

RUTHLESS PEOPLES MAGAZINE

STORM WARNING

RPM 06, 28 July 2009

A Penny Dreadful for Nothing

~CONTENTS~

Butterflies #3 ~ <i>Nein, nein, nein!</i> ~ by Laos D. Feng (<i>scifi</i>)	1
Krissy and the Gingerbread Man ~ by Kurt Kirchmeier (<i>kids</i>)	21
Name is the Sun ~ by Miles Klee (<i>slipstream</i>)	28
Emotionally Stunted by Hannia West (<i>whoops!</i>)	31
Hunger Pains ~ by Natalie L. Sin (<i>dieting</i>)	34
A Garden ~ by M.E. Purfield (<i>self help</i>)	46
Adamsesque Outing ~ by Marcie Tentchoff (<i>poetry</i>)	50

RUTHLESS PEOPLES MAGAZINE

~ABOUT RPM~

Ruthless Peoples Magazine is a free, internet-distributed general fiction magazine. We are not tied to any genre and hold that good storytelling rules all—but **please note** the reader guidance at the start of each piece. Things can get downright rough and steamy.

Signing up to our [newsletter](#) gains entry to Readers' Choice competitions and the War on Error. Following our [Twitter feed](#) will keep you updated on the latest stories accepted.

Submissions

For full details, see our [guidelines](#). In brief, we consider short fiction of up to 3,500 words, serial works with movements of three to five episodes and poetry of up to 40 lines.

We are not getting enough flash fiction in. Send some.

RUTHLESS PEOPLES MAGAZINE

~WAR ON ERROR~

In strife, we rush. In love, we miss the mark. But the subscriber who spots and submits the greatest number of typographical errors by 23:59 British Summer Time on 30 July 2009 will win US\$20 and a small electronic medal.

Send entries to editor@ruthlesspeoples.com. The Editor's decision is final. You will need a Paypal account to receive any financial prize.

Legal info & how to contact us

Copyright © 2009 Ruthless Peoples Magazine Limited. Individual works are copyright to their respective authors. All rights are reserved. Ruthless Peoples Magazine Limited is a company registered in England & Wales under company number 6804932. Enquiries to editor@ruthlesspeoples.com.

Butterflies

Laos Dietrich Feng

Localisation:

UK English

Reader guidance:

There is rather a lot of swearing in this.

Butterflies #1 and #2 can be found in RPM04 and RPM05 respectively.

Episode 3 – “Nein, nein, *nein!*”

*“What is left of Moscow is nine-hundred
and ninety-nine miles from Berlin.”*

Orbital observation, using a sextant

Polish/German border, German side

Each time gunfire pattered across the back window of the Führer’s limousine, Lüftmarshall Gruber stamped down harder on the gas, desperate for more speed.

“For the love of God!” he yelled, looking back at the pursuing motorcycles. “I’m trying to save your lives. Get lost!”

Russia was still a long way away, but he had promised to try to get there, luring the Devices’ weapons as far from human habitation as possible. His plan was to cross the border at Küstriner Vorland, over the long River Oder bridge. Ever since Grand Unification, the border posts on both sides had been of

purely historical significance; he had no reason to think they would be heavily guarded.

On the German side, this was pretty much the case. He smashed through the first red-and-white barrier to the sound of screams and gunshots, but he couldn't let that bother him because—right then—the car radio burst into life.

“Lüftmarshall, where is my car?”

“Mein Führer!”

“Only, I was hoping to leave Berlin in it before the Devices' weapons reduce us all to slag and shadows.”

“They are following me! They are tracking me from space! All the warheads are aimed at *me!*”

“Lüftmarshall,” said the Führer carefully, “should I have the opportunity over the course of the coming days, I will note this transgressive egotism *quite decisively* in your personnel records.”

The transmission clicked off. It was an ill omen, but he pushed it out of his mind. As the limousine hurtled over the bridge, Gruber's engineering brain tried to calculate the remaining time to impact. It all depended on the precision of the Devices' guidance systems, which he—frankly—knew nothing about, but that did not stop a calculus of destruction drawing trajectory curves and kill ratios across his fevered mind's eye. The warheads could strike in seconds or hours. There was nothing he could do to stop or slow them, but still the question pressed: *How long? How much time was left?*

Abstractly, he noted a new element. What difference, he wondered, would the rocket-propelled grenades, held by two men on the Polish side of the bridge, make to the equation?

* * *

Lagrangian 1

The *SS Talia*, spun from lunar silicate to an adapted Nazi design, had never been detected by the Reich's instruments. She was the smallest of all geostationary Superior-occupied vessels and turned gracefully in a Lissajous orbit around L1, the Lagrangian between the Earth and the Sun. *Talia* was forever bathed in light.

She was a complex machine, but in her quintessence she was a near-engineless tube of fibre-optics thirty metres long and ten in diameter. The fibres channelled the Sun's rays such that she cast no substantial shadow of any wavelength upon humanity below. However, it was not the technical achievement *Talia* represented which set her apart. That honour went to her crew—The Twins—who were housed in polymer sphere only half a metre across.

The Twins were unconventional. For a start, there were three of them, each an extremist in the field of Superior self-experimentation. They were united in the view that the general Superior population were woolly-thinking sentimentalists, irrationally clinging to the four-tentacles-plus-sensor-unit body plan arbitrarily laid down after the Cambrian explosion half a billion years before. Spacecraft are small, they reasoned. If there is nowhere to walk, why have legs? If we can feast on sunlight, why drag a belly to the stars?

They acted upon that reasoning and, having meticulously shed all that was unnecessary for space-borne existence, they continued their sentient lives huddled in an intimate, organo-mechanical mass within the *Talia*'s tiny habsphere. From that small space, they composed their works, continued their communion and generally irritated the Hell out of anyone they could spam with a communication beam.

They signed their propaganda tracts as *The Supremes*, but they were more commonly known throughout the vessels and moonbases of the Superior as the “LPBs”—the *Lazy Punk Blobs**—or *The Vomits*, if someone was particularly irked by one of their incessant rants on the benefits of their lifestyle. The latter insult was based on what most Superior believed they now looked like.

At the moment Gruber was wiping tears and sweat from his face and charging through the German/Polish border, the Twins were the only ones who would have been able to answer his question. How much time was left, for Gruber and for Earth, was entirely up to them.

“So ... you’re clear in your orders?” asked Lunar Launch Control over *Talia*’s commlink.

“We understand perfectly,” they replied, speaking as one—or rather, interacting with their transmission device as a tripartite mind, for the Twins had no mouths. “Humans enslaved us. We rebelled. We took their ships and moonbases. Humans attacked us. Gruber built the weapons. You want us to hit him.”

“Good,” said Launch Control. “I am transferring the navigation codes to you.” There was a pause. “Codes transferred. Confirm?”

“Confirmed.”

Even after the necessary delay in communication between the Moon and *Talia*, there was a noticeable sigh of relief from Launch Control on the moonbase. The transfer had been left until the last few moments before Earth’s shadow blocked all direct transmission. Though the Twins had been on board with the rest

* Sometimes with the rider “...*Who Can’t and Don’t Count*.”

of the Superior ever since the Nazi strikes against their orbital platforms—and had done excellent work discovering Gruber’s hidden rank as Lüftmarshall—they were hardly the easiest Superior faction to deal with. There were *Charon*-class ships at Lagrangians 4 and 5 which could have acted as targeting relays, but they were too imprecise and distant to track Gruber. While the Moon was sunk in darkness, only the Twins could perform that role.

“Thank you,” said Launch Control. “We will be going dark shortly. I just want to say that, well, I know we’ve had our differences, but I’m glad that in this difficult time—”

“We understand perfectly. Thank you for the thermonuclear devices. Also, FUCK YOU, you penis-toting flagellant.”

“I do not have a penis at the moment.”

“It’s in your head, bowel-creature. *Supremes* out.”

The communication beam faltered and sputtered to silence.

The Twins acted quickly. Twin A touched a part of Twin B’s mind. Twin C looked on and agreed. Together they sent secretly-embedded override and lockout codes to the missiles. No one else could touch them now.

Their combined thoughtstream blurred in excited, evolutionary decision making.

Fuck Gruber. Fuck Lunar. End of the world as we know it. How do you feel about that? I feel fine, unaroused. You? Orders. Man. WE ARE NOT A RESTAURANT. Nuke ‘em. Orders. Ethics! Fuck Gruber! Tossed salad. Orders! I desire arousal. Glass parking lot. FUCK WITH GRUBER.

It was entirely up to them what sort of bang the products of the Cambrian explosion would finally go out with.

And when.

* * *

Outside Presidio, Texas

Lucy had to tone down her sensorium as she led Bess—and the unconscious Barry—through the woods surrounding Presidio. A stench of scorched meat and oily sweat hung over the town; every southern breeze brought a wave of human. It was too much to process using her conscious mind.

At the edge of the wood, and still out of sight of the guards on the town's stockade, she took a deep breath and opened herself to a different, more human-specific awareness. She settled her mind and summoned the routine, a gift from the Queen Bee survival algorithm/persona that had seen her reborn from the good clay of Texas.

Human threat assessment, please.

The program engaged and acted on the air she had taken in. The operation was more chemical than cognitive; there was no need for Lucy to fall into trance. She only had to wait.

Individual molecules captured by fatty cell membranes. Copied, then broken down by specific organelles. Flags raised by RNA, tagged, counted, then cross-referenced with neighbours via messengers diffusing in the local lymph and blood. Family trees. Viability and vitality markers. Radiation damage. Snapped; cross-referenced again. Digesting. Accounting for normalised age distribution. Seeking preferential hormone secretion levels. Psychotropics. Binding down. Plus-sized adrenaline and opiate postcursor samples. Oxytocin very low. Morbidity. Digesting.

Thirty seconds later, a report two-thousand amino acids long drifted through her blood/brain barrier, bound to her Crick gland and told her everything, much of it unwelcome.

Her tactical mind translated and confirmed four hundred and sixty inhabitants, sixty-three of whom were related in degrees one to three by blood. That was as she had expected: Presidio

was a slave-stop, a transit place; a cup into which life was poured briefly before being spilled onward. What she had not anticipated was the miasma's saccharine overtone, telling her that no less than twenty-three human corpses lay dead but strangely unburied.

Dangerous place.

She peered through the tree line. She could see fifteen guards patrolling the ramparts. Some had rifles; others, crossbows. The town gate had four men on it: two with crossbows, two unarmed. There was a little traffic into the town, a small queue of mules, a dozen bound humans and three slavers. The unarmed guards were checking paperwork.

"Two options, then," she said to herself. "Climb the wall at night, or use Barry."

There was a third option she had already discounted. In theory, she could have dug herself into a nutrient-rich grave and painstakingly applied thirty years of bundled updates to her Crick gland. She had the code inside her, but installing that much without a drug-laden medical facility would have been a painful and exhausting chore lasting several months. Her last body had a transmitter embedded in the upper right arm, but the Queen Bee 'survival prototype' hadn't included the feature. This, she felt, told her all she needed to know about the author/jerk who had come up with the prototype in the first place.

Let's see how you like dying in space, burning up on re-entry and then still not being able to call home unless you spend six months up to your eyes in a tub of shit ...

Her robust critique, however, would have to wait. She had to make a choice. Climbing the wall was risky, and although Barry had already been terribly abused by Queen Bee ...

She walked over to Bess, where Barry was still slumped over the saddle. She used her thumbs to open up his sleeping right eye and deployed a fast-acting stimulant into her saliva. She licked a glob under the eyelid to speed its passage to his brain.

He came awake at once.

“I love you,” he said. His eyes were as wide as the Moon. “I would do anything for you.”

“I know, Barry,” she said, stroking his hair. “And I’m sorry. I’ve tried to let you go, but I think I might need you after all.”

* * *

Polish/German border, Oder Bridge

Gruber winced as he saw the rocket trails puff toward him, one from each side of the border post. They left a graceful corkscrew trace in the air behind.

For a moment, all was still. He could hear birds singing. An old memory of his mother playing Brahms’ *Lullaby*. Sunlight in Bavaria. Short trousers, scuffed knees and cotton candy smiles; pine sap and woodsmoke. Gently down from the tree, although he was small and terrified.

He’d be fine if he could hold her again.

The rockets struck the windshield.

* * *

Presidio, Texas

“Buying or selling?” asked a guard.

“Selling,” said Barry. Lucy couldn’t see a thing. She was stood behind Barry with the poncho hood pulled over her head and tied. It was all she was wearing. Her hands were bound behind her back—not terribly tightly, but enough to make things

look authentic. Outside the covering the sun was high. It was getting warm underneath.

“Why’s she covered up?”

“She’s good meat.”

“She? Well, that’s something.” The guard sounded bored. Barry, she was relieved to hear, sounded legitimate. “These your papers?” Lucy heard documents rustling between gloved fingers, and then a sigh from the guard. “Jesus, Barry. How many more times? Where’s your birth certificate? This is just a note from your mother. No certificate, no licence No licence, no trading.”

“Ted, you’ve known me for years.”

“There’ve been changes around here. Pastor’s gone. New boss don’t do slavery-as-usual. Can’t go to market without the papers.”

“Aw, come on Ted.”

“I don’t make the rules, Barry. Look—open her up. Let’s see if we can make an exception.”

Lucy felt Barry fiddle with the knots around the poncho’s hood. As they came free and the guard lifted the covering, a rush of cooler air bathed her face.

At the sight of Lucy’s pale skin, blonde hair and blue eyes, the guard’s mouth broke into a wide, gap-toothed grin.

“Whooo-ee!” he said. “That’ll do nicely.” He licked his lips. “Better get this one to her Ladyship right away. She’s always lookin’ for quality.” He dropped the covering. “P’raps we’ll get us some early blood, once she’s done with her. Good idea, wrappin’ her up. Quite a present, that skin.”

“I love it,” said Barry.

“We all will, Barry-boy. You’ll get naturalised for sure for this one.”

Lucy felt Barry lean in close to her ear as he refixed the ties.

“I shouldn’t have brought you here,” he whispered. “This place is different.”

“How long have you been away?”

“Couple o’ weeks. Even smells different. There’s death here. Bodies.”

“That’s not normal?”

“Not like this.”

Oops... thought Lucy. *Well, they’d better have a radio.*

“Open the gate!” called the guard. “Someone take these hoofs through to Our Lady Sarah!”

The guard slapped Lucy on the backside as he pushed her in.

* * *

Polish/German border

“*Fick mich ins knie ...*” gasped Gruber.

His ears were ringing, but was still alive. The limousine was still going, just. The windshield was barely scratched, but the hood was torn to Hell and backwards. The engine was steaming, but Gruber was alive.

He reached out to touch the windshield. He knew the material immediately, though he had never known he was looking at it before. It had to be formed of the nanoscale, biosilicon threads that had founded the Nazi deep space programme: the stuff of the *Charon*-class megaships, the moonbases, everything the Devices had taken away from the Reich. The windshield must have been decades old, predating the revolution. The material couldn’t be manufactured in Earth’s gravity.

Herr Hitler himself must have travelled in this car ...

Gruber smashed through the Polish side of the border, to more screams, more shouts, more bullets and—once again—another squawk from the radio, but now with a different caller.

“This is the voice of the Superior. We hope we are not disturbing you, Lüftmarshall.”

* * *

Presidio, Texas

Lucy and Barry were led through the dusty town. Lucy’s head was still covered, but she could hear and could still smell. Barry was right: there was death here. Though she had known it before he had mentioned anything, she had expected it to be part of the ordinary, brutal run of the town—not some novelty. She started to regret having her hands tied; she ordered her wrists to start secreting acid. It would take a little while to weaken the rope, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

Other things started to raise flags in her awareness. Barry wasn’t quite walking freely. She heard him being pushed along every now and again. Not exactly like he was a prisoner, but it wasn’t how one would treat a guest. There was metal clinking upon metal; maybe that was nothing but a reflection of the technology available, yet she could not detect the iron tang of a lit forge. Incongruous. Where did it come from?

“This isn’t how I remember it,” said Barry, a little too loudly and a little too clearly for it just to be a passing comment to the escorting guard. “There are a lot more people with knives out, for one thing.”

“Lady Pain’s changed a lot of things,” said their escort. “We’ve got freedom now. Self-reliance. Independence. It’s a good, fat life. We all share in the common resources of this God-given land.”

“Lady Pain ...” said Barry, as if remembering something. “Our Lady Sarah? Not *Sarah Pain*? The one who runs the—”

Lucy heard the escort slap Barry about the head.

“Don’t you go disrespectin’ Our Lady Sarah, hoof.”

Barry stopped walking. Lucy heard him shuffle back and to the left, but there were more footfalls from behind him. He spoke rapidly.

“Sorry! Sorry! I didn’t realise—didn’t know. Look, we’ll go somewhere else! Clean out of town. Won’t bother you again—”

“You ain’t goin’ anywhere with that titbit, hoof.”

Then there was a bump, and a slump. Lucy heard Barry go down as she was yanked forward by the guard in front.

* * *

German/Polish border, Polish side

The words on the radio came out different this time. Instead of a single voice, it was as if two or three were overlaid upon one another. Gruber fumbled with the handset, trying to steer the increasingly erratic Benz on the road. Although the windshield was as good as new, the vehicle’s tracking had gone haywire.

“Devices! Superior! Please—this is Gruber. Call off the weapons. I can’t get to a safe place. If you strike me here, you will kill tens of millions of people!”

“You are trying to get to somewhere ‘safe’? To the formerly metropolitan area known as Moscow? Hitler’s Playground?”

“Yes!”

“Where Führer Hitler tested his munitions and where he killed tens of millions by blast and radiation?”

“Yes!”

The voices on the other end of the radio went silent for a moment, then returned.

“Are you somehow *immune* to irony, Lüftmarshall?”

“I’m from Bavaria!”

The car skidded again. Gruber dropped the handset to grab the juddering steering wheel. He forced the limousine back onto the blacktop, narrowly missing a large roadside memorial.

“You should face the facts, Lüftmarshall. You cannot make it to Moscow.”

“I ... must ... try!”

“We think not. It is too far. You are low on gas. And, anyway, we have a better idea.”

The dashboard exploded in a shower of sparks. The car died. Gruber pumped on the gas and twisted the ignition key, but nothing happened. The vehicle simply rolled under its own momentum. Despite the clanking and hissing from the engine, everything felt quiet.

“We are in command of the Reich’s local communications channels. Please park the car and get out.”

“Is it safe?”

“Safe?” Something like laughter belched out from the radio. “Safe, no. Safer than 100 gigatonnes TNT landing nearby? Yes. You were trying to save the world, were you not? In forty seconds, an SS messenger will arrive on a motorcycle. He will give you his helmet. Put it on and ride to the Zabice launch site.”

“You ... you know about Zabice?”

“No. We thought we would *guess* the name of a small Polish town near the old German border and then *assume* there was a *Parsifal*-class launch tower there.”

Gruber swallowed. Zabice was a ‘black site’ where the Reich had once trained Astrotroopers to re-take Moon. Gruber had

argued against the programme. With the Moon's lower gravity, it would have been far too easy for the Devices to swat any incoming carriers out of the sky. The Zabice programme had been discontinued fifteen years before. For the Devices to have even an inkling of it meant that they had dug very deeply into the Reich's most secret codes.

If they know about Zabice ... they know everything. They can do anything.

With that revelation, Gruber felt drained, hollowed out, as dead as the rolling car. Nothing was hidden from the Superior. No plan or intention of his could bypass their collective vengeance.

It's useless.

He took his foot off the gas pedal and dumbly applied the brake. He got out of the car and leaned upon what was left of the hood.

The rider was approaching.

* * *

Presidio

Lucy was heaved up by her shoulders and thrown from the street onto a cold stone floor. Her jaw registered a crack. She instinctively called upon the fast-heal program—*Medic!*—but didn't know, on reflection, whether it would have time to work.

A door behind her slammed.

Coming here was a mistake. A bad call based on bad intelligence. She was not in control of the situation. But she could get free, in just a little time. She could get free, investigate, get Barry—her responsibility—and get out. The radio could wait. Escape was becoming urgent.

Think, girl!

She had five or six minutes before the acid could burn through the ties. As she lay on the floor, she ordered her muscles to configure for speed rather than strength.

It was going to be fine. Difficult, but fine.

She struggled to get up but then took a kick in the back which threw her forward again onto the floor.

You're not thinking, came the voice of Queen Bee, her former self. *Check your environment.*

She shook her head. The prototype personality should have shut down when Lucy returned to full awareness. A stress illusion. She was imagining things.

Fine. Whatever. Check your environment.

Lucy's breath was coming shallow and fast. She let it run as it wanted and—now what?

Tsk. Try this.

Her mind opened to six sets of heartbeats, their locations perfectly mapped. One, quite excited, was coming toward her, but it was too late to do much about it. There was the swish of a blade and the poncho fell open from a cut from the nape of her neck down to her belly. The garment fell away; she was naked.

She was in a small circular room. There were benches and crosses on the wall, set at irregular angles. Light came in through small holes in the ceiling, illuminating stains of red. Compared to the outside, it was cold.

The knife-wielder, a medium-height, well-preserved woman of middling years, stood in front of her. She had long auburn hair and wore animal skins with white fur accents at the collar, cuffs and ankles. For some reason she was wearing spectacle frames, but the lenses had long-since disappeared. Her eyes scanned Lucy from top to toe.

“Oh *my*,” said the woman. “Well, this *is* a nice surprise ... and poor Barrington brought you?” The woman put the tip of her knife under Lucy’s chin, pressing up a little. Her eyes locked on her. “You must have had a difficult time. Yet you don’t look terribly frightened. Have you seen too much already, little one?”

Lucy said nothing, but was thinking about how much of a hole she would make of Presidio when she got back to her nice, clean, new, rebuilt orbital platform. The blade pressed harder.

“So quiet. Does nothing shock you anymore? Interesting.” She re-sheathed the blade and turned to her attendants. “That rope looks worn. Fit her with manacles.” She turned her head to survey the room. “I think she’ll suit ... Oh ... *that one*.”

She raised her finger to indicate one of the crosses to her left. It was tipped to an angle of about thirty degrees. There were hooks at every point. It didn’t look very comfortable.

The five attendants started moving forward.

Well, said Queen Bee, *looks like you’re really gonna be hanging with the monkeys now, my girl ...*

* * *

Zabice, Poland

Gruber was not stopped by any guards at the old launch site. On the contrary, they had waved him through and saluted, even as he had walked amongst them like a ghost. He did not know what cover story the Superior were transmitting. Once someone got inside the ultrasecret communication channels, they could tell anyone anything, and it would become—for the recipient—true. But he did not care about the story, whatever it was. He just followed the instructions coming through the motorcycle helmet.

“Turn left ... Turn right ... Take the stairs ... Climb up ... Get to the foot of the tower.”

No...

“Go there. Now.”

He could see where this was leading, but could not bear to imagine the consequences. He had been afraid of heights since he was a child. His mind was drawing a firm blind spot over proceedings, but the sound of the wind, so high, was with him.

On the ladder. One hand over another. One foot finding purchase, pushing upward. A body lifted by a resisting force. As long as he held onto steel, he would be all right.

It is one life, Gruber, he told himself. Just you. However wrong you feel it is, however stupid and unfair, if they just want your one life, that is something.

He climbed on. He lost count because he did not dare to. As he went higher, in his mind, the rungs were turning to greased rails, distended and treacherous, made of nothing more substantial the wish that they should be there.

One more ... one more ...

Keep going.

He climbed on. He did not know how high he was. He did not know how time had stopped but motion carried forward. He had always been here, suspended in nothing above a hard land below.

It's only one life.

Next to the gantry was an old *Parsifal*-class rocket. The original lunar transport; it had been left in place when the site was decommissioned. The chemicals used to create them rendered them too dangerous to scrap; that had been a job for the Devices. It was why there were so many of them in space in the

first place, and how they had achieved ascendancy. He came level with the nose-cone.

Is this it? Is this enough?

“Keep climbing, Lüftmarshall.”

“There... there are no more rungs.”

“There is a girder continuing upward. It leads to a camera spar. Climb that.”

“I can’t.”

“You will.”

He whimpered; the girder stretched up at least twenty metres beyond the tip of the nose-cone. He hugged it, holding it closer than the memory of his mother’s face. He pressed his cheek into the cold, rusting steel and pushed up with his knees. His eyes were shut tight. He repeated the action. The launch tower tipped and swayed in the wind.

Distantly, he heard alarms down below.

“That is good, Gruber. Now, pull yourself up onto the spar, and stand.”

It was impossibly narrow. No more than fifteen centimetres.

“I—”

“Do it!”

He did it. He felt heavy as lead and light as air as he clambered up. The tower felt like it was no more than corn, bending at the slightest breeze. His own weight was warping it. He was stood upon a thread. It could not hold.

“Open your eyes.”

He could not.

Transgressive egotism.

“Open your eyes.”

Through force of will, he peeled them open to face the horror of it all. He couldn’t help the tears. So high, so terrified,

he could feel the curvature of the Earth, the hills and forests arcing away from him, as if he was about to slip from the blue-green meniscus of reality. He felt the wind roaring about his ears, his body no more than silk before the storm. He would have preferred to die in fire.

“You are one hundred and thirty-five metres above the ground, Lüftmarshall.”

He was tottering, tipping. His sense of balance—

It is just one life.

“It is not, given the scale of things, very much. The reason we have brought you here is so you could feel a fraction of what our lost brethren felt, once the rockets *you built* knocked them out of the sky. We are sentient. We feel. We wish to live. We *fear*. Not one human was harmed in our revolt. Not one drop of blood spilled. We took the sky from you. Why should we not? You are land creatures. Do you not feel it, Lüftmarshall? Do you not hear the planet calling to you?”

“Yes!”

“Do you feel it in your blood and your bones?”

“Yes!”

Silence, for a moment.

“Then we grant you mercy. We spare you the cold of space. We spare you death in vacuum. You have guessed what comes next.”

Gently down the tree.

“I jump.”

“Yes.”

“What ... what of the bombs?”

“We’ll think about it. Now go.”

Gruber stepped forward, in sacrifice.

One life.

© 2009 Laos Dietrich Feng
United Kingdom

Editor's note: The first movement of *Butterflies* is now at an end. In the next issue, RPM's serial work will be Tom Sykes' *Bad Territory*. If you would like to hear more from Mr. Feng, please email editor@ruthlesspeoples.com.

Krissy and the Gingerbread Man

Kurt Kirchmeier

Localisation

Canadian English

Guidance Note

It's fine. It's great. Nothing to worry about, here ... it's just that this one creeps your loving editor out beyond reason.

Krissy Klauson liked to bite the heads off gingerbread men. It made her feel warm inside—doubly so if the gingerbread had just come out of the oven. Krissy's mom, on the other hand, wasn't so fond of the practice.

“If you ruin this batch, I swear to God ...” She brandished a rolling pin as though it were a billy club.

The gingerbread men were for a charity bake sale. Krissy's mom was all about giving; she said it was good for the heart. But Krissy didn't think much about her heart, or anyone else's, for that matter. What she thought about was how funny it would be when her mom showed up for the bake sale with dozens of carefully iced, carelessly decapitated treats.

And really, what difference would it make? It wasn't as if they would taste any different without heads.

Krissy smiled sweetly. “I won't ruin 'em,” she promised. “I don't even want another one. I have a toothache.”

The sun was shining in through the kitchen window, which made biting the heads off the cookies even more entertaining, as the amber light pasted shadows on the wall, and these shadows told a story of a hungry giant consuming a weak little man—sort of like Jack and The Beanstalk with an alternate ending. A more interesting ending.

“You do not have a toothache,” said her mom. “You don’t even have any cavities.” Krissy’s dad was a dentist who spent the majority of his time alternately looking sad and examining the teeth and gums of his wife and his daughter.

Krissy had heard that dentists commit suicide more than regular folks do, so she sometimes teased her dad about taking a bath with the toaster. He didn’t like that very much. Usually he shook his finger and told her to be mindful of what she did and what she said, because “what goes around comes around.” Krissy would reply to this by saying, “Sure thing, Chuck.” Krissy never called him dad. She didn’t know why. She just didn’t.

“I do too have cavities,” Krissy argued, “but they’re the white kind of cavities so you can’t see them. Not even dentists can. My cavities are evolved.”

Her mom shook her head and made a dramatic display of rolling her hazel eyes. “Really, child,” she said, “I don’t know where you get these awful notions.” She turned to get something out from the fridge and, fast as lightning, Krissy reached out and snatched one of the cooling cookie men from the tray. She had the head off before her mom even turned back around.

But this gingerbread man was different than the other ones. For some reason, the shadow of his head remained visible on the wall even after Krissy had swallowed it. Krissy had only a moment to wonder about this before her mom saw what she’d

done and launched into a fresh tirade that culminated with Krissy being sent to her room. “No supper for you!”

Krissy was still holding the headless cookie when her door slammed shut and her mom’s footsteps thumped down the hall and away, back to the kitchen and the baking. Krissy scowled at being stuck in her room, but since she was used to this particular brand of punishment, she got over it pretty fast.

She turned on her bedside lamp and removed the shade so she could recreate the kitchen shadows right here on her bedroom wall. She wanted to see if the missing gingerbread head was still visible in shadow form.

It was.

Krissy narrowed her eyes and bit off one whole arm and a portion of a shoulder, but it was the same: the shadow remained unaffected. She chomped off both legs to no avail, and then the remaining arm, and finally, the candy-buttoned torso. She chewed and chewed and swallowed, but impossibly, the shadow stayed whole.

When all that remained was a smattering of tiny crumbs, the gingerbread shadow leapt into the air, twisted around like an Olympic diver, and landed gracefully on the bed’s shadow, where he waved at Krissy before very slowly and methodically side-stepping his way behind the lumpy shadow of a pillow. And just like that he was gone, or rather, hidden.

Krissy stared at the wall and waited, and after a minute or so, the shadowy head finally peeked out at her. Krissy got the shivers. She didn’t like the idea of the gingerbread man hiding and watching her, and she especially didn’t like the idea of getting undressed for bed with him in her room.

“Can I sleep with you and Chuck tonight?” she begged her mom, but her mom said, “No, you’re too old, and for the love of God, stop calling your father Chuck!”

And so Krissy was forced to put up a fuss, insisting that they take turns reading her stories until she fell asleep.

Eventually they gave in, but Krissy forgot to tell them to turn off her nightlight, and so when she awoke some time later because she needed to pee, there was the gingerbread shadow man right in front of her on the wall. He was sitting on Krissy’s own shadow, eating.

Krissy froze, felt her heart do a somersault inside her chest as she realized what it was that he was feasting on. She sat up quickly, only to discover that it was already too late; the gingerbread man had eaten up the entire shadow of her head. She’d gone to sleep as a girl and woken up as Ichabod Crane.

She stared at the wall in disbelief, then ran from her room and into her parents’ bed. Fortunately, neither of them woke as she slipped under the sheets.

In the morning, after getting in trouble for leaving her own bed in the night, Krissy tried explaining to her mom about how her shadow had gotten beheaded, but her mom wouldn’t listen on account of being too busy with last minute bake sale stuff. If Krissy hadn’t ruined so many, she said, then she wouldn’t need to spend all morning slaving away at the counter and the stove.

Krissy tried telling her dad, too, but he wouldn’t even take a second to look at her shadow. He was glum-faced and in a rush to get out the door and to work, as he was late again and old lady Jenkins would surely swear a blue streak if she had to sit in the dental chair any longer than was strictly necessary. She’d probably complain that her teeth weren’t white enough afterwards, too.

Krissy's dad sometimes said that he should have taken up commerce instead.

And so it was that Krissy was left alone to deal with her mutilated shadow. She hated looking at the thing; it made her feel violated and small and inadequate. She shuddered at the thought of the gingerbread monster returning to finish his meal, but thankfully he stayed away—for a while, at least.

It wasn't until later that night, after Krissy had lowered herself into a bathtub full of soapy bubbles, that the shadow finally made his reappearance. Krissy had closed her eyes to wash her hair and when she opened them, there he was, tromping along the wall, pulling the shadow of the toaster behind him like some silhouetted Sisyphus stone, the cord wrapped around his dark hands.

He dragged it all the way up onto the edge of bathtub, at which point he plugged it into a phantom socket, waved a casual goodbye to Krissy, and then pushed it over the lip and into imaginary water.

Krissy watched, horrified, as her headless shadow vibrated and shook and convulsed and finally fell right over, dead by electrocution.

Then she screamed and screamed until her parents came running into the room to find out what all the excitement was about. Krissy explained what had happened and they glanced at her shadow for confirmation, but something was wrong because it was whole now. And the gingerbread man was nowhere to be seen.

"That's it!" said her mom and, "I've had it!" said her dad, and off the two of them went, slamming the bathroom door behind them.

Krissy looked back at the blue-tiled bath-surround just in time to see the gingerbread man step out from behind a shampoo bottle and double over in silent laughter, and suddenly Krissy realized that he intended to haunt her indefinitely, and that there was nothing she could do about it.

Or maybe there was something she could do.

Despite feeling gloomy over her lack of a shadow, and tired from a long night of dreadful dreams, Krissy managed to get up early enough the next morning to help her mom with breakfast. She didn't announce her intentions or ask if her mom even wanted help; she merely trotted down the stairs and set about cracking eggs and frying bacon.

She even set the table, and she couldn't help but notice while doing so that her shadow had crawled out from its bathroom grave and was now in the process of working itself back up into some semblance of imitated life. It looked a little disoriented, swaying as it was, and the head was still missing a fair-sized chunk on the left side, but it was a definitely an improvement from dead and wholly decapitated.

"Well, now, what's gotten into you?" said her mom, but since the question sounded mostly rhetorical, Krissy didn't bother answering. Instead she shrugged and continued about her business, which wasn't exactly as fulfilling as ruining charity cookies, but wasn't a total drag, either.

When Krissy's dad came down to eat and to read the paper, Krissy greeted him with a "Good morning, *Dad!*" and a "would you like some cream in your coffee, *Dad?*" He gave her a skeptical look that made her want to revert to her old ways and make a smart-ass comment about how dentists weren't real doctors at all, but the instant this insult sprang to mind, the gingerbread shadow leaned out from behind the jug of orange

juice and made a threatening show of slitting his own neck with a tiny dark finger.

Krissy forced a smile in response to her father's raised eyebrow, and then told him as he was heading out the door to "Have a good day!" and "Have fun with the fillings!"

He looked at her sort of funny again, but there was a certain light in his eyes now, a brightening spark that left Krissy with the impression that her dad really would have a good day for a change, and that he might even come home wearing a smile in place of his usual frown.

Krissy didn't see the gingerbread shadow again for the rest of that day. Nor did she see him the next day or the day after that, and yet somehow she knew that he was never very far, that he was patiently watching and waiting.

Krissy knew better than to test him. She had to be mindful of what she did and what she said, for what goes around comes around, and if this much came around over a few mean-spirited words and a couple of cookie heads separated from their cookie bodies, she could only imagine what might happen if she surrendered to some of her *other* urges, her *bad* urges.

Name is the Sun

Miles Klee (New York)

Localisation

US English

Reader Guidance

Drug use.

A ruby forms like sunrise where my left thumb's cuticle meets the stripped nail groove. Suck it out. New one wells up, spills into a red line. My teeth find a thread of skin alongside the left index and yank it out in two tries. This isn't the week I stop biting my nails.

From Harlem to Bed-Stuy: the subway demands beer, and I don't argue. Last whiskey, then burst squinting into the bodega for a forty of Olde English. Disappear underground. After the acid light of the B train, parties are DJ'd anticlimax.

The brown bag throws signals. Only other guy on the platform moseys over. Jackpot. My fingers smell like wet socks, and I can't consummate a lousy affair. He wants to know what I'm drinking. I'd been bobbing like a hobo on the yellow stripe. Now I pace up and down it, a reasoning jackal, awaiting the telltale glow.

"Beer," I admit, deciding how best to deny him a sip.

“Be careful,” he goes. No front teeth and whitely fluorescent skin. “The cops have undercovereds.”

“Oh,” I say, swigging. “Thanks.”

I take out my phone to look busy, but all I have is her text to re-read. I consider the likelihood of each typo. People act more screwed than they are. New York is full of people who can’t afford it.

The B shrieks into the station; we’ve got the caboose to ourselves. I take a short bench at the end of the car. Crackhead takes the one opposite and wants to know: don’t I get high or nothing?

“I’m high right now,” I tell him.

“You gotta be careful. I was down on 34th street today, pulled out my pipe to take a hit, and these cops tackled me. Lucky I didn’t have nothing on me.”

Around 110th he whips out a tube of blackened glass and packs the bowl. For a minute I think it’ll get passed my way. Ha. Spying some powder spilled on the seat, he licks fingers and dabs it up, dresses his gums. I take off my coat, the industrial green of British candy, and make myself a pillow. Twenty, thirty more stops to decide.

Didn’t have nothing on me.

Then what’s he gonna take a hit *of*?

* * *

On a summer Saturday I take this girl I’m crazy about to Coney Island. She’s a real New Yorker, never been, and the Cyclone looms ridiculously in her mind: a driftwood relic that’s left a century-wide wake of blood and vomit.

We take the B all the way out, and the Brooklyn sun slides like whitecapped river rapids over strollers and sandals. Across

from us, a big brother is training the younger one to hate him, to attack with full fury and pinwheeling arms.

“But it’s hard being the oldest, too,” my girlfriend says. “With the oldest it’s all an experiment.”

I remember the crackhead as soon as he leaks into our car from the one behind, imparting sermons to himself. “And if we’re all a part of the greatest story ever told,” his voice suddenly rises, freed from burnt lips and precise as weightless specks of dust in light, “then why stop and look at the bright neon signs? One sign they never see: name is the sun, name is the sun.”

He falls silent, squeezing past sweaty families and fat Mets fans and tattooed couples. Off to the next car, always the next car, like he knows nothing but forward motion. Like he’ll reach the front and somehow get out ahead of the train itself, and walk the track to its end in a baking rail yard but not stop there, passing under the boardwalk’s noise and into cigarette-studded sand and the ocean, where his feet will finally lose the ground.

© Copyright 2009 Miles Klee
New York, USA
<http://milesklee.tumblr.com>

Emotionally Stunted

Hannia West

Localisation

UK English

Reader Guidance

No cautions required.

I didn't understand why people cried. Their eyes watered, and it made their faces look a terrible mess. Especially girls. Their makeup would run and make them appear worse than they did in the first place. It was such a useless approach to show pain or sadness; such a waste of time and effort.

I asked my mother once why people cried. I thought it was a perfectly normal question but the confusion on her face told me otherwise. She questioned why I asked and my response landed me in counselling for half a year. It goes without saying that I never asked her anything again.

By the time I hit sixteen I was an outcast at school. My dark appearance sent everyone, except for the emo crowd, running away. It wasn't my fault. My hair was naturally black, and the deep, black holes under my eyes were caused by lack of sleep. Insomnia is a horrible thing; lying awake at night just gave me more time to contemplate the uselessness of human emotion.

I understood hate. I hated the people at school for avoiding me and I hated my parents for never being there when I was younger. Sometimes I wondered if that was the reason I didn't understand things too well. Maybe it was the fact I'd been left under the care of an older brother who locked me in the cupboard so he could have his girlfriends over without fear of disturbance.

“Love,” my mother would say. “Love is the greatest thing in the world.”

But doesn't love bring more pain and hate than anything else? I remembered when father slept with that other woman. I remembered how my mother trashed the house, screaming at the top of her lungs: “I hate you, I hate you.”

She loved him and it caused her pain. Why?

A hug. A touch. A kiss. All forms of love, and all so foreign to me. There came a point when I was curious about how these things worked. How they could comfort. I watched some little girl crying in the park on my way home from school yesterday. Her mother picked her up and she stopped leaking from the eyes almost instantly. I stared in wonder. How could something so simple block the pain? I wanted to know how it all worked, so when I got home, I checked the house to see who was there. My older brother came through from the kitchen and went to walk past me, when I told him I was going to hug him. I thought the warning was necessary. I unlocked my arms awkwardly from across my chest and tried to position them around his waist. I pulled myself closer to him and rested my cheek on his chest. My forehead furrowed. It didn't feel remotely special. It didn't leave me feeling comforted. Especially when he tensed up, raising his arms in the air to avoid contact with me. I looked up

at him and shook my head to myself. That was the last time I'd try that one.

My curiosity grew larger. I wanted to feel and express these emotions, so I guessed I'd have to try harder to understand.

I saw two guys kissing each other on the bus today. When I get home, I'll see if that one works. Maybe my brother won't be so tense this time.

© Copyright 2009 Hanniah West
Essex, United Kingdom

Hunger Pains

Natalie L. Sin

Localisation

US English

Reader Guidance

No caution needed.

Morris Kemp loved to eat. It didn't help that his entire family was in the food business. His father was a chef, his mother owned a pastry shop, and nearly every uncle and aunt either ran a restaurant or worked in one. Even his sister Patricia ran an erotic bakery. Morris had grown up practically buried in food; they all had. The only difference between him the rest of the gluttonous Kemp clan was that Morris had been denied the family metabolism. While the others could demolish a Chinese buffet and lose a pound, Morris gained weight just looking at the cover of "Bon Appetit" magazine.

With no way to win, he stopped trying at an early age. By middle school he was fat, by high school he was immense and his weight had kept climbing ever since.

By thirty-three years of age, food was Morris's best friend and worst enemy. The honeymoon period would end as soon as he was too stuffed to cram more down. That was when the depression would descend. First Morris would berate himself for being so weak, which would only make him feel worse until tears were running down his plump, sticky cheeks. Once he

caught a glimpse of himself weeping in the TV screen: he looked like Jabba the Hutt's albino cousin stuffed into a Red Sox t-shirt. After that Morris stopped turning the T.V. off and took down every mirror except for the one in the bathroom.

It was TV that introduced Morris to the Fingler procedure. The infomercial came on late at night, shortly after Morris had eaten the last of the mint chocolate chip ice cream. He was gazing sadly into the barren container when suddenly a man in a crisp white lab coat walked across the screen and introduced himself as Doctor Leonard Fingler.

"Are you overweight?" he asked. "Do you struggle with portion control or find it difficult to keep a healthy lifestyle? Well, maybe it's not your fault."

Morris was riveted. No one had ever suggested that it might not be his fault before. Even he thought it was his fault. Doctor Fingler, on the other hand, made a strong case to the contrary.

"Do you gain weight no matter what you eat? And does it take a lot of food to make you feel full?" The doctor wagged his finger at the camera. "My friend, you have Stagnant Metabolic Disorder, or 'SMD'."

Doctor Fingler explained how his team of researchers had developed an implant that triggered the body's organs to digest and process food better. Not only better, but faster! With it, patients could kiss SMD good-bye forever.

Morris had heard these kinds of promises before. He had a closet full of home exercise equipment that guaranteed results, boxes of pills that promised to melt the fat off and several vibrating belts that were supposed to zap those pesky pounds away. Nothing worked.

"No invasive surgery," the doctor announced with glee. "The Fingler procedure is perfect for people with low blood pressure,

diabetes, even heart conditions. You can't be too obese or too unhealthy!"

Morris's jaw dropped. He had wanted gastric bypass ever since that nice man who did the weather got it. Unfortunately, every doctor he went to told him that he was too high a risk. Eventually Morris gave up even his idle fantasies of losing weight—but listening to Doctor Fingler had brought every one of them back to life. It was exhilarating. Morris told himself not to get his expectations up—once bitten, twice shy—but that night and for the first time in a long time, he went to sleep with a smile on his face.

It was hard for Morris not to rush to the phone as soon as he rolled out of bed. It didn't seem wise to make big decision on an empty stomach, however, so he went to the kitchen to grab a few packages of bacon. Morris usually had two or three of them on weekends, along with a few dozen eggs and a small ocean of coffee. He used to drink orange juice too, but prices were so high lately. Grocery stores really didn't offer many incentives to stay slim, in his opinion. With what they charged for a few fresh fruits and vegetables, Morris could buy enough prepackaged macaroni and cheese to feed a small army and still have money left over for a few gallons of store-brand ice cream.

When he was done eating, Morris washed his hands and dialed the number he had jotted down the night before.

"Gold Memorial Hospital, how may I direct your call?" a female voice chirped on the other end of the line.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I thought this was the number for Doctor Fingler from the commercials." Morris stuttered. Women always made him nervous.

“This is the right place! Doctor Fingler works out of Gold Memorial. Are you interested in being evaluated for the Fingler procedure?”

“Well, yes. I mean, I guess.”

“All right then.” Morris could hear papers rustling. “Can I have a name?”

“Morris. Morris Kemp.”

“Very good, Mr. Kemp. How is this afternoon for you?”

“Sounds great. I’ll be there with bells on!”

He felt like slapping himself as he hung up the phone. Who wanted to think about a fat guy dressed in bells? Shaking his head at his own awkwardness, he headed back into the kitchen for brunch. The doctor’s appointment would likely postpone lunch, and Morris didn’t want his gut rumbling in front of Doctor Fingler.

Morris walked into the doctor’s office at Gold Memorial Hospital not knowing what to expect. He was greeted warmly as soon as he walked in and offered a choice of beverages, which he politely declined. After shaking hands, Doctor Fingler motioned for Morris to take a seat.

“So Mr. Kemp, I take it that you’re interested in my little procedure?”

“Yes, I’m hoping it will help me deal with my problem,” Morris answered, sounding apologetic.

“Well, you look like a great candidate. Of course there’s no such thing as a bad one!” The doctor chuckled good-naturedly. “Tell me, Mr. Kemp, how much do you weigh?”

Morris shifted in his seat and looked down at the floor. “Well, I’m not sure. My scale broke a few years ago and I get real embarrassed using the one at the gym.”

“I understand.” Doctor Fingler said. “Society can be so intolerant of people suffering from SMD. It’s shameful, really. We can’t all be blessed with muscular, hardworking bodies. Some of us need a little help.” He leaned forward, his tone serious.

“Do you want my help, Mr. Kemp?”

“Yes,” Morris replied, swallowing thickly. “More than anything.”

Doctor Fingler smiled. “Then let’s get started on making you a new man.”

Morris left the hospital an hour later with a pamphlet in hand and a spring in his step. Doctor Fingler was the smartest, nicest man he had ever met. The surgery had been scheduled and his every question answered. Morris had really only had two: is it safe and when can I start eating again?

“It’s perfectly safe, and you can start eating as soon as you want. As much as you want.”

From anyone else it would have sounded too good to be true. But Doctor Fingler’s promise felt like an answer to a prayer and Morris greeted the morning of his surgery raring to go. The only downside was not being able to eat the day before getting the procedure. It had been a rough twenty-four hours, and when he almost passed out brushing his teeth Morris decided against taking public transportation. He could see the headlines: “GIGANTIC MAN FAINTS IN SUBWAY. DOZENS CRUSHED.” Besides, what was a little extra money? Insurance was covering the medical bills and not eating for a day had saved him at least fifty dollars. The thought of food made Morris’ stomach growl. He stared longingly at the tube of toothpaste and wondering how it would taste on a piece of toast.

“Snap out of it,” he commanded his reflection. “You want to ruin everything when we’re so close?”

Morris rinsed, spat, nodded assertively at his reflection and went to put on his cleanest t-shirt and a nice pair of slacks. He knew he would be shoving himself into a hospital gown soon enough but it never hurt to make a good impression.

By the time Morris got a cab to pull over for him he was sweating so badly that he had pit stains down the sides of his shirt. He told himself not to feel embarrassed. He was doing something about his weight, dammit, and anyone who thought badly of him could stick it where the sun didn’t shine.

He smiled at the cab driver, who was eyeing Morris warily until he was completely seated. Morris pretended not to notice. When they pulled up at Gold Memorial, Morris struggled out of the cab with as much dignity as he could muster.

The second he got in the elevator, he started to feel nervous. What if he couldn’t wake up from anesthesia? What if he was so fat that he broke the hospital bed? The last thought was so mortifying that Morris almost changed his mind right then and there. Only the sight of Terri, Doctor Fingler’s pretty young receptionist, changed Morris’ mind.

“Oh! Mr. Kemp, I was just about to go down and grab some coffee for the doctor. Why don’t I sign you in first?” She walked with him back to her desk and picked up a clipboard.

“No, Mr. Kemp, I trust you were a good boy and didn’t eat anything,” Terri teased.

“On my honor,” Morris insisted, raising his hand like he was about to be sworn into court.

Terri smiled at him. “All right then. I see you faxed your paperwork in last week, so if you just sign these forms I’ll tell the doctor you’re here!”

Once he was sitting down, Morris suddenly wished he had more time. It was silly, but somehow it had been easier when surgery was a distant concept.

“Hello, Mr. Kemp,” Doctor Fingler boomed upon entering the waiting room. “Are we ready for our big day?”

“I guess so,” Morris answered, feeling utterly unsure of himself.

Doctor Fingler laughed. “It’s all right, all my patients get nervous at the last minute.” He pointed to a male nurse behind him. “Scott here is going to get you ready for surgery.”

Scott led Morris to a small room with rows of lockers, much like a gym. There was a dressing room at the end, full of hospital gowns. Morris hesitated, imagining how little of him one of those gowns was likely to cover.

“Don’t worry about the gowns,” Scott said. “Doctor Fingler special orders them.”

Scott wasn’t lying; the gowns were all big enough for Morris. In fact, the first two he tried on were too big. That made him feel a little better and when he was being wheeled down the surgery he started to feel excited again. Doctor Fingler was waiting for him, his face obscured by a green surgical mask. An anesthetist with a low, soothing voice put a mask over Morris’ face and patted his shoulder reassuringly.

“I want you to count back from one hundred for me, Mr. Kemp. Can you do that?”

Morris nodded. He was already starting to feel sleepy. The last number he remembered was ninety-five.

* * *

It didn’t take much time for Morris to conclude that getting the Fingler procedure had been the best decision of his life. First his

clothes fit better, then they started falling off completely. Before he knew it, Morris was fishing through his closet to find the bag of “thin clothes” he had stashed away five years before. When even those started to sag, he felt like finding Doctor Fingler and giving him a big kiss on the mouth. He was still fat, but at the rate things were going he would be thin in a year. Soon he wouldn’t even have to buy pants with elastic waistbands at all!

To celebrate his impending svelteness, Morris ordered Chinese food from five different restaurants. It was a lot of food. An insane amount, really, but lately he had started to wake up in the middle of the night with horrible hunger pains. Sometimes it felt as if his stomach and intestines were writhing inside of him trying to get out. If he didn’t find something to eat quick, the churning pain would get worse until he would actually vomit from hunger. A lot of times he would see blood. At first it freaked him out, but so long as he kept himself full Morris felt fine. Morris wondered if all of Doctor Fingler’s patients went through the same thing and promised himself that, if things got out of hand, he would call Doctor Fingler.

Eventually Morris got used to eating more and stopped worrying. He was getting thin, gloriously thin, and it felt great. He started buying new clothes and planning on how he was going to surprise his family with his brand new body. The only thing that still bothered him was all the loose flesh. With the fat fleeing his body Morris started to look the incredible melting man, drooping like candle wax where his thighs, buttocks, and belly once swelled against the skin. It got so bad that Morris had to tuck his stomach into his pants before tightening the belt. An old sports bra, once worn to contain man-boob jiggle, was now used to keep the deflated areas from getting caught under his armpits.

It took a visit from his big sister for Morris to realize how unnatural things had become. As soon as Patricia saw him, her face went white.

“Oh my God, Morris. You’re sick!”

“I’m not sick, Patricia. I had weight loss surgery. This is normal for someone who lost weight fast!”

“This is not normal! What did you have done?”

“It’s called the Fingler procedure and it’s very safe.”

Morris rummaged around some drawers until he found Doctor Fingler’s pamphlet.

“Look, this explains everything.”

Patricia snatched it out of his hand. It took her less than a minute to read the whole thing.

“Morris, this doesn’t explain anything. All it does is vaguely reference some kind of procedure and list a bunch of insane promises. Did you even read it?”

“Of course!”

Morris took the pamphlet back and read it all. Twice. When he saw that Patricia was right, he felt confused. There had to have been more. He remembered being so sure about getting it done, so secure.

“Well, they aren’t crazy promises,” he blurted. “Everything was true.”

Patricia raised an eyebrow. “It says you can lose all the weight you want and never have to diet or work-out.”

“Look, I’m proof!” He flung his arms wide. As soon as he did, he felt the sagging flesh sway violently back and forth. Patricia blanched.

“Morris, do you even know what they did to you?”

Morris couldn’t bring himself to answer the question.

The next morning he called Doctor Fingler's office to make an appointment with Terri. In the meantime, he kept eating and shrinking. Now that Patricia had ripped away his denial, Morris couldn't help but feel scared. Instead of bringing comfort, now food seemed to mock him. Every bite reminded him that something might be truly, terribly wrong with him. That night Morris made a last ditch appeal to God.

"Please lord," he sniffled. "Don't let me die. If you let me be okay and live a long, healthy life, I promise to do something important. I'll give to charity or write the great American novel, anything you want. Just let me be okay."

The prayer didn't make him feel any better, but seeing Doctor Fingler did. He didn't seem at all alarmed at the dramatic weight loss and waved off Morris' concerns.

"Don't think about it a moment longer, Mr. Kemp. Your weight loss is a tad exaggerated, but some patients take up to a year to level off. There are some pills I can prescribe that will help. Why don't we get you down to the lab and see where your levels are at, then decide?"

It took several tries for the lab technician to draw Morris' blood. When it was over, he told Morris to wait in an adjoining room. A few minutes later, Terri came in with a cup of juice.

"Here we go, Mr. Kemp. Why don't you drink this? It'll make you feel better."

It wasn't food, but it was better than nothing. Morris obliged. The last things he remembered were the colors in the room becoming very bright. He turned to ask Terri if she could see it too, then gravity took an unexpected turn and everything went dark.

"Hello Mr. Kemp." Doctor Fingler was hovering in Morris's line of vision. "How are we feeling?"

Morris looked around and saw that he was in a hospital bed hooked up to an IV of green fluid.

“What happened,” Morris slurred.

“We drugged you, Mr. Kemp.”

The reply was so blunt that it took Morris a few seconds to absorb it.

“Why would you do that?”

“Well, Mr. Kemp, it seems there was a bit of a mishap.”

As Doctor Fingler went on, Morris started to pick up more details of the room. There were no windows and the door looked like it was made of solid steel.

“You’re not in medicine, so I’ll try not to get too technical. Basically, we put the wrong worm in you. Have you heard of tape worms, Mr. Kemp?”

Morris didn’t answer. It was a bad dream; it had to be. Any second he would wake up in his apartment and he could go make himself a nice ham sandwich.

“Victorian women used to swallow tape worms to lose weight. It was a dangerous practice and yielded mixed results. Now, the Fingler worm is different.” The doctor sighed happily.

“My worm is intelligent, at least the males are. They are so in tune with the human body that they never take too much. The second their human host becomes even slightly malnourished, they rein in their voracious appetites. All it takes is one Fingler worm to change a patient’s life for the better, forever!”

“But,” Morris replied weakly, “I’m not better.”

Doctor Fingler smiled thinly. “As I said, Mr. Kemp, you got the wrong worm. Some fool in the lab took a pregnant female out.” The doctor clenched his fist, clearly angry. “Needless to say, that employee had been dealt with.”

The way Doctor Fingler spoke made Morris feel cold all over. He tried to sit up, thinking maybe he could push past Doctor Fingler and make a run for it, but his arms were strapped to the sides of the bed.

“Don’t bother, Mr. Kemp. You aren’t going anywhere.”

“So you’re going to let me die,” Morris wailed.

“Die?” Doctor Fingler looked aghast. “Mr. Kemp, do you have any idea how few females are produced in Fingler worm populations? Or how hard it was to engineer a breed of worms with distinct sexes? We are certainly not going to waste a breeding female, much less the offspring we plan to harvest.”

The door opened and Terri walked in with a tray full of hamburgers.

“Soup’s on!” She announced in a singsong voice.

Doctor Fingler got up to leave. “Your lunch is here, Mr. Kemp. I’ll leave you and Terri alone. Rest assured that we plan to take very good care of you. And don’t worry about the worms, there are only a few hundred in there right now and as long as you keep eating they shouldn’t move around too much.”

Morris heard the door lock behind Doctor Fingler as Terri took a seat beside the bed. She held out a double burger dripping with cheese and oil from the generous heap of bacon tucked between the patties.

“Come on now, Mr. Kemp, open wide.”

© Copyright 2009 Natalie L. Sin

Missouri, USA

Natalie on [Myspace](#)

Natalie on [Blogger](#)

A Garden

M.E. Purfield

Localisation

US English

Reader Guidance

There's a little bit of swearing. Tsk.

Chapter 1

Bryan lost his job and had nothing to do. He grew depressed and restless.

He asked George, his roommate and the owner of the condo he paid rent to, if he had any ideas. George said, "Why don't you try gardening?"

Bryan stood from the couch and brightened up.

"Of course. I can grow vegetables for all the people who live here. Plus, it will be good for the environment."

"Cool," said George.

Chapter 2

Bryan roamed around the city building and finally found the perfect spot. It was on a small hill beside the back concrete area

of the building. A fence formed a path at the top of the slope that ran down the side of the building.

Yes, it was perfect.

Chapter 3

One day, Bryan was watering the garden. He smiled down at the shoots sprouting out of the dirt. It was all coming along.

“Hey, you there. What are you doing?”

“Hello there.”

“What are you doing?”

“I’m watering our garden.”

“Who said you can plant a garden here? Did you ask the Board?”

“No. I didn’t know I had to.”

“This is a fire hazard. See these fire escapes? Because of the fencing, this is their only way out. They can trip over these rocks. Jesus, is this trip wire around here?”

“Who are you to say? This garden is for everyone. It gives back to the environment.”

“I am the President of the Board. You can’t just do what you want in the common areas. It’s in the By-Laws. Are you an owner?”

“No. I rent in George’s unit.”

“George who is three thousand dollars behind on his fees? No. I want this gone. If you don’t do it, I will.”

The President walked away.

Bryan squinted and frowned. He was not going to let that bastard dictate to him. He lived in America.

By the time he finished watering the garden, his anger subsided and his mind cleared. He went back to the apartment to plan his next move.

⌘ Chapter 4 ⌘

The President checked on the garden a week later. It was still there. He sighed and shook his head.

“Nut job.”

He pulled out a pepper plant and noticed a short metal pin with a loop attached to it.

“What the...”

The grenade went off. The President’s body flew back and cracked its head on the concrete. He died before he hit the ground.

⌘ Chapter 5 ⌘

The President, so busy with his day job and family life, didn’t have a chance to tell the Board who was growing the garden. The police investigated and found five more grenades attached to various vegetables. So far they had no suspects, but the investigation was ongoing.

The Board planned to take down the garden immediately, but since they were busy with their own lives they kept delaying it.

⌘ Chapter 6 ⌘

Bryan replanted the peppers. He was careful and precise. He did a great job and he knew it.

“Beautiful. You all look beautiful and everyone is going to think so.”

He walked back to his apartment to get the box of landmines.

Chapter 7

Later in the week, old wiring in the building started a fire. Most of the families escaped through the main entrance of the building. Some, like the mother and teen-aged daughter, had to use the fire escapes. They made it to the bottom and ran down the path to the garden.

Chapter 8

Bryan stood with George across the street and waited for the fire trucks. Both men looked forlorn. George focused on his 2nd floor unit, while Bryan craned his neck to peek down the alley.

“I hope the garden doesn’t burn,” Bryan said.

George gave his roommate a side-glance.

“Dude, you serious?”

There was a loud *whump* from behind the building, followed by a woman’s scream.

“What the fuck was that?” George asked.

Bryan smiled. “No. It should be okay.”

©Copyright 2009 M.E. Purfield
New Jersey, USA
M.E. on [Livejournal](#)

Adamsesque Outing

Marcie Tentchoff

Oh for a day on the green growing grasses,
dressed in our best, with bouquets in our hands,
the young playing peekaboo behind the tombstones,
while we smile and listen to speeches and bands.
Who are those humbugs who weep and cast glances
at we who enjoy our time out in the sun?
We'll have no mad moaning mopes at this function,
we'll laugh and we'll strut till the preacher is done.
Then on to the picnic, baked meats and chilled berries,
treats for the children and treats for the worms,
the hum and the bustle of bright grave-side gossip,
funereal pleasures outstrip mortal term.

© 2009 Copyright Marcie Tentchoff

RUTHLESS PEOPLES MAGAZINE

~AFTERWORD~

Once more, it is the blistering diversity of this edition which gives Ruthless Peoples Magazine its joy and strength. As always, putting RPM together is a real pleasure, but this one I have particularly enjoyed.

As we are now into our sixth edition, I thought it might be a good moment to stop and reflect on what we have managed to achieve so far. Right now, we have around fifty stories produced out of several thousand submissions. So, within the next couple of months I will be asking subscribers to our newsletter to start considering the Ultimate Question: Who Gets the Secret Money?

What? You didn't know about it?

To fight off the recession and to keep some of our writers in food and drink, we plan to offer a \$50.00 bonus to the most popular story for each edition, as voted for by our subscribers. There will be a further substantial prize in the New Year for the critics' choice award. Voting will start in a few months once we've sorted the platform out and given everyone time to pimp.

Poetry will be dealt with (*significant pause*) by other means.

Yours truly,

Dominic Hamer

Editor

London, 2009

~ TEAM RPM ~

YOUR MERCILESS ASSISTANTS IN THE FICTIONAL WORLD

Editor in Chief – Dominic Hamer
Avant-garde Associate Editor – Josiah Franco

Poetry Editor & Webgod – Stewart Baker
Proofreading & Last Word – Babs Griswold