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Short Story Collection

by Ksenia Anske

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Anger

Anger. It's the red behind her eyes. The pulse in her hands. The gnawing wish to circle her fingers on his throat. It would be so easy. He looks so peaceful. So innocent. Or maybe it's better with a pillow? No. Hands. The rhythm in the ears, the pounding, overwhelming. Perhaps it will go away. Just close your eyes and it will go away. But it's worse, oh, it's nagging. The heat in the bones, the scorching in the gut, the need to close them, close them, close them. Whatever happens after is not important. There is only this moment, and him, and this cutting knife of anger that slices lazily across her stomach. Perhaps it's drawing something, perhaps it's mocking her. It dares her to try, to cinch, to end his life. The words he said, the words. They were only words. Maybe it's too high a price to pay? He should've thought better. There was a string inside her, a musical string, and he broke it with his clumsy fingers. Now she's mute. Now she can no longer sing, the instrument that was so keen on seeking sounds.

Anger. He doesn't sleep. He pretends. The knife is under the pillow. Now? Or let her hair fall closer. Why should he wait? Why should he forgive? The calm, the cold, like under the

water. Still. Mind sits in his darkness like a missile, poised to deliver the demise, the demise she brought upon herself. It wasn't him, oh no. She did it. She must die. If only she would make another step, and lean, and open up her chest to his closed eyes. He can smell her, that offensive pungent whiff of some cheap perfume. Of course she'd pick something like that to mask her sour stink of anger. Yes, she is angry, he can feel it. It marches all over his skin like hot pincers taken out of a livid fire. But he will wait. The waiting is part of the pleasure. The keeping, the holding of the gushing blood under the cover of cool, under the pretense of sleep. What could be more delicious?

Anger. They're poised to kill each other. They don't know that we're here. The fire, the fury, it consumes us. Shall we let them? Shall we watch? Shall we come out when one of them is dead? Or shall we surprise them, my little helper? Quiet. Quiet. It does not become us to rush into this, it will ruin the sweet taste. We're hidden very well here, in the shadows. We shall wait. Per chance the girl will go first, per chance the boy. Per chance we won't have to do naught except to wash our hands. What do you think, my little helper? Show me your teeth. That's good, very good. Keep your voice down. We'll only have to wait a couple minutes longer...

The Bench

A letter. A boat. He thought he could reach her that way. A paper boat. A page torn out of his memory and folded and sent across time. Could it possibly find her? He didn't know, didn't think, but did it anyway. He wrote a book, a letter to her, too long to hold what he yearned to say, too heavy to float between them. It sunk. What they have built, what they have breathed to life, the tissue flowers and the wings of hopes, it all got poisoned. Not once but many times. There was nothing left but shreds of touch, gestures of extended hands, to caress, to hide in the nook of an elbow. Was it foolish? He thought so. Still, he dared. What could words describe? How could they paint what was too many colors?

It's been years. He wrote it. He forgot about it. He moved on. His stories floated and drifted who knows where. He learned to ignore the nagging pain, the pulling at bottom of his sorrow. And then a call. A call from a distant friend.

"She read it." His friend said.

He had to hear it. He had to believe. He pressed the phone into his ear. "When?" There was no other word. When?

"About three days ago. I think. Why?"

"I didn't," he faltered. "I didn't know. Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"What did she think?" The questions were too many, and he had to swallow them down. Did she like it? How did she find out? Did she read his other books? Did she understand? Will she ever...was it conceivable to hope for...if only once. Only once to hear her voice?

"I don't know, mate. You'll have to ask her yourself."

"Yes. Yes, of course. How do you know?" He asked and didn't hear the answer. It didn't matter how. It mattered that she did. It happened.

Could there be a bridge? Could paper hold their past, would it crumble? If he stepped on it, would it collapse?

"You there?"

"Huh? Sorry. Yes, I'm here."

"I gotta run. Talk later, okay?"

"Sure. Sure."

He wasn't aware of this footing for the rest of day. His hands didn't feel like his. His ears heard music, music in the wind. It bloomed in his face, it made him weightless. "Sonia." That one word, he hasn't said it for years. "Sonia." Oh, how beautiful it rang, how it rolled off his tongue. "Sonia, Sonia." He couldn't stop.

Their park, that bench where they met. She read a book. What was it? He couldn't remember. His feet carried him there, or maybe they didn't. He didn't know how he stood in front of it. Green peeling paint. One board missing. The iron handles still intact. And footsteps. Her footsteps. Dare he look?

"David?"

It took years. Year for him to lift his head. Years to turn. Years to see.

A simple white dress. Hands clasped, holding his book. THE BENCH stamped on the cover in green letters, that same shade. THE BENCH by David Brooks. Her smile, the sunlight of her face.

They stood without words. There was a bridge to cross. Neither dared. She shifted, perhaps from standing too long, and the book escaped her hands. It dropped. The sound startled them, they rushed to recover it, reached for it, brushing hands. Just like that first time. Over a book. The gaze that was impossible to wrench away.

"I didn't know." She said.

He shook his head, wanting to say, "No, it's okay, it's fine. It's not your fault." But the words wouldn't come, stuck in his throat.

"I..." She began.

He pressed a finger to her lips. He was afraid for it to crumble. So fragile, so new.

"It was for you." He said. "A letter for you."

He watched her fingers, the nails cut so short it looked painful, the cuticles in disarray, the fleshy soft parts, the wrinkles on them, the blemishes. So warm. Dare he hold it?

Dare he?

Will it stay?

Crows

Crows are autumn. The sign of autumn. Their "cra-cra-cra" and then another "cra" like a period at the end of a sentence hanging in the air. And the colors. The burned sienna. The fire of maples. The cold sun. You'd think it would warm your face, but it's only there for show.

The damp chill after the rain. Puddles glistening like mirrors.

"Cra-cra-cra," go the crows.

"Shhh, I hear you," goes the wind.

It rips off the leaves. It twirls them, and they dance and land in the puddles and float like discarded summer.

There is the tickle of crispness on your skin. It nips a bit, only a bit. Like a warning. It's not that cold yet. No roofs are covered with hoarfrost, no sheets of ice break under your feet. None of it is there. Only fall. Only October.

And that kiss you've been waiting for, it's warm on your lips.

You hold hands and walk about aimlessly, kicking at the leaves, smelling decay. The scarf is hugging your neck and you

pull it up and lower your face in it and breathe in. It's pleasant.

You stop by a pond and sit on a bench and feed ducks pieces of bread. They are perfectly insolent, the ducks, and spoiled. They snatch the bread right out of your hand and waddle off, very important looking.

"I love you." He says.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"I love you too." You say, smiling, there and not there.

"This is lovely."

"It is."

"Do you have more bread?"

He offers a handful of crumbs. All that's left. "Would that do?"

"Sure."

You throw it.

Now the pigeons are here too, and the sparrows. And the crows go, "cra-cra-cra," like they're saying, "it's mine, it's mine." The crows.

They are autumn.

Ilka

There. No, not there. Right there! See it? See the river? That's where they lived, at the bend. By that brown spot. That moving one. See it moving? Cattails. Puffy bursts of white fluffy stuff on top. Like they're wagging. Or nodding. Or maybe it's the wind playing with them, because it's bored.

See her walking, on the bank? See the cotton dress? Azuline. It has flowers printed on it, forget-me-nots. Her grandmother made it from her father's old shirt, right after he died. She kept the buttons. The buttons were little pearls. Fake, of course, don't think they were real. But she thought they were real, the girl, Ilka. She thought they were real, and she thought her dress was made from the sky, and she liked going to the river—a little stream, no more—to that rotting wooden bridge slung over from one side, sandy and flattened, to the other, grassy, and farther off, where the stinging nettles looked at her, nodding.

She knew not to touch them, she knew not to come near. She helped her grandmother snip them off, just right—she sensed their spite—right by the bottom of their thick hairy stalks, and then tear off the leaves in the kitchen, in the aluminum basin,

and watch her grandmother make a soup, on the stove, and eat it later, with a bent spoon, puffing up her cheeks and hissing out air, cooling the greenish broth and watching half of the cooked egg float around, winking at her its yellow eye. Yellow like the water she looked into. The water of the stream. Golden. Like liquid sun or weak tea. Her grandmother liked weak tea with cubed sugar. She called it orphan's piss and cackled and slurped it, her eyes smiling.

Ilka kneeled and flattened herself on the bridge and hung her head, close to water, the moving mirror, and watched pond skaters chase each other, stop, wait, as if for her signal, her weak whistle, then take off, their spindly legs moving so fast, they jerked from place to place. And Ilka thought how she would like to walk on water like that, smooth and cool to touch, like a melted sugar drop. It would hold her up, and she'd make friends, and they would run around and call to each other and escape the toad that croaked every morning—Ilka could hear it from the open vent of her window. Then down below, on the sandy bottom—no, over it—floated a shape. A long black line, shrinking, stretching. A leech. Ilka thrust her hand in the water and missed. She liked to roll them in hot sand with a stick and watch them squirm. The bloodsuckers. They didn't disgust her like the other girls, and for that Andy next door let her ride his bike.

"Ilka!" Grandmother's voice floated through the cattails.

"Dinner!"

Ilka sighed, stood up, brushed off her hands and knees and skipped along the bank, in that azuline dress that played with the sky. Like it was saying, *Look at me, we're the same color. Aren't we?*

Writer's dream

I read. I want to read, but they're first, so I just stand there. And the woman says, she says, "You're next". And the boy starts reading. Boy. He's a boy to me. In his twenties, lanky. "Read the last two chapters", she says. He stammers a little, nervous. Then opens up, chest out. Proud. I can't listen. I want to, can't. Something...it's scary. What if they tell me it's horrid, what if...or not. Who knows. What can I do? Wait. It slips out of my hands. Sweaty. I press it to my breast, my left breast, where the heart. He's not done yet. He got into it. What rage. Primitive. His sentences are primitive. Not the good kind. The stupid kind. Is that okay to think? Stupid. I'm stupid. What am I doing here? How did I get here? I can't remember.

The books on display. All those famous authors. And me. What? I want to fall through the floor. The boy. He's still reading. Saliva, sputters. Arms, left, right, swings them, like he's about to hit me. Boring. It's something about, a traveler? An explorer? Pompous. The turn of the prose is pompous. He's trying too hard. I want to say, "You're trying too hard. That's bad. Don't..." but I don't say anything, just stand in the corner. By the books. Shelves. Piles of, something. Manuscripts.

Paper. I smell paper. He forgot he's here. I can see it. His cheeks flush. The woman frowns, not a good sign, she frowns. Her hair, her dark colored hair. It's to her shoulders. And her sweater. Why such a sweater? Coral. Did she knit it herself? Not appropriate for her age. Wants to seem more, better. Younger? Turgid lipstick. She scalds him with her eyes. I can see it's over, in her eyes. Over. She's polite, nodding. The boy, encouraged.

I forgot. I forgot my name. Horror. Horror of...she looks at me. Just a glance. Curious. They always do. Are you the one? Is she the one? Can you? Can I? I don't know. What do I know? Nothing. Why do I stand here? What's the use? I take a step. His hand, though. Firm. Stops me. With love. "No, you're not going anywhere." His voice. I nod. Can't say anything. He's next to me, so I can lean on him. If I need to. Has he noticed? "Have you noticed?" I whisper. "Yes." He says. "Shhh." We listen.

The boy is close. Then, finally, the end. He waits. The woman, there is a spot in the armchair, a place, an indent. She left it. An indent, it speaks more, speaks of haste. He wants to see, I think he can see, and he refuses. So young. I was this young, like that, I believed. I see he does, he's decided against his instinct. Waits, triumphant. And the girl he came with, she's blonde, plain and blond. She smiles, too. "That was...", the woman says, "something." The boy, "Please, tell

me." "Please," picks up the girl. "Don't hold anything back." She doesn't, of course, why should she? "No." she says, sharp. "We can't accept it." "But..." He begins. I can see his face slacken, slacken and slide off him. "But..." He stammers, again, not nervous now, appalled, crushed, from this high up all the way down.

The floor here, it's parquet. It creaks if you push right on that spot right there, and I push it, with the tip of my toe, of my shoe, black dusty shoe, I test it. It speaks to me, something, in its floor language, it says, it saw so many of us here, hopefuls. It laughs at me, almost, as if it wanted to ask what I'm doing here, how did I end up here. I can't form a single coherent thought. They're a jumble. The light, the ray of light, and jumble. And my shoes. I need to clean them, polish them. With that rag, where did I put it, I can't remember.

The boy and the girl left. Then, the woman's breath, on my shoulder. The office, her office, it's a room with books. Not her books, other books. "Go ahead," she says, pushes me a little, impatient. She has a schedule. I don't have a schedule, but she does. She's busy. "I'm listening," she says, fingers steepled. And I take a step. Where? Somewhere. It's important to take a step, it's a beginning of my journey. Just one step, and I stop, and I open my book. My book, the book I wrote. Did I write it? Did I really write it? I can't say a word. Can't...

"The last two chapters, please." She says, waiting.

His hand, behind me, his hand, it's all I need. "You can do it," he whispers. "I know." I take a breath. Look. It's the wrong book. My tongue, glued to my teeth. The wrong book. I'm holding the wrong book in my hands. Someone else wrote it, the pictures, the name, other name, not mine, how...I clear my throat. Back. Back to mine. It's mine. Just...nerves. "Go on." She says. "I'm sorry," I say. "I'm...anxious." "It's okay," she says. I can see it's not. She's looking at her watch. Expensive golden watch. I don't have a watch, I have nothing. My books, my rags, and nothing. No. I have him.

I open, leaf through.

"How does it end?" She prompts, to keep talking, to fill the air with talking. The pause is too much.

And I freeze. The end. How does it end? I can't remember. My own book, and I can't remember. Paralyzed. I look up, he smiles. He almost laughs. This happened before. He draws a circle, with his hand, a circle in the air. "There is no end," I manage, "it goes around and around, it ends where it began." "How interesting," she says. I look down. Sentences swim. They break and swim and letters jump and my heart is about to die. My heart beats so fast it will burst any second. It slips from my sweaty fingers, the book, I catch it, tear pages, press it to my breast. She studies me. "Well?"

I clear my throat, cough up my heart, I'm afraid I'll cough up my heart. I read, "He wrote her a letter." One. I managed one. One sentence. I look at the words, they stack. The hate me, my words, they hate me and stumble, on purpose. "He..." I try again. I think I will choke on my tongue. It's fat, dry and fat and it fills my throat and...his eyes. He gives me thumbs up. I look down, at the page, at the place where I hold it open. My book, I hold it open, with my thumbs. They made an imprint. "He wrote her a letter," I say, stronger now. "She didn't answer. He wrote another. And another. Like leaves, leaves of the maple that stood in front of her house, yellow and dead." I stop, swallow, or try to. It doesn't work. Nothing works in my mouth. My hands shake so hard, I think I will lose it, drop my book and lose it.

The woman, her face? Did it clear? A little, did it? Like a light, a passing of light. Better not to think. I go on. Try to go on. I read. I want to read, and I read. I read them, sentences, one after another. They listen, at last, they stopped fighting me, my words, and they listen, they're tied to my rhythm. "Thank you," I want to say, "thank you." But I'm reading. I hear something, a noise. I stop abruptly, lift my eyes. The man. In his fifties? Something. He joined her, the woman, they both look at me. Expectant. Like I'm now supposed to deliver. And I lose my voice, it won't come. Two of them, it's

too much. I claw at my throat. It won't come. It won't come, it won't come, it...he catches me. He caught me. Steadies me. "They like it," he whispers. I can hear laughter in his voice. "Do they?" I move my lips. "Yes, I think." He pushes me up, upright.

I'm in my story. Or my story is inside me. Which is which? Does it matter? They listen. That's all that I can think about, all I can see. They listen. Their mouths are open. The man, he's on the edge of the seat. The suit he wears, the folds where he leans, the tie. So official, and I'm so ragged. Who am I to be here? So ragged. But I read and they listen. And now I can't stop. I don't care. I don't care anymore. I just read.

I read.

I stop.

And the woman, she's happy. And the man. And a piece of paper. They give me this piece of paper. I can't see it, because...I can't see it. What if it's fake? What if I see it, and the words on it, what if they yell at me something? What if it's a trick? What. I don't know, my face. My face in his chest. And my tears. They accepted. My tears. And he holds me, rocks me a little, and holds me. Words, spoken, some words, something about a contract. That piece of paper, a contract. And I press my hands, my book, to my heart. I press.

Cube

If you took the wrong turn off the main forest trail, chances were, you could get lost. Anyone knew that. Dylan knew that too, but the need to go see what kinds of berries hung on that bush just a few paces away from the trail overrode his rational thinking. And who knows how to think rationally when you're ten and only had a couple hard-boiled eggs for breakfast? Pine needles crunched under his feet as he stepped in between roots and, avoiding raccoon holes, finally made his way to what looked like a blackberry bush. But the berries weren't blackberries. Number one, they were golden in color. Orange, almost. Number two, they were shaped a bit differently, rounder, as opposed to a conical in shape.

He reached out for one and promptly plopped it in his mouth. A burst of tart sweetness tickled his taste buds and he proceeded at grabbing another one, and another, and another.

"Dylan, where are you?" Angie's voice pulled him to a halt. He froze with yet another berry barely touching his lips. His freckled face grimaced in exasperation, summer sun dancing across his cheeks.

"I'm coming! Just a minute! I need to pee!" Lying was easy, as always, and Dylan hoped that his sister would let this fly. After all, it was not his idea to go search for mushrooms, and he was tired of being a sidekick to her and her obnoxious friends. She dragged him with her only because she had to look after him while mom and dad were gone shopping. And, of course, on mom's insistence, she had to get him outside "to get fresh air and not be stuck all day long in front of computer." He hated these trips, always either serving as a punching bag for her soon-to-be-boyfriend or a repository for their jokes, starting from his red hair and ending with his jumpy gait.

"Well, make it quick then and get your ass over here. Got it?" Angie called. "Catch up, we're not waiting for you." A few choked laughs followed this.

"Sure!" That was directed towards Angie in a bright cheerful voice of a smaller agreeable sibling. "You can suck it." He added under his breath, and ventured further away, to the next bush.

It took less than a minute for Dylan to clear both of them, since there weren't many berries to begin with, but when he looked a bit beyond, there was another cluster of bushes in the grove, beckoning him. He shrugged his shoulders and decided that it won't do any harm if he quickly ventured out there. In a few minutes he was in front of them, grabbing at berries greedily.

He took another step and saw a small incline lead to the base of the hill and continue into a clearing of sorts, with something dark standing hidden under the overgrown vines and more golden berry bushes. A hill? No, it was definitely not a hill, but a manmade structure covered with green.

"Whoa!" Dylan exclaimed and promptly forgot about his sister. "I think it's a house." His curiosity took over and he sprinted down, falling once and rolling on the grass, picking himself up and making his way to the object in question. The closer he got, the more certain he was it was, indeed, a house. A cabin, perhaps, or a shack, very small, maybe ten feet by ten feet by ten feet...

"Wait, it's a cube. Its roof is flat." He stood an arm length away from one of the walls, lush with greenery and completely hidden under a latticework of twisted vine twigs. He was afraid to touch it, afraid to push the leaves apart and see if it was made of wood or of metal, and if there is a door or a window in this wall. Instead, he circled the shack, carefully stepping around, in between what seemed to be a tree wall planted by someone. They grew too close to each other and too close to the shack, leaving only a corridor of about six feet between themselves and the structure. On all four sides.

On the third circle Dylan worked up his courage and came up closer to one of the walls, to where he supposed a door might

be, because it was facing the clearing from where he came, so it seemed a logical place to start. He slowly raised his arm, and, trembling, poked a finger quickly and retracted it. Nothing happened. He then pulled the leaves apart and saw that it is indeed made of wood, some old oak or pine, and painted orange and looking old, very old.

"This is so cool..." He muttered and looked back briefly, suddenly wanting the company of Angie and her friends like never before. "I'm not a coward, I don't need you." He turned back his head and licked his lips. "You will see. I can do it myself. I will find the door, look inside, and then I will run back and tell you what I found. All alone. You just wait."

Continuing to mutter. Perhaps more for his own comfort, Dylan gently hovered the palm of his right hand over the blanket over vines. Growing bolder, he tore at a couple of them, exposing wood, orange painted wood. The paint job was ancient, peeling off and hardly looking like orange anymore. Dylan's heartbeat spiked to double the usual speed, pounding in his ears. His mouth has gone dry, and still he couldn't tear himself away from the place. A little bit above the line of his eye sight, to the left, he saw what looked like a gap. Sure enough, when he traced it with his finger, right about the height of his waist, he found a doorknob, rough to touch. He grabbed it and turned.

"What the hell am I doing?" The hinges creaked its rusty song and the door opened an inch, held back together by the vegetation. A smell of berries hit Dylan's nose. No, it was better than berries, it smelled like berry pie. He expected a dank odor of mold and old wood, so this delighted him and he broke into a smile.

"I'll only take a quick peak..." He said, and stuck his face close to the gap, simultaneously thinking back to all the R.L. Stine's Goosebumps stories and feeling his spine turn to ice at the idea that someone, worse, something, might grab his nose right this minute and...

He shrieked and without having taken a peak inside fell on his butt and proceeded to crab-walk on all fours, in an inverted fashion, suddenly terrified of the place. The door stood ajar, as if waiting for him to proceed, and the smell became stronger. Dylan waited a minute. No scary monster poked his head out of the shack, no undead being stumbled out, and Dylan's breathing returned to normal. He sat and brushed his dirty hands on his blue jeans, then licked the right one and smoothed his unruly red hair.

"Okay, okay, it's just a *fig*-ment of my imagination." Dylan loved new words and this was the perfect occasion to use the word *figment* which he learned from reading the other day. "I'm in a park. It's not even a real forest, so nothing creepy can

happen here. Nothing." The insatiable need to know what smelled to deliciously inside got him on his feet and poking his nose inside again.

He took a deep breath and let it out, disappointed, grabbing the door and pulling it open halfway.

"That's it?"

Inside it was dark, but sheets of light broke in between the wooden slats of the walls and the ceiling, which wasn't so much a ceiling as it was a top side of a cube, because the interior was perfectly square in any way you looked at it. In the middle of the wooden floor lay a small colorful cube.

"What the hell is that? It can't be this thing smelling, can it?" Without thinking, Dylan took a step in and kneeled next to the object.

"A Rubik's cube!" He exclaimed and picked it up. "A scented one. Weird. I've never seen one like that before." The cube smelled deliciously, a fragrance that suggested it might be made out of the berries he just ate as opposed to plastic. And it was hopelessly scrambled.

"Whoever left it here, didn't know *nothing* about solving Rubik's cubes. But I do, ha!" Dylan said, without any premonition about how right he was saying it just this very moment, and how wrong he was saying it just this very moment. Because the next moment, he turned it this way and that, then

fixed his stare on what he decided will be the top, with yellow center, and twisted the side that had an orange center. The cube's orange face pivoted, and for a second Dylan felt like the floor moved, but he ignored it, too concentrated on the puzzle at hand. He clicked the whole side in place, and simultaneously the same click, but amplified tenfold, emanated from behind his back. By the time he turned his head around and realized what was happening, the entire wall behind him, the one that was painted orange and had a door, shifted, rotated, and locked itself in a new position, door shut.

"NO!" He screamed, dropped the cube and run up to the door. There was no door. In fact, the walls ceased to be wooden, they were plastic now, solid, with strangle colored light oozing from each of them, all mixed up. Red, orange, yellow, blue, green, and white.

"Let me out! Let me out! LET ME OUT! ANGIE!!!" Dylan pounded on the walls, screaming his head off and finding himself on the throes of panic, his legs feeling weak, his knees growing soft, his eyes filling with water and spilling on his face in angry tears. "I said, let me out! Please! I don't want to die!" He pounded on each wall in turn, to no avail. The only effect was dull sounding thuds produced by his fists and his face smeared with snot as he tried to wipe off his face. Finally, he

lifted his t-shirt, blew his nose into it and decided to think straight for a second.

"I don't want to die. I don't want to die..." He sniffled, involuntarily picking up the cube and turning it in his hands. "Wait a second. Is this..." Understanding downed on him, and he looked around to confirm it, pointing at each wall and calling out its color, ending on the ceiling. "They're Rubik's cube sides, and I'm inside! So maybe all I have to do is solve it and it will let me out. Will you?" He asked out loud.

Silence greeted him. Dylan sat on the floor, cube in his hand, paralyzed, his eyes open wide in fear, multiple colors of light playing on his pale skin. His hands shook and his face got covered with a sheen of cold sweat. "If it's a joke, it's stupid." He said, thinking back to Angie and wishing with all his might to turn back the time and never venture out for those berries. "All right then. Let's see here."

He sniffed once more and set to trying to solve the riddle. Each time he turned the face of the cube, a wall shifted and he got thrown around to it, because gravity shifted and whatever wall corresponded to the face he was pivoting, became the floor. At first he shrieked, but after a few of these tumbles he got used to them and didn't even mind hitting his head on the walls. After all, they appeared to be made of plastic and didn't hurt that much. Puzzle solving frenzy took over him, especially

because his father bought him one recently and he was spending all his free time reading tricks online and watching YouTube videos on how to solve one. The toughest part was the last layer, and it took him what seemed like an eternity. At last, exhausted yet exhilarated, Dylan clicked the bottom face in place, and the floor shook him off to the neighboring wall, opening up into a door.

Fresh summer air gushed through it, and Dylan, beside himself, tossed the cube away and crawled out of the shack on all fours, crying and sobbing and continuing forward until he made it about ten feet away from the grove of trees at the bottom of the clearing. Then, and only then, did he turn his head back.

The woods looked at him, wondering what exactly was he staring at. The shack simply wasn't there. In fact, the trees that grew in a strange fence-like manner weren't there either, replaced by an irregular growth of furs. Dylan gasped, but was unable to say anything, was unable to even call Angie for help, wondering if it was maybe the next day, because the sun was as high as when it was at ten in the morning, when he and his sister with her friends took off into the woods from the parking lot. His tongue simply wouldn't move, and in this state he proceeded to crawl until he made it to the bushes with fragrantly smelling golden berries on top of the incline.

"Dylan! Dylan!" Multiple calls echoed around and somebody nearly tripped over him. He could only turn around and lay down on his back.

"Dylan, Christ, are you out of your mind? Where the hell were you when I was calling? Jesus!" Angie leaned over him, her face contorted in a genuine mask of concern. "Are you all right?" She added, her voice scared now.

"Angie-doll, did you find him?" Matt, her soon-to-be-boyfriend stepped out from behind her back. "Guys, over here!" He shouted.

"What happened? What--" Angie started.

"I... berries." Dylan said, pointing at the bush above, quickly weaving a story in his mind.

"You ate those??? Are you crazy? What if they're poisonous!" Angie exclaimed and proceeded to give out her botanical knowledge of all things weeds, which wasn't much.

Dylan tuned her out and turned his head to the left, his gaze tracing all the way across the clearing. He thought that maybe for a moment he saw the cube-house and the grove of trees around it. He blinked and it was gone.

I'll come here again. I'll tell Max and we'll come here together.

"Dylan, are you listening to me?" Angie's voice brought him back.

"Yeah, sorry." Dylan said. "But those berries were good. Very sweet. And so... orange. I wonder if... I wonder if there are red ones on the other side, and maybe blue ones that way..."

Gulp

Darkness swallowed her. Even when she stretched out her fingers, spread them in a fan and moved them an inch away from her nose, still, she couldn't see them. It was like being blind without being blind, yet knowing that the dark milk around you is a complete absence of light that is only possible in an airtight bunker. Or a photographers dark room. Or a black hole. This was none of those, however. This, she realized, was the throat of a ghou, and she was being swallowed alive, in once piece, to be digested by his acrid juices.

"Fuck, I didn't know ghouls eat fairies," she thought and flapped her iridescent wings in a mad desire to make him choke or cough, or sneeze her out, slime and all. How she'd escape him didn't matter, she'd think of something, she'd... Her feet touched slimy muscles of his stomach opening's and she felt it yawn in a hungry grin, a ring of doom, and welcoming door to her ultimate dissolution. She tried to imagine how her golden hair would look as slime, fully digested, and... "No, that's NOT what I need to think about, I need to think about how the hell I'm going to get out of this thing!" She tensed her fingers and punched them into the walls of his esophagus with all her nail-

manicured might. The ghoul yelped and shuddered with a spasm of pain and fury. It sounded half-bark, half-cry. Then it swallowed. A gush of brine or beer or some other nasty tasting liquid trickled on top of her head leaving no air to breathe and pushing her further down. The circular door opened with a sickening whoosh. "No!!!" She yelled, but it was too late. Muscular walls surrounded her like an endless velvet sack. The bad part, she realized was, she's definitely NOT going out of this thing. The good part? There was more light, she could see, and there were others here, in various stages of digestion, perched along the walls in sad rows of grey faces and clasped knees, moving slightly to the rhythm of smooth muscular contortions. They didn't even raise their eyes to look at her, staring at their own misery as if it was displayed right by their feet in some magical acid stomach-juice writing.

"Hi." She waved her hand. No response.

"All right. I'll just sit here. Is that ok?" She edged to the body sitting closest, a grey unidentifiable mass of a man who could be only an elf in his past life that retired into boring slumber. It didn't look like he cared whether or not he lived or died in the next hour or so. She made sure her knees didn't touch his and proceeded at wringing out her wings from the secreted enzymes tracing stomach walls. "Right," she said, to reassure herself that she, in fact, was still able to think

and talk. "That means I live. I'll come up with a plan. This is not the end of the world. I've seen worse." She thought back to the time when she was swallowed by a gigantic flying gargoyle who took off and flew with her for five thousand miles, above the cloud, above...

"Miss, are you going to exit or not?" The retired old man punched his elbow into her unceremoniously, holding out his briefcase as if a parting tool to get through the crowd.

"Me? Uh...no, sorry, no. I'm...not." She squeezed back into breathing bodies, trying to give him space.

"Next stop: Central park. Doors to my right." Female recorded announcer blared into her ear. "I hate subways." She said under her breath, watching train-car doors close and attempting to get back into her daydream, but it was gone.

"Fuck."

Ferret's Lair

They tore at his whiskers. He squealed and bit in the tail of the one that hissed nearby, a few inches by the pipe that opened into gutters. The one nearby moved his massive body a second too late. They all will be doomed, from the tips of their pink tiny tones to the tips of their furry tails, to the very last hair at the very end of each of their ears. All three of them, destined to be swallowed by the vast expanse of slimy gluttony called WOOZEL LAND, ruled by the fattest of them all, with lines of skin rolling in undauntedly clusters on his neck, from brown to beige to a creamy type of white, the result of eating too many pellets of ferret food as proudly produced by Fake VOLE & Co.

He sighed and proceeded to chewing the tail, cleverly using his maneuver to distract the big one and knock the skinny one off balance, all in one swift move with a terrifying look, a special clucking noise as from an angry chicken. Annoyed and hissing, the big one rolled on his back, straining to pull the tail out of his teeth and escape into the gutter, before it would be too late. Before the impending doom would cover them all with its vast unpreventable vastness and its bleak naked non-furriness that instilled a feeling of absolute horror in

anyone who happened to look upon it, except the one that ruled them all, of course.

Our friend suspected, they had some kind of a deal. Possibly, involving mice. Quite possible, still, involving rabbits or some other small rodents, the thought of which was so terrifying that he almost forgot to swallow and clenched his teeth on the big one's tail to which he slapped him with a paw and missed, because a sudden itch forced him to arch his fat body back and nervously but with pleasure scratch in that damned spot until it was gone.

The skinny one decided he's not part of the game anymore and shivered, perhaps thinking he could conveniently slink up the drain pipe, perhaps even have enough strength to grasp at its insides with his claws. He pulled back, puffed his tail and performed an extraordinary number of Weasel War Dance, complete with ten bounces, twenty flips, and then popping on the ground.

Our hero simply looked on, his little black eyes distant, contemplating. Perhaps there was a way out, perhaps the universe wouldn't collapse on itself, not yet. Perhaps the hand of wrath hanging over the edge of the impending doom was, after all, something else, an entirely different species. Perhaps...

The cage door opened and Molly dropped a piece of cooked chicken: "Here, fuzzies, come here. Molly's got a treat for you. Come on, get it. Come on, now!" She smiled her punctured eight-

year-old smile, unaware of exactly what she has just interrupted.

The end.

The Chase

They were sprinting down a narrow road. The thing that chased them was nowhere in sight, but they could hear its distant footfalls.

"How much farther?"

"Another block."

They turned and rushed under the arch and through the door and down the steps and along a hallway to the dark ahead, and in the room in the dark they collapsed.

"That was close."

"You idiot."

"I know. I'm sorry."

They sat for some time without talking.

"Where to now?"

"You're asking me? You're the expert."

"Since when?"

"Since tonight! You said you know how it works! You got us in this mess! You get us out."

"I was only trying to help."

"Yeah, right. Big help that was."

The room was quiet. In the dark and the cold the water dripped and somewhere far ahead the rush of the water echoed.

"If you ever do this again, I'll scratch your eyes out. I'm dead serious."

"Then I'll bite you."

"Shhh! Did you hear that?"

"What?"

They listened.

"We can't stay here for long. It'll find us. Let's go."

They scrambled to their feet and slunk into the dark, and the sounds of water got louder, and the air got colder. They came upon a large stream of water that was churning and gurgling and rushing ahead, and the shapes on its surface bobbed and twirled and, deeper still, across the stream, many eyes were watching them without blinking. They started moving and the eyes disappeared, and there was only the scurrying of the feet and the scratching of the skin on the ground.

"We could have chased them, you know. Eat some."

"No thanks. I've had enough chasing for tonight. My head is hurting and my back is cut. If I won't stop bleeding I'll die by morning."

"So what do you suggest?"

"We could try that house."

"No."

"Why not? It has a hole in the door."

It took them the rest of the night to find their way out and, slinking in the shadows and crossings streets at the run, they came upon the house and stopped and peered inside.

"They're sleeping."

"You sure?"

"Let's go."

They squeezed through the hole in the door and crept up the steps, and in the living room they plumped on the sofa, stretched their paws, curled their tails and slept, unaware of a pair of eyes glowing green in the darkness.

"Young fools. I'll have to explain *dogs* to them in the morning."

The fat housecat curled in his fluffy bed and slept, and in his dream he saw his own first encounter with a dog, and in that dream he was victorious.

Sleep Well, Papa

Papa came to me in a dream. He said the first time was in the bathroom. He was washing me.

"Why?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said. "You were so little, so sweet. I started kissing you between the legs. You liked it."

He said the other time I saw him running out of the bedroom, naked, erect.

I said, "Why are you telling me this? It's disgusting."

He laughed and said, "What's so disgusting about it. Look."

"I don't want to," I said.

I woke up.

He came again, and he wouldn't let me go. He said, "I want to show you," and dragged me with him to the bed. We struggled, and I lost.

My alarm started ringing.

I jerked awake and sat and breathed for a long time. The sheets were soaked.

I didn't go to work that day.

That night I set the alarm an hour back.

He showed up the moment I closed my eyes. "You like seeing me. That's why you keep coming."

"Leave me alone," I said. "I need sleep. I didn't come here to see you. I don't want to see you."

"Tough luck," he said.

He dragged me in an outhouse. It was dark and it stunk, and he suspended me over the hole and asked, "Are you scared?"

"Let go of me."

I thrashed. He was stronger. He pulled off my pajama bottoms and pushed me in the hole. The chilly air goosed my buttocks. I sunk in halfway.

"You know what you have to do," he said.

"I don't care."

"Oh, yes you do. How about this?" He pressed on my head.

"Don't."

"Do it."

"No."

"I said, do it!"

And I did.

I woke up gagging, fell out of my bed and retched. The vomit steamed on the carpet. It was dark, two hours before the alarm.

The next night, I didn't go to bed at all.

I drank three cups of coffee around midnight, and by four in the morning I was wide awake and grinning. I had won.

That day at work, I dozed.

He was there right away.

"Did you miss me?" he asked.

"Get out! Out!"

"I knew you'd come. It's not like you have a choice."

"I said, out. Get out of my dreams!"

"They're your dreams, aren't they? It means you want me in them."

I stumbled home that night and fell asleep while eating dinner, my head on the table.

He didn't even talk to me. He stripped me, shoved me in his car. It was freezing. I hugged myself. My teeth chattered like crazy.

"Where are you taking me?"

"You'll see."

There was nothing to see. Only the dark and the white below it. Snow.

"Papa?"

"Be quiet."

"You can't keep me forever, you know."

"You're so naive."

"It's only a dream."

He smiled. "Is it? Feels plenty real to me."

I pinched myself and slapped my cheeks. "Wake up. Wake up, dammit. Come on."

He stopped the car. "We're here."

It was our old house.

He hauled me out, pushed me to the door. "Get in."

I took a step, another, turned and ran. I could run with my eyes closed. I knew every rock, every tree, every pit in the ground. The snow froze my feet. It didn't matter. I was free. I'd just keep running until I woke up.

I never did.

Not that night, not the next, not the five nights after. He kept me in the house, locked in the upstairs bedroom. He fed me, let me use the bathroom, let me wash myself, always there, always watching.

After a week, I didn't think it a dream anymore. It felt real. There were neighbors, cars in the street. Stray dogs. Some kids came to the backyard alley. They smoked cigarettes, had a snowball fight. I watched them from my window. I wanted to open it, shout to them.

Papa stood behind me, his hand on my neck. "You want to go out there and join them?"

"No."

"Don't lie to me."

"I'm not lying."

He tightened his fingers.

"I'm not, Papa, I promise."

"I don't believe you."

"But Papa—"

"Kneel."

"But—"

"Kneel!"

I did. And in my head, I planned my escape. If I couldn't leave him, I'd take him with me.

The next morning, he came to my bedroom before I woke up. I felt his breath on my cheek.

"I know you're awake," he said. "No use pretending."

"I'm not sure if I'm awake or not anymore."

"I thought it was your dream."

"I don't think so now."

"And what do you think?"

"I think this is real. I think you're real. I think you and I can live here together like you always wanted to, without Mama. What do you say?"

He looked at me. "I don't like this."

"What?"

"You're playing games with me."

"Why would I do that?"

"You hate this. I know you, and I know you hate this. I won't let you go until I teach you to love it. Then you'll stay on your own. You will not want to leave."

The prospect chilled me. "I want to stay."

"Too fast."

I paid for my lie.

That night I didn't go to sleep after he finished with me, wiped himself, and left. I lay under the covers, breathing. Then I had it. I crawled out of my bed and crept out of the room and down the stairs. He was in his bed, asleep. I climbed in with him.

"Papa."

"Hmmm."

"What are you dreaming about?"

"You."

"What am I doing?"

"Eating dinner."

And so, I went into his dream. I was in my kitchen. I was eating spaghetti, and Papa was sitting across the table, watching me slurp it up and chew.

"You want some?" I said.

"No, thank you. I've already eaten dinner."

"There's plenty more in the pot."

"I said no."

"Just trying to be hospitable."

"You don't need to be hospitable. It's not your dream, it's mine."

"You sure about that?" I twisted my fork in the spaghetti and smiled.

He shifted in his seat. "What's there to be sure about?"

"The dream. Whose do you think it is?"

"This is a pointless conversation."

"You're scared."

"Finish your dinner."

"Scared because you're not sure, aren't you?"

"We're going." He stood up.

"I'm not going anywhere. I'm staying. I quite like it here. Nice kitchen. Nice food." I scraped the last of the spaghetti to the edge of the plate and licked it off. "I want seconds."

He understood then and made a dash for the door. I was already on my feet. I sprung after him and leapt on his back like a monkey.

"You're not going anywhere without me," I said.

"Get off."

"Tough luck, Papa."

He rammed his back against the wall. It knocked the wind out of me. I held on.

"Nice try," I said. "It's not real, remember? It's your dream. You want me here, don't you?"

"Get off me."

"You know what you have to do," I said.

"No."

"Suit yourself. I like it here."

"No!"

He ran out the door.

It was like when I was little, riding him piggy-back style. I curled my legs around his waist and held on to his neck. He panted hard, running himself into exhaustion. He tried shaking me off a few times. In the end, he gave up. We ran all the way to my work and past it, to the railway and to the woods behind it, stopping by the dark, slow river. There, he collapsed.

"You got what you wanted," he said.

"Not yet."

"What else."

"It's obvious, isn't it?"

He looked at me.

I looked at my watch.

"No," he said.

I shrugged. "I'm in no hurry."

He was wheezing. "Let's go back. Just you and me. In the house. Wasn't it nice?"

"I didn't know the dead can dream," I said. "Didn't know their dreams were so boring."

A train went by, and we both looked up and watched it disappear into the haze.

He sat up. "The dead don't sleep," he said.

"In my dream they do."

"We talked about this." He got to his feet.

"Did we?"

I was fast.

It was the first time I used the trick he'd taught me. He once used it to fight off a man with a knife when he was a boy. I hunched my shoulders, tucked in my neck and ran at him, driving my head into his stomach. He doubled over. I pushed him in the river. It wasn't deep here, but the bank was steep, and he couldn't swim. I watched him struggling, calling to me, watched him recognize the look in my eyes. That's when he sunk.

I woke up in my bathroom.

The water was running over the edge of the tub. It was cold. I put my hand in it, stirred it around.

"Sleep well, Papa. I know I will."

Cthulhu on a Tricycle

Cthulhu looked three years old, and he was riding a tricycle.

Exactly three months ago, on a sunny April morning, his mother Bobbie Bungey had a strange cosmic dream before she woke up pregnant with a rapidly growing fetus in her belly. However it got there, she had no idea. The last time she had sexual relations was in January at her cousin's wedding with an inebriated individual by the name of Franky Frocatlev, whose face she couldn't remember (never mind how she met him or where he went since).

She tried getting rid of the fetus by taking a very hot bath and banging on her abdomen with both fists. When that didn't work, she tried suctioning it out with an inverted vacuum hose. No luck. Finally, she jumped off the roof of her loathsome unpainted wooden house that she had inherited from her long-dead parents. To her immense disappointment, instead of stalling the growth process, she only accelerated it, and upon landing on the bed of green, slimy vines below, with a stupendous cry and an unbearable pain in her pelvis, she ejected a hideous creature that plopped on the ground and with a rubbery squeak proceeded crawling to the pond where it dunked its octopus-like head and

took great gulps of stale, cloudy water. At the sight of this horror, poor Bobbie fainted. When she came to, the sun has set, and the baby was gone.

She found it in the kitchen, eating something looking suspiciously like a cockroach. It didn't exactly chew it; it simply slurped it up between the many wriggling feelers that comprised its face. While she stood in the door, holding on to the jamb for dear life and contemplating what to do next, the baby opened the fridge, pulled out a styrofoam tray full of chicken breasts, ripped open the plastic wrap with one sharp claw, and happily devoured the contents, then mopped up the juice on the floor by sticking its face to the linoleum and swishing it around in circles, snuffling in content. Bobbie worked hard on keeping the contents of her stomach down, then made herself turn the thing over. It felt cold and scaly to touch.

"It's a boy," she said. She'd forgotten she had a voice.

"Cthulhu fhtagn," the boy squeaked in response, and burped. A foul stench of putrefaction washed over Bobbie's face. No matter. She had been through worse before, when Dana Anne locked her up in the mortuary and turned off the light, and she had to grope her way out, bumping into naked corpses and sinking her hands into the hollows and cavities of their stiffened flesh.

Holding Cthulhu at a safe distance, she washed him, wrapped him in a blanket, and put him to sleep, and for the next three months, after quitting her nursing school on the pretext of uterine cancer, which was not far from the truth, fed him raw meat in increasing quantities, all the while watching with astonishment the process of his rapid maturation. What normal babies took a year to do, Cthulhu mastered in days. Today he was three months old, though he looked all three years, and on the last of her savings Bobbie bought him a tricycle to keep him from chasing Jenkin, the fat family cat she also inherited from her long-dead parents, which, so far, had miraculously managed to escape Cthulhu's claws, unlike the rats, the squirrels and the birds in the backyard.

Jenkin had seem to sense at once that the baby was evil. His fur stood on end the morning he returned to the house. He slunk into the bedroom, hopped on the bed and hissed at the ugly, stinky thing that prominently occupied his pillow. Cthulhu clearly didn't appreciate such a rude awakening and reached for Jenkin's tail just as Jenkin snapped his jaws around Cthulhu's wrist. The noise that escaped the baby's throat caused Bobbie's heart to implode and her stomach turn a full three hundred and sixty degrees in an instant. By the time she reached the bedroom, hastily wrapped in a robe, her hair dripping, her feet leaving puddles of sudsy water on the creaky parquet, Cthulhu

victoriously held Jenkin in one fist, dangling him upside down by the tail. It was a game to him, and the cat's pitiful cries were discordant against the sound of Cthulhu's inhuman cackling. Bobbie had no choice but to watch the feelers close around Jenkin's head, then his fat furry body, and then the paws trying to claw their way out in Jenkin's feeble attempt to preserve his feline dignity and his short, comfortable life. The last to go was the tail: Cthulhu slurped it up like a long spaghetti, and when his dark, beady eyes shifted to Bobbie and took her in, she didn't like the hungry gleam in them. Bobbie took a step backward, at which Cthulhu laughed so hard his scaly skin bristled, his feelers smacked, and in a jet of fetid, gooey drool, he disgorged the poor creature, half-alive with fright, right at Bobbie's feet. Then he slid off the bed and crept on all fours to the kitchen, without a backward glance.

Since this unfortunate incident, Jenkin's continued presence could only be attributed to the food and perhaps a need for revenge. Cthulhu chased him lazily and without much vigor, as he preferred smaller animals that didn't require him to stretch his mouth quite so, but Jenkin calculated his every approach, teasing the hideous offspring and jumping out of reach at the last possible moment. Jenkin's erratic behavior and acute distress roused the neighborhood cats to the danger lurking in Bobbie's house. They congregated on the walls, peering in from

the height of eight feet at the lumbering, burbling oddity that took its pleasure in eating rats and afterward splashing in the muddy pond waters.

No toys interested Cthulhu; they always ended up in a heap of chewed up wood and broken plastic. The tricycle, however, was a stroke of genius. Bobbie has noticed that circular motion has mesmerized the boy, in particular, anything spinning. He watched her twirl the spoon in her coffee, whisk the eggs, wipe the table in large, energetic circles, and when she peered closer at him, she thought she saw in his dark, brooding eyes the mighty eddying of the cosmos itself. The illusion lasted perhaps a fraction of a blink. It was enough. It gave her an idea.

The moment Cthulhu laid his eyes on the tricycle, he was on top of it and pedaling as though he's been doing it all his life. The result of this innocent purchase was unpredictable and escalated rapidly in the next twenty-four minutes.

Pale and trembling with both horror and excitement, Bobbie retreated from the boy happily riding around and around the backyard to her car, where she plopped in a seat with a stifled sigh and for some time stared at her ghastly reflection in the rearview mirror. She wiped the cold sweat from her brow, and nodded with the determination steeled by three months of suffering and many sleepless nights. She looked awful. She had lost twenty pounds, though in the back of her mind it made her

deliriously happy. What wouldn't she give to see the look on Dana Anne's face! Alas. Her friends long ceased trying to reach her over the telephone, and she shopped at night to avoid bumping into anyone who might question her: she didn't have the answers. Today, she emptied the last of her savings account, and tomorrow she faced either starving while watching Cthulhu devour the rest of the food, or abandoning him, her first and only baby. Her hands were shaking and her eyes were wet, but she felt brave, and that was good. She turned the key in the ignition, let the car idle. She could do this. She knew she could.

Cthulhu stopped and stared at her through the windshield. Above him, on the thick wooden fence the cats sat motionless in a furry tableau. Bobbie waved to him weakly, and he continued riding around, each time coming closer to the car, until he finally stopped by the driver's door and said the only words that he has uttered since birth.

"Cthulhu fhtagn."

"Mommy is here," said Bobbie with the voice she didn't know she owned. "My little twinkie wants something?"

"Cthulhu fhtagn."

"All right. No need to be so impatient. Mommy is coming in a moment, sweetie pie."

"Cthulhu fhtagn!"

The blow to the door was such that it shook the car, briefly lifting it off the ground. Bobbie startled; her heart pounded fiercely. She had neglected to bring any kind of a weapon, even a kitchen knife was better than nothing, but now it was too late. The strong, sharp claw has wrenched the door open, and the awful octopus-head was inches away from her heaving chest. The feelers writhed and tangled into a pulsing, undulating cluster, and with rising horror Bobbie surmised what her boy was demanding of her.

"Mommy will give you chicken, babycakes! Would you like some chicken?"

If it was possible to name that which was borne on Cthulhu's face as an expression, then it was an expression of disgust accompanied with hungry gulping noises. Bobbie regretted her decision for the next eighteen minutes. She had no time to think; her conscience had taken a hike. She pushed the rubbery body off the tricycle, sprang out of the car, picked up creeping Jenkin off the ground and with a clumsy shove threw him at Cthulhu's face. On instinct the hissing mouth and the extended claws clamped fast to the tentacles, and it seemed to Bobbie a victory. She was wrong, of course, and she should've known better. In a sickening wriggle of noisome feelers, first Jenkin's head disappeared, then his body, then his paws. The

last to go was the tail, and Bobbie knew this time Jenkin was gone for good.

She didn't remember how she got back in the car. She sat staring-it was a sight to behold.

It seemed as though the entire feline population of the neighborhood has launched an attack on the hateful monster who ate their beloved Jenkin. Like delirious fiends they launched at him in a screeching, hissing mass of fur and limbs, the shrill cacophony of their mewling voices raising hairs on Bobbie's neck and forearms. She dimly heard the neighborhood dogs join in on the madness, yowling and barking, and she thought them stupid, just making noise, when the cats were the smart ones, going in for the kill.

Cthulhu laboriously spun around to greet the multitude of his adversaries. The thick rubbery appendages on his back spread out into a pair of bat-like wings, and his arms extended to the sides and upward, catching the first unfortunate animal in mid-flight. With frightening speed, the entire bundle of his facial feelers opened up into a hellish writhing flower, and in less than a second the whole cat disappeared, followed by a prolonged and satisfied belch. The green miasma issuing from Cthulhu's gullet obscured Bobbie's vision for a moment; when it cleared, the scene that presented itself to her eyes caused Bobbie to question the soundness of her mental state. The poor creatures

had hardly any time for protest, whether by sounding their agony or by scratching at Cthulu's claws, which were infinitely more powerful and sharp than their furry appendages. One by one Cthulhu swept them into his noxious mouth, and the more of them he consumed, the faster he grew. Bobbie thought he might've passed for a ten-year-old, in the unlikely event some lost stranger chanced to look into her yard at this very moment and make such an observation before losing his mind.

On the twentieth cat Cthulhu grew another foot, and on the thirtieth another. When the earth around him was nothing more than a trampled slime of mud-soaked dying vines and the patches of fur scattered about and fluttering with each of his exhalations, when the last of the cats had been devoured, bones and all, and the fortunate few upon witnessing this terrible carnage were wise enough to flee, at that moment Cthulhu stood at his full height, and Bobbie knew that her life lay in her hands and in the power of her beaten up Volkswagen.

"Come on, baby. Don't fail me now."

She shifted the gears and floored the gas. For an unbearable second suspended in space and time, the tires squealed, and Bobbie's shaking hands slipped off the wheel under Cthulhu's questioning gaze. Then the rubber caught on the cracked, dusty asphalt, and the Volkswagen jerked and revved

forward, slamming into the puzzled, abominable perversion that had once been lodged fast in Bobbie's uterine walls.

Bobbie never knew that the sound of tearing flesh and crunching bones could give such an immense satisfaction.

She stopped the car inches away from her garage, shifted in reverse, and backed over the grotesque remains squashed in a jelly. She rode over it at least a dozen times, ignoring the bumping and the nauseating, squelching sounds, making sure the thing was really dead.

It took her another four minutes to collect herself and step out of the car. There was no question that her beloved Volkswagen was ruined, but it was worth it. What remained of the demon was nothing more than foaming brine, the venomous stench hanging low above it in tongues of green vapor. Bobbie knocked her head back and laughed hysterically at the sky, the mental strain to keep herself sane at last loosening and letting go of her anguish. In another minute she was wiping her tears and catching her breath, and in another she heard a nasty sound akin to that of oozing froth and bubbling oil. She glanced at her feet and froze in utter, unexplainable horror. The nasty slush drew itself together drop by drop and recombined into a form she came to loathe: Cthulhu stood and spread his tentacles wide apart in what her reeling mind recognized as an attempt at a smile. She'd never seen what lay beyond; her son afforded her

the pleasure. The ghastly hole was ragged, singed at the edges and covered with slime. It opened up into a darkness that was impossible to describe, as human language had no capacity to absorb the space so devoid of matter, so ancient, so cosmic. Bobbie glimpsed revolving stars and nameless skies, measureless aeons of time and nightmarish dreams. She was drawn to it, it called on her, it commanded.

"Cthulhu fhtagn," she heard herself say and fell to her knees.

It was a considerable effort for Cthulhu to swallow his mother. He labored hard at it, until even the heels of her shoes have vanished in his hellish maw. He straightened his back, a fully grown creature, and in two strides crossed the lawn to the pond. The waters seethed, rose around him, licked his pulpy body; the earth shuddered; what little noise there was stilled in the summer night. And from the depths of the churning black oily substance rose walls of Cyclopean architecture made from greenish stone. The diabolic figure squatted ominously on what looked like a pedestal, reached down and caught an object from the ground before the vastness of rock bore him skyward on top of a colossal monolith; it obliterated the pond, Bobbie's house and most of the street.

Those who had enough time to see the queer, abnormal edifice before they were smothered, noted a peculiar silhouette

of dragon-octopus form. It wasn't the fantastic shape of said monstrosity that had them enthralled, it was the incongruous activity it enjoyed.

It was riding a tricycle.