

# OBSESSIONS

## A Short Story Anthology

Edited by Katarzyna Bazarnik and Edyta Gaida

Kraków 2015

**korporacja ha!art**

*Obsessions. A Short Story Anthology*

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Free publication / publikacja bezpłatna

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First edition

Printed in Poland

ISBN: 978-83-64057-72-4

Published by:

Korporacja Ha!art

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Online bookstore:

<http://www.ha.art.pl/sklep/>

Printed by: Agencja Reklamy Wizualnej Trybun Dominik Mrózek

The anthology has been funded by:



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## **Mrs. White's Promise**

*Jakub Wiśniewski*

*I swore to God. I swore to God I wouldn't say a word. I swore to God I wouldn't say a word and then I broke the promise. I swore to God I wouldn't say a word and then I broke the promise cause I couldn't stay quiet any longer cause it grew inside me like a baby, like a bad baby, like a crippled half-ape, like a little Bela Lugosi version of me, there, in my mind's womb. I said I wouldn't say a word. I said I wouldn't say a word but I told the father, the other father, behind the lattice like this one, in the dark like this one, and he didn't believe. To tell the truth, I broke the promise to tell the truth. That was the only reason. I'm not fond of breaking promises, but I'm not fond of breaking into premises either. And he did break into her house, and I saw that, and my myopia, as Dr Carter calls it, couldn't make me unsee it, nothing could, and it grew inside me like a baby. But I swore to God I wouldn't say a word. I'm a little promise breaker, that's what I am, that's all I am. Forgive me if I'm talking to fast, father.*

The day Mrs. White caught a glimpse of forever was like any other day, except the wind stopped flogging the city. It seemed Black Mountain managed to stop it, relieving all the brick houses for a while, whitewashing the exhausted redness of their rows. Falls Road dragged its rain-washed asphalt under the black cabs, between the sidewalks left for passers-by trying not to step into ubiquitous dogshit, while Autumn crawled upon the city with all its tedious cry for the light.

Mrs. White was a woman old enough to witness the Troubles with grown-up eyes. She was also old enough to forget it. She was twenty when her husband proposed to her and sixty two when he died. Her short hair took its color from the grey eyes looking at the evil world from behind the half-inch-thick spectacles. Her face expression seemed never-changing, fixed once and for all at some sort of strained stillness, self-forced truce with the outside noise. That's how West Belfast saw her when she walked everyday along its dirty walls and raucous murals, step by step, straight to the center and back to Violet Street.

Her kind was on the brink of extinction. She had two things that had softly evaporated from the people around, replaced by kebab and fashion or porn magazines, depending on the sex. She had the courage to throw words like stones at the packs of kids bumming around the neighborhood no one seemed to care

about. And she had what some would call true faith. The former ability was of social usefulness. Whenever she met such seemingly stray children rumbling through the city as if *Lord of the Flies* was their Quran, shouting, kicking litter baskets, breaking traffic signs, roaring at the empty space of Belfast, she used all her strength to chase them away, which was usually not enough but was infinitely more than most people's indifference.

The second thing, faith, was an unseen load. It was a rose buried in guano – no eye could grasp its beauty but the thorns were still there. She carried this flower in her hand like a self-aimed weapon and she held it fast, feeling the prickles piercing her skin and forgetting how to loosen her fingers.

That day, as usual, Mrs. White was coming back from Saint Patrick's church with a brown leather bag in one hand and the thorny rose in the other. The skin of these hands was parched and white, as if she rubbed them against every house she passed by. It was dry not because of her age but because of water and soap.

It was around noon when a short, joyless street with an ironic name – Springfield Avenue – saw Mrs. White walking home, clinging to her imaginary rose.

*Yes. Yes, I know. Yes, I know it's a sin to kill somebody. Yes, I know it's a sin to kill somebody, to take their breath away. Yes, I know it's a sin to kill somebody, to take their breath away, to suck it out like it's never been there. And a good woman she was. I didn't know her in person but she seemed like a good woman to me. I know it's a sin. But people are dying. People are dying even when they're not, aren't they, father? And they can die in two ways: the good way or the bad way. And is it the good way to die a death of a promise breaker? You know it's a sin, father, don't tell me if it's not, I mean, don't tell me it's not. It's a sin like any other, to break a promise like this, to put a man in jail just because I had a chance to do so. That's the real sin, don't tell me if it's not, father, I mean, don't tell me it's not.*

Mrs. White was in love with movies. Not the ones seen in theatres, with loud, compressed music, hectic action, innumerable Godzillas, Spidermen and Titanics, but old, classic movies, good-old-days, golden-age-of-Hollywood pictures. It was her secret passion. Every evening, she sat on the couch in front of her 1980s TV set, turned on Turner Classic Movies channel and forgot everything that didn't make it onto the screen. Leslie Howard, George Sanders, Tyrone Power, even Chaplin, Dean, Keaton and young Brando – they all burned through her bleak Belfast evenings like long-dead stars still shining in the sky.

Like any passion, it made her feel good and it made her feel bad. Her conscience needed a sin to protect her soul against, like the umbrella needs the rain to keep its owner dry. That's why she walked down the Falls Road as often as she could without annoying father O'Mara and confessed every movie she saw, every scene that made her uneasy, every smile that made her smile too. That's why she made herself wash her hands.

Springfield Avenue was completely empty. Even the wind left it alone. As Mrs. White walked down the street, passing innumerable copies of a brick house, she noticed that one of them had its door open. The moment she looked at it, strange sounds reached her ears: a broken glass and a cursing, weeping man. She involuntarily slowed down. Something was wrong.

She touched her spectacles and moved a few steps closer. All she could see through the open door was a few inches of carpeted floor and the beginning of stairs, the rest was dark. The windows, covered with green draperies, kept something inside. The sounds coming from the inside were like a one-man fight, some objects were crashing and hitting the floor but only one voice could be heard. It was hoarse and broken, desperately hissing random curses interwoven with sobs.

Mrs. White shivered and touched her parched hands.

*I took my phone. I took my phone and dialed 999. I took my phone and dialed 999 and said it was at Springfield Avenue, Belfast. I took my phone and dialed 999 and said it was on Springfield Avenue, Belfast, and the police told me they're coming. They talked to me and I told them what was to be told, and it was easy because I remembered the man's face so vividly and it wasn't easy because I made the promise not to remember it at all. I told them everything I knew because it grew inside me like a baby, father. But I didn't tell them about the promise. The next day I knew what happened, the whole city knew, they said there was this woman and her fifteen wounds, a few days later it turned out she reached her second trimester, and then they caught the man I made the promise to. The inspector came to me and thanked me for help, it was all official and stiff and it made me feel worse, father.*

The man jumped out of the house like a wounded tiger. He seemed numb and agitated at the same time, chaotically dragging his legs towards the street Mrs. White stood at. At first he didn't notice her. Just like she didn't notice the knife and the blood on his clothes.

But in two seconds they realized the mutual danger. Mrs. White was petrified, she didn't even open her mouth. The man suddenly stopped and raised his eyes. They were aimed at her like two guns, red and exhausted as if he never closed them.

They didn't need to turn their heads to know they're alone. The street was deserted. They stood a few steps apart, shocked and motionless. Mrs. White's mind was busy taking pictures that would stay with her forever.

Then he spoke.

"It's not me..."

There is a secret recipe how to blend a whisper with a scream, a cry with a hiss. The human voice knows it. It takes despair to recall it.

"I didn't want to!" he said.

This time, she believed him. He looked at the knife in his hand, then at her.

“Just promise you won’t say a word.”

She was silent. In the grip of his eyes, her body was an unfinished statue, paralyzed, hypnotized, unprepared.

“For fuck’s sake, just promise you won’t say a word!” Those few words bereft his voice of all its hoarseness. If Mrs. White had closed her eyes, she’d have thought that it’s not a murderer’s voice, that it’s a terrified orphan boy standing in front of her, crying for his mama’s help.

“I promise.”

He took a deep, hasty breath, as if he was drowning.

“Swear to God!”

“I swear to God.”

A few seconds later the man, the knife and the blood were all gone. There was just Mrs. White, slowly getting back control of her own body and feeling God’s breath on her dry hands: the wind came back.

*I saw it. I saw it on TV. I saw it on TV and I cried like crazy. I saw it on TV and I cried like crazy because it shouldn’t have happened. He was there because of me and I still see his bloodshot eyes, more dangerous than the knife in his hand, looking at me, asking for help, asking to get him out of the hell he threw himself into, whatever it was. I saw it on TV and it was different from all other deaths I saw on TV, different from Clark Gable’s and Glenn Ford’s, and Wayne’s and Gary Cooper’s deaths, and I don’t even know if they died on screen, I forget these things, I forget these deaths easily. But his death was different though it was on TV, too. They showed his cell at Crumlin Road in the news, it was all white and scary, and his belongings, and they said “The most common time for suicides to occur is in the early morning hours”. And no one knows how it could’ve happened because they took away his belt and shoelaces but he found a way anyway. And please father, don’t tell me it’s nothing but my twisted conscience, I’ve had enough of that kind of reassurance. What I need is penance. And it’s true I wash my hands so dry they hurt, but Lady Macbeth washed her hands pretty often too, didn’t she?*

Father O’Mara sighs. He covers his face with his hands. The hands are thick and strong, white and sound.

“Mrs. White, when was the last time you confessed?”

She is silent.

“I think it was on Tuesday.”

“I don’t understand, father.”

He grunts nervously.

“I think it’s no good for you, Mrs. White.”

“I…”

“God is merciful. Your sin was forgiven. If there was any. You should go home and have some rest.”

Mrs. White nods her head a few times. Her grey eyes fade to black.



“Alright. Thank you, father. God bless you.”

After she goes out, father O’Mara steps out of the confessional. The church is cold and empty. Silence pulls its strings, hushing the conscience. There’s a man sitting near the entrance like a last-bench student. O’Mara approaches him and says:

“Same. Romney’s case.”

“But it’s been fifteen yea...”

“Yes.”

“She should see a doctor.”

“Who shouldn’t.”

They walk out of the church. Father O’Mara locks the gate. He hides the keys in his pocket.

“Did you see her hands?”

*February 2015, Kraków*

## **Sun under Ice**

*Edyta Gaida*

It's been ten sunless years since the never-ending winter fell over the Earth. Jorda knew this, because she had access to Miss Uvarova's newspapers where she could check the date. Most of the others simply lost count of days, months, and years, waking up to the same leaden sky every day, falling asleep in the same cold grip of winter.

It's been ten long years since she lost her parents and became a ward of Miss Uvarova's Home for Orphaned Girls. She was eight then. Eighteen now. Had she not taken care of her future at the Home, she would be leaving soon – thrown out into the cold, another mouth no one wanted to feed, another pale face adding misery to the world. But this fate was awaiting other girls, not her.

She put down the paper and looked at the eight girls sitting in front of her. She used to laugh and cry with them, and huddle together under flimsy blankets for warmth – but that was a long time ago. Now she was a governess, a teacher, a warder. They hated her.

“Natasha, stand up,” said Jorda from her place of teaching authority.

A girl who was trembling the most stood obediently up, not looking at Jorda even once, keeping her eyes neatly on her cardboard shoes.

“What is the speed of light?”

Natasha stuttered and trembled, but gave the right answer. Jorda went on asking about the mass and temperature of the Sun, and getting the proper answers out of her. Soon Natasha was good to go. They would see the last of her at the farewell ceremony in three weeks' time.

As Jorda was examining the other girls, she noted that they couldn't even spend a glance on her. She was just an invisible examiner. Someone not entirely there.

It was usually like that. Sometimes, not very often, she caught them shooting wary glances in her direction. And, of course, they always stopped talking whenever she entered a room. She had sold them in exchange for personal comfort. She could do that again.

When she examined them all, they silently stood up and left without asking for permission. Jorda sighed and decided not to report their insolence. They would be gone soon. She could handle this much.

She taught another class of younger girls whom she had not betrayed, and yet they knew all about her, knew to despise her and to hate her. She gave them an additional snow-shovelling hour out of sheer spite and because she needed to confirm her authority, more for her own sake than for theirs. They were fourteen. They could handle some sport in the open air, even if the air was deadly and could cost the lazy ones a toe or even a foot.

Come dinnertime, she braced herself for humiliation. Yes, she would be sitting at the teachers' table. Her bowl of soup would be larger than those received by other orphans – but the amount of soup would be the same as in their small bowls. Other girls would see the bowl and hate her even more for being better fed than they when in reality she was just as hungry and undernourished as they were. Another of Miss Uvarova's cruel jokes.

She spoke to no one, even though other teachers – Miss Uvarova, her younger sister, and Priestess Sara, who taught them to long for the Sun – chatted animatedly around her. The orphans were far less lively. Having finished her soup she waited patiently until the Priestess stood up and said the evening prayer.

“Mighty God in the sky, the source of all life, the eternal fire, who shines over us, who governs us – please, come. Your name is the Sun, Sol, the brightest star, the light in the darkness. You shall prevail. You shall shine through the veil when mankind has been taught enough to cherish you, to love you, to obey you. Nevermore will your power be harvested for our own gain. Nevermore will your name be called impiously. For you are the God who punishes and whose preachings are hard. Yet, you are kind, and your power is free to give to those who worship you as you deserve.”

Jorda mumbled with the others the short prayer, “Let the Sun shine tomorrow.” Then they left the dining hall slowly, hunching their backs and scuffing their feet.

As she reached her room, she was feeling unusually bitter. Normally, most of her emotions were frozen up like the landscape. Yet, that night she resented her fate and her decisions, resented her position in the orphanage, resented her parents for having died in the airplane crash, even though all of the planes dropped dead that day when the Sun passed its judgement. She resented other girls for hating her. If only she wasn't all alone, if only she could huddle together with another warm body under the blankets, maybe she wouldn't be so cold.

On a sudden whim she decided to eavesdrop on Natasha, Tanya, Lucy, and Petra who lived in a small room next to her. Usually she resisted the urge, because whenever she heard them badmouth her, her stomach clenched and she couldn't sleep. But not today – she wanted to make a connection, or at least to know there was someone else living next to her. She crouched next to the wall, making a nest for herself in the jumble of old unused cables which littered her room. There was a small hole in the wall connecting two rooms, which she usually left stuffed with old rags and covered by a broken computer screen. She gently moved the screen and removed some of the rags.

“...and we never know, maybe tomorrow they will tell us to leave, come on! The king will be there.”

Natasha’s voice was more enthusiastic than ever. Jorda started to tremble.

“But if they catch us...”, said Lucy, wary and uncomfortable.

“You can’t always let them dictate what you do. Lu, you never went with us and whenever we told you about the king you were mad to go. Come on, tonight is the night.”

Jorda could almost see Lucy hesitantly chewing on her lip.

“Oh, alright. But I don’t have skates, so...”

“We’ve got that covered,” said Natasha happily. “We found a few more pairs, you know, for when something goes wrong. I think these will fit you well.”

Jorda heard some shuffling and giggling. Her chest felt constricted and heavy, and by god, she wanted to go.

As she was listening to them chatting and putting on every garment they owned, because nights in the sunless land were even more deadly than days, she was struggling against her pride, good sense, and everything she had ever stood up for. Going with them would mean breaking the rules, and the rules were good. They prevented untimely deaths and stupidity. But not going... not going could be even more disastrous. Whoever the king was, she had to see him.

She quickly put on her clothes, heavy shoes, gloves, three scarves. After a moment of hesitation, she picked up some of her spare gloves and hats, because a traitor bearing gifts must be more welcome than a bare-handed traitor.

She knocked on their door, her heart pounding so heavily that she could hear almost nothing else. Natasha carefully looked out, not opening the door fully. When she saw Jorda, her features hardened and she said nothing.

“I heard you. I heard everything,” said Jorda, praying to all the gods of light to let her be persuasive. “But I won’t tell. In exchange, I want to go with you.”

Natasha closed the door in her face. Jorda was stupefied, but soon anger took over. She was on the point of going to Miss Uvarova when the door opened again.

“You may go,” said Natasha, not looking her in the face.

“I want skates,” said Jorda.

“Sure, just choose a pair and be quick. We are leaving in two minutes.”

Jorda tried on the first pair and they fit, because she had larger feet than the girls. She gave Natasha her gifts and they went out.

They were slow and silent at first, listening out for anyone stirring within the house, but everyone seemed to be asleep. When they had walked far enough not to be detected, the girls started to talk quietly among themselves, not even checking if Jorda was following them. They went up a small hill, and soon they were talking aloud, laughing and joking. Jorda gathered from what they said that there would be a group of boys from a nearby village and they would skate on a frozen lake. Nothing more was said about the king and she started to suspect herself of having imagined him.

They entered the forest left over from the woodcutting fever a few years back. After cutting any more wood was prohibited, the remaining woods were left for those few animals who managed to survive the cold and hunters. They walked on and on, now silently, carefully picking their way among trees and low-hanging branches. The old snow was hard and dull under their feet, and the dark overcast sky gave no light. Finally, when Jorda started to doubt they would ever reach their destination before freezing to death, she heard voices from afar. The others heard them, too, and started to walk faster. Soon, they came out of the forest and went down a gentle slope towards a group of five people.

Natasha, Petra, and Tanya greeted the boys happily, and hugged them. Jorda flinched and hoped she wasn't expected to do the same. Then they introduced Lucy, who was now smiling shyly.

"Might be our last night here, eh?" said one of the boys, now holding Natasha's hand. "We should make the most of it."

They laughed and Jorda felt more uncomfortable. They didn't even introduce her. No one noticed her. She might as well be invisible or dead.

But then, one of the boys who stood behind the others, moved forward.

"And who is your other friend?" he asked quietly.

Natasha sighed.

"I knew you would notice her, Mr Good. She's not our friend. It's Jorda."

They looked at one other, frowning, exchanging surprised glances. Jorda knew – they must have heard all about her. They must hate her. She shouldn't have come.

But the one who asked about her moved then forward and stood in front of her, so close, she held her breath and felt paralysed.

"Hello, Jorda," he said, smiling. He smelled of warmth and something pleasant which she couldn't pin down. "Welcome to our kingdom."

Jorda realized she wasn't feeling cold any longer. Even better, a comfortable warmth was spreading through her body now, a warmth she had never felt since the Sun disappeared. She looked at him transfixed, her breathing now shallow and shaky. And then he touched her.

He gently put his finger on her chest, where the heart was supposed to be. She couldn't feel it through the many layers of her clothes, and yet she suddenly gasped, a violent hotness burning her inside like fire.

"There," he said, smiling. "I've melted the ice inside you. You are now free to feel, to want, to love."

He turned and moved away, and Jorda was left standing on her shaky legs, clutching at her chest which now felt wide, open, and vulnerable. She hated this feeling, yet cherished the warmth it brought her.

Natasha was looking at her, and came over when the others started putting on ice-skates.

“I don’t like doing this, just so you know. But he chose you and burnt you, which he hadn’t done for any of us. Whether you like it or not, he has accepted you. And if he has nothing against you, how could I?”

Jorda looked at her with disbelief.

“So... you don’t hate me anymore? How is that possible?”

Natasha sighed, and looked at the sky for a while. Then she looked at Jorda again and said:

“He is our King. The Sun King – that’s what we call him, anyway. He makes us warm and gives light, you will see later. Basically, we believe there is a small particle of the Sun inside him which lets him do these things. We think there could be more people like him. Maybe they could bring the Sun back one day.”

“But... that’s impossible,” said Jorda, yet she felt that as the King moved further away – the others were now on the lake, slowly starting to skate – she started feeling colder.

“Come and see for yourself,” said Natasha and smiled at Jorda for the first time in many years.

They put on their skates and went on the ice, Jorda unsteadily, Natasha with grace. When she reluctantly offered to help and teach her the basics, Jorda shook her head. She determinedly walked on the ice at first, and then started to glide. The lake was dark, the sky black, the snow loomed dirty greyish on the shore. Jorda giggled under her breath. She was skating.

And then she saw it. It looked as if a small light, a firefly or a lit candle, was swimming under the ice, slowly growing larger, and as it grew, Jorda felt warmer and better.

“Can you see it?” asked Natasha, coming close to her.

“But won’t the ice melt?” asked Jorda.

“It never does,” said Natasha, shrugging. “Come on, everyone wants to be close when he’s like that.”

They made a circle around the Sun King, and skated slowly, basking in his warmth, and looking at the reflection of his light trapped under the ice. The forest loomed around the small lake, and they were as if in a cathedral of trees and sky, worshipping the deity that had descended to meet them. Then the King came over to each of them in turn and let each person be even warmer, and look into his eyes, smiling, happy and safe. Jorda was last and he hugged her, and she felt hot, boiling inside, so awful and wonderful at the same time. When he let go, she was lonely again.

Very soon, too soon, it ended. The King’s light started to dim and the cold returned. They said their goodbyes, promised to meet in a week’s time, and left, girls towards their orphanage, and boys in the opposite direction.

They were quiet and sullen all the way. The cold was even worse after those precious two hours with the King.

The following week was a torture. Whenever someone said something cruel or hateful, or just careless, as small children do, Jorda could feel it, and it hurt. Now she

started to appreciate how hard she had grown, how much ice used to be there in her heart, guarding her. But not anymore. And she had nothing to fall back on, no friends, no one really close. She ended up crying alone, because she wouldn't let herself go to those she had betrayed even though they now seemed not to mind her.

She started going out for walks. She would look at the sky, hoping to glimpse at least a minute glow, a small ray of light, anything that would indicate that there was Sun beyond the hard grey veil. But she saw nothing. She could look and search for hours, growing more desperate, longing for the Sun more and more, but it just wasn't there for her, it wouldn't reveal its face. She even neglected some of her duties and was less mentally present at the lessons she gave. All this in just a week.

But time passed and there she was, preparing herself for another trip to the lake. They went together, and now the other girls sometimes included her in their chat, but she was mostly silent, sick with anticipation.

When they reached the lake, the King wasn't there. No one was there. Jorda felt like dying or killing something.

"They just haven't come in yet," said Natasha but she, too, was uneasy.

"But they were always here already when we came," said Petra.

Lucy just looked around. The cathedral of trees was cold and horrifying when they were alone.

"So that's what we will do," said Natasha after a moment of thought. "We will go to their village and see if something happened."

It was another long walk from the meeting place, but they were eager to go. The King would be there.

Natasha knew the way and she led them through the dark forest. The boys' village was the same as theirs – a few small houses and an old school which also served as another orphanage. Very often children who had living parents would be sent there, too, because there just wasn't enough food and the orphanages received supplies from the government.

As they reached the building, one of the boys, Locke, went out to meet them.

"He said you'd be coming, so I stood watch. We couldn't leave – Eric and Sasha have the flu, it's bad, and he is keeping them warm. He said you would understand and he will meet you next week."

"Couldn't we just see him for a while?" asked Jorda, now truly devastated.

Locke looked at her uncomfortably.

"No, we can't," said Natasha, sighing. "If anyone sees us, they will be punished, and we, too. We need to get back before the dawn. Come on."

Jorda looked at the building, longing rising in her chest like a wave, and saw a golden glow in one of the windows. Having only that image to console her, she turned back and followed the other girls through the cold woods.

The torture continued. She went out more and more, sometimes in the middle of a lesson she was giving. She couldn't sleep, and if she did, she dreamt of the golden light being taken away from her, and of frost biting her intestines and lungs.

After two days she gave up trying to fall asleep and took up walking alone to the meeting place every night. She often came back already after dawn, staring at the faceless sky, not having it in her to care anymore. Something intrinsic to her survivor character was irredeemably broken.

Finally, one night before the meeting she could stand it no more.

“I need that part,” she said to Natasha when they were saying goodnight, as if it explained everything. Then she dressed up and left.

She didn’t stop at the lake, she pushed on, even though her limbs were shaky, and body weak, exhausted from lack of sleep. She finally reached the boys’ orphanage and threw snowballs at the window she had seen glowing before. Soon, someone opened it and she simply said:

“I must see him.”

She waited a few minutes and he finally came, warming her up with his presence. She sighed with relief and looked at him accusingly.

“You did something to me. I can’t sleep, can’t eat, and I keep looking at the sky and looking for the Sun. Undo it. Turn me back.”

“I can’t,” he said, shrugging. “I melted it forever. You will always be warm from now on. Don’t you like it?”

Jorda closed her eyes. She was exhausted.

“Then give me the Sun. Give me something so that I stop desiring. Something that will fill this hole!”

She was on the brink of tears, shaking all over.

“But I can’t. I don’t know, where the Sun is. Aren’t the meetings enough for you?”

“No!” she shouted now, and clenched her teeth to stop herself from crying. He couldn’t help her. She knew what she had to do.

“It’s your fault,” she said. “So I ask you one thing in return. Come with me to the lake and make me warm. Just this one time. I promise I won’t bother you after that.”

He agreed and they went together in silence. Jorda’s shaking stopped, she had now a purpose and she knew what she had to do.

They reached the lake and the scene was black and formidable as always. But he was there with her. He moved to hug her, but Jorda recoiled.

“No, don’t touch me. It’s too hot. Just be here with me for a while.”

He nodded. She led him to the lake, she wanted to see the particle of the Sun in him and soon it was there, meekly glowing the small firefly light. She was warm and safe again. She wanted this to last forever.

She stood close to him, inhaling this strange scent, and preparing to jump, coiling her inner strength like a snake. And the light grew and grew, and when it was big enough, just the size of the hole she felt inside her, she pushed him hard. He fell backward, completely unprepared, and she sat on his chest and hit his head once and again on the ice, until she saw blood and he stopped breathing. She was still feeling warm, but the light under ice disappeared. She wasn’t discouraged, because she knew it must be somewhere there, hiding. She moved away to look for a stone or



something sharp and found it in the snow. She had to act quickly before he froze.

She was found two hours later by a group of girls led by Natasha, who felt uneasy about Jorda's strange behaviour and departure and organized the rescue party. When they found her, she was sitting on the ice covered in blood and parts of his flesh, searching frantically in the cavity of his stomach, and muttering to herself. When she saw them, paralysed and horrified by her, she just cried:

“It's not there! I looked everywhere and still couldn't find it!”

Natasha was the first to touch her. She gently took Jorda by the elbow, made her wash her bloody hands in the snow and led her back to the orphanage. When they finally reached it, the sky was just brightening up. And then the Sun rose.

## **Dreaming of Mountains**

*Janina Huss*

Sometimes it makes sense not to help others. The morals on a mountain top are different from those in the city. You might be forced to leave your best friend to freeze to death, while you try to make it back to safety by yourself. Your friend will not hold it against you. He would have done the same to you. But how will you live with the guilt once you are back in civilization? How can a mountaineer have two completely different sets of morals – one for the city and one for the mountain?

I have read every major book about Mount Everest. I almost know enough about the mountain to climb it myself – in theory. In reality I am an office worker from a coastal town, and I have never climbed a snowy peak in my life. I cannot stop reading about this mountain because I want to understand what drives people to spend time above the altitude of 8000 meters, where every step is a struggle and where one's body cells are slowly dying.

The scenery, the camaraderie and the adrenaline rushes can surely be addictive. In interviews, mountaineers often say that they do not have a death wish, and that they take every precaution to climb as safely as possible. Climber Cathy O'Dowd wrote, "You certainly shouldn't be on Everest if you haven't thought through what could happen. You can end up a landmark - 'turn right at the guy with the green boots, turn left at the woman in the purple jacket'." Strangely, despite their strong awareness of danger and the safety measures that they take, these climbers still have an extreme urge to push themselves further and further. To me mountain climbing seems like a mirror image of human nature, where all contrasts are enhanced to the extreme.

On May 10 1996, Everest guide Rob Hall decided to wait on the summit until 3:30 pm for Doug Hansen, his client, who was attempting to climb Mount Everest for the second time. The first time the guides had made him turn around below the summit for safety reasons, and he had followed their lead. Doug Hansen was a postal worker, a likable man who had struggled hard to raise the money for this second attempt. Maybe this explains why Rob Hall didn't make him turn around, even though there are rules on Everest, rules that all climbers know about. If you haven't reached the summit by 2 pm, you need to turn around, even if the summit seems very close. If you keep pushing up past this hour, you will have to descend cold, exhausted, possibly out of oxygen, and in the dark. The two men didn't even

make it that far. Nobody knows what happened in the following hours, but Doug Hansen was suddenly gone and Rob Hall was alone just below the summit, with feet too frostbitten to walk, struggling to survive the night.

Even today, climbers will pass Rob Hall's body, as well as other bodies from several decades, on their way to the top. Everest doesn't release her dead. The air is too thin for a helicopter to fly, and climbers are too weak in the 'death zone' above 8000 m to worry about anybody other than themselves. So the bodies stay there, buried in the snow, forever, and the books about their deaths become bestsellers because city people like myself enjoy reading about big adventures and big dreams.

In the late nineties I went to watch a movie from 1996, called *Everest*. Göran Kropp, the Swedish climber who biked to Nepal and solo climbed Everest without oxygen that year, had just been all over the news in Sweden. Of course Göran Kropp was mentioned in this movie, but to my disappointment, he wasn't its star. Surprisingly though, I was still drawn to the scenery, the heroism, and the emotions of mountain climbing. I got my first mountaineering book a few days later, and I have been fascinated ever since.

There is an interesting paradox related to the focus and discipline that will get you to the summit. On the one hand, you need extreme willpower to climb a mountain, especially when your whole body is screaming against it. On the other hand, you have to remain sensible enough to spot real danger and turn around before disaster strikes. And all of these vital decisions you have to make while the lack of oxygen is severely affecting your rational thinking. Any small mistake might potentially kill you, but if you survive, you will be a hero.

Is this why we love reading about climbing expeditions and great adventures – because the books remind us of a life that seems bigger than ours, of a greater happiness? These adventure tales are like a picture taken at higher contrast, where we can appreciate the light sections because the dark ones are so much darker. Maybe these books also fascinate us because of the climbers' code of conduct, where a good deed is worth far more on a mountaintop than in the city. Nobody expects you to help a friend on the mountain, and yet climbers will often risk their lives for each other.

My mountaineering books give me a different perspective on life, the mind game of 'what if.' Would I be the hero or the selfish villain in an extreme situation? In theory, everybody wants to be a hero. But today's climbers, who have paid a year's salary to fulfill the dream of a lifetime, are not too keen on risking their expedition by helping somebody else. A few years ago David Sharp, a young Englishman, spent three days slowly dying, next to an Everest path where several climbers were passing through. Nobody attempted to help him. The young man's own mother was quoted in a paper, saying that she understood the climbers that had left her son to die. She only blamed his death on the harsh conditions and the altitude. But Everest veteran Sir Edmund Hillary was quoted saying that he was shocked and appalled at the direction that modern mountaineering was taking,

and that he would never have let his own summit bid overshadow a fellow human who needed help.

I was also appalled, but not surprised. Since the days of Mallory and Irvine, the number of commercial guided climbs has increased immensely and the attitudes of climbers have changed. The question is: is this really a problem? One could argue that climbers who enter the death zone should expect no help from anybody else, ever.

The loneliness on a mountain top scares me and fascinates me. The magnificent scenery, the silence, the almost sacred feeling of climbing on pristine snow and overlooking the entire world. The thin air. From a rescue point of view the death zone could just as well be on a different planet. Even if you can communicate with the outside world via radio, nobody can come to help you. Rob Hall's wife called the base camp from New Zealand and the team put her call through to her husband. While the couple said their good-byes over a bad radio connection, a whole group of climbers listened in pain. Nobody was able to change the outcome.

The most gruesome Everest story about loneliness that I have read was about Bruce Herrod who descended Mount Everest alone as the last climber of the 1996 season. When the climbing season started again a year later, two climbers found him near the summit, frozen, hanging upside-down from the rope he had used to secure himself. David Breashears writes, "Unnerved, I climbed on around Bruce, leaving him roped in place for the time being. We soon reached the summit [...]"

These climbers managed to switch off their own emotions to climb past a friend's body with their eyes fixed on the summit. In my everyday life this extreme rationality would seem cold and insensitive. But who knows – maybe Bruce Herrod wouldn't have minded. After all, he was a climber himself. In all fairness, the climbers did recover his camera from his backpack, just like his girlfriend had asked them to, on their way back. They then cut his body down and watched it fall out of sight.

The loneliness of a place where a body can hang from a rope for a whole year makes me shiver. Solo-climbing in this environment requires extreme strength, physically and mentally. Many climbers have invented little tricks to put themselves in a better mood. The Swedish solo climber Göran Kropp brought a Walkman containing samba music with him on his expeditions. In potentially deadly situations he would listen to happy music and force himself back to a courageous and optimistic attitude where good decisions were made. A Norwegian solo adventurer would carry a small children's backpack with a painted face with him on expeditions. He named it Wilson. Wilson became his imaginary friend to talk to whenever he was happy, or sad, or angry. If the conditions were really bad, he would yell at Wilson, and sometimes even punch him in the face.

These modern-day heroes are impressive, but my favorite heroes are still the English gentlemen from the first expeditions a hundred years ago. Educated at

Oxford or Cambridge, wearing silk, cashmere and tailor-made tweed jackets, separated from their families for months at a time, they would read classics in their tents and write beautiful letters home to their loved ones. Their climbing achievements were incredible, considering how much better and lighter today's equipment is. With their constant focus on gentlemanly behavior, these climbers remind me of the knights of the Holy Grail that I used to admire as a child.

Mallory and Irvine were two of these classical English gentlemen. They were last seen near the summit in 1924 before they disappeared without a trace. Their disappearance remained a mystery for 65 years until climbers found Mallory's body in 1999. The big question was, and still is, whether he had reached the summit 30 years before Sir Edmund Hillary. An examination of his body showed that Mallory no longer had his wife's picture in his pocket. He had promised her to leave the photo on the summit. Does this mean that he reached his goal? Nobody knows. Maybe we will find out if the expedition's camera is found one day. One thing we do know: back in Mallory and Irvine's days, the morals on the mountaintop remained the same as in the city. Being a gentleman was always the highest priority, even if it put your life at risk.

I am not a climber myself, but when I was a child, I used to open an atlas on any page, point at a name on the map, and say, "Someday I want to go there." When I read *Kon Tiki*, about a man who builds a raft and sails it across the Atlantic, I was so excited, I stayed up a whole night to finish the book. At the age of nineteen, I backpacked in South East Asia by myself. Several people warned me about the risks I was taking, but to me, the freedom was worth every risk. Maybe this is why it is so obvious to me that there is something magical, something beckoning, about those mountain tops. I understand and respect the romance of searching for something elusive just for the sake of the search, and I respect the people who sacrifice everything, including their own lives, for the pursuit of a dream. George Mallory said, when asked why he would try again and again to climb Mount Everest: "So, if you cannot understand that there is something in man which responds to the challenge of this mountain and goes out to meet it, that the struggle is the struggle of life itself upward and forever upward, then you won't see why we go. What we get from this adventure is just sheer joy. And joy is, after all, the end of life. We do not live to eat and make money. We eat and make money to be able to enjoy life. That is what life means and what life is for."

## **The Methane Lake**

*Tomasz Seweryn*

I am sitting on a boat floating on a methane lake. I am far from home, so far. When I look up and my sight pierces the atmospheric haze I do not see the Sun or even the Moon. I see the Lord of the Rings, the mighty Saturn. I am on Titan. The boat wobbles delicately on waves. It would be easy to mistake this lake for one filled with water; liquid methane is almost indistinguishable from H<sub>2</sub>O. It looks like one of those deep, opaque pools where monsters are supposed to dwell. The lake's surface is illuminated by pale, silver light cast by the Artifact. I'm not sure how long I have been staring at it and asking myself questions about its origin, its purpose, its composition, its apparent defiance of the laws of physics, but I am denied any answer. It is a two-meter radius orb, floating in the air a meter and a half over the surface of the lake. Its surface is silver and seems to flow and have tides like a sea. In science-fiction an inscrutable alien artifact is a popular motive, I've read many books featuring a Big Dumb Object where some inhuman construct arrogantly defies every attempt to understand it. My situation is different; the Artifact yielded us some information about itself, but not much, and won't give any more. But there is a logical reason for it: we were completely unprepared to discover it and we do not have the equipment necessary to study it. I sit, and I wonder.

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It has been three days since they arrived on Titan and they were still busy with setting up the base camp. Almost all of their equipment arrived years before them and was assembled by robots. Their hab modules had been pre-built, similarly their vehicles – boats, gliders and a small rover. However, they still had to power up everything with the fission generator they brought with them, run diagnostics for every system and check for malfunctions and damage. If it wasn't for Nathan, Ellen would forget everything in her devotion to work. She was grateful to him that he was able to focus on his job and to keep an eye on her to remind her that she had to eat. And of course to exercise, they all had to. Titan's gravity was much lower than Earth's and like all astronauts they had to perform daily physical exercises to keep their muscles from atrophying. Everyone wanted to be able to walk when they got back home.

The base camp was located on a small island on Koitere Lacus, one of the northern methane lakes of Titan. They came here to study Titan, primarily its lakes. Ellen's job was to study primitive microbial life forms detected a decade earlier by the Titan Underwater Exploration Robot, also known as the Kraken of Kraken Mare due to its slightly cephalopodan appearance when it extended its scientific instruments, and the sea it was studying.

She was coiling the power cable around her arm, standing next to the shore of the island, or Ys Insula as it was officially designated on the maps of Titan.

"Well, that's the last of them," she said to her husband "all the boats are powered up and ready for surfing. Get your shorts ready and we'll go water-skiing." Nathan looked at her, turned the visor of his helmet transparent and smiled. "Don't you think that the water" he emphasized the last word "might be a little too cold for skinny-dipping today?" For a moment she thought about summoning precise data on her visor, but in the end decided against it. "Nah hubby, it's something, like, just below two hundred degrees Celsius, you always said you preferred colder climates"

"Maybe not that cold" he said and wondered for a while. "Hey, but it's a good idea. What'd you say we take it for a spin, get to know the lake, you know? Charts are one thing, but we really should get to know the lake with our own senses." Having coiled the entire cable Ellen started to walk back to hab buildings. "Yeah, I'd like that a lot, but we still have some work to do, we even haven't moved our personal belongings from the landing module to our hab, let's focus on our tasks, ok? But hey, soon as we finish, we'll go sailing!"

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When I was a child, a new family moved to our neighbourhood. They had a daughter around my age and my parents forced me to invite her to my tenth birthday party. I remember how mad I was at them for that. I have always been a shy kid and wanted to throw only a small costume party for my few close friends. We were all supposed to dress as our favourite superheroes; pretend we're the Justice League in the backyard and eat candies until we could not move. Inviting a stranger was terrifying, and a girl at that! But of course I relented, my parents convinced me that I should be nice and become friends with her, after all she was supposed to live next door to us. I vividly remember the embarrassment at school I suffered when I told my friends that I'll be inviting her and she probably doesn't even have a superhero costume. Of course I never told them that my parents forced me to do it, if I would do so I would completely lose my face. I claimed that it was all my idea and pretended that I am this chivalrous nice guy who wants to help his new neighbour. Of course, at the time I have not met her, had no idea how she looks like or even what her name is. But the guys preferred to tease me and run around shouting stupid jokes, like little boys tend to do, rather than investigate the issue. Thank God.

Back then, I was of rather weak constitution since my parents couldn't afford my genetic editing and the stress of revealing the unexpected guest to my friends was enough to make me sick. The school nurse checked me out, asked some simple questions and determined that I should rest at home for a day or two. I did as ordered and my mother spoiled me for the rest of the day with ice cream and cartoons. On my birthday the neighbour's daughter, Ellen as I learned later, came first. I was stunned. Not as a man is stunned by a beautiful woman of course, but as a boy who expects broccoli for his supper and instead receives hamburger and ice cream. She came wearing a very good Spider-Gwen costume, handmade and full of detail. I immediately started to regret that I insisted for my mom to buy me a Green Arrow costume instead of Spider-Man.

Turns out, Ellen was really fun to be around. We talked about comics and cartoons until my friends came, and then we played together. Like me, they also were pleasantly surprised. She was one of us. For a bunch of nerdy ten-year olds, discovering that a girl can be like us was like hearing the gospel from the lips of Jesus himself. She also gave me the best present though for a time I didn't see it like that. She gave me a book, which compared to action figures, collectible cards and video games seemed a little pale. But this book changed my whole life.

It was a book about space exploration, and specifically about the exploration of the planet Saturn and its moons. Text, photos and AR-media filled over four hundred pages. Playing with the entoptics was entertaining but it was the text that captured my attention. My favourite section was about the moon Titan, I was fascinated by it. The only celestial body in the Solar System to support life! Only microbial of course, but the Orpheus Rover mission of 2024 quickly became my favourite topic of conversation. I think I've read it at least a dozen times during the weekend. A few days later, I lent it to Ellen so she could read it and we could talk about space, distant planets and their explorers, be they robotic or human.

We quickly became friends and our passion for space exploration was just one of many things we've had in common. We soon learned to talk about everything with each other. We were best of friends and just that for a surprisingly long time. We've been growing up together, going to the same schools, even the same class but we dated different people and only ended up together when we left our little hometown to study at Princeton University. I chose astrophysics and mechanical engineering, while she chose astrobiology and... English literature. We were determined to become space scientists.

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In the end, it required five days of hard work from the entire team to set up the base camp properly, and begin the scientific research. Everyone was anxious to begin; even before they arrived, some of the instruments were gathering data that required sifting and analyzing. Paavali Tuula of Finland, the team's specialist of



Titanian weather had most to do but no one was slacking. To avoid accusations of a romantic trip, Ellen and Nathan drafted scientifically valid reasons for their shared cruise across the lake. Ellen decided to gather some samples of methane upon which they were to sail, in the hope of finding life, while Nathan decided to study the physics of a large body of liquid methane. Obviously, everyone knew that it was their romantic retreat but they decided that they didn't care as long as Ellen and Nathan actually did their jobs when out there.

Having the team's blessing they packed their boat, made sure that their environment suits were powered up and sailed away. Unlike its Tellurian equivalent, Koiterre Lacus was not very big; however the coastline's rugged shape made it impossible to observe the entire lake from any one vantage point, and especially not from the isle. They cruised for an hour chatting and stopping from time to time to gather samples and take measurements and then continued on their way. After two hours of sailing they were about to go back when Nathan's instruments detected some anomalies in the behaviour of the fluid. Fuelled by their curiosity they followed the anomalies to a small secluded bay. There, they found the Artifact. It was a silver sphere, levitating over the methane lake; its peculiar gravitic influence on the liquid skewered with Nathan's instruments and caused the anomalies.

When they returned to the base camp with the news, nobody believed them. It required much convincing and arguing to just persuade anyone to come with them to the bay to see for themselves. In the end, Robert Havel, the team's psychologist, responsible for the mental health of the members of the expedition, agreed to be taken to the Artifact. After all, just after a few days on the alien moon he might have had his first patients. But when Havel returned confirming Ellen and Nathan's claims about the Artifact, everyone wanted to see. Beth Adams, mission's commander had to firmly order a proper queue. Since both Ellen and Nathan knew the course to the bay, they took two boats to hasten the presentation; it also allowed taking more equipment to study the Artifact. When preliminary data was gathered, photographs and videos taken, and everyone saw the Artifact, they've sent everything back to Earth. Like Cassini of old, our signal required, more or less, an hour and a half to reach Earth, depending on Titan's position. The response from NASA was enthusiastic, they wanted more information, photos, their impressions, everything. On Earth, preparations for second manned mission to Titan started even before the official press conference during which the discovery was announced. It changed Earth and lives of many people, but they were tens of thousands of kilometres away from the explorers of Titan. The astronauts debated and speculated until late night, until chief Adams had to order everyone to go to bed under a threat of additional cleaning duties.

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Our student days were bringing us closer and closer. We did our fair share of partying and participating in social events but it was our fascination with space and science that really tightened our relations. During our third year at Princeton, Ellen dropped out of her English literature class, deciding it is worthless as an academic pursuit and embraced chemistry. It was a pleasant view for sore eyes because throughout the three years of studying English it was making her miserable. She loved reading, even the so-called “classics of literature,” which is something I never really understood, but analyzing texts looked to her like pseudoscience and opinion-mongering, when compared to astrobiology.

Year after that, we moved from the dorm to an apartment. It was bliss, just the two of us, free from the incessant noise and moods of student life. We were studying for our MAs and working part-time here and there but our attention was almost completely absorbed by our relationship and scientific pursuits. We were always spending time together, whether it was watching TV shows, having sex or writing articles for scientific journals and attending conferences. We’ve defended our theses without much problem and celebrated it with our friends for a week. It was time to say goodbye to New Jersey however, since we’ve decided to move to Boston to earn our doctorates on MIT.

We have rented a nice flat, not big or fancy but enough for the two of us. Found some jobs and started working on our doctoral theses. It was much more straining than I thought it would be. What I naively imagined as a piece of cake, turned out to be absolutely exhaustive effort which required thousands of hours spent on research and development of our ideas, theories and experiments. The amount of books and articles I’ve read was staggering; I honestly have never thought that I would need to read so much for an engineering project. It took years of hard work at the university, at laboratory, abroad and even in the Near Earth Orbit. But against all those odds, we have managed to not only find the time for ourselves but even to marry. Our ceremony was very small, when we said our vows, there were only the two of us and a priest. Few cameras were streaming the event for our families and friends to watch. You might wonder, why in seven hells, did we stream our wedding but didn’t invite anyone? Well, we’ve actually invited everyone we loved and cared about but they were unable to attend due to our choice of wedding venue. We married on 4<sup>th</sup> July 2047 in Asimov Lunar Outpost, situated in the Peary Crater close to the north pole of the Moon.

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“Where’s Nathan?” asked Ellen when the dinner started. “He never missed a meal.” The Artifact fascinated everyone for days, and then for weeks. It quickly became their sole focus of study. But as time passed and their investigations yielded little to no information the interest was slowly fading away. It was an exciting topic for conversations during the meals, but little more. They were sorely

under-equipped to deal with that sort of problem and in the end everyone agreed that there is nothing that they can do and they have to move on. “Oh, he showed something quickly and went to run some new tests he devised on the Artifact,” said Chief Adams. “Is there something wrong?” Ellen nodded. “Yeah, he spends more and more time around this thing when everyone moved on and it’s starting to worry me. He’s becoming obsessed with the damned thing.” She didn’t look up, she didn’t want to see the looks everyone gave her, and suddenly she wanted to disappear, run away from those people. But she couldn’t. “Well, I’m sure he’s got good reasons, he is the most qualified of us to study it after all.” Ellen wished he wasn’t.

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Three years after our wedding, Ellen and I received our PhDs and to our delight, were quickly nabbed by NASA, which at the time was in dire need of new blood due to the 2048 Mount Chimborazo Space Elevator catastrophe. I remember my shock when I read about the Christian fundamentalist terrorist raid on the facility and its destruction with a dirty nuclear bomb. Ecuador’s economy plummeted, bringing the country to near ruin, after the incident. All the good that was done thanks to the elevator, was undone in a single night by the hands of mad fanatics.

This was the first time since we’ve met that we actually had to spend most of our day apart from each other because we were assigned to different teams. After five years of working on various projects, we were finally together once more when we were selected to participate in the Manned Titan Exploration Mission. I don’t think it is possible to accurately describe all the emotions I felt at the time – joy, fear, elation, excitement, anxiousness and many, many others at the same time. Me, my wife, and seven other scientists, were to be the first people to set foot on Titan. More, we were to be the first people to ever venture to the outer Solar System. The project obviously, didn’t appear out of thin air, it was already in the works when we joined NASA and we both sent our applications as soon as we could, some of our work in the Agency, before we were chosen, was actually related to the Mission. It was supposed to be the first mission of the Outer System Exploration Programme.

The travel to Titan itself was to take over five years, but to our luck, we were to spend most of it in cryo-suspension, being aware only during the mission launch and our descent onto Titan. The ship’s AI was programmed with the specifics of our destination, it was also intelligent enough to solve most of the problems that would arise by itself, and if not, it would contact Mission Control back on Earth. It was all needless anyway; there was no real need for a human to oversee the mission, but for our psychological comfort. Studies have shown that astronauts fared better if they knew that somewhere out there is a human mind to whom they or the AI can refer to if the need arise.

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Nathan didn't know how long he had been sitting in the boat, staring at the Artifact. It was all he was doing these days. He stopped running tests two months ago. He had ideas what to do, but he didn't have any necessary equipment. He did everything he could, yet he couldn't simply give up. He couldn't forget about this piece of alien godtech. He wrote hundreds of pages of his hypotheses, theories, calculations and proposed experiments but that was long ago. He didn't do any of these things now. There was no point, nothing he could do.

He was barely spending any time in the base camp, he returned from the lake just to power up the suit, the boat, eat something and maybe get few hours of sleep. He didn't talk with anyone, not even with Ellen. He thought that she hates him now, though he didn't know why. But he couldn't think about it, he had more important things to focus on. He stopped exercising seeing it as a waste of time; he didn't want to go back on Earth. When the replacement team arrives, he thought, he'll tell them that he's staying. They'll have to listen to him. After all, they'll come here to study the Artifact, and he is the greatest specialist in the Solar System. Even if he knew next to nothing. But he wouldn't allow for anyone to discover anything about it without him present, he wouldn't allow anyone to steal his discovery from him.

Suddenly, something red started to pulse around his right eye. Nathan waved his arm hoping it would fly away but it didn't. It took him a few seconds to realise that the battery display of the suit started showing a warning message. He needed to return. Irritated, he kicked the box with the lake-sampling device. Ellen's main instrument fell to pieces. He didn't care. He tried to start the boat. It did not move. He tried again, but it remained dead. The boat's battery was already completely exhausted. But he couldn't fathom how. It could last days, much longer than his suit. It was impossible for it to run out of charge faster than his suit. And he would NEVER forget about charging it. He panicked, someone had sabotaged him, someone was jealous of his discovery, and they wanted to murder him. Hell, they didn't want it, they managed it! His wife must have been on it. She betrayed him. Or worse, she was behind it. He saw how Chief Adams was listening to Ellen's advices when he was ghosting through the base. They thought that he doesn't notice, that he doesn't care, but he saw and he cared. And they've murdered him. He won't give them this satisfaction. He WILL know the purpose of the Artifact.

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I am sitting on a boat floating on a methane lake. I am far from home, so far. When I look up and my sight pierces the atmospheric haze I do not see the Sun or even the Moon. I see the Lord of the Rings, the mighty Saturn. I am on Titan. The boat wobbles delicately on waves. It would be easy to mistake this lake for one filled with water; liquid methane is almost indistinguishable from H<sub>2</sub>O. It looks like one of those deep, opaque pools where monsters are supposed to dwell.

The surface of the lake is illuminated by pale, silver light cast by the Artifact. I'm not sure how long I have been staring at it and asking myself questions about its origin, its purpose, its composition, its apparent defiance of the laws of physics, and I won't be denied answer.

I extend my arm and touch the Artifact.

I immediately lose connection to my body, I do not know whether my consciousness has been just copied or brutally extracted from my brain. I wonder if my body is a hollow husk, lying lifelessly on a boat or maybe my other self is staring angrily at a thing that apparently does nothing. But soon I move on, it stops concerning me. I have been sent from node to node, all of them similar to the one on Titan. There are many more of them seeded throughout the galaxy, after travelling across a few nodes I am uploaded to a sort of cross-roads station. My mind is getting enhanced, I can think faster, clearer, with greater alacrity, my memory has been filled with data which a few moments ago would be absolutely impossible for me to understand but now reading it seems to be as natural as breathing once was. Then I am on my way once again, the process repeats itself a few times before my consciousness leaves the galaxy. I do not know how long the process takes in real-time. Am I travelling as data etched on a laser beam? If so, then millions of years have already passed and I am the last human alive, if I can be called human, or alive for that matter. Or maybe, I am moved by some unseen and inscrutable quantum forces, in the blink of an eye. Maybe my body on Titan has not yet fallen dead and I'm already three galaxies away from the Milky Way?

World after world, star after star, galaxy after galaxy I am speeding across the universe. Unimaginable distances covered in seconds, which may or may not last aeons. I begin to see the end of my journey - the edge of the Laniakea Supercluster. I am moving towards the Great Attractor. It has been one of the great mysteries of the universe, interesting to Earth's scientists but not talked about much because learning any certainties about this grand accumulation of mass is simply impossible due to the sheer distance between the Milky Way galaxy and the Attractor itself. I can see this mass now - millions of galaxies converging together to create an impossible structure. Its purpose is now clear to me, it's nothing less than a mission to save the universe, to stop or at least stem its heat death. Albert Einstein's equations and later astronomical observations proved that the universe will be torn apart by dark energy and die miserably in eternal cold and darkness, this universe full of life and energy will become a dark tomb where light, energy and even simple movement no longer exist. The Great Attractor is a world-saviour engine. A machine the size of billions of galaxies with the purpose of allowing life to flourish, it is the very principle of negentropy made manifest.

*The project of this scale, however, requires workers. And it seems that I have just been hired as an engineer.*

## The Corridor to the Right

Wojciech Łukasik

It has never occurred to me how much surroundings can influence the psyche, until the scenery around me began to change. I have always been a keen observer of stones, plaster falling off, rotting wooden elements in old constructions; but have never thought of myself as part of those structures. It seems I fell for the 'independent observer' scam. Nobody ever 'just watches', if you watch, you are already involved. The idea of a macro- and microcosm has, of course, been known to me for quite a few years by now, but only recently have I realized that it also applies to buildings, trees, walls and fences all around, these tangible manifestations of the *anima mundi* in strict cooperation with human ingenuity.

As I descended into the basement, I noticed the smell which had actually always been there, spilling onto the stairs and climbing slowly, hideously, until it became a matter-of-factly, homely smell and went unnoticed for long periods of time. Recently, there has been an influx of water into the ground surrounding the basement: rains, moisture, morning dew have all saturated the place with ubiquitous humidity, slowly moving in the air, like a hangman's noose after the rain. There were small drops of water even on the cobwebs below the ceiling, all black from the dirt they have been collecting since their makers have abandoned them, like the great watchmaker did abandon the world after its creation. As above, so below.

The analogy struck me, together with a cold chill, which came from some window deep in the corridor. People never care to shut the windows in the basement tightly, like they would in an apartment. Who comes down here anyway? Only some people brave enough to store their bikes behind weak doors made of a few wooden planks barely held together by rusty nails. Or to entrust their pickled cucumbers to this Plutonian abyss of cobwebs and dust.

And why did I get down here anyway? As much as dilapidated houses, rotting fences and rusted machinery hold an understandable fascination for a mind infected with the thought of overwhelming Vanity of the world, basements have always held a special place in my mind. In this kind of cityscape one never owns a garage. Only the rich folks do, and they never let anybody in. One has to get down to the sub-zero, souterraine level and there pursue the interests that have to be kept out of the house. I have heard of a young man, who had a passion for explosives, and did precisely what I just described. He produced dangerous substances in

dangerous amounts, all in the quiet, moist darkness of his parents' basement, and only stopped when he got injured in an accidental explosion.

That is, of course, an extreme case. Other people would fix their bikes *la-bas*, or put together these plastic models of planes and spaceships with the kind of glue that stinks horribly. Its smell never wanes. In the basement it soaks into the overall smell of dust, decay and cigarettes. Somebody always smokes in the basement instead of going out on the balcony, especially in the winter, when unfriendly elements rage outside. The smell just stays there forever. We shouldn't forget old leather, tar and paper. And oil for the machinery kept there, saws, drillers, all sorts of things that might be useful for fixing your car or your apartment.

As a child growing up in a block of flats one soon realizes that the most fun things are hidden in the basement precisely, Pluto's hoard kept secret under key and father's or grandfather's survey. Nobody would let a child play with tar, a jar of quicksilver or a collection of saws, for it might... As one grows up, the fascination usually goes away in the vitriolic common-sense world, which dissolves anything that is not of its own matter as if it never existed, exactly as its alchemical counterpart can do to gold or even to possible evidence in murder cases.

This one aspect of basement life, or rather visitation, for one never lives there, I have never perceived before: it is much like being in a tomb. There is space enough and the proximity of doors ensures that the interment does not become necessary, but certainly a basement could be, at least metaphorically, an atrium for the catacombs of Paris. Or Hell's Kitchen. But in my mind, the 'abandon all hope' should be written above the exit, not the entrance. In the basement you can finally stretch your legs on an old chair, stop worrying about the way your hair looks and wear old clothes. No one would care. It's in the world up there that things matter and you have to hide. Here you can touch the darker essence of the world itself, a humble compensation for the lack of Vesuviuses of our own and the shortage of lava tunnels in our parts.

I began to proceed along the corridor. I do have the keys, but today is not the day to leave something in our own basement room or to browse the shelves for an old driller. Matter-of-factly things do not apply, at least for a half hour. The window is overgrown with dandelions, which flutter in the wind as I pass along, looking for something else. There are the ominous warnings not to eat the rat poison, actually there are cardboard trays of grain, all pink from the poison, and I can't see why anybody would want to eat something found on the ground in a basement corridor. But there they are, skulls and bones, 'humans and animals can get poisoned.'

Fortunately I did not stumble over the remains of an unfortunate rat. It would have been gross. And the rat must have been a newcomer, the veterans already know what poison looks like and avoid it. Survival of the fittest also finds its reflection in the basement world. Or maybe the rat was simply old or weak, or infected by some hideous ailment? I probably shall never know, for I did not wish

to disturb its repose. Bells from the nearby church began to ring, a death certificate written in musical notes, dispersed among the blocks and ricocheting against the old houses in the farther part of the neighbourhood. Tree branches, still naked since winter had not yet wholly lost its hold on the landscape, waved at me from behind the window like the hands of the dead and cast a vague shadow over the ground, ready to sprout new flowers and pastures green...

I have reached the end of the corridor and decided to pace one more time along its walls, watching the holes in blocks of concrete it was made of. There were holes in every single one of these blocks, I have never actually seen anything like it. On the plaster covering the neighbouring buildings, which had once been white, and now a dirty shade of grey, somehow the places where the holes were never got quite as dirty as the rest of the walls. And the blocks continued for as many stories as the building had. Ours had ten probably, maybe eleven. So this is the foundation, this concrete floor, swept by the janitor once a week or even less frequently. Upon these blocks the whole construction stands against the stormy skies.

And the foundation does not look healthy. I gazed upon the fantastic shapes in the concrete, which nobody bothered to straighten out, in the sickly light of the basement lamp, which consisted of a lightbulb, naked save for a loose net of wires, which did not dim its light a single bit. It was as straightforward as the sun, but a far-away reflection of its might and life-giving power. This one gives no life, only aids the sore eyes to see these concrete seas, upon which spiders sail. Some parts of the accidental design looked like the desolation of a lonesome desert, and others like a bunch of bushes in strong wind. One shape was peculiar, or actually two shapes: a surplus of concrete shaped itself like two breasts sticking out of the wall, or perhaps two buttocks. It could be discussed for hours if the smaller shape protruding below was the waist or the legs of the character, and if the random shapes around were actually legs or garments, or Satyrs in a bacchanal procession around the silhouette in the middle.

The peculiar fascination with abandoned places below the surface of the earth has now taken its hold over all of my nerves and I felt another chill from the window in the back part of the corridor, which began to clutter again. I decided to go there and close it once and for all so that it would clutter no more, so much has that sound gotten on my nerves when repeated over and over again. I hate repetition as much as I enjoy labyrinthine, underground corridors. Why should a piece of glass and wood disturb the silence of my tomb?

Only now have I realised how loud my steps were sounding in the empty corridor, reflected by the metal pipes, the bricks of thin walls dividing individual rooms from each other, the glass jars filling all those cases made of wooden shelves, loosely connected by means of nails and cobwebs. This must have been the loneliness of souls in sad, cold Sheol of old myth, where only shades dwell, or of the colourless Hades of the Greeks. The sound of water flushing in the thick pipes nearby added to the surreal ambience, a Styx befitting this modern age of



increasing multitude, pressed into smaller and smaller rooms. I paced more swiftly for a moment, closed the window and wiped my hand on my trousers, leaving a dark stain. The whole window hatch was covered not only in cobwebs like everything else, but in old, dense oil. I shouldn't have dirtied the trousers, it's going to be a mess cleaning this up.

The longer I dwelt on the labyrinth around me, on its hidden twists and possible secret passages, the more my senses sharpened to what was going on around me. Not necessarily anything visual, it was rather aural phenomena of increasing intensity. Here and there I heard a creak of doors opened in the flats above me. Yet some of the creaks were of unknown origin, as if coming from within the labyrinth, barely heard, but eerie in the sound of wind beating against the dirty glass of windows I didn't even know of, behind corners made of cement, resembling volcanic rock spat out by the mouths of countless Vesuviuses and ground into building material.

There was one particular sound that caught my attention: that of a dripping, as if water from above was trickling down in a tiny stream and forming a puddle on the cement floor. It probably gathers in the lower parts of the uneven surface and sinks down with infinite slowness, only to be absorbed by the soil below and re-used by plants. I wonder if their roots stretch so far as to go below the building? Probably not, otherwise the walls would certainly crack. The roots of trees that grow here are usually just a few centimetres below the surface, making big bulges in the asphalt of alleys and overturning unfortunate kerbs, as time does to old tombstones. Certainly the plants do reach for us, I remembered, for a branch of one of the two weeping willows in front of the building has touched my balcony this year, like a grotesque hand trying to touch the window, shaken by the palpitations of stormy wind.

I followed the direction indicated by the dripping. One, two, three drops have fallen, and I thought I was tracking the place where they fell, but nothing of the sort could be seen. In a moment I heard the very same dripping come from an entirely different azimuth. I reoriented, went into a lateral corridor and still saw nothing. The dripping continued mockingly from behind my back.

Dazzled, I leaned against the dirty wall, forgetting about my jacket and the dust that must have gathered on its lava-like protrusions. There were holes in the concrete blocks, I said, and near the entrance all of those halls were filled with cigarette butts. Here there were none. Too far have I gone through the corridors, nobody ever goes in here, the people whose rooms are here have possibly died or just left their old junk here to rot, and never come to see it or use it. What for? There is an old engine, all eaten by rust. I see jars of paint mixed to achieve some particular shade for the walls of an apartment, now all the colours have found their levels and are separate again, forming funny broad strips inside the jars. A doll's head, all bald – its scalp lies nearby on the shelf, probably separated from the head by some inventive child. All deeply soaked in dark blue shadows, slowly passing into the greyish shade of darkness.

Memories started flashing before my eyes. Not of any particular event, rather these disjointed images that come to mind when sleep eludes me. A peculiar piece of clay, shaped like a sofa, in a kindergarten art class. Old jars of paint in my own old basement, a long time ago. Spring flowers, yellow dandelions, magnolias closing for the night. They are outside, somewhere in the darkness, but now I found the stairs leading to the door an insurmountable obstacle. Like souls of old Hades, I longed for the upper world, but found the door blocked by granite and limestone boulders, the passage guarded by vicious Cerberus of anguish and harpies of nervous impulses. Trapped in the *Urwelt*, I felt as if sand of Palaeozoic seas was getting into my shoes. Shells of ancient molluscs cracked under my foot, there were ammonites and nautiluses, and others I cannot name. I was delving deeper and deeper into the past, forgetting entirely the time of my birth – and thinking about the fleeting moment of my death, when the candle shall be extinguished by a sudden gust of wind.

It was completely dark outside, and now everything started to look surreal in the strong, unrelenting light of the bare lightbulb. Before it was just one of the lights, the other being the sun, its last, orange and reddish rays the *conquistadores* of its fiery power. Now they are all gone, my hellish Jerusalem left for me to wander through, empty streets and houses now like the faces of madmen or demons, the windows their eyes, the doors their mouths, and holes left by the devastation of battle other orifices of unknown function.

Brittle stars started to creep out of the watery darkness below, at the surface of the corridors' uneven floor. The water trickling from somewhere in the upper parts of the building now became ubiquitous, everything was soaked in its heaviness and smell of putrefaction. Liverworts grew in the leisurely flowing streams, as they usually do on mountain rocks touched by a gentle, but steady flow of water of a forming river. Only down there do these streams converge into a creek, a river, a sea. The flow of musty air must have come from the river, which flows nearby. I concentrated on the topography of the nearest surroundings to keep in touch with reality.

I don't know why I kept pacing through the basement corridor instead of simply going up to the apartment and getting a good night's rest. Probably I was so tired with the everyday nothings, uttered by neighbours and flatmates, other workers, students and old people, by the ubiquitous motley crowd of humans who tire me with their speech and with their manners. Somewhere in the darkness, in the deep part of the corridor, reptilian eyes shone as torches in the darkening world, relics of the age long gone by, when their kin dominated the whole Earth, and the ancestors of humans were tiny squirrels terrified to death of their scale-skinned superiors.

A moment and the walls shall begin to melt: the mountain at whose base I am now crawling might be a dormant volcano, ready to emit the gaseous manifesto of age-old furor, stored in the Earth's entrails. The pervasive sound of dripping water now became the hiss of hot steam, filling up the whole corridor, and my face began to feel extremely dried up and uncomfortable. I tried to reach the window, but it

was too far away to get to, in my excited state. I carelessly paced in the opposite direction, entertaining the thought of the stairs. The lightbulb flickered ominously as I passed toward the first of the steps. Some invisible force held me back from taking the step and freeing myself from the anguish.

The sombre sound of wind now entered the basement from the windows, leaking cold, night air and the scent of dormant trees and flowers. Unwittingly, I took a turn away from the stairs, toward the small corridor to the right, where a few rooms were located. There was an additional electrical lamp at the beginning of the small passage, but the rest of it was drowned in darkness, ever thickening, resembling a huge mass of tar.

I stood there as a wanderer at the crossroads, waiting for Mephistopheles to appear, unsure if an appointment with the devil can ever be kept. The dusty atmosphere fell heavy over my chest, breathing for too long with the invisible specks floating in the air has put terrible poison in my veins, and now it was in my brain, stifling every move.

Suddenly, I saw a light flickering on the wall, and out of the lateral corridor an elderly man emerged with a flashlight.

‘Would you guide me to room 36?’, he asked and explained it was allocated to his flat, but he hadn’t been there for ages.

‘Of course.’ – I came to my senses suddenly, and didn’t have to think of the right answer. I didn’t really know where room 36 was, but could certainly help him find it in the impenetrable darkness.

We passed on, by the window the creaking of which I had stopped before, and took the next turn right to find the room the man was looking for.

‘Thank you’, he said.

*If only he knew what infernal visions his appearance had dissolved!*

**tap tap tap**  
*Krystian Pilch*

“Not today!”

“Come on! It’s just perfect!”

“I said it! Not today!”

“Why? Why not?”

“Cause I’m not falling for it again!”

“Falling for what?”

“Are you mocking me? I do it, I lose!”

“Lose what?”

“My last chance!”

“Your last chance? You’re exaggerating!”

“What did you...! I’ve wasted way too many chances! And half of my life!”

“But it’s been fun, and you can’t deny it!”

“At the beginning, yes! Then, not at all! By the way, you’re changing the topic again!”

“And the topic was...?”

“It was... err...”

“So?”

“So what?”

“Are you going to do this?”

“No, I’m not! I repeat: not today!”

“By saying *not today* you’re thinking of doing it in the future.”

“...no, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. So, why not today?”

“Because it’s a very special day for me. For her. Yeah, that was the topic! Her!”

“Are you going to be happy?”

“What do you mean?”

“Are you going to be happy without it?”

“Of course I will! She’s all I need.”

“Really? Your heart will start pounding again. And you hate that feeling. When is she arriving?”

“In half an hour, maybe.”

“Then we have much time left! Let’s do it!”

“I’m not doing it! Are you deaf or something?”

“You’re screaming so loud that even a deaf person could hear you.”

“Because. You. Just. Can’t. Listen!”

“How can you say that? I listen carefully. Every single day I’m trying to be by your side. As your old friend.”

“I’d be better off without you.”

“That’s so cruel of you!”

“You’re the cruel one! I’ve never wanted to meet you!”

“Don’t be like that! We were young and wild and free!”

“Now I’m old and tamed and imprisoned. With you.”

“At least we’re together. And it’s a warm place. A cosy one, even. Okay, maybe we don’t have a window big enough to see, well, anything, but it’s better than none.”

“You and your remarks. Just shut up.”

“My poor friend. Don’t be like that! Do you want to see her in that sorry state?”

“I’m not in any sorry state. She finally agreed to visit me, so I’m just a bit nervous.”

“Then come on! Let’s do it and cheer up! You can’t be nervous when she comes!”

“Stop it! I said, I’m not doing it again!”

“But why, my friend?”

“If I did it, I’d be in a really sorry state.”

“Nah! Don’t you get it? You’d be happy! She wants to see her man grinning from ear to ear, not down in the dumps! Speaking of which, wasn’t it in the city dump where you first met her?”

“Yeah, it was, and you were there too. Unlike you, always dirty and insistent, she was a bright light, similar to the sun rising on the horizon. Like a...”

“Yeah, yeah, roses are red, blah, blah, blah!”

“Stop that! If not for her, I’d be still working there!”

“Exactly! You’d have a solid job! You lost it because of her!”

“I got a better one afterwards.”

“And you lost it again! Also because of her! And all of this because she dumped you! Ha, that somewhat fits your first job!”

“I earned it. I acted like trash, if you like making references. Do you...”

“At least your sense of humour is still intact.”

“Don’t interrupt me! Do you remember why she dumped me? Huh?”

“It’s simple. She didn’t love you.”

“No! It was because of you! Because you were always driving me to do one thing she hated the most! And, hell, back then I listened to you! Every! Single! Time!”

“...”

“...”

“I loved her too.”

“What?”

“I said that I loved her as well.”

“Wh- For how long?”

“We met her at the same time. I fell in love with her at the very same moment as you.”

“Why didn’t you tell me earlier?”

“We are friends, aren’t we? How would you feel?”

“...”

“We used to be almost like brothers.”

“We *used to*. That’s true.”

“What’s changed?”

“Simply? You. You’ve changed. And I’ve changed because of you. You wanted more and more. When I said stop, you didn’t stop. A real brother would do that.”

“You’re hurting me.”

“You’ve hurt me by hurting her. That’s the result. We’re sitting here, in a cold cell, with one toilet, and a window that doesn’t even let much light in. That’s the reason you want to do this, right? To make me look bad in her eyes again! Heck, maybe you’ve been making me do it every time just to get revenge on me for marrying her!”

“You’re exaggerating. Again.”

“Don’t act so cool! I’m right, huh?”

“Brother, please, stop it.”

“Quit calling me brother, you son-of-a-bitch! You did it again! You made me find the source, so I could just share with you! Just because you never talk to anyone! Ha! Don’t be so surprised that she hasn’t given you even a single look so far!”

“Please, stop. Can’t you see what happens when you stop listening to me?”

“This wouldn’t have happened if you hadn’t given it to me back then! Heck, I was so stupid! So stupid!”

“Don’t hurt yourself! Please! This is how we met. It’s important to both of us. Do you remember that crazy year? Yeah, it was 1969, the year of miracles. Who was playing then? Darn, I can’t remember his name...”

“Santana...”

“No, the guy on the next day...”

“Hendrix...”

“Yeah! That one! Damn, to think that he would be called the god of guitar today!”

“It’s almost ironic. We used to share a common god. Where did that god bring him?”

“That’s what they said. The truth was different.”

“Yeah, right... I was done after his death. I guess, we also hadn’t seen each other for several years, right?”

“But you started working on the city dump, and I happened to come there later. It was an epic reunion! We didn’t have to act cool to get one of those. You’ve found a guy who would share with us virtually for free!”

“And I had to meet you again the same day I met her. If not for you, I’d still be with her. Just sitting and watching soap operas together.”

“We were seeing each other rarely back then... luckily, it’s all over. She dumped you for good.”

“Do you want me to hit you?”

“Hey, easy! Listen to me, okay? She pretended to love you, and I have proofs! First off, she’d never let you go out with me and our friends. Secondly, she even forbade you to meet with me!”

“She was absolutely right! That’s the reason we’re sitting here! You! Because I broke my promise, met with you one more time, and because you made me go there and try to beat the crap out of this guy!”

“He didn’t want to share with us. He earned it.”

“And now, I repeat, we’re sitting in this cold cell because we were found lying unconscious under that bridge nearby that guy’s cold body!”

“We’ll get out somehow. So, can we have a go?”

“Heck, no, we can’t! She’s going to be here any minute now! I don’t want to see her sad face again! She phoned me! She promised to forgive me for the last time! I just need to stop!”

“But that’s the mark of our friendship. You can’t...”

“I love *her*, not *you*!”

“You’re obsessed with her!”

“Yes! And I want *her* to be my obsession! Not *you*!”

“You can’t go back now, and you know it! Once you start, you can’t stop! You can’t choose between me and her! There’s no choice! There’s only me! Me! You can’t...”

“SHUT UP! SHUT UP! SHUT UP!”

“You... can’t... stop...”

“SHUT UP! SHUT UP! SHUT up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up... Shut... up...”

“...”

“...”

“...”

“...hah...”

“...”

“...hah, hah...”

“...”

“Ah, ha, ha! You’re done! You won’t make me do it again! Ha! Lie there! Sleep tight! Ha, ha! My love, she’s coming to me! I made it! I stopped myself! She’ll be so happy hearing that!”

“...”

“...”

“...”

“Someone’s coming. Is it her?”

“Prisoner 202 320?”

“Yes, officer? It’s me.”

“I... I am so sorry.”

“Officer? I don’t understand.”

“The plate number AOP 352. Green Toyota Corolla. Did it belong to you?”

“Did... what?”

“There was an accident. A truck hit that car. There was a woman driving it. We need to identify her.”

“A truck? An accident? My... Darling?”

“Your... I’m so sorry. We couldn’t do anything. The car was completely crushed.”

“My... Darling...”

“I am really sorry. I will need your statement. I will come back in a moment with documents.”

“My...”

“...”

“Darling... he had to be... mistaken...”

“...”

“No... why now? Why?”

“...my friend?”

“My Darling...”

“...my brother?”

“Leave me alone.”

“I want to help. I forgive you, just don’t throw me away. Please.”

“Leave me... alone...”

“Don’t cry. Be brave. She’s in a better place now.”

“Is that supposed to help me?! She’s gone!”

“We have something that can help you ease the pain.”

“...”

“Just bring your hand under the pillow... yes, now bring the syringe out.”



“ ... ”

“It’ll ease the pain. She wouldn’t want you to be in pain.”

“ ... ”

“Bring it to your arm now. Easy. We don’t have a strap, but it doesn’t matter. Now, stick it slowly into that vein... wait. What are you doing?”

“*She* was my love.”

“Don’t do it! Don’t bring it to your neck! The needle is sharp!”

“You were almost right. I can’t choose between you and her. So, there is only one choice.”

“Don’t hurt yourself! No! STOP!”

“See you there, my obsession...”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“ .. ”

“ .. ”

“ .. ”

“ .. ”

“ .. ”

“ .. ”

“ .. ”

“ .. ”

## Traces

*Tomasz Trela*

He swam towards the shore, his arms beating against the current. The waves pulled him back. The pier kept getting away. The more he struggled, the farther it was. He went under. When he emerged from the covers he was covered in sweat. He reached under the bed and picked up a small sketchbook and a pencil and started taking notes and making little drawings.

Cold rain was buffeting the windows of his apartment. Leafless trees shook in the wind. The green numbers above the night stand flashed 3:05 am. Peter gave up on the hope of getting more sleep, got up and stumbled to the drawing desk.

His latest project was a children's book called "Little Peter." It showed a small blond-haired boy and his family going on various trips and having all sorts of adventures. No matter what happened to little Peter the parents were always supportive and helping. It was written by Peter himself and was loosely based on his own life.

He sketched some scenes, like the one where little Peter gets lost at a train station. After several hours he noticed that there was something odd about the drawings. The last illustration showed a rainy day, a man with a stern face was holding an umbrella and looking at poor Peter losing his to the wind.

Peter looked back at all the sketches. The man kept reappearing. Either in the background or as one of the main characters, an uncle, an older cousin, next door neighbor. They all resembled a faint memory of his own father. Days dragged on and he felt less and less like drawing. The deadline for submitting his preliminary sketches was approaching, one more month.

His phone displayed several missed calls from his publisher, a few from his brother John, and one from his friend David.

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The coffee shop was almost empty. David came a few minutes late but he came without a fail, even if the meeting was scheduled at such a short notice. He didn't wait long before asking:

"So, what is bothering you?"

"Well, I had this dream. I was swimming to a pier that looked like the one next to my home, but I couldn't quite reach it."

“You still keep your dream diary?”

“Journal,” he insisted, “but yes.”

“Well don’t get offended, I just think it sounds better with alliteration.”

“Anyway, after I woke up I started drawing. I went back to drawing Little Peter, but I just haven’t been able to concentrate on it. And it’s been like weeks.”

“How come? You’ve never been on such a long hiatus.”

“I think I have the same face syndrome,” Peter said dead serious.

“The what?”

Peter sighed as though he was explaining something that should be common knowledge.

“It’s when an artist draws faces the same way, using similar proportions and such. After a while they all start looking the same whether they are supposed to be old or young or even of a different gender. This doesn’t happen to each character in my drawings though. Most are different, but every man that’s supposed to be in his 50’s just looks the same. It’s like I’m drawing this one man over and over. And I can’t get back to illustrating. I need to get out of this rut.”

David let it all sink in and, though he was no expert, seemed ready to deliver his own diagnosis. He started with a question:

“You know the feeling when you get a song stuck in your head?

And it won’t go away?”

“Sure.”

“They say it’s because our mind concentrates on what we haven’t finished. What you have to do is listen to that song to the end. Get it out of your system.”

Peter mulled the idea over for a bit as he was finishing his coffee.

“So you remember to forget,” he concluded after his last sip.

“Yeah, guess so.”

They started getting up from their chairs and putting on their jackets. David seemed to have remembered about something.

“Alice was asking about you. You know you should not just avoid people like that.”

“Bad memories.”

David sighed.

“Peter, come on. You can’t keep doing this. She made a mistake and she owned up to it. You have to let bygones be bygones. You have to forgive.”

“She shouldn’t have done it,” he insisted.

“You know. Me and Anne. It’s not always good, but it’s not always bad. We sometimes can’t stand each other but we make up. We both know it’s not always sunshine and rainbows and kisses and hugs.”

“It could be.”

“If you write or draw it like that, sure. Take care.”

Peter fell silent. The door creaked. He sat back down, ordered another coffee and postponed going back to his barren drawing desk. He observed people and

listened in on the conversations hoping that something would spark his imagination. He was the last to leave.

After a long walk through the park he went back to his apartment. A photograph was propped up on his desk. The one with the lake, the pier, the shore. He took the photograph out of its frame and placed it on the drawing table in the centre, a canvas of white surrounding it. He started placing tentative lines around the photograph, extending the shore, cutting a line across the horizon, adding the sky and the clouds. He eventually started drawing the shed that was just to the right of the place shown in the photograph. He drew the door which could never be fully closed, the dirty window panes, the tin roof that was leaking in places. A silhouette of a man appeared next to the shed. Someone he hasn't seen in years.

He drew the pier over and over. Starting from a different detail, starting from a whole outline of the coast, starting from the house. The man appeared again. Peter drew the figure separately, this time covering a whole sheet. He kept drawing and erasing facial features till the ones reappearing consistently were left.

Peter dug up a box of old memories. Among piles of letters and cards there was an old faded photograph. It was cracked in half and a silhouette that would fit the one he drew was as pronounced. The visage was hidden in one of the white tears. The second photograph showed him standing up. Everyone but him was in focus. It was some sort of a party. His uncles were there.

There was another photograph which was too dark to discern any details. It showed a man in a navy suit with curly hair standing on the beach. The face was there and he could make out the brow and the bridge of the nose. The man in the picture looked stern and determined.

Aided by this photograph he started drawing again. He drew the oval of his face, long ears. He hesitated a moment and drew eyebrows, eyes, hair. The man was in his 50's with black curly hair and a cocky grin. The drawing bore some resemblance but still didn't do justice to the original. He tried again, and again and again. Picking up details from whatever remnants he could find.

Peter used all the printer paper he had. He moved on to drawing in his sketchbook. Drawing smaller faces between bigger ones. Peter drew till he run out of paper. He looked at the heap of beneath the desk. It was all in vain. His imagination and these photos were not enough. He did have an inkling of where the other photos could have been, if they still existed.

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He was folding his umbrella as his mother opened the door.

“Peter! My goodness! In such awful weather.”

She hugged him and let him inside.

“You haven't visited in... ages!”

He pretended to still be struggling with taking off his shoes to avoid eye contact.

“I’ve been busy.”

“Too busy to give me a call? Or John for that matter?”

Peter could come up with different excuses but knew that it wouldn’t do. He tried to look as guilty as he could.

“Well, now that you’re here do you want some tea?”

“Sure.”

She went to the kitchen.

“There’s not much in the fridge I’m afraid but I got some soup if you want.”

“What kind?”

“The good kind.”

They were sitting in the living room in front of the TV. She passed him the spoon with her trembling gnarly fingers. The soup consisted mostly of vegetables that were approaching the end of their shelf life and just happened to occupy the one in the fridge. It was the “anything goes” soup. During the sips and periods of silence he pretended he was interested in whatever was on the screen.

“How’s Lisa?” she asked.

Peter stopped himself short of asking who she meant, he hadn’t heard that name in a while. He racked his brain for a bit.

“Found someone else, upstate. Settled down, had a kid.”

“That’s nice.”

There was another long pause in which both of them pretended to be following some talk show whose main topic was unfaithful husbands.

“You know. Maggie is back in town. Started teaching at the Elementary.”

Another long period of silence passed. After mustering some courage he finally asked about what he came here for:

“Do you keep any photo albums here? You know, the old ones.”

“Well I could look around the apartment, but as you know, there’s not much room here for that stuff. Besides, John made me throw some away. What do you need anyway?”

“The pictures from twenty years ago. I need to find them.”

“Oh I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

Peter concentrated on unearthing old memories he deemed buried for a long time. An image flashed in his mind.

“Where’s the box?” he asked.

“What box?”

“You know, the one with roses.”

His mother fell silent. It seemed like she forgot the question and went back to watching TV but after a while her expression changed.

“I guess with all my cook books and the old fishing gear and...”

“In the old house,” he said, his voice going flat.

She nodded.

“Do you come over there?”

“Not me. John does, to rake leaves and mow the grass. There’s no bus passing near that place, you know.”

“Do you have the keys?”

“Well, didn’t you have yours? Back when you were studying?”

“I lost them.”

“Well, John is away for now.”

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Peter thought it over. He’d go straight for the house. Retrieve the box and go back. The drive wasn’t that long and he found himself in his hometown after a few hours’ drive. He walked through overgrown grass downhill, he could see the lake from between the trees.

The old shed was gone. The remnants of the pier were still there, covered in moss and slowly dissolving into water. The house looked just like he remembered it. A bit run down but still not losing its charm. He tried the front door even though he knew it would be locked. He started looking for another way in.

Logs were stacked along the side wall. There was a chopping block next to them. And a small window near the ground. Peter tried poking it. The window opened a bit, he grabbed a stick from between the logs, reached for the latch and unhooked it. Squeezing through the window wasn’t as hard as he thought it would be, though it did feel less dignifying than he imagined. He reflected on his present situation.

*Fortunately, none of the neighbors were around, otherwise Big Peter would have a run in with the law and that would be an awful adventure indeed.*

He finally scrambled through the window and found himself in the basement. The air was musty and the floor was creaking. Old furniture was lined with old watches and dozens of old wristwatches. The old fishing gear was rusty, the space was filled up with boxes of books, magazines, dust.

Peter carefully examined the contents of each box before stacking it up with others against the wall. He froze when he saw the cardboard box with roses painted all over it. He opened it cautiously and took a peek inside, his heart sunk. The box was full of old postcards from various relatives who somehow bothered to write. Nothing more.

He went upstairs to the living room. The old projector was still there, on the mantelpiece. Upon closer inspection, he discovered it wasn’t empty. He took the white frame with trembling fingers and peered through the dark film.

*After discovering the stash of old slides Big Peter changed his mind about leaving. He couldn’t wait to see what each of them held.*

He opened several windows to let in some fresh air. He could see the mist stretching over the bay. His hands were going numb. He moved the projector and a thin sheet of paper slid from beneath it. He picked up the drawing. It showed a long fisherman’s hut, with an old man standing in front of it. A memory flashed in his head.

*The sun was shining through the window. He watched him draw the house and the fisherman. Though his lines were rugged they had a certain charm to them. They could not be replicated in any way as the figures were made up of random short squiggles going different ways.*

*He was sitting in his dad's lap. The closest he's ever gotten to his father embracing him. The kid with the blond hair was smiling. The previous night his dad came back drunk, swore a bit and went to sleep. And the next day he was joking and drawing for his son. As if nothing happened. As if he was a different man.*

Peter went downstairs. There was no wood in the tray next to the furnace. He picked up the axe and as he was heading outside he looked at the front door. He remembered when dad came around once. Peter was studying at a local college at the time. He wanted to draw him or take a photo but his father just covered his face. He gave up after that. He unlocked the door half-expecting to see him again. It opened with a whine.

When he was young he felt like he had two fathers. An aggressive drunkard and a mellow fisherman. Whenever dad came home from work it was the drunk him, the one that always brought up the past and swore and called his mother names, accusing her of being unfaithful just because the lads claimed her to be. Peter tensed up and started raising the axe rapidly and bringing it down with brute force cleaving pieces of wood.

All those comic books he threw away saying they were not good for him.

All the times he rubbed off the sharpie tattoos he drew.

All the times he came back home drunk, screaming and swearing.

All the time he called him..

“Bastard.”

The axe bit into the block and froze. He didn't bring it up again for several minutes. He was overwhelmed by other kind of memories. The kind he tried to bury among the bad ones.

All the times he tried teaching him to read Russian.

All the times he took him fishing.

All the times he read a story to him.

All the times he carried him around on his shoulders making Peter feel like he was seven feet tall. He could still remember the stubble of his beard and his flannel shirt.

He slowly gathered pieces of wood and went back to the house, tore up some magazines and fired up the furnace. He watched as the logs were slowly being devoured by the flame, he held his numb hands against the warm air.

Peter returned to the living room. The radiators were getting hot. He took off the jacket, sat down and turned on the projector. He watched the slides. Lingering on each one, soaking up all the details. All the marks time left on them. All the coffee stains, little cracks and spots. He looked at the parade of relatives and family gatherings. There were also slides of their fishing trips, his father clearly visible on each one.

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Peter slept in his old house and went back to his apartment the next day with the box of slides. He carefully scanned every single one. His father's face was looking at him sternly as if he were right in front of him.

"You won't get your wasted time back."

That's what his dad was always saying. He never believed him. If he had only the former as his father, like Little Peter. He looked at all the illustrations of a smiling kid playing with his dad. Little Peter was always happy and loved. Caricature of his own life with all the bad things cut out.

Peter was looking at his paper childhood. The one which he wanted to believe in so much. He gathered it all and threw it in the fireplace. He watched the paper blacken, the lines of graphite turning silvery and vanishing as the drawings crumbled. His imaginary past turned into charred remains.

*Big Peter rediscovered drawing in his 20's. Traced photos at first and then attended an evening life drawing class. He kept working and drawing. Doing some simple graphic design at first and then moving on to drawing cartoons, illustrations, comics. Finally working with a writer on a full book.*

He placed the scanned slides on the drawing desk and started sketching. First marks were tentative but as he kept going they became more defined and confident. Whenever he was hesitant about the next line he looked to one of the slides for guidance. After a few hours of combining various bits of photographs, slides and other sketches an image emerged. It was a portrait.

A portrait of a rugged man in his 50's, with graying hair and a sunburned face, busted vessels all over his cheeks. Despite his appearance he was still smiling, his eyes bore a certain shade of sadness but also a glint of an intelligent mind. Peter looked at the framed drawing one last time and put it in an envelope addressed to one Stanley Pierce. The drawing was perfect. He breathed a sigh of relief.

Peter put all the photos back in the box. All but one. He was still holding an old wedding photograph in his hands. His mother was smiling, all in white, her face surrounded by golden locks of hair. His dad was standing next to her and looking to the side, grinning. A loving housewife and a mellow drunkard. They looked happy for that brief moment in the past. How did it all turn so bad? He had so many questions. This time, he decided to call before coming over.

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"I was young. I wanted kids. That worked out. No matter what he kept saying you are both his. Flesh and blood."

"I know."



“I think you both turned out alright, all things considered. I raised you well, with not much help from him. Although, you could finally try to find a girl.”

He shook his head.

“I don’t really have time for that.”

“You still teaching?”

“Mum, I’m drawing,” he said patiently. “Doing illustrations for books.”

“Oh yes,” she nodded. “I got some copies. You can draw. I think you got that from me. I did draw some when I was young, flowers and such. They always asked me to draw when I was at school.”

Peter kept making notes and asking more questions. He didn’t have a name for his new project but he knew that, this time, it would be closer to the truth.

**The Well of Obsession**  
*Magdalena Szumlińska*

The end was nigh.

That's what they said, at least. The news reporter looked around himself, at the debris and the dried blood, he looked into the distance, where the smoke was rising from and the sound of machine guns beat an unsteady rhythm, and then glanced conspiratorially at the camera and said:

“The end is nigh.”

How *not* to believe such blatant exaggeration and carefully-staged drama? I scoffed, then switched off the TV.

The silence enveloped me in a comforting embrace, and I sighed and relaxed into the sofa. My once young and compact body, now pudgy and soft, settled deeper into the cushions, and I tilted my head back so that all I could see was the ceiling, and all I could hear was the blessed silence.

Out of the blue the silence seemed to grow foreboding – *why* was it so quiet? I should at least hear –

I looked at the electronic nanny speaker, pink and white and emitting only a static crackle. No breathing, no minute sound of the squeaking mattress, nothing.

I stood up so quickly I became dizzy, then rushed out of the room and into the hallway, from where I bounded up the stairs and into another hallway. There I stopped, listened again and, my ears catching only the worrying silence, I sped up to the room at the end of the corridor. Again I stopped, heard nothing, and rushed in, panting with anxiety, my mind spinning with a thousand different scenarios where he suffocated in his sleep, where he fell out of his bed and banged his head and lost consciousness, where he –

But there he was, safe and sound and asleep, as always during my late-night panic attacks.

I crept further into the room, slowly and without making a sound. Picked the electronic nanny up from the floor, where it fell out of his bed, and hit it couple times with my hand, just to be safe it's working. I put it near his head, just inches away from his open mouth, and stood there for a minute or two, just listening to the second most beautiful sound in the world.

Then I left, because I didn't want to wake him up with my hovering.

I collected the speaker of the electronic nanny from downstairs, thought about watching a movie, disregarded the notion, changed into night clothes, lay on the bed and then –

and then fell quickly asleep, listening to the music of my son's breathing.

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The most beautiful sound in the world was my baby's laughter, his voice raised in uncontrollable mirth. Accompanied by the most beautiful image in the world, his wide smile and joyous eyes, there was nothing in the world I loved more than moments like this one, when we were in a remote universe of our own and I could just tickle him until we both cried with laughter.

The sound of a thunder brutally tore us from our little world, and I saw as the understanding dawned on his face. He hated storms. I didn't know where the aversion came from, as I've always loved a good blizzard, but I suspected it was something that he would likely grow out of. Presently he didn't start crying – yet – but I saw him stiffen and his little hands attached themselves to me, fisting my scarf tightly and squeezing my arm almost painfully.

The playground began to empty out.

"C'mon, there's nothing to fear," I scooped him up from the bench and he pressed himself to me close. My heart broke into million pieces when I felt his body shake, but I smiled with false confidence, "nothing at all. The rain won't catch us, we are faster than the clouds!"

"We are?" he peeked at me from his hiding place in the crook of my arm, and there was mischief beneath all the fear and insecurity.

"We are!" I assured. "And I'm going to prove it to you. Not a drop of rain will fall on your pretty head!"

"But mom, the clouds are *right here*," he exclaimed, pointing at the sky almost directly above us. The clouds were indeed spreading fast in all directions, darkening the world into fake twilight. But my thoughts were racing faster than wind, and human imagination is boundless.

"There is a café around the corner," I thought aloud, "and until then – here!" I stripped my hoodie off and manoeuvred his pliant body into it quickly, then zipped him up and covered his little head with the huge, in comparison, hood. He looked almost like a monk, if only the hood wasn't bright blue and didn't have a sports company logo on the front. "Now, there is no way you will get wet!" I explained cheerfully, knowing full well that the sports jacket will be ineffective in a downpour.

He looked at me trustingly, and I vowed to get him to that café before the rain gets heavy.

As I was gathering our things into my bag and checking if I got my phone and wallet inside, he asked, "But – won't *you* get wet?"

I shook my head and smiled widely at his concern. "Nope. I'm waterproof."

He wasn't convinced – actually, I never found out whether he knew what that meant that day.

“But mom, you *will* get wet and then sick and then *die!*” he explained with conviction, fear returning to his eyes.

The sound of lightning stopped me from responding, and I picked him up and threw him over my shoulder and started running towards the café, but as soon as we were safely inside I looked him seriously in the eyes and said, “I'm never going to die.”

“No?” he was dubious, and rightly so, as he had to go through his father's death and funeral at the mere age of four.

“I'm never going to die as long as you live” was my response, and either my solemn tone or his blind trust in me made him accept the words at face value. He smiled with relief and started prattling on about cupcakes, but my attention was diverted from him by the sound of a news reporter's voice grimly stating the statistics of people killed and injured in a recent border skirmish, some three hundred kilometers away from us.

I politely asked the cashier to turn the TV off due to gruesome images shown on the screen. He switched it to Disney Channel, and that was the end of my worries for the time being.

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“So – how is Kevin?” surreptitiously looking at my watch. Only half an hour passed, and I was already growing queasy with stress.

“Oh, he is fine, but – you know how kids are, I worry all the time,” she self-deprecatingly laughed, and I couldn't help but nervously join her.

“Please, you don't know what ‘worried’ means. I love you, and you are my best friend and the best person I know in the entire world, but I still cannot stop looking at my watch every ten seconds.” I grimaced apologetically, but by her expression I could tell she didn't wholly understand.

“I'm so worried so much that the doctor had to prescribe me anti-anxiety pills,” I confessed, and she took my hand and squeezed tightly.

“Why didn't you say anything?” she asked calmly, and started looking around – for a waiter, as I soon discovered. “The bill, please,” she directed at him, then turned and looked at me with her big, sad eyes.

“But – where are you going?” I was confused, and just a tiny bit scared that maybe – maybe – she thought me a psycho for going to a shrink? She squeezed my hand comfortingly, downed the coffee and took out her wallet.

“We are going for a walk, towards your house. Then we will get a bus, and then we will relieve your mother from duty and play with your son, because you are anxious and I don't want you to feel anxious because of me. And when he goes to sleep, we can talk about serious stuff again. That okay?”

I couldn't help but stand up and hug her, tears of gratitude welling in my eyes.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

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It was the weekend, and my parents and my in-laws came to my house to eat dinner, and talk, and play with their grandson. The tradition started when we moved in together, my late husband and I, and it brought us all close – it made us into a family. It allowed us to process the grief after my husband died together, and it helped us to make plans for the future together, and it helped me not to feel alone in that house, with only my son to keep me company.

Every weekend, everything was all right in the world, and we were all together and complete.

Until my parents started nagging, that is.

It was over a year after my husband died, and they thought that I should go out more, that I should prepare myself for long stretches of separation with my son when he finally starts attending school, that I should start looking for a job and stop living off our savings and my husband's death gratuity. My son was out with his other grandparents and I was feeling trapped, the walls of their concerned gazes and well-meaning reproach closing in on me like a prison.

I could feel myself shaking and my mind suddenly stopped processing what they were saying: it was all hurtful, so to stop the hurt I stopped listening. When they finished the lecture I stood up and mindlessly exited the house, went up to my son and knelt before him. The question "Mommy, what's wrong?" didn't register as I hugged him tightly, and he embraced me with a quiet understanding that I was too distraught to explain.

My brave little world, helping me face the big unpredictable universe.

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That night I decided to face my late-night terrors, acknowledging them and preparing myself for the battle beforehand, and switched off the electronic nanny before my son went to sleep.

My hand shook as I grabbed the remote, and decided on the plan of action. One hour of catching up on recent events. One hour of reading anything but books on parenting and childcare. Fifteen minutes of exercise. Then sleep.

The plan was doomed from the start, as I was hardly able to keep my eyes open during the TV program on which presidential candidate is likely to win and why he is a bad choice, and during the first commercial break I fell into deep, uneasy sleep.

When I woke up I was crying, the nightmare of my son attending primary school and getting molested by a teacher and bullied by his peers making me think of suicide prevention and spotting paedophiles and finding bruises on the beloved little body...

I stood up and almost raced to his room but, by the tiny thread of desperation, I held myself in check. For a good minute or two I stood there, my body battling with my brain and my brain fighting against my resolutions – but after a time the overwhelming urge to go check up on him eased a little, and I could go to the kitchen and drink a glass of water and come back with only a few pauses of held breath and listening to the silence and convincing my panicky self that nothing was wrong.

It was a minuscule victory, but a victory nonetheless.

My nerves settling and my determination renewed I turned my attention to the TV screen, where a documentary about nearby war – very stark, very matter-of-fact documentary – was just starting. I quickly got sucked into the complexities of the conflict, which resulted in escalation from a few local skirmishes a year before into full-blown political and military war just months ago.

I didn't know about most of it, because I didn't want to know, and I didn't want my child to hear about it. I wanted to shield him, for however long I could, from seeing the violence and hatred that the world out there was capable of harbouring.

After some time, there was a segment on specific attacks, and that's when I saw myself.

A woman so unlike me – dark-haired, black-eyed and seemingly much older – a woman my age, but with every worry and every bit of pain written in the premature wrinkles on her face.

“The chemical attack was very local and looks more like a military test than a tactical move to eradicate the population,” said the reporter, and the camera moved from the woman's face to perform a wide sweep of the landscape, “but it left many people in need of food and clean water, and it did cause some casualties – mostly children. The woman standing beside me,” the camera once again focused on her face, “is now in mourning after her child died in the attack.” The reporter turned to face the woman and moved closer.

“Could you tell us what happened that day?” he asked in a gentle tone, in a different language.

“It was murder,” the startlingly lucid voice of the translator interrupted her disjointed monologue, “it was murder, and murder of the innocent. It is bestial to kill children – they knew that the only casualties would be among the youngest children, whose bodies couldn't withstand even the smallest amounts of poison, they knew,” the woman broke down, crying helplessly into her dirty palms, but the cool voice of the translator continued, saying the words she sobbed out, “I killed my child, because I didn't want him to suffer too much. My bare hands,” a moment

later the camera focused on her hands, which were squeezed to the point of pain, “killed my little boy, because I knew he would be dead later. I only wanted to stop the hurt.”

The reporter then went on to explain why she wasn't charged with third degree murder, and why what she did wasn't so unreasonable and hysterical as it sounded, and why her life was ruined, and why the village was in mourning... but it eluded me, because in that moment I saw myself in the eyes and the desperation of that woman in a land hundreds of kilometers away. And I knew that, were I there, I would have done the same thing.

And I knew that for her, the world had ended.

*So I went upstairs and sat on the edge of my son's bed, and caressed his neck, because I didn't have to make that choice, and my world was ... it was complete.*

## Sweet Bea and Sour Cass

*Erica Johansson*

It's almost midnight, but somehow I'm not surprised when my mobile goes off.

"Hey, it's me."

Of course it is.

"Pick me up? I'm at Rockstore."

Phone goes silent.

Typical.

I pull up in our dinged-up red Mini. Rockstore seems busy tonight. People are milling around under the Cadillac sticking out of the wall above the entrance and the music is so loud I can feel the bass all the way from here. It's Bea's favorite place. She's sitting cross-legged on the hood of a car, smoking. Just like her to not have a care in the world.

"Bea!"

She waves and jumps down, obviously in an excellent mood. She tosses the half-smoked cigarette in a puddle and throws herself in the passenger seat, somehow managing to get her shoelaces stuck in the door.

"Cass, you're my best baby sister," she says with a huge smile and leans over and plants a kiss on my cheek.

"I'm your only sister, but thanks." We're as close in age as sisters can be without being twins, but most people think we are. We got tired of the mix-ups a long time ago and solved it by picking new hair colors. Instead of two blondes, we were now one chestnut and one, at the moment at least, pink-haired. I put the car in gear and ease out into traffic. Why are there so many cars on the roads tonight? Did all of Montpellier decide to take a nighttime drive?

"Bea, when are you going to stop calling me in the middle of the night like this?"

"Cass, when are you going to *start* calling me in the middle of the night like this?" Bea sticks her tongue out at me. I roll my eyes. Why would I call her in the middle of the night? To tell her about the extraordinary exciting essay I have due tomorrow? She'd laugh at me, I'm sure.

"Didn't you have a date tonight? What happened?" I ask.

"Sure did."



Bea reaches down to free her shoelaces but gets distracted by the gossip magazine sticking out from under her seat. “Got bored. Where are the fun guys? You know? The ones that make you laugh and forget that you have a shit job to go to in the morning?”

Oh. Is that why she’s always dating these guys? Because she doesn’t like her job? I’m not sure that’s the best reason to look for romance, and I must remember to talk to her about this. Later though, when I don’t have an essay due. Bea holds up the magazine and points to the cover. “And the hot guys? Like this one here?”

Oh, that one! He’s dreamy...

“Probably in your dreams, Bea, because rock stars grow on trees.”

“You’d like to meet him, wouldn’t you? I’ve seen the posters in your room, Cass. You think he’s sooo hot, don’t you?” She’s teasing and I know it, but of course I blush anyway. She knew I would, wicked sister that she is. Sometimes I wish I could be more like Bea. She wouldn’t blush at a picture of a hot singer.

Bea chuckles, but doesn’t say anything else. She flips through the magazine, skimming the pages, humming something that sounds vaguely like “fire in my toes, snakes in your stool.” I think I heard that wrong.

“Stop the car! Stop the car!”

I slam on the breaks, and my heart continues on down the road all by its lonesome. What? I didn’t see anything! Bea jumps out of the car and runs around to the driver’s side.

“Get over there.” She points to the passenger seat she just vacated.

“What?” Why is she outside my window? And where is the emergency?

She opens the door and tries to shove me out of the seat.

“Get over there.”

“You’re not driving, you’ve been drinking!”

“Shit no, I didn’t even get that far before I called you. Move!” Bea practically sits in my lap before I manage to scramble over the gear stick. She turns the car around.

“Where are we going? Did you forget something? I’m capable of turning the car around, you know...”

Bea gives me a side-glance, big smile on her face. Um... She’s got that look again. Nothing normal ever comes from that look. She slaps the magazine in my lap, feature side up. It’s him! Rock star’s in town, apparently.

“We’re meeting him.”

Say what?

I’m certain my jaw relocated to the floor of the car, because it’s not attached to my face anymore. Sounds attractive. I look at Bea, because I don’t quite know what else to do. Then I look at the picture in the magazine again, but that is so distracting that I have to look at Bea again. Bea is not distracting like that. She’s more like the teddy bears on my pajama pants. Oh. My. God!

“I’m in my PJs! Beatrice! Are you insane?”

Bea bursts out laughing.

“So? You’ll stand out. He’ll be sure to notice your relaxed sense of fashion.”

“Bea!” Cranking up the panic meter here. “Do not –”

“Oh, relax.” Bea digs through her oversized bag with one hand. She manages to fish out a blue piece of fabric that she throws at me. “Just please tell me you shaved your legs today...”

I’m holding the blue thingy up in front of me. She threw a skirt at me. Right. Bea’s skirts are very short, and from the looks of this one, it’s far from an exception. My skirts wouldn’t even call this a wannabe skirt. A butt band perhaps. Does she think this is helping? Argh, she’s giving me The Look again.

“I have an essay due tomorrow morning. I can’t go around town looking for some cute guy.” That is reasonable and logical, and she can’t argue with that.

“Ha! Some cute guy. Only the dude you have been secretly in love with since we were fourteen and he did that rebel on a motorcycle song for that movie with whatshisname.”

“Channing Tatum.” Shut up, Cassandra! Not helping.

“Yeah, and you dragged me to see that thing like five times just because he sang in the bar scene.”

Okay, I might have done that, but it was more like four times.  
Just for the record.

“But my essay? Come on, Bea.” She doesn’t need to know that it is as good as done. Life at Paul Valéry is easy breezy.

“I know you, Cass. You practically had that thing in your bag hours ago. Don’t try that with me.”

Damnit.

“Cassie, Cassie, Cassie,” she’s using her singsong voice. Ah, it’s so tempting! Okay then, this one time wouldn’t hurt, would it?

“Fine.” That was weak. I try again, louder this time. “Fine.” Yeah, I definitely overcompensate because Bea jumps in her seat. Oops. At least I made her happy, just look at that smile.

I go about changing out of my comfy, trusted pajama pants with the adorable teddy bear print into that hellish wannabe skirt. It’s tricky in the front seat of our small car and I keep banging my knees on the dashboard. Great, I’ll accessorize the mini skirt with bruised up knees. Even I know what people will say about that.

We bomb through the narrow streets of centre-ville towards the park. I actually love outdoor concerts, and it’s a mystery how I missed this one. Must remember to keep up with these things, or Bea might kidnap me again. Bea is excited, and it’s contagious. That’s one of the best things about my big sister. She can always make you feel better just by being around.

There’s no parking anywhere close to the park, so we hike it. We can already hear the music and the crowd, and the atmosphere is electrifying. I’m walking faster and Bea is laughing at me. I’m getting all giddy!

Bea makes a sudden turn and drags me along.

“Where are we going?”

She gives me that big grin again. Uh oh.

“Staff entrance is this way. If Vincent is working we can probably get in.”

Oh, trusty old Vincent. Bea dumped him ages ago but he’s so laid back about everything that he probably didn’t even notice. We get to the not so fancy but heavily guarded staff entrance. How are we getting in? Bea’s solution is simple. She just walks through the gate and into the backstage area. I’m in shock so I just stand around with my mouth unhinged again. Seriously? That’s all you need to do to get backstage? Why haven’t we done that before?

There’s a loud bang and angry shouting voices coming from the other side of the fence. That certainly isn’t Vincent’s voice. It doesn’t take long before a big guy in a too tight T-shirt appears with Bea slung over his shoulder. Oh no.

She’s spitting angry, too. Big Guy deposits her outside the gate and puts his finger in her face.

“Stay out.”

Bea tosses her pink hair in his face and flounces away.

“Vincent’s not here.”

No kidding. I’m sure he wouldn’t have mustered the energy to hoist her up on his shoulder.

“So what do we do now?” I ask. I’m feeling a little bit bad for Bea. She’s got this whole adventure planned out for us and it’s foiled because some lazy dude decided not to show up for work. “We can catch to the concert from outside, if you want. I saw beer vendors over there. If we hurry before the police chase them away we can get some beer and hot dogs and listen to the music.”

Bea sullenly agrees and we make our way around the fenced in venue. It’s not so bad, after all. It’s quite warm, almost summer now, and we get a good spot where we can almost see the stage. If we climb the tree, we could most certainly see the concert, but the tree is already fully occupied so we sit on the grass and eat hot dogs and drink Kronenbourg. Bea slowly gets over her bout of moodiness and soon she’s back to her normal self. Normal Bea is laughing and calling me out on my bullshit. Normal Bea never lets me get away with excuses, either. It’s why she’s so awesome.

“Sorry I dragged you away from your studies, sis. I know it’s important to you.”

Wow, that doesn’t happen every day.

“It’s alright. You were right, anyway. I’ve already finished that essay.”

And now she’s laughing at me again. Yeah, go ahead. Sometimes I want to laugh at me too.

The concert ends too soon. We only caught the last of it anyway, so we make our way back. It was really good though, and we are tipsy on beer and music.

“This was really fun. We should always do this when there are concerts here.”

“Yes,” Bea agrees. “And next time I’ll make sure Vincent is working.”

That reminds me. I’ve been having such a good time I forgot exactly what we came here for. We’re outside the backstage area where Bea got tossed over Big Guy’s shoulder. Well, I’m going to make Bea proud.

I start climbing over the chain link fence. It's not easy in a butt band but I finally manage to swing my legs over. As I turn around, I get a glimpse of Bea's face and it's priceless. Now it's her turn to stand there with her mouth open. She looks so funny! I start laughing, and I'm laughing so hard I can't keep my grip on the fence and I fall flat on my back. It didn't hurt and I'm still laughing. Bea is too, like a crazy person.

"Oh my god," she wheezes between gusts of laughter and points to something hanging on top of the fence. It's something blue.

"OH MY GOD!" I'm not wearing the butt band anymore! The cursed thing is stuck on the fence. I look around in panic. There's nowhere to hide! I think I'm about to cry. I'm backstage, at a concert by the hottest rock star in the entire world, and I'm going bottomless. Not happening to me, so not happening!

Bea is still laughing but she's trying to push something through the chain links. My PJs! Thank god she put those in her bag. I try to pull them through but they are surprisingly uncooperative. Some people pass by, giving us funny looks. I would look funnily at me too if I were on the other side of the fence. They don't say anything though. I finally manage to get the pants all the way through and hurry to put them on. Okay, that feels so much better.

"Right," I say to Bea, who is still on the other side of the fence. "I'm going to go find my man now." And she's doubling over with laughter again. Yeah well, if I've come this far I'm not going to give up now. PJs or not.

I head towards the back of the stage. I've cleverly deduced that that would be a good place to look for my guy. There are people around but I try to look like I have all the business in the world walking around here. It's not easy, given my outfit, but I think I pull it off because nobody questions me. If this were my security team I would fire them all. I could be a crazy person, for all they know.

I turn a corner and stop dead in my tracks. He is standing in front of me! My inner fan girl wants to squeal really loud, but I'm mostly successful in keeping her in check. Only a strangled weird noise comes out. Oh no, he heard that! He's looking at me now.

"Hello."

Very civilized, Cassandra. He'll be impressed, for sure. He's standing there with a green beer bottle and a cigarette in one hand and a BlackBerry in the other, and tattooed arms and looking all sexy and sweaty and... and... Seriously, is he wearing a pink tank top? So not cool, dude.

"Are those pajama pants? With teddy bears?" He's looking at my legs with an expression of disbelief. Oh no, you don't! You don't stand there in a *pink* tank top being all judgy on my PJs.

"These are Paddington slacks, don't you know?" I can be very disdainful when I choose to be. Then it occurs to me that he spoke to me. *He* spoke to *me*! Doesn't matter what he said. This is so cool! I almost jump up and down and clap my hands.

“Right,” he says, dragging it out. Yeah, I didn’t really buy that one either. But he’s smiling, so yay.

“Did you like the show?” he asks like a completely normal person.

I shake my head and his smile falters a little.

“Oh...”

Oh no, I didn’t mean it like that!

“We didn’t see the show, we listened to the end of it outside the fence. It sounded very good, though?” Why did that come out as a question?

“But now you’re inside the fence.”

“Now I’m inside the fence.”

Why does that sound like it could be very meaningful? I can’t think clearly.

“It’s not mine.”

What?

“The tank top, I mean. I lost a bet so I had to wear it tonight.”

Oh, he’s a man of his word. He definitely gets plus points for that.

“Okay.”

I don’t know what to say to him. I never thought that far ahead, because I honestly never thought I would be standing face to face with him. So I do the only thing I have been thinking about.

I kiss him. I mean, how many rock stars am I going to be within kissing range of in the foreseeable future? Probably not that many, so I’m being all *carpe diem*-esque. Or should that be *carpe diem*-ified?

I think he was a bit surprised, because it takes him a second to respond, but he catches on eventually. Oh my god!

There’s a strangled sort of noise coming from behind me and the kiss is over. It’s Bea. She’s standing there doing some serious gaping. Yeah, I’m with you, sis!

“The guards are heading this way.” Her voice is really weak and strange.

Right, I guess that’s probably my cue. Wouldn’t want my rock star to see Big Guy toss me out on my head. I turn to him again, and stifle a laugh at the confused look on his face. He’s looking at Bea and Bea is looking at me, so I take charge.

“It was very nice meeting you but I have to go now because my sister pissed off your body guard earlier.” I shake his hand, and immediately regret it. That was weird, wasn’t it? He’s just laughing now. In a nice way, though, so I don’t feel too bad about my spastic behavior.

“Good bye.”

Big Guy comes around the corner and zeroes in on Bea.

“You!”

Bea is still paralyzed from the shock of seeing me kissing my rock star so I grab her hand and just run. She stumbles after me but we make it out through the gate before anyone catches us and we don’t stop until we’re half a block away.

Oh wow, what just happened? Bea is over her shock and she’s slapping my arms.

“Ow, stop!”

“You little... You kissed him! I didn’t think you had it in you. Oh my god! How was it? Tell me!”

I think for a moment. My brain hasn’t processed everything yet, but I do know one thing.

“He’s a lousy kisser.”

Bea gapes at me. Then she bursts out laughing again and I do too. We’re standing there on the sidewalk laughing like two lunatics and it’s awesome.

“Oh, Cassie. Best. Night. Ever.”

Yeah, it really is.

We make our way towards the tram, leaving the car for tomorrow. We can’t stop giggling and we’re walking arm in arm, just like we always did when we were little.

“You just happened to have a skirt in your bag, Bea? Why on earth would you have a skirt in your bag?”

“Oh, Cassie, the uses of a skirt in your bag have sadly eluded you. It’s about time you let me educate you in the carpe diem physiology.”

“Philosophy.”

*“That too.”*

## **Snow Is All I Remember**

*Jakub Biernacki*

‘Zip it up, we’ve got an eternal winter here, it’s not a time for having your belly...’

‘I don’t care.’

‘Your kidneys will.’

‘No, they won’t.’

Her face was hidden between a wool cap and a thick scarf that covered her nose and mouth. Only hazelnut eyes moved in the slit, only her eyebrows frowned. The scarf had a pattern with Christmas trees and snowflakes. She appreciated both the irony and the warmth.

The down jacket must have belonged to someone much bigger than she was. She wore it wide open, so the unforgiving frost could bite her like a dog. But apparently it didn’t. Her neck was covered with sweat.

He wanted to say something, but instead he crouched down looking around with his hands on the white surface. Something under the snow moved with a suspiciously cracking sound. Maybe it was ice over a deadly cold water abyss, maybe just a forgotten road sign lying flat in the middle of a crossroad it used to warn about.

The cracking stopped after some steps but they had to stay focused. There was no footprint, no runner’s track, it must have been snowing during the night. Heavy clouds were still hanging up there, supported by black columns of old skyscrapers. The next one was not going to be a July night either.

‘Sometimes, when the sky is very clear, and there is no snow, you can see the Statue from here.’

‘Pff...’ she replied.

The air smelled like a can full of lubricating oil. A quick thought about French fries crossed his mind.

‘Are you mad?’

‘Whatever.’

‘Can I make an assumption? You are not mad about the way we had to choose, are you? Nor about the cold since you’re obviously very hot, no pun intended.’

‘«Can I make an assumption?» You were a lawyer Before, right?’

‘So you are mad about the chewing gum I didn’t give you, aren’t you?’

‘Whatever.’

The man jumped twice, so all of the stuff he had in his backpack readjusted to his back. He wore goggles from the 90s and his skis were long and not very practical in narrow passages between the debris the fallen buildings had turned into years ago. Her skis were short, hardly any longer than skates people used to wear in Central Park fifteen years ago.

‘What if I give you one when we get to the Settlement?’ he smiled somewhere in his scarf.

She said nothing but her schuss stopped looking so offended.

‘So...’ she started.

‘So?’

‘What statue?’

‘The one with the crown and the torch.’

‘Oh, this one.’

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The contrast between temperature inside the building and in the white wilderness outside was as heavy as the layers of snow over the creaking ceiling. The girl had already shed her jacket happily, and proceeded to a fireplace. She got to the hottest place over the mantel and sat there like Cheshire cat with her grin floating under a black fringe.

She said nothing.

The room was almost empty. The humankind had returned to small spaces; the easier to heat up, the better. There were a couple of long benches, walls padded with a tapestry of warm blankets and a big man in a cowboy hat. The door he appeared in crawled soon with other people, looking cautiously at the strangers.

‘Welcome to the Settlement, what brings you here, mate?’ said the Cowboy Hat.

The man was called McThomason as far as they knew. And as far as they knew, he was in charge of the cottage, the mines and the whole Manhattan Fiord.

‘I’m Frank, and I think you know why we are here. We came here all the way from DC.’

‘Aaa, Mr President’s man. C’mon, mate, let’s get some booze together.’

The next room was as big as a closet with tools and cables hanging down from the walls. In the middle of this chaos, there was a small table with a bottle without any label. Labels were also a part of the world that was long gone.

‘Try this stuff, the miners found it somewhere beneath the snow. I think it tastes like a Bakon but they say it must be at least a Smirnoff. Never mind, it’s still better than what we have now.’

‘You know why I’m here, Mr McThomason. You’ve got some serious problems here and it makes the President fairly concerned.’



‘Problems? What problems? We have some minor accidents, but I ain’t sure what could make...’

‘There are people missing here. Mr President’s people. We regard it as a serious problem.’

McThomason raised his glass.

‘To serious problems!’ he made a toast and poured what was inside the glass into his throat. ‘You know, mate, what is this place?’ he asked. Frank said nothing, he was just looking on the host with patience. ‘These are modern freaking quarries, a place where people come to work and get some treasure or die. But dying happens more often. These metal and glass fiords around are no place for such smartasses, pardon my French, mate. Sure, it ain’t mining in solid rock, but it’s not a piece of cake to get under the ice, to the buildings where cold demons live and ice stalactites pin people down like exotic flies in an entololo-something’s collection. To get anything your President may be interested in. Shitty life, I tell ya.’

He reached for the bottle again.

‘That’s why people disappear. They die. Sure, they say there is a white lady dragging lads to her Palace of Ice. And that there is something living in the Stuyvesant High School buildings in the docks. And that there’s a place inside the steel mountains where the snow burns your skin and makes you shed it like a snake. They say many things, because we are back in the freaking Middle Ages, mate.’

‘We all have our ways to get on with the reality.’

‘Yes, we do,’ he said looking into his glass.

Frank stood up.

‘We’ll need as many maps of this area as you can deliver, the roads to the mines are particularly interesting. Maybe you’ve got some plans from Before? Maybe you found some under the snow. Oh, and a room would be a nice gesture. Meanwhile, I’m going to check on the girl.’

The room with the fireplace was even smaller than it was few minutes ago. A couple of miners and a couple of women came inside in the meantime. The miners had long hair like an extra coat on their backs, their beards had barely thawed in the warmth of the Settlement. They still had some ice crystals in their eyelashes. The women must have been McThomason’s daughters. Frank let his eyes skate on their pale skin. They were older than he thought, wrinkles have started their incursion quite a while ago, the gold hair of Glory was already mixed with snow, the black hair of Grace was not entirely black anymore. The daughters sat on a bench in the corner and looked as if they were trying to assess the visitors, especially the girl, with their identical eyes.

Miners too were interested in the girl on the fireplace. Frank focused on their conversation.

‘I ain’t no girlie. My name’s Fat.’

The men laughed. Frank looked at them without a word. He knew that it always ended in the same way.

‘ve seen many of them girlies, but no one of them wanted to be called fat!’

‘Damn, fat you’re not, I know what I mean, my Ma was fat, it don’t look that way!’

‘Oh, no,’ she jumped down from the old mantel. ‘They call me Fat, but not because I AM fat.’

Their big bodies were not able to move fast enough when she got to the table, walked it like a model at a fashion show in an asylum, and grabbed a piece of meat one of them was about to eat.

She swallowed the greasy part and smiled with shiny mouth.

‘Fat!’ she grinned.

The man started to growl.

It’s always the same, Frank sighed. It was his time to join the conversation.

‘Come on, Fat, we have a room to find cosy here! Come, come, come,’ he called her like he could call a bratty kid.

Which she was.

But when she was very close, he whispered into her ear.

‘Check the girls.’

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The Settlement was the last place on the way to the Great Manhattan Mines. The last one with a fireplace, a roof and food anyway. The miners liked to spend their free time in this shrine of pleasures, but it was not usually possible. The mines reached so deep beneath the surface of the ice that people working there must have very often slept in the cold chambers of old buildings covered with meters of snow. Only the tallest towers of Manhattan were visible on the surface. On the other hand, only their basements offered treasures that had not been stolen yet. Or rather ‘not been mined yet.’

But contrary to what was believed, the miners liked warmth as any other human being. Or perhaps even more. At the time, only two of them were visiting the Settlement, bringing with them plastic chairs, steel safes, alcohol, tins and everything that could be sold in one of the big towns of the south.

The tall one with bruised forehead was called Blue Jim, the short one Pulaski, because his father was Polish.

‘Good you’re here. The Foreman said there’s gonna be some guy coming to take care of the Lady,’ whispered Blue Jim.

‘Yes, the Lady,’ added Pulaski. Frank stroked his unshaved face.

‘Have you heard about the Stuyvesant High School? The building down the docks?’ he asked the miners.

The miners looked at each other. Clearly, there were things that even big, bearded bears like them did not like to talk about. Frank’s luck was that they were the things he wanted to know.

‘The miners come and go, you understand?’ began Blue Jim. ‘Very few of them spend here more than several months. It’s a hell of a job: death at every corner, cold and stuff, you understand? But even we want to feel safe, even we.’

‘I’ll try to help you. That’s why I’m asking you about the school.’

The words echoed between them. But they must have been the right words because Blue Jim opened the crack inside his beard.

‘The school is a couple of miles from here. You can see it when the weather’s good. And you can see it from the Mines as well. It ain’t that big but at nights... At nights there is light there. We thought it’s a reflection, like a mirror, but it’s the only light. The only light. Someone’s bound to live there and it ain’t no human, you understand?’

‘I do. But I don’t care. Have you told Mr. Thomason about it?’

‘Oooh yes, sure we did!’ shouted the miner. ‘But he ain’t listen, this man’s eyes are blind, he only cares about his daughters and his booze. We understand it, because his daughters are hot and his booze’s good. But...’

‘But you want something to be done, not just some cowboyish bravery and another orders for more bottles. Tomorrow I’m going to pay the school a visit and find out who resides there.’

There was a quick glimpse of understanding in Pulaski’s old eyes.

‘You really are frank,’ he said with seriousness.

‘So they say.’

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‘Did you know that they once found some honey in the Egyptian Pyramids? And one guy opened a jar, or whatever it was, smelled it and took a handful. And it was good. I think they made some sandwiches and carried on looking for mummies.’

Fat met Glory in the corridor between the fireplace room and the kitchen. She had a pinny round her waist.

‘They ate something they should’ve put in a museum?’

‘Hmm, I guess... But the point is that this is how we know that honey doesn’t go bad. You can store it as long as you want and eat it afterwards.’

Fat looked at her with suspicion.

‘You have honey?’

‘No,’ she said and opened a cupboard. ‘We have Coke. The honey of our times. So, you wanted to have a chat, right?’ she asked when they lounged at a table. It looked like something that could have been decorating an Italian restaurant in the Lower East Side. The cans hissed and the air became sweet and melancholic.

‘No, I wanted to ask you a question. What do you miss? From Before.’

‘What? Aren’t you supposed to find out about the guys that disappeared? How does it help?’ Glory exclaimed with surprise. ‘I thought it’d be something like «where have you been on Monday night between 3 and 4 in the morning?»’

‘No, it’s Frank,’ she answered. ‘I just talk. So?’

‘Hmm...’ Glory lifted her can and stirred it as if it was an expensive alcohol. ‘I miss people, you know? I miss the times when six miners eating in a cafeteria was not a crowd yet, as it is now. When you could get up in the morning, open your eyes and fill them with a sea of people waving in the streets. But you’re too young to remember this, girl.’

‘I’m older than I look’ she replied and Glory sighed.

‘You’ve been to DC, Fat, is it better there?’

Fat studied an image in her head with several brick red buildings surrounded by a wall that tries to hold back the snow, the wind and anything they may carry along. The President lives in the tallest one, an old factory or something, adapted into the new White House. They painted it white actually, but maybe it was just to hide it in this world of snow.

‘Hardly.’

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The night was cold as always. Manhattan slept in perfect darkness. The only person admiring the view was Fat. She stood in a courtyard, as if she was on guard, protecting the Settlement against anything she could protect it against.

‘What are you doing here? It’s freezing!’ said Glory, leaning out of the door. Her voice was hoarse, she must have been sleeping.

‘I don’t sleep.’

‘Well, I see that. But why?’

‘I don’t sleep.’

‘What do you mean? Everybody sleeps!’

‘I don’t.’

Heavy snowflakes were flowing down around her without the tiniest of sounds. This night snow had an oily blue colour, the colour of lazy melancholy.

‘Do you know what happens when I fall asleep?’ she asked. Glory smiled, she liked a good story as much as anybody else. And she knew one when she saw it.

‘No, I don’t.’

‘Right,’ Fat sighed. ‘Neither do I.’ Glory looked on her with disappointment.

‘I don’t know what happens. I’m awake before, and I’m awake after that, but what is between? I don’t know.’

‘Does it scare you?’

‘Scare?’ she turned to Glory for the first time. Hazelnuts looked really tired, as if they fell down in autumn and spent the last fifteen years of winter under the snow. ‘Being dead for hours and then resurrecting every day, checking all my muscles if they still work and eyes if they still see? Of course I’m scared.’

‘That’s why you’ve been asking what we miss? Because you miss dreaming? That’s funny,’ she laughed quietly. When she did it, she sounded like a mouse choking with a piece of cheese.

‘You can’t miss what you’ve never had. And it’s not funny.’

‘It is! People here miss so many things, you know. MP3, NY Yankees, RedTube, you name it! And they will never ever have it back. And you? You can just come back, lie down next to your beefcake guy, and close your eyes. You dream, everybody does, you just don’t remember.’

‘I don’t.’

‘Oh, c’mon!’ said Glory and grabbed her arm. ‘Come, come with me, you’ll see...’

But Fat didn’t move, not an inch. She stayed there like the lady with the crown and the torch stays at the shore.

Glory pulled her once more, and fell down on the snow. She giggled. The smell of wine evaporated from her hair.

‘Tell me something,’ she asked. Fat could barely understand her words among the giggling sounds. ‘Did you ask Grace what she misses? What did she say?’

‘She told me about Peter from her class.’

‘I knew it!’ she laughed. ‘That, my friend, that is one, steamy piece of bullshit. There was no boy in her life Before. Not one at least. She was a high school bitch par excellence! She blew guys, she went to these parties, she didn’t give a crap about anything else. I think she was high when this happened.’ Glory made a wide gesture pointing to the Settlement, the corpses of the skyscrapers around and thousands of tons of snow. ‘I guess she still thinks it’s only a bad high.’

Her last words were almost drowned in the chattering of her teeth. The cold was biting and she had nothing but a dressing gown. As Fat had no answer for her, Glory shook off snow, and crawled back into the tiny sanctuary of the Settlement.

Tomorrow the snow would get half way to its roof.

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The only place that is not too close to the settlement and not too far. With a considerably big venue. And apparently inhabited by something. Or someone.

‘Are you sure you want to go there, Fatima?’ asked Frank. He tried to catch the hazelnut stare but it kept escaping the trap. Eventually, he grabbed his jacket, Peruvian wool hat and enormous mittens that made his arms look like spades.

‘So, did the miners tell you anything?’

‘Mr McThomson gave me some clues, yes. For example that there is an old military base with chemical weapons down there, under the ice. But it was not terribly helpful.’

They stood in front of the Settlement. A pile of different goods brought here by the miners had disappeared under the fresh snow. The skyscrapers glimmered in the distance in what was left from sunlight in their covered with clouds world.

The air was fresh and it smelled like the ocean.

‘Where are we going?’ she asked when Frank took a way down the hill.

‘To a haunted castle.’

‘Neat.’

The snow welcomed their thighs with pleasure.

‘Zip up!’

‘Shut up!’

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A barely visible trail on the snow led to the front door. As if it was haunted by impish ghosts playing mischief to scare those hairy adults in the valley. The walls of the buildings around were black as the cliffs of Valhalla, their ascents disappeared in clouds.

But there was some light glimmering inside the high school building. And some people.

That was the Palace of Ice.

Frank pulled the doors heaping up small banks of snow on both sides. It was not just some people, it was a ball. An absolutely silent and still ball for dozens of guests. Like a party of shiny dummies trying to bend their stiff bodies in waltz played by the light of thousands of ice mirrors around.

‘It’s scary,’ said Fat trying not to forget to chew her gum.

The dancers were covered in ice, the crystals styled their hair and created ball dresses out of the miners’ uniforms. Every step they took seemed to live its own life and ran away echoing around the statues.

They went along the main hall, where people tried to go into spins with their feet being a part of the floor and hug each other with their stiff elbows.

‘Where is she?’ whispered Frank. Fat asked herself the same thing but she did not feel like saying it loudly.

The girl was at the foot of something that was supposed to become stairs made entirely of ice. They led to the upper floor, where more space waited for new dancers. She was sitting in the corner with her face drowned in clothes.

‘So it is her.’

‘Yes, it’s her, Fat. She had to carry water from the docks, work as hard as she would have to do in the mines to make this...’ he stumbled. ‘This exhibition.’

Glory looked like the Snow Queen, but her dress was just a cheap skirt from a retail shop, stuffed with rags to keep the frost away.

Glory looked like the frozen Elsa, but her voice was far from the sweet aria timbre of the princess.

She messed up the old and the new fairy mythology unscrupulously.

‘Get out!’ A whisper from inside the ball of rags. ‘Get out!’

‘You know we can’t go. With the authority given me by...’

‘Please... Why can’t you just go? Why can’t you just be surprised?’

‘We knew,’ answered Fat. Her face was white like snow.

‘How?’

‘As you told me, you missed the crowds. What’s the best kind of a crowd if not a party?’ she tried to smile.

‘I lied.’

Silence. Frank was about to finish the arresting phrase when Glory raised her head and looked at them.

‘It’s not missing, you know? I don’t miss those things, people only miss the things that were real. I remember missing a teddy when dad took us on holidays once. It was real, so I missed it. But these things from Before, the whole life from Before, they are not real anymore, you know? It’s not missing anymore.’

‘What is it then?’

‘It’s a fucking obsession, and we have to feed it!’ she screamed at the top of her lungs. She stood up suddenly, and looked them in their faces. Her eyes were red and swollen. Fat jumped towards her when she saw a barrel leaning out of Glory’s jacket. Silver like ice and just as dangerous. But Glory was faster. She took aim at Fat and croaked.

‘This little thing is a gift from the filthy miners. A useful one. Do you know why they like our home so much? It’s not the food, it’s the cook, if you know what I mean. Yes, Grace treats them nice, as she did Before. See the pattern?’

‘I see a crazy girl with some broken dreams,’ said Frank, but Glory barely paid attention to him. ‘Fatima, take care of her.’

His companion looked confused. She clenched her fists but could not move, hypnotized by the barrel.

‘Fat?!’

‘You think I’m crazy?’ Glory cried. ‘It’s not me who drinks every liquid someone puts under my nose! It’s not me who’s afraid to sleep! It’s not me who travels with the daughter of a rapist! Ha! Surprised? News travels fast, even without the Web!’ She stepped back with the gun still ready to fire. ‘Now, you’re gonna let me...’ she tried to say, but in the very same moment Fat reached for the gun. She was fast like a cat, she could catch a snow rat if she had to, but still, a finger on a trigger was faster.

Glory fired.

But nothing happened. The Lady’s face expressed disbelief and continued to do so even when she was punched and knocked over. She fell heavily on the icy floor and hit her head with an explosion of pain. Fat jumped on her and put her head down. It wasn’t necessary.

Fat stood up and wiped her blood red hands with the down jacket. She gave Frank a long, grim look.

‘Guns from beneath the ice are usually useless,’ he said.

She accepted the explanation ignoring the «usually» as well as she could. The ice statues were still and silent.

‘Do you think we all have to go nuts like her?’ asked the girl.

‘No, Fat, we won’t. Glory was different, you told me that.’

*‘I’m not certain now. After all, snow is all I remember too.’*



**The Dirty Mind**  
*Astrid Juckenack*

The stench of day-old urine, feces, vomit mixed with musky deodorant, and mold seemed to penetrate every last of his alveoli and to settle there, soiling him from within. The restroom was a dingy little place with only two stalls and a gaping hole where the urinal had been ripped out of the wall, located in the basement of the train station, next to a dilapidated-looking kiosk. Rick stared at the toilet bowl in front of him as if he could actually defeat it, his back pressed against the varnished chipwood door of his usual bathroom stall as if it had long since defeated him. He would clean himself of it later today – four minutes from now – the remainder of the time he was intending to spend in the bathroom – plus the half hour he needed to get home. The weather had, in dismal Lower Saxon fashion, been cold and drizzly all day long. The dampness had crept into his clothes in the morning and clung to him ever since, making him freeze and feel like a bacteriological incubator at the same time. At least it only took a few pleasantly stinging breaths of cleaning agent to scour the icky feeling from his lungs, each breath confirming the exact opposite of what the rational part of him knew: that the fumes were probably hurting rather than helping him.

Therapist number three – a thin-skinned woman with a perpetually astonished look on her face – had been shocked to hear of this habit and informed him that “this is an unbelievably dangerous habit, Rick. This is not just obsessive-compulsive, Rick. You are becoming a danger to yourself, Rick. If you are intentionally harming yourself, Rick, this could be a bipolar habit, Rick.” Rick had promptly been referred to a radiologist for an X-ray of the thorax. This procedure never took place, and neither therapist number four nor any of his successors had learned of his respiratory hygiene.

A sudden flicker of the light caused Rick to jump violently. His heart seemed to skip a beat and his mind to go blank at the mere thought of darkness. The back of his head banged against the door and a dull pain flashed through his skull, followed by another short moment of darkness. He sucked in a sharp, toxic breath, took another glance at his watch – two minutes thirty seconds to go – and became still. The outlines of his shadow on the tiled wall in front of him looked clear and steady. The neon tube on the ceiling (not placed exactly in the middle of the room, to Rick’s daily annoyance) gave a small buzz, for the first time as loud as to be

heard over the ventilation's blowing sound but steady nevertheless. He breathed out in relief, for a moment forgetting how much he despised the place. Then, without any further flickers or warning signs, the light went out.

Bathrooms had been the first of his fears. In the beginning, they had only been too small. The walls had closed in on and threatened to crush him, while the doors had been either too heavy or too flimsy, holding him captive and exposing him at the same time. The ventilation had been too loud and an ear-piercing reminder that he was trapped in a closed-off cell, and even though they had never actually filled the room with Zyklon B, the idea had poisoned his thoughts for good. Curiously, the germs had come last. Once he had noticed them, though, he had noticed them everywhere. They were impossible to avoid, impossible to wash off. He had scrubbed his fingers raw, but to remove the skin had not been enough to remove the dirt. To clean himself had made his shower, sink, even his soap dirty, and to clean them had made him dirty again.

At the sight of his bloodied hands, therapist number one/his mom had shed some tears.

“Rick.”

“Mom?”

“Oh, Rick.”

Silence. He hadn't known what to answer her. She was a strong and composed woman who always held her own and helped others to carry their own burden in the process. Then, she had been pleading with him. Rick hadn't ever seen her surrender to anything before. More haunting than the bacteria, fungi and germs that seemed to linger everywhere was the knowledge that it was him who had broken a seemingly unbreakable woman.

“What are you doing?”

“Nothing. Just washing, just... sorry, mom. It's nothing.”

She had taken his hands in hers, clasped them tightly, fearfully. She had tried to assure him that he wasn't dirty at all, that he had always been a healthy child, strong, bursting with energy even when the rest of the family had been down with the flu. Therapist number one/his mom hadn't been able to watch his attempt to wash her off his hands. She was just his mom now. The more he had tried to be clean, the more impossible it had appeared. Failure and disease had stained him equally. This was better now. There were dark, solid scabs on his knuckles. Unpicked for days and healing.

“The only way to tackle this,” therapist number eight had declared in a voice fraught with meaning, “is to remind yourself that cleanliness is not control. It is controlling you, and I challenge you to put yourself back in charge.” Therapist number eight's 250-pound body had radiated a foul odor only chlorine spray seemed to remove from Rick's lungs. After five sessions, his respiratory tract had been too irritated and his progress too minimal to go on.

He had ventured out to challenge himself, though. It was therapist number eight's advice that had compelled Rick initially to enter the restroom. He had been eager to change his habits. His first time of staying in the room for a full five minutes had been his proudest moment in years, and therapist number nine had been delighted. The 50<sup>th</sup> time had been a bitter wake-up call. Who would have ever thought that a challenge could backfire this badly? Twelve therapists later, the five minutes he spent in the restroom each day were a compulsion that baffled every professional.

For the first few seconds in complete and utter darkness, Rick was nothing but stupefied. His glance was as fixed and straightforward as if the wall and toilet were still visible in front of him. The feeling of calm was reminiscent of the feeling he got when given bad but unalterable news. It was a feeling of surrender. The actual realization that he was virtually blind in a space he had felt trapped in to begin with only came as a slow after-thought.

Without a further thought than that he needed to get out, Rick spun around on his heels and bumped into the door again. Slowly at first, then increasingly frantically, he ran his fingers over the door's smooth surface in search for the knob, very aware of all that his fingers touched but he couldn't see. The sound of the ventilation rang in his ears. Rick's breath went sparse and shallow until he began to feel light-headed and gasped for air. With a triumphant, though quick, exultation, he found the knob, twisted it and stumbled in the restroom's sink section. Dark as it was, the thin strip of light that shone through the door sill was unmissable. Rick reached it with a few strides, yanked it open and rushed into the open, brightly lit hallway.

"Careful there!" The woman who had uttered the sentence took a quick step to the right, avoiding to be barged into by a few inches. He slammed the door shut behind him, then looked at her for the first time, trying to mutter an excuse. No words would come. He was relieved to have left the restroom but, tense with stress and fear as they were, his muscles were twitching nervously and put a grimace on his face where there should have been a smile.

The woman looked at him startled and anxious. "Did you see a ghost in there?" She had a soft, friendly voice, one that matched her soft, friendly appearance well.

"No, no, I just... I mean, the lights went out, I had to find my way blindly," Rick stuttered, realizing in mid-sentence that he was rubbing his hands against his coat. The formerly pink, brand-new skin on one of his knuckles had rubbed off and the fresh wound left a thin streak of blood on the fabric. With difficulty, he slid both hands in his pockets to keep them still.

The woman nodded. "Are you alright?"

"I think so." Rick glanced at his watch and frowned. "Five thirty-seven." He mumbled the time to himself, not meaning to address the woman. Five thirty-seven in the afternoon meant that he had spent two and half minutes more in the restroom than he normally did.

“Is that a problem?” The woman asked with one eyebrow raised. “If you need to get somewhere, please just go on. I wouldn’t want to detain you or anything.”

“I don’t need to get anywhere. Well, I’ll eventually need to go home, obviously, but it’s not like there’s a... a schedule or whatnot. I mean, I –” At this point, Rick stopped himself to take a moment and gather his thoughts. He wasn’t meant to spend seven and a half minutes in the restroom. Five minutes were exactly right: that’s why he had chosen five minutes to begin with. Well, he had actually chosen five minutes because they seemed manageable and the additional two minutes and thirty seconds would have been a great accomplishment under regular circumstances. Now, he desperately wanted to go back inside to complete exactly five minutes and dreaded the thought of returning to the dark, torturous room all the same.

“Would you like some disinfectant?”

Following the woman’s gaze, Rick was startled to notice that he had taken his hands out to rub them on his coat and pants again. He felt his cheeks flush with embarrassment but nodded. Was it so obvious that he was dirty? Or that he was crazy?

Therapist number fourteen had insisted that he stay away from disinfectant. It had worked for the first two weeks, until Rick had failed miserably. There was still a faint burn-scar on the back of his right hand. Rick didn’t blame her – she couldn’t have known that he hadn’t known that bleach burned the skin. He didn’t carry sanitizer with him in public because he ran through too much of it if he did, and the stares and hushed comments had eventually become so many that he felt it easier to endure the germs instead.

He held out his hands and she squeezed a few drops of clear, tart-smelling liquid into his palms. Eagerly, Rick spread it over his hands and winced as it came in contact with his damaged knuckles.

“Why does a man who is bothered by these restrooms so much use them when there are cleaner ones upstairs? Too stingy to pay a Euro?” She smiled, not believing what she suggested for even a second.

There were plenty of possible lies that came to Rick’s mind, many of which he had used before. He had successfully convinced therapist number six that he had to clean his bathroom twice a day due to a made-up problem called sewer reflux. Disgusting as it sounded, it had worked wonders. For a long time, even his mother had believed that the plastic covers on his pillows and mattress were to keep his house dust allergy at bay. Even when she had already been certain that he was going crazy, she had not once questioned the allergy.

“It’s a... challenge.”

“Did you pass it?”

It was just like calmly staring into darkness. “I’ll probably need to go back.”

“Or you could do another challenge instead.”

Startled, Rick didn’t know what to say. Nothing he had said or done seemed to make him appear likable – quirky in the best case, scary in the worst. Maybe she

liked to drink coffee and knew one of these modern, open places that were all glass and clear surfaces and disposable cups, spoons, napkins, disposable everything. He hadn't ever had coffee with a woman before, anywhere. It had been years, in fact, since he had bought food in a public place. Or maybe she knew that he wasn't just spooked but a lot more troubled and a lot less attractive for it. Maybe all she saw was that he needed to get away and once they'd reach her platform she'd say "goodbye" and leave. Rick contemplated that for a moment. He would probably be relieved or wouldn't care at all, and just be happy that he had changed something in not torturing himself. He didn't expect women, or any stranger, to like him. Years of sickness had taught him that their mere respect was already much to ask.

"Do you know what this is like?"

She laughed, but not at him. "I really don't. I can catch a later train, though. Just come on. It's fine."

He dreaded the stink and the darkness and the 300 seconds with them, just as much as he dreaded to go against his every instinct and miss them. He nodded, reluctantly but having his mind set on the decision. Time to take on a new challenge.

## NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

In March 2015 the Creative Writing Section of the Association of Students of English, part of the Institute of English Studies of the Jagiellonian University, announced a competition for a short story on the theme of OBSESSIONS. The competition was open to college and university students whose native language was not English. The purpose of the competition was, firstly, to promote the study of English, and secondly, and more importantly, to foster literary creativity. By the 30<sup>th</sup> of May the organisers received twenty-one submissions in the form of coded, anonymous entries. After an initial review eliminating stories of an inadequate level of English, nineteen stories were presented for assessment to the jury, which comprised people professionally tied to literature or literary criticism. The jurors included (in alphabetical order): Katarzyna Bazarnik, Ph.D., a literary scholar, editor and writer, Anna Filipek, MA, an award-winning author in the 2010 European Daniil Pashkoff Prize for Creative Writing in English by Non-native Speakers competition, Soren Gauger, a Canadian writer and playwright living in Kraków, Prof. Marta Gibińska-Marzec, an eminent literary scholar and Shakespeare specialist, Michał Palmowski, Ph.D., a literary scholar and writer, and Renata Strzok, a member of the Creative Writing Section of the ASE JU. The jury met on the 10<sup>th</sup> of June 2015, and after presenting their preferences, followed by a discussion, they decided on the list of stories to be included in the present anthology. The following list shows the number of votes received by particular stories: Jakub Wiśniewski's "Mrs. White's Promise" – six votes, Edyta Gaida's "Sun under Ice" – four votes, Janina Huss's "Dreaming of Mountains" – three votes, Tomasz Seweryn's "The Methane Lake" – two votes, Wojciech Łukasik's "The Corridor to the Right" – two votes, while all the remaining stories received one vote each. Admittedly, some pieces tackle the topic of obsession rather loosely, and do not fit a narrow, dictionary definition. Others approach the genre of the short story in an adventurous way. But both the jurors and the editors see this as a merit, not a flaw, of the collection. Hence, the anthology represents a varied choice of topics, forms and subjects inspired by the competition theme. The following Afterword summarises the jury's verdict and offers more detailed impressions on all the awarded stories, while the theoretical article discusses the present scholarship on the genre of the short story.

## JURY'S AFTERWORD

Meeting on the 10<sup>th</sup> of June 2015 to discuss and select the best short stories for the present anthology, we were faced with a difficult task. First of all, as we initially agreed, most of the stories submitted for our consideration were articulately written and demonstrated an advanced command of English – a language foreign to all the participating authors. Creating imaginative fiction is the highest challenge for anybody learning a foreign language. One needs to master not only advanced grammar and vocabulary, idioms, and registers, but most of all, subtleties of literary styles, natural dialogue, and generic norms, in this case those of the short story. In our opinion the participants of the competition have met these expectations with an admirable degree of success.

We read the submissions with growing interest, feeling – as we were moving on from one story to another – more and more engrossed in the imaginative worlds evoked by the young writers. Three stories in particular caught our attention. The first, selected unanimously for the anthology, is Jakub Wiśniewski's "Mrs. White's Promise." Its theme, psychological maturity, and excellent sense of literary style impressed us greatly. The second most appreciated story is Edyta Gaida's "Sun under Ice", which allured us by its gripping images of a frozen, post-apocalyptic world. It was not alone, in fact, as other stories were set in similar surroundings, including "Dreaming of Mountains" by Janina Huss. This turned out to be the most controversial submission. We all admired the author's style and sense of composition, and enjoyed reading it, yet the generic status of the text seemed unclear. However, we recognise that generic boundaries in contemporary writing are fuzzy enough to allow the critics to call Jorge Luis Borges a short story writer. We also saw a vivid character confessing to us, the readers, her obsession, so we have granted her our pardon and included her in the anthology, leaving theoretical concerns to be solved in the following article. A similar sense of character is evident in two other stories which rely on this instead of plot: Wojciech Łukasik's "The Corridor to the Right" and Krystian Pilch's "tap tap tap". But there is more to say about each story, and below we offer brief reflections on each title.

Jakub Wiśniewski's "Mrs. White's Promise" is the undisputed winner of the competition; it is the only story shortlisted by all the jurors, which, considering the fact that the jurors' literary tastes do vary, is a unique achievement. "Mrs White's Promise" plunges us into the consciousness of the eponymous heroine who obsessively relives a past event. Fifteen years ago she accidentally witnessed a terrible crime and she was forced to make a promise that she could not keep: she

promised the murderer not to inform the police. Now this broken promise weighs heavily on her conscience. Being a very religious person, she considers it a serious transgression and demands due penance. The story appealed to the jurors for various reasons. Some considered the creation of the character of Mrs. White a remarkable feat of imagination, as she seemed extremely convincing. Others praised the story's composition: the story is told by means of an extensive flashback interrupted repeatedly by Mrs. White's stream of consciousness (which most likely is Mrs. White confessing her sin for the hundredth time to Father O'Mara). Yet we all agreed that the story's chief merit is its rich, supple language. This language alone could be a source of "aesthetic bliss."

Edyta Gaida's "Sun under Ice" is one of the stories that have attracted the attention of several jurors, scoring the second highest number of points in our voting. Located in an orphanage for girls in a post-apocalyptic world (not the only one in this collection), it is a story of an alienated eighteen-year-old Jorda, who blackmails her younger inmates to let her join them on a secret night trip to a nearby village. The author builds up suspense successfully, leading us to a surprising and highly disturbing end. Though this seemed slightly contrived to some jurors, we all appreciated the author's vivid imagination and skill in composing a coherent and detailed universe in a limited textual space. And she definitely knows how to hold her readers' attention to the very last sentence.

Janina Huss's "Dreaming of Mountains" was perhaps the most hotly disputed story of the bunch, owing to the fact that it bears more resemblance to an essay than a short story. This was enough for some of the jurors to disqualify it outright. However, we ought to remember that if Marcel Duchamp calls a urinal a work of art, then it goes in a museum. And if the author in question calls her reflections on mountains a short story, then we have no reason to disbelieve it. Most importantly, however, few of the other pieces we read were as cohesive, focused, mature, and ultimately compelling as this one, all of which tends to make issues of genre slide into the background. Ultimately, considering expandable boundaries of the genre blurred by Franz Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges, and Robert Coover, to name only a few, and the compositional and stylistic merits, the jury decided that this text deserves publication.

"The Methane Lake" by Tomasz Seweryn is another post-apocalyptic story, set in a distant sphere of the Solar system, where a team of scientists, including a married couple – the main heroes of the story – are exploring Titan. The husband becomes fascinated with a mysterious Artifact hovering over the eponymous lake, leading ultimately to a fatal obsession. The narration fluctuates between the present and the past, as if imitating the lulling movement of the methane waves. It also alternates between the first- and third-person voice, which adds an interesting



dimension to the story, reminding us of Lem's *Solaris*, by which it could have been inspired. It offers more intertextual fun, as it also contains allusions to Tolkien's famous cycle. This is another author who knows how to keep his readers interested till the end.

Wojciech Łukasik's "The Corridor to the Right", a story about a "visit" to the basement, was judged by some to be wounded by its own ambitions – though in most of the jurors' opinion it is a much nobler thing to be injured by one's *ambitions* than by a lack thereof. The writer has a splendid eye for juxtaposition ("pickled cucumbers and the Plutonian abyss") and a nose for what is evocative to the senses (almost everything in the piece exudes a smell or is tangible to the fingertips). What made the decision firm, however, was the simple fact that, in a couple of places while reading, we experienced that sudden "Ah!" when, amidst reams of more-or-less competent writing, one stumbles across something that looks very much like literature. Take this bit, for example, with the sudden drop at the end: "There were small drops of water even on the cobwebs below the ceiling, all black from the dirt they have been collecting since their makers abandoned them, like the great watchmaker did abandon the world after its creation. As above, so below."

Krystian Pilch's "tap tap tap" runs like a snowball down a steep hill. The story opens with a racing quarrel and it only gains momentum along the pages, sparkling curt replies in a verbal ping-pong. As every scream of the duelists triggers the next bang of a reply, the reader follows at a dizzying pace, picking up the fragments of reality revealed in brief understatement: a woman who returns from the past, a claustrophobic cell, a dead guy. The image that slowly emerges is a grim one, and the quarrel obsessively circles around the urge to take a drug to obliterate all worry – and all chance for renewal. As the two voices battle for and against taking the shot from the syringe, the reader is reminded of the devil and angel battling for a soul – only the angel is not entirely angelic, and the devil assumes the shape of a loving brother. To complicate the situation, it is also far from certain if the two fighters are indeed separate characters or just two voices in one head – one egging him on to return to the old habit, the other urging to him quit. The racing snowball inevitably crashes into a house when the main character learns about the death of his former, yet still loved wife – the battle to save your soul is lost when you lose your love. As everything around becomes dead still, the main character ends the quarrel by taking his own life with the fateful syringe. The reader is left only with the quiet and rhythmic tapping of his trickling blood.

Tomasz Trela's "Traces" follows the story of an illustrator whose work is impeded by the same face syndrome: every older male character he draws seems to resemble his long-unseen father. To some jurors it read somewhat like a thriller: in

the dynamic depictions of the hero's creative process, marked by an obsessive drive to recreate the face he remembers from childhood, there is a lot of suspense to capture the readers' attention. As the story progresses, some readers may feel that their expectations of something "terrible enough for a thriller" are left unfulfilled. However, you cannot but appreciate the insightful account of the hero's efforts to cope with the dissonance between two different images of his father that are equally vivid in his memory. The way the author balances showing and telling to present his readers with a rounded, psychologically complex character is another merit that determined our choice.

"The Well of Obsession" by Magdalena Szumlińska is a story of a mother obsessed with the safety of her little son. The author builds a convincing psychological portrait of a traumatised woman. Launching off with a report of war atrocities broadcast on the news, the narration twists into a cosy bedroom to show us the mother suddenly terrified by the silence of the electronic nanny. Then we move to a playground threatened with a sudden thunderstorm, juxtaposed with a seemingly peaceful café, where the mother is meeting her friend. These scenes are layered with retrospections disclosing a tragedy behind the initially serene picture of family life. The author has a good sense of structure. The series of scenes showing the protagonist's growing anxiety leads us to a surprising climax: in a kind of framing device she returns to the war images to link them ingeniously with the heroine of her story, and leaves the ending disturbingly open.

Erica Johansson's "Sweet Bea and Sour Cass" is perhaps the only story in the collection that provides the readers with a moment of comic relief, which was the quality appreciated by the present jury. After all, it is not an easy task to write a humorous story on a theme that suggests distressing or morbid topics, and the author rose to the challenge with admirable charm. The eponymous heroines are sisters as different from one another as lollipops from lemons. Despite that, their relationship is deep and loving, but not sentimental. The author manages to convey this through an account of just one crazy night during which both sisters surprise one another. The story is narrated at a brisk pace, in colloquial, witty dialogues, and closes with a truly funny slip of the tongue.

"Snow Is All I Remember" by Jakub Biernacki revisits the post-apocalyptic vision of everlasting winter and humanity reduced to scavengers struggling for survival. However, this future world well-known in literature and cinema gains a unique quality through a series of unsettling, yet beautiful images that haunt the reader long after the story has finished. Over just a dozen or so pages, the author reveals a rich imagination, a complete world and characters who cannot be easily forgotten. Painted with careful strokes of well-chosen language, the consistent images leave the reader with lingering coldness. The final scene in the hall filled

with ice sculptures of dancing people proves particularly disturbing, as the frozen figures reflect the underlying theme of frozen memory. What do you miss from the past? What do you remember from the past? Was any past actually real if snow is all that you still remember? The truth of memories and their bearing on the “here and now” are the issues approached on the deeper level of the story, but the author avoids clear answers. As a result, in the palace of the Snow Queen, Kai is left still struggling with the splinter stuck in his heart and eye.

Astrid Juckenack’s “The Dirty Mind” is the story of a man obsessed, quite literally, with dirt. After the shocking exposition of the hero in his habitual surrounding – a lousy public restroom in the undergrounds of a train station – the author plunges into an equally unsettling reminiscence of his past. The jurors who recommended this story for publication were convinced primarily by the way the theme of obsession pervades the whole text. It is not just the hero’s disorder that might be labeled “obsessive”: the use of first-person narration to convey a case history where even the patient’s mother is called “therapist number one”, and the patient himself shown as lacking any traits other than obsessiveness, are in themselves... obsessive. We also appreciated the surprising “normalcy” of the final scene, which introduces hope and relief to this otherwise dark picture of a life with obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Generally, all the jurors praised the authors for their excellent command of English grammar, vocabulary and their feel for literary style (although, admittedly, a few minor language mistakes were spotted in some of the awarded stories, and corrected in the editing and proofreading process). We also appreciated their deep understanding of the generic conventions, as well as divergent paths and creative exploration followed by the young authors. Indeed, some texts anthologised here take an adventurous approach to the genre of the short story. But let us repeat, in conclusion, that “it is a much nobler thing to be injured by one’s *ambitions* than by a lack thereof.”

*Katarzyna Bazarnik, Anna Filipek, Soren Gauger, Marta Gibińska-Marzec,  
Michał Palmowski, and Renata Strzok*

Katarzyna Bazarnik, Edyta Gaida, Wojciech Łukasik, Dominika Stankiewicz

### **Dreaming of the Short Story**

*Stories are central genres in all cultures, in some form in almost every imaginable situation and stage of life. They are intimately woven into the minutiae of everyday life, whenever we come together. They are told in all social groupings to interpret life's chaos and rhythms, to evaluate each other's behaviour, and to educate and entertain our children. There is something miraculous about the way a child's attention is instantly drawn by a story, as their imagination is ignited and held. And the power of stories to grip the imagination of adults is no less mysterious, either as origin myths so potent they have moulded the destinies of nations and continents for millennia, or as literary fiction that can absorb and excite the most rational minds of the modern era.*

J.R. Martin and D. Rose, *Genre Relations. Mapping Culture* (49)

Almost every anthology of short stories is prefaced with a discussion of the genre in which the editors attempt to capture the essence of the short story. Almost every such attempt fails. Understandably so, since the short story is both notoriously simple and difficult to define. The self-explanatory label is deceptive. What does the word "story" mean exactly? What components does a text need to have to be called "a story"? Moreover, what does "short" mean? Shorter than a novel? (But how long is the novel?) Where does a short story end and a novella begin? Does a one-page-long story belong to the same genre as a twenty-page-long one? Is a Six-Word-Story really a story? In this article we attempt to provide tentative answers to these questions, first summarising critical and theoretical discussions of the genre. Then, using the present anthology as a case study, we offer its reader-writer-oriented analysis, supported by some stylometric evidence. Our motivation to discuss this stems from the fact that the choice of short stories presented in this anthology calls for such an enquiry and some explanation, too.

In his discussion of the "short" aspect of the form, Ian Reid, the author of a concise but comprehensive study of the genre, notes that it is impossible to draw an arithmetical equation to determine the perfect size for the short story. He also points to the lack of unity in the trans-lingual terminology, as the English "novel" has a different denotation from the German "Novelle", French "nouvelle", and

Italian “novella”. English lacks its own term to denote a piece of literature which is between the short story and the novel in terms of length (Reid, 11). Polish also distinguishes between *opowiadanie* (“short story”) and *nowela*, akin to the German, French and Italian forms.

When Reid tries to present the quintessential qualities of the short story (Reid, 54), he ends up deconstructing them. According to the scholar, they include “unity of impressions,” which he, however, does not find necessary for a short story to be successful (Reid, 55), a “moment of crisis,” which according to him may be ambiguous, left to interpretation, or even absent from a text (Reid, 56), and “symmetry of design,” which he finds in many cases obsolete, as it often results in an obvious and unsurprising plot resolution, and may be boring (Reid, 60). Finally, he concludes that the short story cannot be discussed in normative terms and that what he calls its “protean variety” (Reid, 3) demands an inclusive attitude towards the genre (Reid, 7).

However, for many readers and theorists, “story” is to a great extent tantamount to a plot. Understood as a representation of a sequence of events, it seems akin to, if not identical with, the definition of the plot in the Aristotelian sense. As such, the story is the fundamental component of many literary genres, and to some extent it is traceable even in most lyrical texts (Miller, 74-75). Following this classical definition, a story can be understood as a series of actions linked by causal relations. Or, to use another set of terms, the minimal requirements for a story are the exposition, complication and resolution, with a possible addition of evaluation, and the coda (Martin and Rose, 50). Reid suspects that this still favoured insistence on the tripartite sequence stems from human predilection for symmetry and certain aesthetics based on the number three (Reid, 6). However, he believes this normative rule to be obsolete and names Sylvia Plath’s “Johnny Panic” and “The Bible of Dreams,” and Robert Coover’s “The Babysitter” among others, as examples of short stories in which linearity and the cause-and-effect order is disrupted. Still, he assumes that some sort of plot is necessary in a short story, as in “The Babysitter,” marked by “psychological action” (Reid, 7).

While it is true that many stories rely strongly on this pattern, numerous writers have been offering us different kinds of stories for at least the past one hundred years. Already in 1945 A.L. Bader spoke of “older” and “newer” type of story:

Readers and critics accustomed to an older type of story are baffled by a newer type [...] they maintain that the modern short story is plotless, static, fragmentary, amorphous— frequently a mere character sketch or vignette, or a mere reporting of a transient moment, or the capturing of a mood or nuance—everything, in fact, except a story. (86)

This also rings true for the stories collected in the present anthology. While the majority of them are intuitively recognised as fitting into the generic boundaries, there are some problematic cases. Take “The Corridor to the Right”, for example, or “Dreaming of Mountains”—two pieces that at first glance hardly comply with the definition specifying that the short story is “a relatively brief fictional narrative in prose” that “possesses at least the rudiments of plot” (Harmon and Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, 406-407). “The Corridor” begins with an exposition that seems to promise a dramatic story. The initial sentence informs us that some events have changed the narrator’s perception of the surroundings, and we hear him describe the descent into a cellar. A vivid description of the gloomy, unwelcoming setting immediately brings up connotations with the Gothic tale. So we read on avidly, with growing suspense and apprehension, evoked by detailed, poetic descriptions of the dark, damp, and dirty basement. But in this case the whole plot boils down to a series of movements through the corridors. As in Chris Offutt’s stories analysed by John Gerlach, here also “[n]arrative is an impulse that leads to lyric all-at-once perception” (55). In fact, the structure of Łukasik’s story relies on a juxtaposition of meditative passages with flashbacks bringing back images from the hero’s past. This can be perhaps better described as the “strategy of emplotment,” which results in the story being perceived more in terms of a spatial structure than a linear narrative. Hence, Bader was right to notice that in such stories the point of emphasis shifts from presentation of events to a description of a mood or atmosphere. But according to Charles May, such a “movement away from the linearity of prose toward the spatiality of poetry” has always been present in the historical development of the genre. He is convinced that “the short story has always been more closely associated with lyric poetry than with its overgrown narrative neighbor, the novel” (May in Gerlach, 44).

Besides, considering the plot the main or the dominant component of a short story would exclude from the genre other important components equally essential to this literary form. Let us look at another, better known example, and consider: what is Jamaica Kincaid’s “Girl”? It has little plot either, at least in the “traditional” sense. Syntactically, it consists of only one sentence. Yet after reading it, we feel that we know the character, her life, her story, her struggle – is that not the very same effect that other, plot-driven short stories have on us? Reid notes the predilection of the short story to focus on a moment of great psychological significance, and on an individualized, main character who more often than not is a sort of an outcast, someone who differs in some respect from the majority, which he sees as its Romantic inheritance (Reid, 28). So what differentiates the short story from the novel is not only the length, but also what the novel makes explicit and the short story communicates implicitly, hinting at it with subtle stylistic devices. We judge the quality of short stories by their ability to create realistic, complete characters and their stories without ever fully describing them *per se*.

To understand better the role of characters in the short story, it may be useful to resort to A. Greimas's concept of actants. They are types of agents that may have different manifestations in a narrative and can perform different functions. Actants appear as certain forces in a text; they belong to the syntactic order, while characters to the semantic order (Herman and Vervaeck 2005, 52-53). So when Martin Scofield proposes "an idea as a hero" as central to some stories, this can be understood in Greimas's terms. Scofield distinguishes "a mode of story in which the overall idea, rather than character, plot or 'themes' in the usual sense, dominates the conception of the work and gives it its unity or deliberate disunity" (5). In the short story, it enables the author to focus on one idea, rather than create a network of them, and this also makes up the difference between the short story and the novel – this singularity of focus is what all definitions agree upon. Scofield explicates another important point, mainly that "[t]he 'idea as hero' should not suggest a 'thesis-driven' or polemical work, or one that works discursively rather than poetically" (5). Here, we need to mention two other features that differentiate not between a story and a novel, but between a short story and a narrative essay: namely, the aesthetic function and the element of fiction. Short stories are meant to convey actions and emotions, not to inform, persuade or teach, as essays tend to do. What is more important, when reading a story, we cannot identify the author with the narrator. Unless we know the author to be the narrator, we must necessarily treat the story as a piece of fiction, a work of creative imagination rather than an account of real events.

In view of the above reflections, it is perhaps easier to understand why "Dreaming of Mountains," the most controversial contribution to the collection, seemingly much closer to an essay than a plot-driven story, has been ultimately included in the anthology. It is an extended meditation on the mysterious attraction of high mountain climbing. Yet even in this generically hybrid piece "rudiments of plot" are detectable. We can easily imagine the author, speaking to us in the first person voice, a timid "office worker from a coastal town" who has never climbed a snowy peak in her life (Huss, 18), sitting at her desk, surrounded by books about Mount Everest, devouring them passionately, or brooding on her subject, reminiscing about her past readings, and recalling her only trip to South Asia, and then starting to type with determination. So her story begins with her reading; the complication consists in her contemplation of undertaking a climbing trip, and the resolution is tantamount to her realisation that she would be unable to pursue her dream of "high mountains." Her story concludes with a realisation that what really counts for her "is just sheer joy. And joy is, after all, the end of life. We do not live to eat and make money. We eat and make money to be able to enjoy life. That is what life means and what life is for" (Huss, 21).

So it seems that the author-narrator has had her epiphany, if epiphany is the essence of the short story, as Mary Rohrberger, another eminent critic of the genre, implies. In their focus on the final illumination "Dreaming of Mountains" and

“Corridor to the Right” are close to the definition offered by this scholar. In “Origins, Development, Substance, and Design of the Short Story,” Rohrberger explains why she thinks that all short stories are in fact modernist in form, even though the genre originates in Romanticism. To her, a short story is something more than just a plot, a mere sequence of events. A “short story” proper is *symbolic*, meaning that it offers more than it gives by means of the plot. It is to be distinguished from “simple narrative,” that is a story that has all the features of the genre, but is by no means symbolic. Rohrberger resorts to Joseph Frank’s concept of *spatial form*: “a set of narrative techniques and processes of aesthetic perception that works to impede linearity” as a feature fundamental for the genre (6). As she argues, while some novels may make use of the spatial form, all short stories rely on it. They need to be seen from the perspective of synchrony, not diachronically, due to their form. Another crucial element, according to her, is epiphany, inherent in short stories. In Rohrberger’s words, even though the surface structure of short stories evolved from Romanticism through modernism to postmodernism, the genre has consistently “defied linearity and arrested time and movement in an eternal and continuous present” (8). Viewed from the perspective of Henri Bergson’s theory of time, short stories are synchronic (rather than diachronic), set in the “psychological” (and not the “mechanical”) time – they show overlapping events, where the past merges with the present, irrespective of the clock.

The short story is characterized by multiple levels generated by substructures that underlie narrative surfaces. Embedded with images forming patterns, metaphoric designs, allusions that resonate, linking small actions or objects in the extensional world with cosmic wholes, short story surfaces occasionally parallel but usually diverge from their substructures, creating tensions, contradictions, ironies, ambiguities, paradox, flux. (Rohrberger, 8-9)

Thus, a good short story captures the passage of time in a moment, showing past, present and the future with the epiphany being “a point of frozen energy resonating just beyond understanding” (Rohrberger, 10). Therefore the metaphysical notion that in the short story there is “more than meets the eye” is inherent to the genre and inscribed in its form. This remains in conformity with observations offered by May, Gerlach and Scofield, who all emphasise compositional coherence and poetic dimension as its essential aspects.

All submissions for this competition in short story writing demonstrate a deep understanding of the features discussed above. Even those that demonstrate extreme generic fuzziness contain their traces, simultaneously proving that the short story may be understood in nuanced and subtle ways. Moreover, some might argue that if the author considers her or his work to be a short story, no one has the authority to say otherwise and that is how you define the term. Admittedly, such a Duchampian attitude, inspiring as it may be in visual arts, seems more



problematic in literature. Making a Borgesian gesture of repeating someone else's words in a short story contest would amount to plagiarism, not admiration. However, Borges's stories are most appropriate to be mentioned here as a context in which one needs to read some texts included in the present collection. As was signalled above, there was a particularly fierce debate on whether to accept "Dreaming of Mountains" as an entry for the competition at all. The majority of jurors initially claimed that it is not a short story because it has no plot and strongly resembles an essay in its tone. But, as we argued above, after all it *is* a *kind* of story – an imaginative fictional representation – of a yearning mind obsessed with others' obsession, composed of snippets of information that form a myth of the mountain and validate the protagonist's emotions. Through this short piece we get to know the narrator-protagonist – her identity, her dreams, her desires – just as we get to know Jamaica Kincaid's anonymous girl.

However, Huss's piece is evidently a borderline case and it would be interesting to measure by some objective means if it were closer to other short stories or to essays. Fortunately, such a question of generic belonging may be examined in a newly devised, experimental way. A dynamically developing field of digital humanities offers us tools of empirical research to verify such controversies. We have decided to use stylometric methods to examine "generic signals" in the stories collected in the present anthology and compare them with the classics of the short story and the essay with the view to identify the position of fuzzy cases. Basic stylometric research entails preparing a corpus (a group of texts in plain text format) of books or stories, which are later cut down into words. The software "then compares the results for individual texts, performing e.g. distance calculations and using various statistical procedures (cluster analysis, multidimensional scaling, or principal components analysis)" (Eder, Rybicki, Kestemont 6). When the table-creating function is enabled, the software also prepares a sheet file, which can be used for Gephi visualisation. It was the basis for the general assumptions made below, since the scope of this article does not allow for a detailed stylometric analysis, which would include multiple comparisons and diagrams. The analysis used in this article was performed with the R software, the *stylo* package, and the Gephi software used for visualisation.

For the purpose of this article, the stories included in the volume were grouped into a corpus together with some classics of the fantastical short story: Poe, Machen, Bierce, Lovecraft, R.E. Howard, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. These authors were the subject of previous research, therefore it was easy to monitor the results now. Also included were a few essays and philosophical texts, some in translation, by Mark Twain, Francis Bacon, Bertrand Russell, Abraham Lincoln, George Eliot, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Michel de Montaigne. Once again, the use of all-time classics makes it easier to monitor the outcome of the research (from the researchers' perspective), since their texts are generally well-known and recognised as generic models for the short story and the essay.

Obsessions stylo  
Cluster Analysis

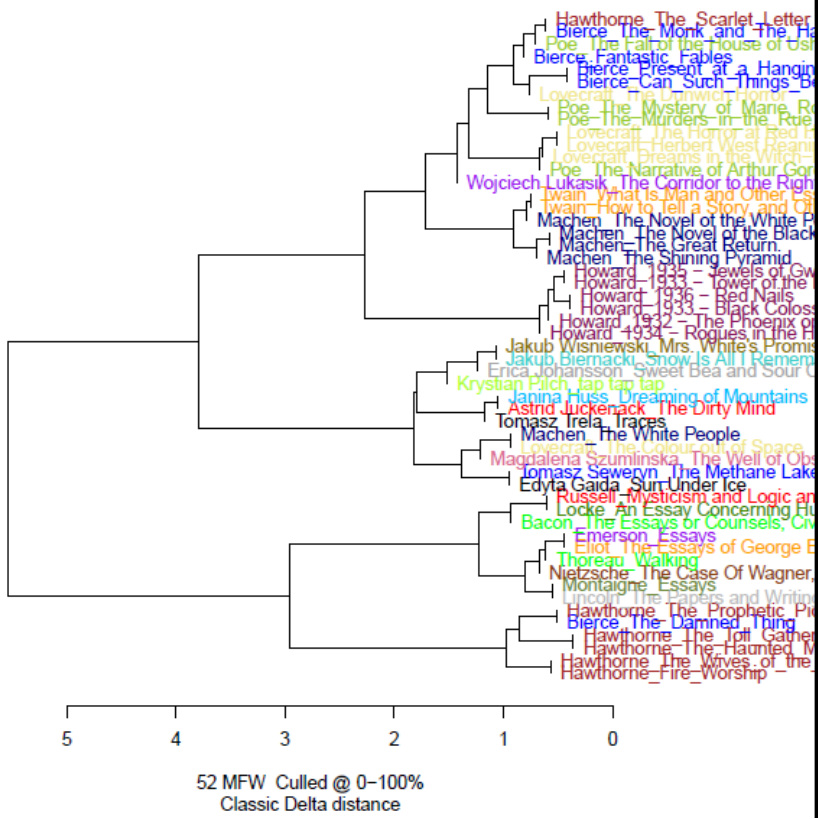


Fig. 1. Cluster analysis of 53 short stories, essays, and philosophical texts, including the 11 short stories anthologised in *Obsessions*.



First of all, the basic cluster analysis clearly divided all texts into two groups: essays and short fiction, with the controversial contributions (“Dreaming of Mountains” and “The Corridor to the Right”) clustering with the short stories (see Fig. 1: the cluster analysis shows the most basic connections, while Fig. 2 allows for a more elaborate analysis since it shows more connections in one picture). Further, in the Gephi visualisation, the fictional texts have also grouped together in a large cluster, with a protruding area of essays, and a few extended branches, leading to other essays by Nietzsche, Bacon, and Locke. Ambrose Bierce’s work seems to have formed a buffer between the short stories and essays by Twain, Lincoln, Emerson, Thoreau, Montaigne, and Russell. Nathaniel Hawthorne seems significantly different from the other short story authors included here, probably because of his focus on social, rather than fantastical, themes (see Fig. 2).

It is evident from the diagrams that the texts included in the present anthology are firmly within the area occupied by classical short stories. The stories by Jakub Wiśniewski (*Mrs. White’s Promise*), Edyta Gaida (*Sun Under Ice*), Jakub Biernacki (*Snow Is All I Remember*) and Magdalena Szumlińska (*The Well of Obsession*) have turned out quite close and strongly connected to R.E. Howard’s *Red Nails*, perhaps because of the authors’ choice of themes (Gaida’s with phrases like “ice covered in blood”) and the use of American English (Wiśniewski and Szumlińska). Tomasz Trela’s story has shown up quite close to *Rogues in the House* and to Lovecraft’s *Dreams in the Witch-House* and *The Dunwich Horror*. Astrid Juckenack’s *The Dirty Mind* is statistically similar to *The Jewels of Gwalhur*.

On the other hand, Tomasz Seweryn’s *The Methane Lake* is, quite expectedly, rather strongly connected with H.P. Lovecraft’s *Herbert West – Reanimator*, another science-fiction tale. Łukasik’s story, *The Corridor to the Right*, is strongly connected to *The Dunwich Horror* and *The Jewels of Gwalhur* on the other side of the diagram. It is logical, since it was intended as a weird tale, but the Howard connection is somewhat surprising, since the story’s static style seems to be closer to Lovecraft than to Howard’s action-laden prose.

The stories by the anthologised authors are also interconnected: some of them show a high degree of similarity. Most significantly, Jakub Biernacki’s story is very strongly connected with Erica Johansson’s *Sweet Bea and Sour Cass* (also linked to Machen’s *The Shining Pyramid*), which is in turn connected to Krystian Pilch’s *tap tap tap*. Jakub Wiśniewski’s story is also somewhat similar to Biernacki’s *Snow Is All I Remember*, while Szumlińska’s story is (not very strongly) linked to Janina Huss’s *Dreaming of Mountains*. The latter, being the most controversial case in the anthology, does prove to be somewhat distant from the other stories, lying in the middle ground between the short story and the essay. It is strongly connected to Mark Twain’s *What Is Man? And Other Essays*, which can be seen as confirmation of the editors’ and jurors’ opinion that Janina Huss’s story is a text hybridizing the two genres. However, as we hope to have demonstrated here, generic labels should not be treated as strict regulations. Of course, genres are characterised by a set of

formal and thematic features, connected to “a situation of address which mobilises a set of rhetorical purposes, and a more general structure of implications” (Frow, 31); and above we enumerate most of those specific to the short story. But for modern theorists, genres function more as guidelines for reading and interpretation than strictly delineated boundaries separating specific texts. As Martin Scofield reminds us, “[g]enres [...] are not essences, and we may give ourselves unnecessary labour if we try to identify one element or principle which defines the short story” (4). So they are better understood as “frames that establish appropriate ways of reading or viewing or listening to texts” (Frow, 31).

Returning to Duchamp’s “Fountain” once more to illuminate Janina Huss’s method of composition, it can be argued that the ready-made used by the French artist in the gallery context let real-life objects into the sphere of visual arts, thereby expanding the repertoire of possible materials and devices available for visual artists. Using “literary ready-mades” may entail mixing different genres, a practice that has a long tradition in literary history. Likewise, writers may resort to factual information, or other literary and non-literary texts and mix them in creative ways, as the author of “Dreaming of Mountains” did. Admittedly, Huss’s strategy to fuse actual people and places with a fictional character obsessed by her dream in a semi-essayistic narrative can be simultaneously seen as a familiar gesture and a risky enterprise. But “[e]ven if a text disrupts all the expectations we may have of it, these expectations nevertheless form the ways in which we can read it and the ways in which we can change our minds (that is, develop new expectations),” writes John Frow in his study of genre (30). Huss’s piece has definitely made us rethink our understanding of the short story. So perhaps rather than lamenting the generic hybridity of “Dreaming of Mountains,” the readers should focus on understanding how the author manages to fuse the elements of the fictional and the non-fictional, the literary and the factual in a beautifully coherent piece. After all, it is the pleasure of aesthetic experience and epiphany experienced vicariously with the main character that seem to be fundamental features of short fiction, and these are strongly present in her text and other stories included in this collection.

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## Acknowledgements

All the people involved in the publication of this book deserve many thanks. I would like to thank the Authors for taking part in our competition, and our excellent jury – prof. Marta Gibińska-Marzec, dr Katarzyna Bazarnik, Soren Gauger, Anna Filipek, and Renata Strzok – for choosing the best works.

I would also like to thank Ramon Shindler, M.Sc. for his expert proofreading, and Dominika Stankiewicz and Renata Strzok for their inexhaustible energy in hunting down all typos. Also, thanks to Tomasz Trela for designing the cover.

Many, many thanks to Agata Majewska. She was the one who first said “Let’s make a competition!” and helped us through the process thanks to her vast knowledge about organizing student projects, publishing books, and successfully applying for funds.

Thanks to Anna Pecka, who came up with the theme for the competition and remained an unceasing source of support throughout the project.

I am also very grateful to dr hab. Bożena Kucala for writing a review of this Anthology.

Mr Darius Degher of the Shipwrights Review deserves many thanks for spreading the news of our competition among his students. He was the only one who reacted to our invitation so enthusiastically and it is thanks to him that the Anthology can boast three excellent stories written by the students of the Malmö University.

Last, but certainly not least: dr Katarzyna Bazarnik. Without her, the book would never have been published. She helped us overcome hurdles large enough to easily thwart our initiative. She invested a lot of her time into the project and remained its enthusiastic and dedicated supporter from the beginning to the end. I cannot thank you enough, dr Bazarnik.

Once again, I thank all the people who had a part in creating this Anthology. Without you, it would have never come to be.

Edyta Gaida

