downs it in one, and she says, so, what's the plan?

I was thinking a spag bol, I says, stir-



ring the pot, trying to relax, my heart going like a bastard greyhound, my heart about to pop its box.

Lovely, she says, taste of the Mediterranean.

Exactly, I says.

You've had your hair done, pet, she says.

Well, I says, a little touch-up, really, is all.

Suits you, she says. Now come here ...

It's difficult for me to go into the precise detail of what happened that night. Or didn't happen. I've blocked out much of it – Mr Molesworth, I have no doubt, would have a technical term for the blocking. She wasn't a small girl and she wasn't a shy girl. Turns out she was ripe as raspberries. I remember struggling up for air, here and there, from beneath the weight of her hot kisses. I remember trying to get up to turn the ring down on the cooker. I mean, the spag bol was getting out of hand ... glug-glug-glug,

glug-glug-glug! I said, our tea will be ruined! Shut up, she said, and kissed me more. Actually she was beautiful, in her way. I can't deny her that, young. She was a treat. And I wasn't brave enough.

This ... blocking-out business? It really is something I should bring up with Mr Molesworth. We're up to two sessions a week and frankly we're running out of things to talk about. He tells me the psoriasis is all in my mind. No, I say, it's all in my bedsheets. It's got that bad, the psoriasis, there are mornings I have to Hoover out the bloody bed, I've shed so much.

The shedding of skin. A single bed. Thirty years since my last involvement? I just couldn't go with the moment. I just couldn't be Mr Smooth. Coitus interruptus? Coitus never-bloody-began-us.

She was sweet about it. And she stayed on for the spag bol, at least. We played the radio. Fun Boy Three came on and we had a little dance even. Small flat, big girl, how we didn't put a window out ... And she kissed me again but it was chaste, then. I'd become like a dear uncle to the lass. I

was born a dear uncle.

But still, you know, around this time of year, a warm July day? I find myself thinking the oddest notion, I find myself thinking – spag bol. I buy the pork mince, the beef mince, the garlic and the onions, the tins of toms, the cream to thicken, the herbs to freshen, right at the end, a handful of basil, ripped not cut, just for the aromatic ... Have a little sniff?

Lovely.

I don't remember her name. Was she a Maggie? She wasn't a Maggie. Was she a Sue? She was no Sue. A Sandra? The summer's over just as you think it'll stretch on for ever and till Tuesday. I leave the window open to the street, the kids playing, their voices floating past. The mischief. Their voices cut with something, an edge. I'll have a sip of Chianti and a bloody good sigh. I'll ladle up a bowlful. The window open and the radio on. A supper for one.

A Story of Stolen Salamis

by *Lydia Davis*

My son's Italian landlord in Brooklyn kept a shed out back in which he cured and smoked salamis. One night, in the midst of a wave of petty vandalism and theft, the shed was broken into and the salamis were taken. My son talked to his landlord about it the next day, com-

miserating over the vanished sausages. The landlord was resigned and philosophical, but corrected him: 'They were not sausages. They were salamis.' Then the incident was written up in one of the city's more prominent magazines as an amusing and colourful urban incident. In

the article, the reporter called the stolen goods 'sausages'. My son showed the article to his landlord, who hadn't seen it. The landlord was interested and pleased that the magazine had seen fit to report the incident, but he added: 'They weren't sausages. They were salamis.'

A Story Told to Me by a Friend

by *Lydia Davis*

A friend of mine told me a sad story the other day about a neighbour of hers. He had begun a correspondence with a stranger through an online dating service. The friend lived hundreds of miles away, in North Carolina. The two men exchanged messages and then photos and were soon having long conversations, at first in writing and then by phone. They found that they had many interests in common, were emotionally and intellectually compatible, were comfortable with each other and were physically attracted to each other, as far as they could tell on the Internet. Their professional interests, too, were close, my friend's neighbour being an account-

ant and his new friend down South an assistant professor of economics at a small college. After some months, they seemed to be well and truly in love, and my friend's neighbour was convinced that 'this was it', as he put it. When some vacation time came up, he arranged to fly down south for a few days and meet his Internet love.

During the day of travel, he called his friend two or three times and they talked. Then he was surprised to receive no answer. Nor was his friend at the airport to meet him. After waiting there and calling several more times, my friend's neighbour left the airport and went to the address his friend had given him. No

one answered when he knocked and rang. Every possibility went through his mind.

Here, some parts of the story are missing, but my friend told me that what her neighbour learned was that, on that very day, even as he was on his way south, his Internet friend had died of a heart attack while on the phone with his doctor; my friend's neighbour, having learned this either from the man's neighbour or from the police, had made his way to the local morgue; he had been allowed to view his Internet friend; and so it was here, face to face with a dead man, that he first laid eyes on the one who, he had been convinced, was to have been his companion for life.

Notes During Long Phone Conversation with Mother

by *Lydia Davis*

for summer – she needs
pretty dress – cotton

cotton nottoc
coontt
tcoont
toonct
toctnot tocont
tocton
contot

On the Train

by Lydia Davis

We are united, he and I, though strangers, against the two women in front of us talking so steadily and audibly across the aisle to each other. Bad manners.

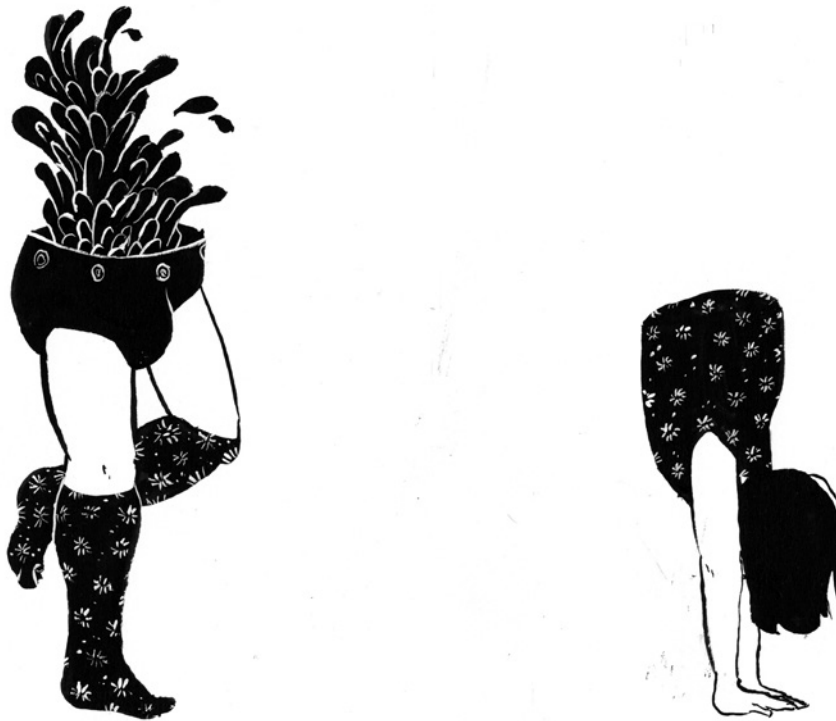
Later in the journey I look over at him

(across the aisle) and he is picking his nose. As for me, I am dripping tomato from my sandwich on to my newspaper. Bad habits.

I would not report this if I were the one picking my nose.

I look again and he is still at it.

As for the women, they are now sitting together side by side and quietly reading, clean and tidy, one a magazine, one a book. Blameless.



Susie Brown Will Be In Town

by Lydia Davis

Susie Brown will be in town. She will be in town to sell her things. Susie Brown is moving far away. She would like to sell her queen mattress.

Do we want her queen mattress? Do we want her ottoman? Do we want her bath items?

It is time to say goodbye to Susie

Brown.

We have enjoyed her friendship. We have enjoyed her tennis lessons.

Room 313

by *Nuala Ní Chonchúir*

You rap on the door and call out, 'Housekeeping'. You don't wait long when there is silence. You want, sometimes, to swipe the key-card and catch people doing things that are the stuff of locked doors. The most you have witnessed is a retreating bare behind, married to a shocked 'Oh'.

You love business people; their hardly there-ness, their generosity. Before you roll out your cart each morning, you study your list. The list is your map for the day: too many Leavers and it will be a tough one; lots of Stayers means a soft run. If the Stayers are business people, even better: they lie on one side of the bed, barely denting the pillow. They use a single towel and don't mess with the toiletries. It's Hoover humming idly and TV on, a little sit-down, then pluck away a few stray hairs from the bed and bath, and job done.

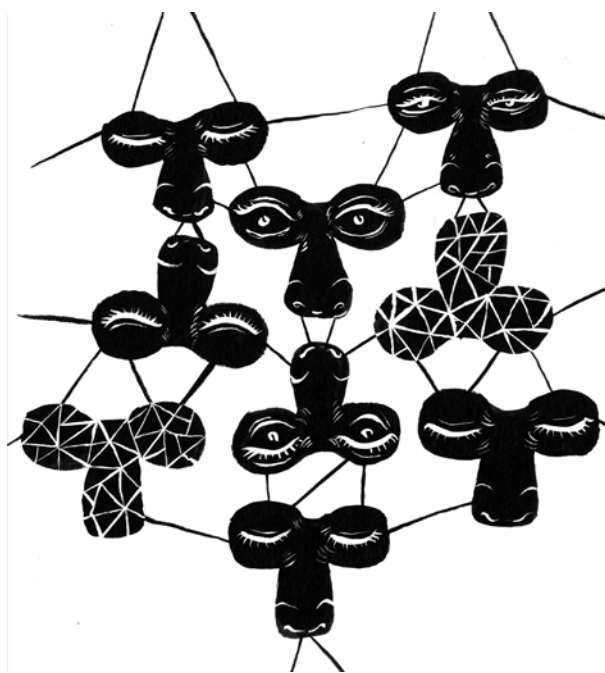
You like families too; the other maids complain about them – the walked-in sand, the chaos – but they leave behind toys and you get to keep them for your girl. You have taken home hardly loved dolls, sweet picture books and all shapes of buckets and spades.

The ones you hate are the lovers: these are the chocolate-on-the-sheets brigade; strawberry hulls mashed into the carpet; sticky champagne glasses and a sodden towel heap. They leave hairs clogging the plughole and floaters in the toilet; they are too distracted to flush. Lovers are slovenly, slapdash, and the bastards never tip.

All this week you are doing Room 313. Marta, the Head Housekeeper, says it's not normal for a hotel to have rooms with the number 13 on the door and she refuses to even enter them. But Room 313 is your favourite, your lucky room. It is the room of the €100 tip that you kept secret because the other girls would talk too much about it if you told them. And then Marta would sweep the rooms before you begin each morning, vacuuming up your tips; she would lose her 13

phobia pretty quick, you reckon. Ever since the €100 tip, you've loved this room; it seems to hum with energy.

Its current occupant is a business-woman; you have christened her Coco. All her clothes are black and white; her underwear too. She wears black slippers with white piping that feel soft as baby skin beneath your fingers. Even softer when you slip out of your uniform and try them on. Coco's perfume is citrus sweet and comes in a tiny metal flask that you have to wipe down after you spray it because your fingerprints smudge the silver.



You stand at the windowhouse of Room 313 and look down. It rains all the time here; a lid of grey covers the place and rarely lifts. Even the sea is dark – it churns and turns, a murky broth. You think of your daughter and wonder what her voice sounds like now; she is silent on Skype these days, staring at you as if you are a stranger. Your mother says she is a great talker but you have not heard a word from her mouth for months. You miss her in a way that did not seem possible when you left Yalta. You would give anything to hold her small body in your

arms and place her in bed for the night; rub her back until she drifts. You would love to see her wake with candyfloss hair and one pudgy paw under her cheek.

Room 313 has a peacefulness that makes you linger. You turn from the window and begin a half-baked tidy; Coco doesn't cause much mess. You pull the bedcovers straight, fix the curtain pleats and empty the bin. You stay a while in her room, sitting in the chair by the window, enjoying the comfort of the space, the calming view of the seashore. 313 always smells nice, no matter who stays in it; the hotel's corridors are sour and they make your stomach flip-flop. You think how you would like to bring your daughter to the beach, even on a wet day, and let the water lap her toes. Together you could claw the damp sand with your fingers and make a mighty sandcastle.

You are sitting on Coco's toilet when you hear her come in and you have to suck the poo back inside and pretend that you are washing the sink, so she doesn't suspect. You open the bathroom door and she is standing, staring.

'Oh, it's only you,' she says, and laughs. She opens the window and lights a cigarette. 'I'm the solo smoker at the conference. I feel like a pariah, so I come up here to have a fag. Want one?'

You shake your head. 'I will come back later; I was nearly finished anyway.'

'No, no. I won't get in your way.'

You take your can of Mr Sheen and start to spray and dust the wardrobe doors, know-

ing that she is following you with her eyes. The cigarette smoke mingles with the Mr Sheen and her perfume, newly scenting your skin.

Coco goes to the safe and taps in her code; the safe lows like a calf as it swings open. She takes out a pearl necklace and holds it up.

'What do you think of that?' she says.

'Pretty.'

'Come here. Try it on.'

'Oh, no. I couldn't.'

'Please,' she says, and points to the mirror, so you stand in front of it.

She moves behind you and you feel heat radiating from her body. Her hands come around your front and she unbuttons the top of your uniform. She lays the cold pearls against your throat and snaps the clasp.

'Look at them, like a row of moons,' she whispers, close into your ear. 'They come from the Gulf of Mannar. Imagine the diver, naked, plunging to the ocean floor. Imagine him shucking open the oyster, looking for that lunar glow.' Her eyes are locked on to yours in the mirror. 'Imagine how many times he had to dive through the deeps to find each pearl on this string.' Her hand moves across your breastbone, fingering the beads one at

a time. 'Where do *you* come from?' she says.

'Ukraine.'

'I knew you were too good-looking to be Irish.'

Coco lays her hands on your shoulders and you feel like a bird, safe under its mother's wings. She dips her head and her lips are on your neck; you can feel the soft wetness of her tongue; she licks at your skin then bites gently with her teeth. You close your eyes and feel everything swell between your legs.

In one swift jerk she unclips the pearls and marches towards the safe. She throws the necklace inside, slams the door and punches in her code.

'You never know who'll be wandering around your room,' she says, grabbing her handbag from the chair and leaving.

Your skin shines where her mouth was. You run your forefinger across the wet patch then lick it. With the same finger you press the digits on the safe's keypad. Once again it gives an animal groan. You take the pearl necklace and pop it into the pocket of your uniform. With it you pocket the diver and his shucking tool, the oyster shells and sunshine and clear green sea of the Gulf of Mannar. You turn off the light and close the door on Room 313. The grains of sand that the pearls once were, safe now, in your hands.

THREE POEMS

On glimpsing non-modern art through closing doors

by Joe Dunthorne

In the mosh pit with the die-hards,
Perseus holds Medusa's head
at arms-length, eyes averted,
appalled by her try-hard haircut.
For those about to rock.

Gabriel has time to regret
the double drop, the sweat
beneath his halo,
before turning his eyes to God.
I think I'm coming up.

Ophelia in the flotation tank,
testing the lock on each chakra,
locating her inner place:
reeds, blossom, a party dress.
Oh to stay right here for ever.

King Vulture at Trivandrum Zoo

by Joe Dunthorne

Wearing his skull on the outside,
he fidgets like a full-bladdered school child;
their uniforms rub static against the cage.
They fail to take seriously this fearful psychic
mortician, his sockets, six foot deep.

He has no room to pitch his wingspan
so they drift towards the peacock.
He feels comic, like *Carry On Carrion*,
but in time he'll see these children again,
as they lead away in a crocodile.

Dinner

by Joe Dunthorne

Though I like to imagine my girlfriend alone
with ravioli in a café where they know her name
but mispronounce it, I'm aware she's happier
being visualized in the Korean place her gay
colleagues frequent – tossing porterhouse
on a hot plate and being paid compliments
for eating and still looking, the way she does.

I like to make life hard for myself so I straighten
one of the men. He dismantles a raw egg salad
and glistens at the lips. I turn two more, just
to see how I handle it. Soon they're all enjoying
the raw egg salad. Next thing you know she asks
for her steak bleu and they've entered some kind
of parlour. The waiter's no longer Korean.

How I Met Welger Holland

by Mike McCormack

I was presented with an opportunity I could not turn down. The job, as it was outlined to me, was well within my compass and did not cost me a thought; the fee with expenses would be enough to see me clear for a good three months. The snag was that the contract would require a trip into D-Wing. Ten years on I remember everything about that job and the consequences which followed from it, but I am not going to talk about them here – that is a story for another time. For present purpose, all you need know is that I was faced with a journey into that part of the colony with such a reputation for violent and lawless chaos that it was deemed prohibitively dangerous for anyone who was not spoken for or who was not a made man.

So I needed a guide, someone who was sure-footed and well-got in that chaotic realm. I asked around and the same name came up again and again. Welger Holland, they said; if I needed a guide he was the man. There was no one more capable of navigating his way around the hazards of D-Wing than Welger. But there was agreement also that the same Welger could be hard to get hold of and pricey to work with; it was well known that he preferred to go it alone. Still though, if I was looking for someone to see the job through and, more to the point, see me safely through then Welger was the man.

That settled it. I put out the word – I had a job for him and the money was good – would he meet up to discuss it. Days went by. I began to despair that my message had dissolved into the ether without ever reaching him. Pretty soon my client was reminding me there was a deadline to be met and time was pushing on. Circumstances were changing and our window of opportunity was closing.

I was beginning to give up hope and look elsewhere when I got word.

Word came by way of a hand-drawn map on a single sheet of paper. The illustrated terrain was bordered to the north by a range of V-shaped hills that swept down

to a sea which covered the bottom of the page. The wide strip of bog-land between hills and sea was crossed by a narrow road which wound away to the north. And sure enough there was an X on it, and judging from the scale of the map this X lay about fifty miles to the west of where I stood.

The map was clear enough but nothing in its stylized topography prepared me for the sight of Welger's place.

The handball alley stood at the edge of a derelict village that was visible across the level bog-land from a distance of two miles. Eighteen metres by nine, but without a back wall, it faced out onto the road and looked across a wide floodplain that tapered on to a shoreline in the distance. Welger's dwelling place, which was built under the front wall, was a staggered series of shipping containers laid across each other, three tiers high. There were no windows in the sides of these containers, but the front was inset with a bizarre assortment which had been lifted from various buildings and set into the metal walls with a lot of skill; there was a leaded church window in the lower tier and a full sash window in the middle one; in the centre of the top tier there was a full truck windscreen with a pair of furry dice still hanging from the middle of it. Like so many other constructs in the colony it evoked all sorts of echoes and disparate connections and I could only think that here was another construct which, if the world was right, might not exist at all. Two security gates had been opened back to the side walls, in front of which were stacked a large pile of yellow plastic containers; it was a moment before I decoded the biohazard and pathological waste decals on each drum.

'You're on your own?'

I hadn't spotted him standing on the wooden steps which led up to the door in the second tier.

'Yes.'

'Come on up.'

The dinner was on the table when I got inside, and he was already peeling

spuds into a large plate of stew. He had stripped down to a sleeveless vest for the job and he sat there heavy-shouldered and bullnecked under a thick rope of gold chains. I was startled to see that standing beside him was a scaled-down version of himself – a young boy, gold chains, sleeveless vest, the whole lot. He couldn't have been more than ten years old and he too was peeling spuds into the plate.

'You'll have a spud,' Welger said.

'No, I'm grand, work away yourself.'

'Don't say you weren't asked, pull in that chair. Is it true you're looking for Welger Holland?'

'Yes.'

'Congratulations, you've found him.'

He gestured to the boy. 'And have you met this man?'

'No, I can't say I have.'

'This is the Spooks-man, or Michaleen if you'd prefer.'

Michaleen's gaze flicked over me, a glancing lighted twitch, and was then gone. It happened suddenly but I had no doubt that this child had subjected me to a complete appraisal in that brief instant. Without a break in his rhythm he returned his whole attention to peeling spuds, dropping them into a mess of meat and vegetable stew; it was quite something to see two men peeling spuds into the same plate.

'You didn't come here to watch a man eating his dinner. What's troubling you?'

I outlined the proposed mission, its beginning and end and its need for someone who could skilfully guide it through those hazards it would encounter. I thought my speech sounded breezy and plausible, persuasive even. When I finished, however, Welger was looking at me with the expression of a man wondering who had let such a dangerous clown into his house. I was alarmed also to see a narrow smirk spreading across the Spooks-man's face.

'You must have lost the small bit of sense you had on the journey over. Those potholes must have jogged it loose out of your head,' Welger said. His broad face wore an expression of genuine regret as if I had disappointed him in some way he had not anticipated. He turned back to his dinner and his voice was low.

'Michaleen, what should any man know about D-Wing?'

'A man should know enough to keep well wide of it, that's what a man should know about D-Wing,' Michaleen said, without looking up from his work.

'And what sort of business should a man have in D-Wing?'

'A man should have no business in D-Wing.'

'If right were right?'

'If right were right.'

'But if a man did have business there, what would that be a sign of?'

'It would be a sure sign that he needed his head examined.'

'And this man with business in D-Wing – what sort of man would he be?'

'He'd be a foolish man or a sorry man, one or the other.'

'Possibly both?'

'Yes, he could be both.'

'...a foolish man or a sorry man. Good man, Michaleen, one more of them will be enough.' Welger looked at me. 'There it is, you heard it yourself from the Spooks-man.'

It was clear that this Q and A routine was not a rhetorical or dramatic device. The smooth way in which both had played their part convinced me this was Welger's genuine attempt to retrieve that surplus knowledge he had offloaded onto the Spooks-man. The boy was Welger's way of organizing his thoughts and clearing his mind. Now he spread his arms in a show of finality as if our discussion was over.

'So tell me what you know about D-Wing,' I persisted. 'Tell me the things I should guard against.'

Welger squared his elbows once more around his plate. It was obvious now that neither I nor my questions were wanted here any more. I was ruining his dinner; from the expression on his face I gathered I was taking the good out of it. He pushed his plate away and drained a glass of milk; he set it down and considered it carefully as if scrying in its clouded sides. The Spooks-man lifted a hat from the armchair and left the room without a word.

'How does a man describe chaos?' Welger began. 'What unit of order or metric does he measure it with? How is it delimited? What lawful words does he use to describe all that is lawless and unreasonable? That's the difficulty with D-Wing. No matter what you know or

what you think you know, very little of it will be of any use to you once you cross the threshold. If the world and all its laws and everything contrary to those same laws were drawn down from the heavens and compacted into a few square miles, then you might have some idea what D-Wing is like. On the other hand, if the world were lost to itself it could be rebuilt from the chaos and plenitude of D-Wing for any man who had a mind to do it. What's law one moment is inverse the next. Some say that there is nothing at the ends of the world but a grand harmony, all peace and higher attainment. Others say that there is nothing but dissonance and savagery, all things contesting against each other. Hard to say who's right, but no doubt there's a template for both options somewhere in D-Wing. It balances all propositions against each other and lets them have free play so that it is both itself and the opposite of itself at one and the same time. What was north a moment ago is now south and if someone tells you that black is white you might as well believe it because it has as much truth as its opposite, whatever that is; and if you drop the hand on the prettiest girl you've ever set eyes on and find that she has a pair of balls bigger than your own you shouldn't be surprised. Every man there is an authority and a fool in equal measure. That's how it is in D-Wing. It is a place where it is both night and day and darkness and light at one and the same time; it is heaven and hell and it's the proper place for no man in his right mind. And all that is as sure as you are sitting there on that chair; do you follow?'

I did not, but this did not seem to worry Welger. His garbled homily completed, he pushed himself to his feet and reached for the bottle on the dresser beside him – a bottle with a clear bluish liquid and two small glasses. Welger chuckled.

'Yes, it would drive you to drink – and a lot worse.'

He poured a stiff measure into both glasses and pushed one across the table to me. 'Good health,' he said, and threw back the shot with a quick tilt of his chin. I followed suit. Nothing at first save the warm glow of herbs marinated in alcohol and then a moment's respite before it ignited in my throat and across the top of my chest. The breath was snagged from

my lungs so suddenly I stood teetering on the balls of my feet with tears flowing from my eyes. Welger threw his head back and roared with satisfaction. 'Not bad,' he shouted, as if his hearing had been affected. 'Many's the man has had the legs swept from under him by that stuff; that'll fry your gizzard and no mistake.' He poured another two shots and set down the bottle. I blinked away tears; I was surprised to find that the room remained unchanged even though I was now seeing it through a warm haze. Nothing but a total restructuring of the world and all its coordinates seemed rational or proportionate after such a blast to the system. I was tempted to forgo the second drink, but I figured that with Welger's eye on me this was not the time to show myself feeble in any way. I needed this man's help so I had to show myself worthy of it. I picked up the glass.

'You heard the Spooks-man,' Welger continued. 'Any man going into that shit-hole would want his head examined. You must be desperate.'

I outlined the job again. This time I hinted at debts I had run up and also the possibility that this contract might lead to others in the future; it was an opportunity I could not pass up. Welger considered.

'You're brave, but being brave and being wise are not the same thing and that's where the trouble lies.' He gazed across at me with narrow eyes. 'The sense of that place lies beyond reason. No one is able to reduce it to first cause or principle or to any ultimate realization. That's just the way it is – a law unto itself in this lawless place. You may have heard that D-Wing is some sort of chassis where everything happens and all laws are under constant annulment; well, that is both true and false. It's nothing you can put a word on, or nothing you can put a finger on. Some of the inmates there refer to it as being-in-negative. They see the place as a necessary countervailing energy to the way the rest of the world normally runs; a negative realm which completes and balances the world. But others just call it a shit-hole, which might be another way of saying the same thing.' Now he ran a hand through his hair, turning it in a glossy swathe to one side of his head. He seemed aware that his speech had unravelled into a sermon he had not

intended and that it was too far gone to recall it to its original theme. He gazed out the window, down onto the floor of the alley where the Spooks-man was wheeling a barrow-load of plastic drums to the tip at the side of the road.

‘What it all adds up to is that anyone who finds himself in D-Wing can expect to come away from it a changed man.’

The meeting had reached a crucial point. Everything he had told me and, more importantly, the certain and thoughtful tone of his telling had left me in no doubt that he was essential to my journey. And now the slightest miscalculation on my part might throw the whole project into jeopardy. I decided to hang back and let him talk some more. There was something in the onrush of his speech which gave me to believe that he had not yet finished, that he had something further to add. Besides, I was intrigued; I had noticed that for all his talk Welger had yet to speak of himself in the first person. Every reference to himself was offset in the third person or as a rhetorical question. It had an eerie feel to it, hearing this man who was so physical in his presence and loquacious in his speech apparently incapable or unwilling to speak of himself at the heart of this same knowledge or as the bearer of it. He was a kind of kindling absence in the middle of his own rhetoric, as if his entire speech issued out of a brightening hole. Whatever it meant I could not say; amid so much drink and eloquence it now appeared I had mislaid the ability to reason to certain ends. To pass a couple of beats I took a short sip from the glass and made an elaborate show of grimacing under pressure and pushing out my chest to drawn breath. Welger guffawed.

‘Too much of that tack and there’s supposed to be a marked softening of the brain. Not that you’d notice on some of the people in this place.’ He threw back the dregs of his glass.

‘Where do you get it?’ I asked, trying to press the point that we were now comrades in this drinking thing. ‘I’d like to bring a bottle back with me.’

‘Where does anyone get anything?’ he asked, and swiped the question aside with a wave of his hand. ‘You know a man who knows another man, that’s how

you get it and beyond that we won’t say another word.’ His mood had now darkened and this sudden inwardness gave me a moment to reflect on the fact that I was no longer a practised drinker. The narrow room had taken on a gelid sway around me, everything in it swelled and heaving in a glow. I was close to putting my head down on the table in front of me and falling asleep; I struggled to refocus my concentration. My voice sounded as if it was coming across a vast distance.

‘Let’s put the problem another way,’ I suggested, as if we were laden down with choices. ‘If you were offered this contract at these terms, wouldn’t you take it up?’

Outside the Spooks-man was crossing the alley with an empty barrow. This sight seemed to settle Welger’s thoughts and make him irritably decisive.

‘The job is not the problem, you could send that lad out there to do the job.’ He looked at me keenly. ‘And of course a man wouldn’t be doing this on a God-spare-you-the-health basis. Any man taking this kind of risk would be well paid.’

‘Yes, but that depends on how much is achieved. If we get in and get out of D-Wing then I can guarantee you will not go short of diesel for the next two months.’

‘You’ve been authorized to make this offer?’

‘Yes, I have been authorized to strike a deal.’

He shook his head. ‘You’re shitehawk-ing me – you have no diesel.’

‘There’s diesel.’

‘How?’

‘I know a man who knows another man ... you know how it goes.’

He grunted, not appreciating the joke. I drew on what I hoped was a business-like tone. ‘But if we go in and come out with definitive proof that we have completed our task then that would be covered in a negotiated bonus.’

Welger guffawed. ‘Bonus my hole.’

I seemed to have weighed the situation well. Without knowing how it had happened, the discussion had moved from the question of whether or not he would do the job to the price we would settle for. Something in my expression must have betrayed my satisfaction; Welger’s expression was open and wolfish.

‘You’re some fucker right enough,’ he declared. ‘But there’ll be no decisions

today, not with drink taken. We’ll let the matter rest for a while.’

‘I’ll need an answer soon, time is moving on.’

‘Time does that.’

He pushed open the door and we stood out into the evening. On the road the Spooks-man was unloading more drums from his wheelbarrow. His hour’s work was well evident in the large pile of containers he had shifted. Even at this distance the hazard and pathological decals on the sides of the containers were visible. Welger watched him as he passed.

‘Always going,’ he said, ‘there aren’t enough hours in the day for that lad and that’s a fact.’

The autumn light was failing in the distance; an opalescent band marked the horizon. The air in the ball alley was unusually humid. Welger swiped the air ahead of him and blew through his lips.

‘You wouldn’t know anyone who’d be interested in a trailer-load of midges?’ he said as he turned back into the house. ‘We’ll talk again,’ he called, and he pulled the door behind him, leaving me alone on the steps.

And that’s how it was, my first meeting with Welger Holland.

A couple of days later he pulled up in the van outside the house shortly after dawn. I woke up to hear him leaning on the horn. I pulled on the trouser and the jacket and grabbed the bag of tools from under the bed. We settled on a price before we took off and no, he was not cheap.

That was ten years ago now and it was our first job together. It went well but both of us were marked by it in different ways. To this day Welger has residual pain in his kidneys which sometimes keeps him awake at night; he tells me also that he never fails to remember it every time he takes a piss. More than once he’s cursed the day I came calling for him. As for myself, my own marks are of a different sort. All I will say is that since my first visit to D-Wing I have never been able to tell time properly and my balance is sometimes affected. But I will say no more; that job and everything which followed from it is a story for another time.

As Welger himself would say – in the only phrase he uses when speaking of himself – we’ll talk again.

from 1001 Estonian Nights I.M. Andres Ehin

by Patrick Cotter

As I travelled along the forest-insulated road to Rapla,
one evening, not too late, nineteen eighty-three,
while summer simmered to its end with shortening days
and the sky was full of geese disappearing in shaftless arrows,
my attention lapsed on the almost empty road
built flat and wide for armoured columns to lumber over.
My little Trabant, blue and farting, nearly collided with a green man
and his stricken silver craft. I alighted to apologize
but he merely aimed a gnarly, twiggy finger
at the barely arriving stars, pressing their way through dusk's veil
and asked for directions in an Estonian so impeccable,
vowel lengths so exact, his use of the abessive case so apt,
no Western agent could have mastered in a sun's lifetime.
No American with oxidized copper face-paint.
No Brit with a beauty mask of dried green tea.
No misplaced Irish reveller on the 18th of March.
As the moments passed, and my ignorance of Orion
in relation to Cassiopeia became apparent, I noticed
his webbed feet and his utterances change
to honks of pain for his grounded state.
I've seen enough of men dying to know
death is a taste that first visits them on their tongue.
His mouth frothed with the unimaginable heaviness
of a dark, dark hole which suddenly sucked the whole
of his being and machine as through a simple tear
in fabric, immediately afterward self-mended invisibly.
I was left with just a breeze for company and the whiff
of stale lynx piss piddled by a queen in heat rising from
juniper bark at the forest's edge.
I don't remember how I got behind the wheel again,
pressing on the accelerator until the twin spires
of Mary Magdalene's church loomed into view,
like the antennae of a Gothic spaceship.
I know I'm having trouble making you believe this.

Liftoff

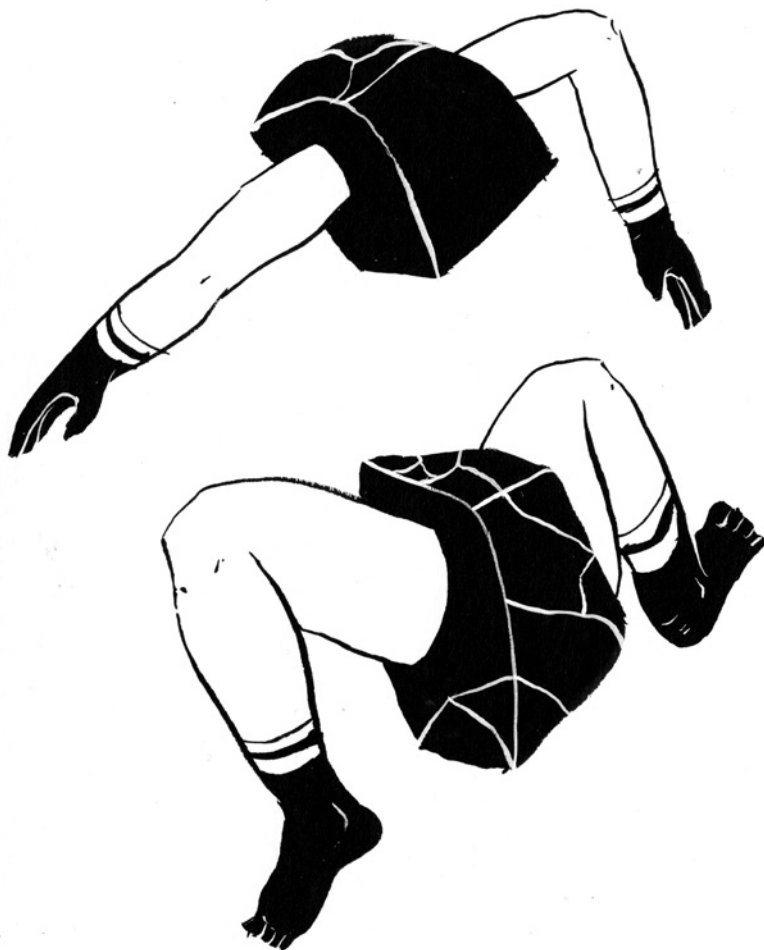
by D. W. Wilson

My husband has this thing about witnessing a murder. It happened when he was fourteen and fishing from a tin boat with his dad and it followed him through high school and his great departure and his great return like an addiction he just couldn't kick. He used to tell the story in a low, menacing tone, between mouthfuls at dinner or long gulps on those nights we swung by the bar. Not many people believed him. Even his dad, at the end, wouldn't affirm Dom's suspicions, and I can't imagine him so busted up, all his scrap-ping and bar fights and bloody noses included.

Dom won't visit his dad's cabin for some obscure reason about masculinity and paying his dues. A self-imposed exile, I guess. Lately I find myself hiking there and wasting away the days. I took our nephew once, but he's not like Dom and I think the vastness made him uneasy. He said it wasn't as cool without Uncle, and though I'm inclined to smack him I'm also inclined to agree. Truth is, I go out of nostalgia and the hope that I might stumble upon some leftover skeleton or a tattered cloth circa thirty years old, the chance to glimpse Dom's lingering awe. Anyway, it's a cosy little cabin and I've gained an appreciation for just lounging in Dom's tin boat and doing nothing for hours.

I suppose the causes of loneliness are at once rational and romantic. Dom wouldn't be caught solo in a pub but he'd break his knuckles for me in a second, and

afterwards we'd lean over the laundry sink and I'd rub iodine into his cuts with my thumb. Some nights he drawled on about sheepdogs and wolves. He would've made a good cop on account of his gut sense of right and wrong. I left him once, full-out separation, but Dom showed up below the balcony of my new apartment, a very drunk Romeo. He said in so many words that he couldn't change without my help.



The bed, the bed is cold. If not for my brother's own solitude I wouldn't have swallowed it. I'd have closed the patio door and pulled the curtains shut.

In fifth grade my brother lost an eye. Mom had a photograph of our family at an amusement park outside Calgary and

in it Dad has one skinny hand hoisting a balloon sword. We're all grinning wildly and we've all got amateur photographer red eye. Except Milo. He has a white eye and, turned out, *retinoblastoma* – a tumour as big as a pencil eraser on his retina. Mom went a little crazy. She dumped out two dozen envelopes thick with photos and touched Milo's face in each one. Birthday party in the snow: two red eyes. Posing with the Stanley Cup: two red eyes. Waving at a monkey: one white eye. Milo couldn't remember when he'd started losing vision and the last half of the year was devoted to his attempts to relearn depth perception. I'd see him near the school's stuccoed exterior, alone,

bouncing a tennis ball and trying to catch it. My friends would point at him and smirk and sometimes ask if he wanted to play catch, only to run away when he turned his good eye upon them. In one of those raw father-son moments Milo asked Dad for a telescope so he could 'Just look at the stars'. I don't know what Dad did to get the money, but a few months later Milo had his telescope. Sometimes, when he thought himself alone, he'd wheel it down to watch kids on the playground, in their houses and, as we grew up, in their cars if they stopped at a red light. Mom and Dad couldn't have known and I was his little sister, I couldn't confront him. It'd have been too cruel to turn him in – kids called him *Three Eyes* if he wore glasses

and *Matey* if he wore the patch. When he left for good he shook Dad's hand and thanked him for everything and kissed Mom on the cheek. Then he picked up the telescope and a wad of money and now he lives with two cleverly named cats and designs websites from home. His

walls are covered with space memorabilia and he can prattle for hours about the Eagle Nebula. He believes in aliens, and probably government cover-ups. I don't know if he's ever had a girlfriend.

I always assumed Dom's fascination with what he witnessed on the lake was linked in some unassailable way to his dad, just a connection they formed to fight off their fear that night, but not long ago I caught Dom in the tool shed, hunched over newspaper clippings from the late seventies. He had articles tacked to a piece of plywood and his muttering to himself was creepy enough to make my heart thump.

After his folks divorced, Dom and his dad went fishing for trout every other weekend. His dad had hand-built the cabin and it tilted as if under a strong wind (his dad was a tin-basher, not a framer). No one had bothered to finish the inside so the polyurethane hung like flagging skin. Then, as he tells it, one night on the lake they heard grunting and thrashing and they watched two men heave something heavy into the water. It smacked the surface and the men brushed their hands on their pants like boys. They exchanged glances; what brings two people together more strongly than the fear of being caught? Dom's imagination brimmed, for in those days the news was all Summer of Sam, blond wigs selling by the dozens and murderers at large. Scared speechless on the bench in their boat, a slimy oar clutched inches above the water, Dom's horror turned to curiosity and he took up the paddle and refused to leave. It is at this point that his dad leans close and hisses: *Listen, Dominick, chances are it's just a pregnant doe.*

Dom says by this time no amount of coaxing could have persuaded him of that. Not only did he now have an entertaining story for his friends, but the story made the whole of that small town alive. Suddenly people could be murderers. He snooped with more than just idle curiosity. In his English teacher's Datsun he discovered a letter that said she was at risk of losing her job. With a pair of binoculars he watched his neighbours tend a few marijuana plants tucked among their large garden. Once, at a house party, he made a stand against a local kid who he discovered was a paedophile. Dom had dropped some change down a heater vent,

and when he reached in after it he came out with a disturbing set of photographs. It was New Year. He'd just smoked his first joint and a couple girls made eyes at him. He was sixteen and horny, but it didn't matter. Things got heavy. A dozen guys rolled up their sleeves and Dom pointed at the photographs, called them all perverts and smashed a bottle against the nearest wall.

That night on the lake, Dom and his dad paddled back to the cabin. They had a net of trout and old man Crane liked to fry them before bed. Dom tethered their boat to a blackened pine lightning had split in two a summer back. He dragged the fish behind him and asked the occasional question: could that have been a body? Who were those guys? Should we go to the cops? His dad told him to either carry the fish or hand them over, because he didn't like to eat dirt. So Dom carried them, got their weird slime between his fingernails and accidentally wiped it into his hair. His dad laughed like a gong.

At the time Dom figured his dad was trying to calm him down. He mulled over the flailing toss. Then at the cabin his dad burns the first fish – forgot to butter the pan – and fumbles the spatula. Dom gets a whiff of his dad – sour, not like body odour but fear, so tangible it sticks to his tongue like hair. Later, the two guys they saw on the lake show up and his dad feeds them beer and fish while Dom hides under his bed and grips a canvas duffle like a pup. This, I think, is the root of Dom's loneliness but he's never fully explained it to me. I don't think he can. It has something to do with walking the walk, if I had to guess. But he was just a boy.

In an argument Dom will raise himself to height and call you someone who needs protecting. That's his nature, and it explains his application to three different police forces, but I wonder if it can account for his boyhood tendency to see himself as some kind of sleuth. See, the thing at the lake was not the only massive conspiracy to get his blood pumping. Dom's very first fight was in grade five with a kid named Jarod. Dom caught Jarod ruffling through everyone's lunches while the class was away in gym. Jarod would grow up to pack his mangled face with Skoal and beat his wife, but even at ten years old he struck a grizzly pose. Dom says he felt this seething rage, this

pressure at the base of his throat. And suddenly he remembers some macho line he heard on television about evil and good people standing up. Dom's first punch. Jarod got a shiner. The whole thing ended in about a minute – a teacher found them – but the sense of righteousness lingered. I fear it'll never leave.

Maybe you could blame Dom's hero complex on the times, the US licking its wounds, comic books and the deadly Russians scorned in whisper. Captain America resurfaced, Batman, a hundred different spandex-clad good guys on television every night. Bruce Lee dies and adolescent males of every generation mourn his passing. Or maybe it's just the drama and drudgery you're privy to as a tradesman's kid in a small town, the horrible banality of it all. I used to dismiss Dom's complaints outright, but I've changed my mind. This town, Invermere, wasn't such a getaway hotspot in those days. It fragmented their family. Dom got in too many fights. His dad encouraged him and told the stories at work. Nathan Crane, the quintessential nose-to-the-grindstoner, had suddenly gone proud. *My boy, my boy beat up these two jackasses.* Then Dom's sister got pregnant from the same pervert he'd called out – a massive conspiracy unveiled. She was fourteen. And just like that, Nathan Crane goes from thick-chested to pale-faced and no more gruff stories over peanut butter sandwiches.

For years at the cabin Dom searched for a body. Until he was sixteen the closest he ever came to finding a clue was a tie-dyed sleeve caught on a husk of driftwood. He and his dad were fishing as usual. His dad had developed a tendency to scratch at his temple, over and over, and a bottlecap-sized patch of scaly red skin flared beside his right ear. Dom fights with the reel. His dad stares up at the vast nothingness of the twilight sky. A fish splashes, maybe an owl hoots. In the distance, the dying light etches a halo around the Purcell Mountains. Then Dom sees this flaccid cloth snagged to some driftwood and he yells out and his dad startles like one of those old lawnmowers. They paddle to it and Dom lifts it with his fishing pole, eyes all wonder, an act of God at last. Evidence, he proclaims. Of what? his dad asks, but Dom's too awed to hear it. His dad sits on the

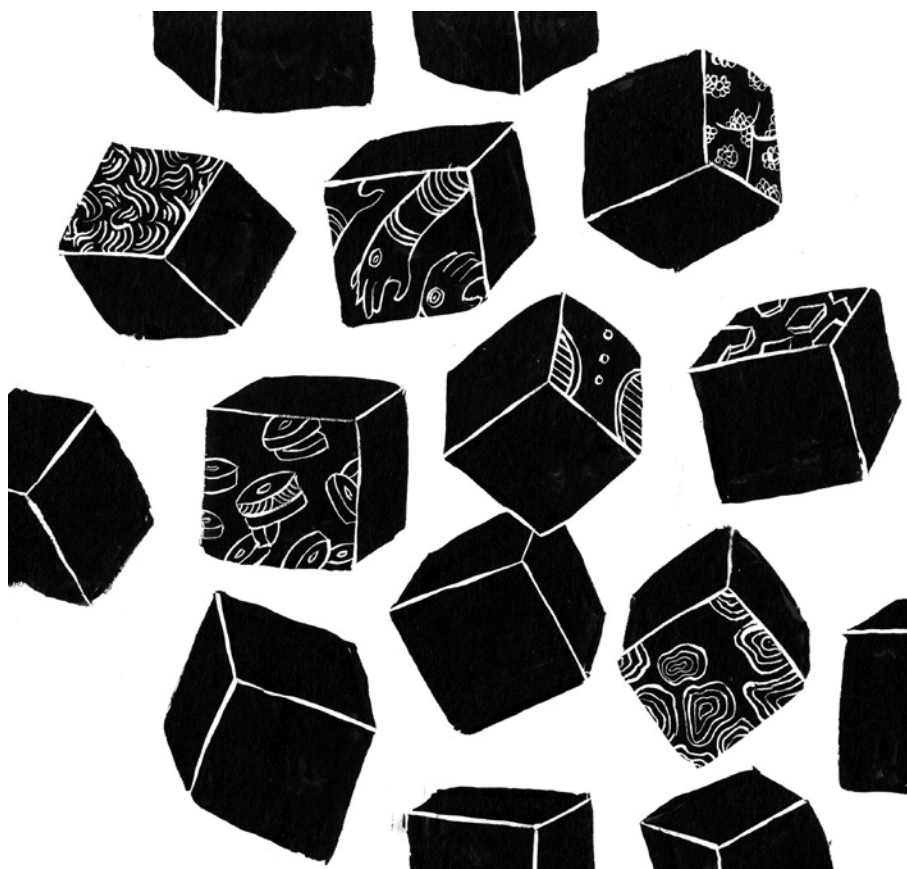
bench, knuckles on his cheek, such great dissatisfaction. Anyone could see it.

Less than a year after his grandson was born, Nathan Crane sold half the cabin's property, quit his job and established Crane Heating. They still fished when they could, but Dom's dad barely found time in a day to cook a meal. They tried for a weekend each month. Once, their tin boat ran aground and they spent two weekends repairing it. Dom studied his dad across their portaged boat, the way he'd press his tongue against his bottom teeth, the way all his wrinkles bunched up like metal shavings where his lips pulled tight. Here was a man who knew only how to work. Here was a man who needed protecting.

Dom has a *get-through-me-first* element to his character. He scours policing homepages for position openings and when one becomes available he raves about his odds. You can see the teenaged detective, a paradigm Hardy Boy. I picture him in full regalia, ragtag fists and slanted jaw, thumbs hooked into the thick belt, a badge. And then I remember his boyhood resolve to pit himself against the *bad guy*. Cute, until you realize how many people your husband might need to defend – it's no fun waiting up until the wee hours just to have him stagger home bloody-knuckled. Trust me, these weekends aren't all relaxation and mountain breezes. Some days I float out on the water and get a little tipsy. Several times now I've had to disembark on the nearest shore so I could pass out on dry land.

During Dom's last two years the school started calling his dad every time a scrap happened. His dad would

lean cross-armed against the principal's doorframe and give curt nods. The principal was a short, arrogant man who Dom says wore spandex more often than he should. He had a desk tag that, in gold, read: *Mr Greene*. Greene's take on the situations involved Dom as the proverbial troublemaker who picked fights with straight-arrowed, clean-cut kids, but Dom's dad either worked with or around those kids' parents and he knew their type. After Greene finished preaching, Dom and his dad would climb into an old



Chevy pickup and his dad would crack the window a finger's width, light a cigarette with a match. Nathan Crane smoked DuMaurier Originals and Dom would close his eyes, head against the seat, to enjoy the first, fresh whiff of the cigarette. They would drive around the lake, the long way home, and talk – a short, bonding commentary on the small town around them. I think they came to appreciate those truck rides as much as they did the fishing trips. Not that Dom would ever admit to this. He smokes DuMaurier Originals; go ahead and tell me that's a coincidence.

Dom lived with his mother and her

partner, a man named Jeff who dressed up like Santa for Halloween. Those times his dad drove him home, Dom would step down from the Chevy and take a long look at the front door, a long look back to his dad. Nathan only lived in a one-bedroom but it wasn't like Dom hadn't spent the night on the couch, wasn't like he couldn't spend every night on the couch. It went on like this. Dom, Nathan, front door, a rotation of gazes. Then Dom would say thanks and sling his pack over his shoulder and slink through the side

door. When he tells this part of the story Dom adds that he never once looked back. I don't believe that for an instant.

As a boy Dom was not the articulate sort. That certainly hasn't changed. He never told his dad how brazenly he believed they had seen a body disposed of, how he was certain of some great conspiracy among his classmates and their parents. In his final year a family of rednecks, the Jacksons, came forward and said their son had been missing for four

years. About nobody could understand why it'd taken them four years to report this, least of all the cops. Dom heard the news when the local paper, the *Valley Echo*, published an unheard-of weekend article by the police sergeant. The odds of finding the boy, the article said, were essentially zero.

Dom read the article twice. The adrenaline hit him like an awakening. With a copy of the *Echo* tucked under his arm he sprinted to his dad's house to deliver the evidence and demand they hunt for remains at the cabin lake. Nathan looked browbeaten. Dom declared he'd known it all along

– they’d seen it, they had to go to the police – and then, to his own horror, that his dad had made a grave mistake that night. He called Nathan scared.

Nathan fell back on to a kitchen chair in that slow-motion way a man does when events he’s long avoided finally catch up. For the first time Dom takes a good look at his dad, like an adult, and what does he see except a man who has toiled too long at projects that mean nothing.

All those creases, the scars and nicks, the sublocating knee, phlegmy cough – all these suppressed secrets. His dad was sick as Invermere as a whole. Nathan sucked on his teeth, a look like living vengeance in his eyes. He smashed a coffee mug against the wall and it splattered over the striped wallpaper. Dom stood there a moment before the adrenaline flushed and it all became a bad idea. He fled.

I’m five years younger than Dom. I was brought up in Saskatoon. His youth took place in a separate world – the high-school pregnancies, this tension between the rednecks and the bluecollars – but we both have a sense of what it’s like to have no one to confide in. We each knew about fear and the fatigue associated with living in an isolated world. For me it was my brother, and for Dom that cabin lake, and for both of us this bizarre sense we understood something the rest of our family did not. I’m the only one who ever caught Milo peeping. Dom’s the only one who honestly believed he’d witnessed a murder. When Dom and I met we were stumbling from lives of abject loneliness and I think it’s the mere fact of this companionship that let us survive. Which is why I came back to him. We’re the only ones who will understand the other. We’re co-dependent. But it’s gone to hell recently. He’s seized up. And there’s this return to pouring over the events of that night, those years that followed, as though he’s not only grieving for our relationship but his whole high-school years, the conspiracy he failed to uncover. I’ve tried to bring him back to the cabin but he dismisses me out of hand. On some evenings I’m tempted to get in my Ranger and not look back.

In his last months of school Dom

did what all small-town boys do. He drove loser laps through Invermere’s main haul and installed a lift kit on his Dodge. He went to parties and got hammered off Alberta Premium Pure and flats of Kokanee. Out at a tree-planting camp in the West Kootenays he smoked weed and woke up naked next to a girl he thought was pretty. He felt the rush you get speeding to beat a train to the car crossing. He graduated with decent grades and entertained thoughts of trade school and the city and somewhere in the haze of valediction and diplomas he forgot about the lake and the dark secret it held.

The *Valley Echo* published a story about a set of femurs and a lower jaw found dozens of kilometres down the Sevenhead River. Though forensic investigation would be required, the article said, police felt confident it would lay to rest any suspicions regarding the missing Jackson boy. Dom says the article made him drink a bottle of whiskey alone. For him the possibility that something foul had happened at the cabin had always been the last thing between this town and utter meaninglessness. Those flailing limbs, the meaty splash. Nobody even *believed* him.

At the year’s end, with school behind him, Dom drove out with a couple friends to the gravel pits where the valley tradesman had their annual keg party. There was a bonfire hot with shipping flats and everybody had shown up: framers, doped-out drywallers, even the electrician with the rowdy girlfriend who tipped shots into guys’ mouths with her breasts. Then a beaten Chevy came chewing gravel and his dad stepped down, a two-sixer of Jim Beam cradled like a babe. Dom had never seen his dad on a job site but the crowd welcomed him with a cheer. His dad gave a half-hearted wave and Dom nodded to him and the party consumed them both. Somewhere during it all his dad staggered out of the limelight and sat with Dom on the tailgate of his small Dodge. His dad patted it like you would a good dog and they both hunched over, wrists on their knees. For half an hour or more they just drank and pointed at things and smiled. No talk. They hadn’t gone fishing in months.

When Nathan spoke Dom jerked as if

he’d been snagged by a horsefly.

Suppose we could go take a look, said his dad.

I don’t think there’s any point now, Dom heard himself admit.

I’m not sure there ever was, son.

Dom had nothing more to say. He toasted his dad and hopped into the Dodge and drove home and missed the big events of the party: the preacher’s son lit himself on fire with moonshine; some rednecks ditched a ratbag car over the cliffside; the plumbers started an all-out brawl with the electricians; and in the bleeding hours, when the sun crested the Rockies, they found an old tin-basher face down in a ditch with stab wounds in his gut.

At three the next day Dom kissed his weeping mother and went out towards the gravel pits. That’s a long and winding ride. The road becomes gravel, and then dirt, and on all sides the trees lean in and it’s impossible to know how far you’ve come. Sometimes, you can’t even see the mountains, and on any given day you’ll pass run-down deer and shot-gunned coyotes and roadkill too stupid or slow to escape to the shoulders in time. Dom can’t remember what he felt for those thirty-five minutes, or what songs were on the radio, or if it was raining, clouded, sparkling. But Christ, it’s not hard to imagine. He was eighteen. When he arrived, the cops had erected a barricade, but they let him through – this was in Invermere, after all. And there, on the roadside, Dom found the bloodstained shrubs and the chalk outline and he wondered about the last things his dad would have thought and if he had at last believed in a great conspiracy.

I’ve been out here on the lake for what feels like years. The water is cool and still. This summer the mosquitoes are few but thumb-sized wasps shamble through the air like zombies. I’ve ransacked this lake and the shoreline and the rivers that feed into and out of it and it all seems incapable of hiding the remains of a human. I wait here on the lake like a woman chastising a man. I paddle around to the cliff jumps and watch teenagers make splashes that shoot twenty feet into the air, and I sit here in this boat, solemnly, mulling over the secrets each of us dig up on our way.