

INVERSIONS



Scribings

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edited by Jamie Alan Belanger

Scribings, Vol 5: Inversions

Jamie Alan Belanger, editor

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that includes a short excerpt from every story.

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Introduction: Inversions

Surprises surround us in every aspect of life. Prepare too much for one experience and the path inevitably shifts, revealing another, hidden path that you never anticipated. Sometimes the path inverts completely, upending any semblance of a plan and invalidating all your expectations. But what good is an experience if you know the outcome in advance? You can watch a movie dozens of times. As much as you enjoy the repeated experience, you know the first viewing had the most impact on you. Subsequent views can recapture part of that initial experience, but often you find yourself searching in the images, perhaps to find something else hidden deep inside, lurking in the background, hiding in plain sight. You peel apart the layers of the story, searching for another surprise hidden somewhere inside. All that searching is bound to pay off. The story doesn't change; *you* do.

Sometimes the surprise that lies in wait is a window to another world. Throughout history, people have constructed tales of hidden worlds beyond the reach of mere mortals. Stories from olden days talk of entire peoples hiding alongside us in mythical realms we are not supposed to know exist. Visitors to those lands have been witness to wonders and horrors nearly beyond description. Some say these layers of reality wrap and permeate us without our knowledge. Some say there are not just peoples but entire worlds parallel to our reality, an infinite rainbow of alternate universes. Concrete proof of just one of these places or peoples can change your entire view of our reality.

People also harbor surprises; thoughts and feelings they display on the surface, and others they bury deep inside. Hopes. Dreams. Secrets. Hidden agendas. The more you get to know a person, the more the layers peel away, revealing thoughts that surprise and delight you, or that you never expected to find, or that you hoped were not there. Part of the excitement of getting to know a person is in peeling away those layers to catch a glimpse of who they are on the inside. Everyone hides pieces of themselves from others; the reasons are as interesting as the people themselves. With any new discovery comes the potential of a radical change; a single action or piece of knowledge can shatter trust and completely invert how you see and feel about that person.

Some of these surprises challenge us, some entertain, and others push us to our limits. But all of these surprises achieve the same result: they turn our expectations around, inverting the perceptions we have of the people and the world around us. Part of the joy and terror of living lies in experiencing these surprises. The journey, as they say, *is* the reward.



Sand Fleas

by D.L. Harvey

My driver had dropped me off at Turtle Crossing, a small, family-owned New England restaurant taking up the first floor of a stone building. Dried herbs dangled in the front windows and a sign stating "All organically grown, harvested, and fed ingredients" covered the window in the entrance door. I hadn't visited this town, an hour's drive from my woodland estate, before Laughing Lugh's Crew's invitation to collaborate. It was the only time during the LLC's tour when they'd be anywhere in Maine, so we'd settled on meeting here.

Unfortunately, the patrons had heard someone squeal, "Eeeee! It's Polly Tate," interrupting the relative quiet when I'd entered the room. My name, poorly whispered, caused a cascade of murmurs. I'd seen one of the LLC's musicians in back, near a small bar by the kitchen entrance, waving me in while making a horrendously excited racket. I smiled as I passed the curious people; trying to communicate with my crinkling eyes my apologies for creating a scene, for interrupting their meals. My smile hid my distress at disrupting so many other people, the back of my mind reviewed how glad I was to be out of the spotlight, no longer having to worry about the possible circus this could've become in years past and the effect of smiling creating crow's feet on my brand. My brand; the packaging ala moi. I passed by, poised for any sort of interaction while the people stared. I didn't see anyone hoisting the gods' awful cell phones, but I could hear the volume of whispers growing in my wake. But I wasn't here about me.

LLC had asked me to be here to discuss reviving my career by working with them. They were getting involved at the grassroots level of some save-the-world-type cause, the Environmental

Sanctuary Initiative. While long-distance communication would have kept my debilitating ailments a secret, they needed to know that my refusal wasn't about them or their desire to save Maine's coastal ecosystems. Their rising status was warranted and could weather the success or failure of engaging in such an ambitious movement. And I just wanted to meet some fellow musicians I admired and talk shop for a while. I'd expected to walk away feeling good, having made a connection with some potential friends.

I dropped my thick and ragged looking hoodie on the back of the chair immediately. I kept the knit scarf on my head, restraining my large mass of curls I hadn't attempted to manage today. Looking at the casually dressed band, I knew the baggy shirt hanging half on and half off of my shoulders had been the right choice. Unlike the era during my career, the me-being-me look was an asset for comfortable informal meetings without lawyers, agents, and underwriters.

"Thank you for meeting us," a young man in his 20s stood, leaning forward to shake my hand. His chin-length hair was almost as curly as mine, except his was like frosted, summer sunshine while mine was like the darkest, winter night. His eyes smiled with his lips, when he caught me looking at his hair. "I'm Wick Hope. Yes, it's my real name."

I smiled, shaking his hand forgetting to volunteer that I knew who they all were.

"This is Teddy James," he said as he motioned to the highly energetic male trying desperately to live in the height of fashion. He bent over the table to reach me and shake my hand.

"Eeeee, Polly Tate!" Teddy said again but quiet enough that only our table seemed to hear. He was bouncing in his seat and speaking rather quickly, "I am so excited to meet you. I have been a fan since I was a kid, since you were a kid. I swear I know everything about you. You influenced my musical choices heavily throughout my entire life." From my research, I knew he was a gifted 24 year old drummer.

"Oh My Gods, if I didn't know any better, I'd swear you were going to blow right here," remarked a rather dark pixie of a young woman to his left. Her hair was as short as Wick's but an array of pastel colors of straight tresses lay like a shimmery glaze over flat, black hair.

"And Fynn MacCoil," Wick gestured at the bassist. She did not stand or extend a hand. Her large almond, grey eyes stared at me challengingly and gave me a quick nod. With the dark make-up and spiked collar with the similarly designed bracers, I thought she might not be a perky, cheerleader type.

I clasped Wick's hand and said, "Hello." I clipped the word short to hide how breathless I'd become.

...



Wolf and Raven

by Shelli-Jo Pelletier

He had watched mankind for barely an eyeblink, and yet he knew he was a figure in their history from the time that history began. In Japan he was *okami*, which meant "wolf" and "king" and "god." To the Norse he was *Fenrir*, destined to devour the Earth at the end of time.

Here in this village between the sea and the snow they would call him *Amaroq*, the "Great Wolf."

He watched now as they moved like lines of ants, up and down the pathways of their tiny village. The swirling snow hid all but the tips of his pointed ears from view, and even those were white and looked like snowflakes twitching this way and that in the wind. He watched as the men walked up the streets to the town's center with woven baskets of fish, caribou and seal in their arms, and he watched as the women walked down the streets to the center of town with iron pots and roasting spits and blankets made of hides. They left the trappings of their current lives behind in their homes, to walk the streets the way their ancestors had walked upon them.

The celebration was not for him, for these men had always revered *Amaroq* as the greatest of hunters, a fierce beast who would not be placated with offerings of food or joy. Still, he watched the village because here and now, where ocean met land and half a year of night met half a year of day, was a crossroads where a great choice would be made. *Amaroq* could not act until that time, so for now he watched.

At first he watched alone. The men in the village below scurried to and fro, encompassed by their preparations. But shortly after the silver ball of the sun touched the mountaintops, the sound of wingbeats made itself known to him. He folded back his great white ears not in warning or displeasure,

but in recognition of her presence. By his side a sleek black Raven stood lightly on top of the snow, where even his wide paws sank through the thin icy crust.

Like him, she was also called many things by many people, but he knew she had lately taken to calling herself Tulu when she visited the hearts of men. She whispered in their dreams at night so they would have stories to tell when they woke, benevolent as an indulgent mother when they so often heard her wrong.

The Raven threw back her wings the way a woman throws off her cape upon entering a home. And instead of a black bird--or perhaps even a white bird, for tales said she had once been this before the stains of time had darkened her--there now stood a woman in a long white gown, her hair a white braid down her back. On her face a black mask that came to a heavy point over her mouth, and a cape of black feathers draped over her back.

"Look at the way they prepare their celebration. They can sense this night will be a night of choices," Tulu said into the air, her words emerging as crystallized clouds.

"They are perceptive in ways even we do not understand," Amaroq said, and Tulu laughed. Many stories told of how Raven had created the wide world for all the animals and mankind to live on, but the men ignored the parts of her stories that displeased them and instead told tales of a silly Raven and called her "He." As if the Creator of the world could be anything but a mother.

* * *

A rainbow hung in the sky above the village. Not a bridge between worlds, as some stories portrayed. Rather it was the tail-end peeking out into view of all the layers of the worlds that existed, each piled on top of another like a multi-colored stack of furs, and sometimes blending into each other the same way yellow bled into green bled into blue.

Amaroq and Tulu existed now in this way, standing in the snow on the ridge above the village and also in another place entirely. A blend of Raven, Wolf, and something far more from somewhere else, a world vastly unlike the land of snow and ice. The Wolf and the Raven saw the arc of colors in the sky overhead and knew it to be a far darker portent than the good omen the village would believe it to be.

"He comes soon," Tulu commented, watching the last sliver of the silver sun dipping below the horizon, starting the change of the daylight world to a long night of dusky twilight. The shadows stretched on the ground in the village and all but disappeared. Torchlight sprang up at points in the little ant-path streets. The wind changed direction, bringing to the Wolf's sharp ears the distant sound of men's chanting and drums.

...



The Hidden Smell of Sunlight

by Robin Hansen

Janus had an affinity for plants and only spoke near them.

Mostly what he said around houseplants was "Water! Water! Water!" and he or his mother would bring water to the jade plant or spider plant or philodendron, which would offer bright green thanks.

Weeding the tomatoes in the kitchen garden, Janus said, "Water. Please. Water. And phosphates and calcium. Nitrogen." Janus got silently to his feet and brought a hose and a wheelbarrow of manure and lime to the tomato plants, which thanked him greenly with their poisonous fragrance.

Janus was considered a nutcase by those who knew him. Those who didn't know him thought he was mentally challenged. Seven years old, he had never begun to talk. He was a member of a forgotten population in the Great Smoky Mountains that was thought to be inbred. No one expected him to make sense.

He had never said much of anything to anybody.

His mother saw that he loved plants, so she let him help in the kitchen garden and take care of her houseplants. He always knew what each plant wanted or needed--whether it was manure, more lime, green sand, water, weeding, or just cultivation. The tomatoes, the melons, the pumpkins, and the apples on their homestead grew large and sweet and healthy, as if offering gratitude for his care.

He knew so much about green things, even as a little boy, that his father said the plants must be talking to him.

Janus should have been named Janice. His mother wanted and expected a girl. She wanted a Janice, but she got him instead. She heard there was a boy's name that sounded just like Janice and so

he became Janus--the Roman small god of doorways, who saw both backward and forward. But Janus faced neither forward nor back, only the now.

He had six older brothers and a little sister. His father wanted to tell him that he too had six older brothers, and that made them alike. Sort of. He was saddened that Janus didn't notice his words.

He was a sweet boy, quiet and within himself. He loved to lie in the grass in the pasture or in the star moss under trees. When he lay there, his arms and legs stretched out like a snow angel, it was almost as if the grass or the moss embraced him.

The first time he was aware of something besides needs and wishes of plants, he was lying in the grass under the oak tree outside their house when he fell--was it *asleep*? And because it was Janus, it was strange that it--was it a *dream*?--had little to do with plants.

In his mind he saw water awash with rotten bits of stuff, and large white seabirds he would never see in the mountains of western North Carolina, feeding blue and yellow bottle caps to their ugly, large-beaked chicks. A little ways beyond them, a skeleton with grayish feathers of the same kind of bird dried on a naked rock.

And he spoke words that came to him, just as he spoke the needs of plants. "The Destroyers have changed the remains of those dead four million years to make an evil substance that kills the birds and insects that eat it. The Destroyers have created this for their brief deadly pleasures. We are helpless against this substance. We cannot restore it to Earth."

He saw a great, barnacled, fish-like animal rise to the surface to gulp what looked like a big transparent balloon. "Balloon," he thought, warning the creature, because its death was palpable because of the balloon.

And then, the pale, multicolored floating things, close, but spreading far away in a huge body of water, more water than he had ever seen, bending away under a bowl of treeless, cloud-cloaked sky.

Beneath all of this, a terrible distress. And a deep, brooding anger.

It was nightmarish, but suddenly over. He started awake, and the grass under him lay both cushioning and scratchy against his skin.

"Don't be afraid, Janus," he whispered.

...



Repurposed

by Matthew Stephen D.

Still alive...

A splitting pain tore through his head.

The wind howled over him.

The snow blew over his face.

He could smell blood and feces.

He was alive.

He strained to get to his feet. His vision burned its way through the cruel sunlight. The rays of light loomed over the mountain pass, shining crimson on the snow, casting down an oppressive, unsettling calm. As his eyes strained to make sense of his surroundings, he saw a dark lump on the ground. The fog finally cleared from his vision, and he found himself surrounded by the bodies of his fellow soldiers, alone in a sea of death.

The sense of what was present began to rain down on him, and Sebastian started to remember himself.

As he stared out at the smoking remains of the camp, the events of the early morning began to cascade through his mind.

He had awakened to the smell of smoke, the sound of clashing steel, of screams, and of someone yelling from outside his tent.

"Captain Gorman, sir! Captain! Wake up, sir!" one soldier called to him.

Sebastian shook the sleep away, and washed his face with a handful of snow.

"What's going on?" he demanded, fumbling his way out of the tent. The surprising brightness smashed through his senses. The battle had come to them in their sleep, and the night sky was ablaze with light shining off the burning tents.

"The auxiliary, sir! They've turned on us! They just started killing everyone!"

The words tumbled through his mind, but his eyes screamed the truth at him. Conscripts from the mountain clans were cutting men down; some before they even got the chance to get out of their bedrolls.

Sebastian stood frozen amidst the storm, *knowing* this had to be a dream. He fought desperately to hold onto that thought, but logic was losing its battle to the immediacy of the present.

He turned to the man, a command nearing the edges of his teeth, only to see a blade tear through the man's open mouth from behind, and the snickering bearded killer on the other end of it.

The conscript came slowly at Sebastian, blade gleefully dancing in for the strike. Sebastian leaped out of the way, diving down the small slope that lead to the main body of the mountain pass, and after rolling all thirty feet or so to the bottom, he sprang up into a swift, helpless run, making his way to any safe place he could hide.

It came in the form of a large, foul smelling barrel, which sat just outside of the infirmary tents.

"Shit..." Sebastian muttered as he pulled the lid off, finding that the barrel was indeed filled with what its odor suggested. The legion kept a ready supply on hand, so the healers could make their medicine. He desperately looked around, hoping to find a better place to hide, but saw that there wasn't. With a heavy sigh, then a deep breath, he jumped in, and sank to the bottom.

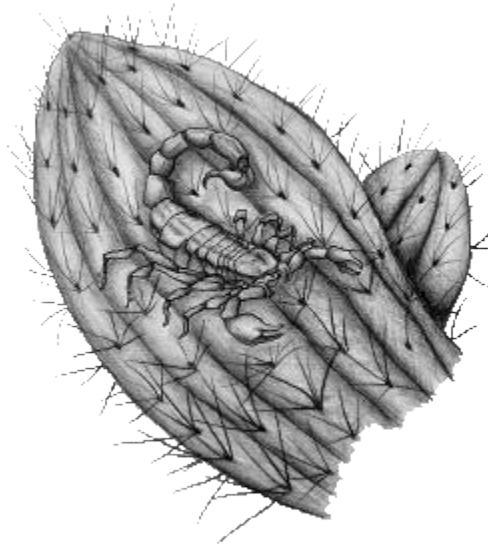
As he sat there, neck deep in filth, he began to silently curse everything.

Starting with his horrible luck, thinking about how he was going to die in a foreign land, covered head to toe in shit.

Then he began to curse God, thinking about how this was God's way of punishing him for his cowardice over these last few months.

Then he cursed himself. *I deserve this...* he thought, in that cramped, stinking barrel, *this is what I get for everything I've done... everything I didn't do. I must be the most despicable worm that ever lived...*

...



Barren

by Richard Veysey

"We did it!" one of the six dressed in orange shouted. "We really did it!" His face, rough with stubble, was not suited for the look of elation upon it. After a moment of celebration, his customary frown returned. His jumpsuit was labelled with a number, but such things were hard for anyone but the prison's pencil-pushers to remember. He wasn't the type to give out his name, so most just called him Smith.

"Sh, not so loud! What if they're close? They could hear us," another said. He was slender, almost skin and bones, but his face was round and youthful. The others knew him as Rogers, but he also answered to Hacker.

The lone woman in the group looked upward. "I'm more worried about them seeing us. They'll be sending out helicopters before we can even reach the hills." She shook her head, a force of habit from when she had hair reaching halfway down her back. But the prison had kept her hair short, never lower than her shoulders. When she wasn't being called 'woman,' she asked to be called Guff.

"We should take off these jumpsuits." The speaker was skeletal, like Rogers, but his face was gaunt and lined. When he'd first come to the prison, most had given him the name Tweaker, but his real name was Bates.

The man at the head of the group shook his head. "No. We'll want to keep them on. The suits will protect our skin when the sandstorm starts." He didn't turn, keeping his head forward, his pace steady. He appeared the oldest in the group, with his salt-and-pepper hair and deep brown eyes. Everyone knew him as Carter.

The group continued walking in silence that was only broken by the occasional gust of wind. Their eyes wandered, but there was nothing but endless sand for them to take in. The sky was clear, with no clouds to protect their skin from the harsh desert sun.

"Damn it! Damn this sun right now!" Bates's face had taken on a more pink tone. He turned toward Rogers. "You're a lucky bastard, you know that? With your skin I bet you've never had a sunburn in your life."

Daniels, the last member of the group, put a hand on Carter's shoulder and pointed at a dark cloud in the distance. "Do you see that? That's what's going to keep us safe. The wind is already picking up. Soon the sand and dust will be so thick in the air that it won't be safe for the helicopters to even take off. They probably won't realize we've escaped until it's too late for them to start a search. That will give us time to reach the hills. When the dust clears, we'll have plenty of places to hide from the copters."

* * *

Carter held his arms over his face, hoping to keep the swirling sands from touching his exposed skin. Each grain that made it through sliced across his face like a razor. He kept his eyes closed, praying that his feet would keep him going in a straight line. Hoping he wouldn't lose the others.

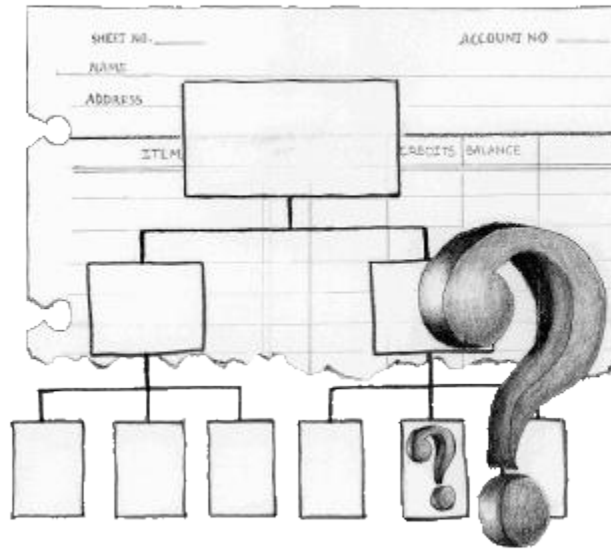
He hadn't known them for long. First he'd met Daniels. The man struck him as being remarkably rational and reasonable for someone in a prison. Carter had no doubt that the man's crime had to be something white collar.

Carter had scoped him out during the social lunch period. It always amused Carter how much prison was like a school. Groups had their lunch time and there was the 'recess,' where they could play sports in the field or participate in other social activities. There were even cliques and people who were more popular than others. But here bullying was the least of the things the unpopular had to fear.

Daniels was a new face to Carter, though that may have only been because their paths had not yet happened to cross. He sat alone at a table. Carter found that unusual. The man glowed with charisma. Carter had met men like him. They were the type that emerged as natural leaders in any situation.

Carter decided to join Daniels one day during their meal period. Few words were spoken that first day. Even as the lunch seating arrangement became more permanent, their relationship was largely a silent one.

...



Annex

by Steven Inman

The annex first appeared to Robert as a small rectangle quietly drawn on a chart: a black line two centimeters by one centimeter surrounding the words "SATELLITE REPOSITORY ANNEX."

"Hmm," Robert murmured to himself, mildly surprised. "An annex... it could be Jeff's." Jeff, an information technician and water-cooler friend of Robert's, had surprised him ten days earlier, announcing a transfer to a new office. "The Annex Depository," Jeff had said.

Robert had paid little attention, thinking this to be a dream, some idle rambling thought of his friend. And transfers took ages in the Corporation: parties were given, send-offs were made, cards were circulated.

But Jeff had never returned to the water cooler. He was gone, and had never explained why or where exactly he was headed. Robert had been bemused, then interested, and now concerned, concerned enough to ask others at the office where Jeff might be, where this Annex Depository might be.

Nobody had heard of the Annex, and actually, some people had never heard of Jeff, though the staff had been distracted lately, nervously discussing business news and sharing the thin rumors of impending collapse.

So Robert put Jeff in the back of his mind and did what he was supposed to do, what he'd been hired to do: trace down offices and departments that may not be productive and efficient.

And a week later, it occurred to him that if this Annex is so unknown, perhaps it is also inefficient. The corporation may be a leviathan, but there was still no room for waste.

Days of poring through records resulted in nothing. Questions were met with shrugs, calls not returned. So Robert turned to archives, and started with the broadest piece of data: the organizational chart. And there he found not an Annex Depository but a Satellite Repository Annex.

The rectangle was attached with a single faint line to another small and nondescript office, the "Data Assignment Office" and the line between the two rectangles had an even slighter bend and fade to it, as if the Satellite Annex was willfully stepping into the background of the large Organizational Chart, hiding among the multitude of tiny squares.

"Well," Robert muttered, bending over the table and bringing his eyes close to the dry yellowed surface. He glanced to the bottom right: the date was July 19--. "Hmm."

He said nothing more than that. Other staff passed by the Archive of Records office, walking-wandering to or from some vague task or pointless chore while Robert leaned back and considered the chart before him. His shadow covered a small corner of the paper, dark curves of human covering the rectangles. Shadows from passing people flickered over the walls and desk.

Windows, already tinted, were purple-black in the summer twilight, and were very narrow and rarely used. Robert lifted his gaze and looked out into the twilight. Robert did not move for a time, other than tiny tilts of his head as he followed different lines of the Corporation. There were many lines, there were many rectangles; it was a very big Corporation, made much bigger over the years since the collapse and chaos of the Fog, when all businesses and economies fell into turmoil. Rumors now drifted, talk of another impending Fog, but the Corporation felt it was ready to face anything.

Someone looked into the office, momentarily curious as to what was going on, if anyone was working, but Robert had his back to the door and did not notice, and the person moved off without even shrugging.

Some time later Robert straightened and looked around. There were more organizational charts; he took these out and went through them. The topmost bore a recent date: only eight months old but there had been few changes in that time. Robert ran a finger along the lines, looking for the Satellite Annex. There was a square in the same position, but the label within now read Joint Storage Facility. And the line was different, now reaching in the other direction, connecting to the Management Admin box.

Repurposed and *re-assigned* in the corporate structure? That could very well be.

...



Hostage One

by Jamie Alan Belanger

I was waiting in line to deposit my weekly paycheck when two armed gunmen burst through the front doors of the First National Bank. Normally, on a Friday morning, there's a small group of regulars who show up, and always the same employees. I've come to know these people like a second family, which is good because I never got around to assembling a first one. And yet, for all the time I've spent with these people, all I could think when those men pushed through the front door was, *Oh shit, not today!* That thought, of course, was absurd. As if any day were good for a bank robbery. I just didn't want to be present for this one. I had to work hard to keep myself from laughing--at myself, at the gunmen and their ridiculous ski masks, at the reactions of the other customers.

The gunmen are wearing ski masks--one red, one blue--with little white pom-poms that bounce as they move. It's like watching armed bobble-heads; *so* hard not to laugh. "Everyone down on the floor, *now!*" shouts the one in the Red mask. He points his shotgun directly at me while he speaks and scans the small crowd with his bright green eyes. As his aim crosses over us, one by one, we collapse to the floor. Blue stands behind Red, pointing an unusually large revolver at the tellers behind the counter. A moment of confusion gives way to pure, abject terror in my fellow customers.

"Get down and stay down!" Red shouts at us, but we're already on the floor. Blue storms the counter and looks over the edge to keep an eye on the tellers. Red calls out, "*You*, get over here now," an order I assume is for Avery, the branch manager, who emerges from her office. I hear her heels clicking along the floor.

From my position, I scan the rest of the hostages.

Whimpering beside me, a nice pregnant lady named Gloria clutches her toddler son close to her chest. She's a sweet woman; speaks in broken English but manages to get her point across. Kind, thoughtful, and very patient. Seems to be a good mother, from what I can tell. The child, Roberto, stares at the gunmen, probably still trying to figure out what's happening. To his credit, he does not look scared, merely curious.

Beside Gloria is an ornery older man named Ned. I can't help but scowl when my eyes land on him. He's a complainer, always holding up the line and badgering the poor girls behind the counter. He never seems to understand what he's told; every week he issues the same complaints, receives the same explanations, and ultimately ends up in the manager's office, repeating his complaints to Avery and sometimes to her superiors over the phone. He complains about the bank, the employees, the fees they charge, the security measures, their computer systems, the weather, his doctors, whatever restaurant he went to the previous night, his neighbors... you name it, he's upset about it. We all know plenty about him, because he complains about everything. His left hip, for instance, is a recent replacement. He complains about that every goddamn week too. Laying on the floor now, Ned is strangely quiet for once. His face is twisting in something most would see as pain, but I know him better; he's just processing this new experience and figuring out how best to complain. He is, by far, the most annoying man I've ever met. I've often wanted to find a way to pay him back for all the minutes and hours of *my* time he wastes.

My eyes fall on Avery next, who is staring at Red and his shotgun. Avery is gorgeous; there's no way around such a simple explanation. Her looks are, honestly, what most men might call plain. I always saw something more. She speaks softly and acts like a proper bank manager. She follows the rules and knows all the procedures, and gets her job done with an alacrity that justifies her position. Then she'll crack a quiet joke and reward you with a smile, a sly curling of her lips that pinches her cheeks and makes her whole face light up. I find her to be pleasant, and very playful. Whenever I can dream up an excuse to spend time in her office, I do so. Then, much to my annoyance, she efficiently deals with my banking inquiry and sends me on my way... I have yet to find a good enough excuse to stay in her office longer than she deems necessary. For the past year or so, I've been trying to ask her out, but the moment just never seems right. The moment usually gets interrupted by Ned. I really need to start banking on a different day, but I get my paycheck on Thursday nights and need the money in my account to cover my Friday rent check, so--

"Get up!" Blue shouts at the tellers, breaking my line of thought. "Up now, both of you! Get out here with the others!"

...



Tiny Shoe Prints

by Timothy Lynch

Patrick opened his eyes and looked around the room. He'd been dreaming. He was chasing Dad, but Dad seemed older than he was now. He'd heard a sound, a sort of ring; was his alarm clock on? He looked, no. The dream made Patrick feel weird. He didn't like the thought of Dad getting older. He rubbed his face and scratched his head, then gave himself a big stretch.

Today was a special day. Patrick smiled. It was his birthday. He jumped out of bed and ran to the mirror. *Am I taller? Now I'm eight, eight, eight, eight!* His favorite number. He did an I'm-eight dance, complete with a heel click, then ran downstairs.

"What's for breakfast, Mom?"

"Eggs."

Patrick's lips curled in an automatic reaction; he stuck out his tongue. "Mom why can't we have French toast? It's my birthday, you know!"

"I know it is sweetie! Happy Birthday! I thought you loved eggs."

"I don't like eggs."

"You do too, you fibber. Don't ya wanta grow up big and strong?"

"I am big and strong," he said flexing his biceps.

"So, how many slices of French toast do you want?" Mom said with a mischievous grin.

"You're the fibber, Mom!"

Patrick heard the wooden shudder of the opening front door. It closed, muffling the sound of cars and birds. Dad walked into the kitchen.

"How's the birthday boy!" Dad tussled Patrick's hair. "I just put a pot of shamrocks on Grampa's stone for *his* birthday. You know, I can't be sure... but I thought I saw something out of the corner of my eye."

"What do you think it was?" said Patrick.

"You never can tell," said Dad.

Patrick was reminded that it was Grampa McHale's birthday too. Grampa always used to tell Patrick about magical beings. After leaving Grampa's and Gramma's, he and Dad would look for signs: things slightly out of order, small tracks, paths where a fairy person might have been. He missed spending his birthday over at Gramma and Grampa's. He and Grampa had been best buds.

"Grampa liked shamrocks," Patrick said.

"He liked Guinness better! But I guess shamrocks will do," Dad said.

Patrick always thought that Grampa told the best stories about growing up in Ireland. Dad told Patrick that Grampa didn't really grow up in Ireland, but Patrick couldn't believe it, the way he told stories: like that one time a man twisted an ankle in what he thought was a rabbit hole, and how the man's ankle swelled up so much that he couldn't have anything on his foot. So he left the old shoe right on top of the mound and went home. And how the next day when he went back, not only was there a brand new shoe in the man's style where the old one was, but there was a second one to match!

Patrick loved that story and so many others Grampa McHale used to tell. He wished Grampa McHale didn't have to be in heaven, but he was probably pretty happy since, Patrick thought, *heaven was supposed to be a great place to be*.

"You look taller," Dad said. "What are you, six now?" Dad said, winking at Mom.

"Nooo Dad!"

"Wow, six years old, already!"

Patrick shook his head from side to side. "I'm eight! Eight!" and held up the correct number of fingers. "Eight!"

"So what did you want to do on your birthday?"

Patrick shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know."

"I thought we could buy stuff for sandwiches and have a picnic at the beach later," said Mom.

"Sound good buddy?" asked Dad.

"Sure!" said Patrick.

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