

THIS IS THE FIFTH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE OF USED GRAVITONS. WHEN USED GRAVITONS BEGAN IN 1934 BY LOCAL BOISE IDAHO NE'ER-DO-WELL, SHEA SOMETHING, THE MAGAZINE WAS PACKED WITH THE USUAL GET-RICH-QUICK-SCHEMES AND ADVERTISEMENTS FOR SNAKE OIL REMEDIES. THE MAGAZINE WAS NAMED AFTER THE HYPOTHETICAL ELEMENTARY PARTICLE THAT TRANSMITS THE FORCE OF GRAVITATION IN THE FRAMEWORK OF EINSTEIN'S THEORY OF GENERAL RELATIVITY. PEOPLE JUST THOUGHT IT WAS A GOOD NAME AND HISTORY WAS BORN. WITH USED GRAVITONS WAS THE MOST POPULAR MAGAZINE IN THE UNIVERSE... PEOPLE WERE THEN TRAGEDY STRUCK IN 1888 (OR THEREABOUTS) (WHAT WILL LATER BE REFERRED TO AS "THE WORST TIME TRAVEL WILL BE INVENTED") BE REFERRED TO AS "THE WORST TIME TRAVEL SCREW UP IN THE HISTORY OF SHITTY TIME TRAVEL SCREW UPS", WHEN SHEA WHATSHISNAME WAS STRUCK DEAD BY A RUNAWAY MULE HOPPED UP ON COUGH SYRUP WHICH WAS A FAD AT THE TIME. YES, THERE WAS A FAD THAT INVOLVED PEOPLE GIVING LARGE QUANTITIES OF COUGH SYRUP TO MULES. IT WAS A SMALL TOWN SERVICE TOWN LIKE YOU DIDN'T DO STUPID STUFF WHEN YOU WERE A KID, WHAT WAS IT WAS YEARS AGO, FUCKING GETTING INTO THE MIDDLE OF THINGS, I DONATE BLOOD, LEAVE MY BLOOD ABOUT IT. A MULE ON COUGH SYRUP KILLED HIM. THAT SAME YEAR 1976 MICHAEL KUNTZ, WHOSE NAME IS NOT PRONOUNCED HUMOROUSLY, DISCOVERED THE RIGHTS TO THE UG NAME, AND HAVING A COUGH SYRUP CURES WITH NO WAY TO SELL THEM SINCE HE HAD THE FIX-EVERYTHING PILL AND THE ERADICATION OF ALL DISEASE IN 2059, SWOOPED IN AND BOUGHT THE COPY RIGHTS FOR A MILLION DOLLARS AND HE WANTED TO PUBLISH HIS OWN COUGH SYRUP AND THIS TIME MIKE KUNTZ MET CATHERINE AND SHE WASN'T BEING RELEASED WITHOUT EXTORTING MONEY. SHE WAS EXTORTED BY YOU WAS A PAID ACTRESS YOU EVER TRIED EXTORTING? IT IS NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE TO GET A CAT WASN'T THE BEST TRY. SHE WASN'T WORTH IT WHEN HER FRIEND MICHAEL'S. THE FRIEND OF THE WELL-KNOWN FRIEND IN BOISE IDAHO, MORGAN PENNELL, CALLED WHAT YOU NOW HOLD IN YOUR HAND. THEY ASKED ME TO DO THE COVER FOR THIS SPECIAL EDITION, I HAD TO SAY NO BECAUSE THE ONLY I HAVE EVER SUBMITTED REJECTED BY THEM WAS THIS COVER AND UNFUNNY I SAW THIS AS A WAY TO FINALLY GET PUBLISHED BY USED GRAVITONS. I PURPOSELY WAITED UNTIL THE LAST MINUTE TO SUBMIT THIS SO THEY WOULDN'T HAVE MUCH OF A CHOICE. I ALSO BROKE MY THUMB WHILE TRYING TO FIGURE OUT A SIZE FOR THIS COVER, SO I HAVE LITERALLY BLED FOR THIS ISSUE. CAN THEY SAY THAT OF THEMSELVES? NO. OF COURSE THEY CAN'T. WHY NOT? BECAUSE THEY HAVE SECLUDED THEMSELVES IN THAT IVORY TOWER OF THEIRS, LOOKING DOWN ON US.

W W W . U S E D G R A V I T O N S . C O M

USED GRAVITONS
THE FIFTH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

MY THUMB STILL HURTS

THIS IS THE FIFTH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE OF USED GRAVITONS. WHEN USED GRAVITONS BEGAN IN 1934 BY LOCAL BOISE IDAHO NE'ER-DO-WELL, SHEA SOMETHING, THE MAGAZINE WAS PACKED WITH THE USUAL GET-RICH-QUICK-SCHEMES AND ADVERTISEMENTS FOR SNAKE OIL REMEDIES. THE MAGAZINE WAS NAMED AFTER THE HYPOTHETICAL ELEMENTARY PARTICLE THAT MEDIATES THE FORCE OF GRAVITATION IN THE FRAMEWORK OF QUANTUM FIELD THEORY. HOWEVER, PEOPLE JUST THOUGHT IT WAS NAMED AFTER THE COUNTY FAIR RIDE AND HISTORY WAS BORN. WITH A RUN OF 17 MILLION COPIES, USED GRAVITONS WAS THE MOST POPULAR MAGAZINE IN THE WORLD; MAYBE EVEN THE UNIVERSE... POLLS HAVE YET TO BE TALLIED. BUT THEN TRAGEDY STRUCK IN 1880, YEARS BEFORE THE MAGAZINE WAS EVEN STARTED IN WHAT WILL LATER (AROUND 2076 WHEN TIME TRAVEL WILL BE INVENTED) BE REFERRED TO AS "THE SHITTIEST TIME TRAVEL SCREW UP IN THE HISTORY OF SHITTY TIME TRAVEL SCREW UPS", WHEN SHEA WHATSHISNAME WAS STRUCK DEAD BY A RUNAWAY MULE HOPPED UP ON COUGH SYRUP, WHICH WAS A FAD AT THE TIME. YES, THERE WAS A FAD THAT INVOLVED PEOPLE GIVING LARGE QUANTITIES OF COUGH SYRUP TO MULES. IT WAS A SMALL TOWN. SERIOUSLY, LIKE YOU DIDN'T DO STUPID STUFF WHEN YOU WERE A KID, WHATEVER MAN IT WAS YEARS AGO, FUCKING GET OVER IT. I'VE MADE UP FOR ANY WRONGDOINGS, I DONATE BLOOD, LEAVE ME ALONE ABOUT IT. ANYWAYS, LIKE I WAS SAYING, A MULE ON COUGH SYRUP KILLED HIM. GOOD NEWS WAS THAT DURING THAT SAME YEAR 2076 MICHAEL KUNTZ, WHO INSISTS HIS NAME IS NOT PRONOUNCED HUMOROUSLY, DISCOVERED THAT NO ONE OWNED THE RIGHTS TO THE UG NAME, AND HAVING A LARGE QUANTITY OF SNAKE OIL CURES WITH NO WAY TO SELL THEM SINCE THE INVENTION OF THE FIX-EVERYTHING PILL AND THE ERADICATION OF ALL AILMENTS IN 2059, SWOOPED IN AND GRABBED THE COPYRIGHT FOR A MEASLY MILLION DOLLARS AND PREPARED TO PUBLISH HIS FIRST ISSUE. AROUND THIS TIME MIKE MET HIS NOW WIFE CATHERINE BALDWIN, WHO JUST BEING RELEASED FROM PRISON FOR EXTORTING A LITTLE BABY, SERIOUSLY SHE WAS EXTORTING AN INFANT, IT WAS A PAINFUL PROCESS, HAVE YOU EVER TRIED EXTORTING A TODDLER? IT IS NEAR IMPOSSIBLE, BUT DAMN IT IF CAT WASN'T GOING TO AT LEAST TRY. SHE FAILED, BUT IT WAS WORTH IT WHEN HER PATH CROSSED MICHAEL'S. TOGETHER WITH A WELL-KNOWN FRIEND IN BIOCHEMISTRY, MORGAN PERRINE, THEY CREATED WHAT YOU NOW HOLD IN YOUR HANDS. THEY ASKED ME TO DO THE COVER FOR THIS SPECIAL EDITION, AND HAVING HAD EVERY STORY I HAVE EVER SUBMITTED REJECTED BY THEM AS BEING CHILDISH AND UNFUNNY I SAW THIS AS A WAY TO FINALLY GET PUBLISHED BY USED GRAVITONS. I PURPOSELY WAITED UNTIL THE LAST MINUTE TO SUBMIT THIS SO THEY WOULDN'T HAVE MUCH OF A CHOICE. I ALSO BROKE MY THUMB WHILE TRYING TO FIGURE OUT A SIZE FOR THIS COVER, SO I HAVE LITERALLY BLED FOR THIS ISSUE. CAN THEY SAY THAT OF THEMSELVES? NO. OF COURSE THEY CAN'T. WHY NOT? BECAUSE THEY HAVE SECLUDED THEMSELVES IN THAT IVORY TOWER OF THEIRS, LOOKING DOWN ON US.

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**USED GRAVITONS
THE FIFTH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE**

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EDITORIAL

UG is five-years big. And I know what you're thinking: "What's so great about that? I've got a shitty five-year-old kid and he or she hasn't done anything worth celebrating." Well, in that you are correct. Five-year-olds are pretty worthless. We're here to tell you that with the combination of our over-priced college educations, a love for all things strange, and our grown-up superpowers, our team and our contributors have done so much more than any snotty human five-year-old could ever do. I swear.

How about a little back story?

It all began in the year 2010, in a sleepy, little town called Boise (pronounced "boy-zee"). One stormy night, when lightning was threatening to kick in the door, a man was incredibly drunk. He was drunk like ocean is deep. But he wasn't just ordinarily super deep-ocean drunk; he was drunk and in need of a spaceship. Or at least that's what he thought a gravitron was at the time. So he did what any American would do when he or she is psychopathically drunk; he went on the Internet to buy things. Some call it shopping under the influence. Some call it the self-surprise. Others call it a party. But that night the Internet search engines turned up no results for the sale of a used gravitron. Today an eBay search for a used gravitron yields the following results: an April 1977 issue of Marvel's Avengers, roller derby wheels, a vaporizer pen, used Sketchers shoes, a spinning top-toy, and a wicked stair master exercise device. But no actual gravitrons. The next logical step? Purchase the Web domain www.usedgravitrons.com so that you can become the Internet's leading retailer of used spaceships. Or country fair recyclables. Or a lit magazine. Whatever. It doesn't matter anymore. The domain was purchased and history, etc.

Two years later, that man found me in a bar in a drunken stupor bragging about how I had a two-dollar bill. I guess I wouldn't shut up about how great my two-dollar bill was. That man must have been jealous, because he offered me a lit magazine in exchange for my crisp two-dollar bill, and even more history happened. It's been a lot of fun to steer this ship for a while. Then I got lonely on the high seas of literature, and I invited Morgan Perrine on deck for a drink. We shared a bottle of rum, and I convinced him to be my first mate. It's sort of a drunk history I guess.

This is our first theme issue. Dig in and it might come to you. Sometimes it's subtle. Sometimes it hits you like a 500 mph thunderbolt delivering the scroll and its seven seals; it might be a metaphor.

Thanks for reading,
Mike

At The Dance

-5 experimental vignettes-

by Neile Mezynski

DANCERS (VIGNETTE I)

(This vignette exposes hidden thoughts and feelings in a comedic light of a man and woman at a dance. It takes place in a dance hall.)

A middle-aged man and woman are seated at the back of the room on chairs several feet apart. They are expressionless. She in a dress and low heels, he in a sport jacket and slacks.

Atmospheric soft music is playing . He rises and goes over to her and says:

He - "Dance?" (matter of factly)

She - "Please." (quietly, directly)

They rise and walk to the center of the room and face each other. He puts his arm around her in readiness to dance, her head drops immediately onto his chest, her body buckles (split second), she quickly recovers they resume the dance position. No expression from either.

They dance around the room.

He - "Walk?" (direct)

She - "Please." (she leads)

They quickly walk side by side (she slightly leads) circling the room, arms at sides, no expression. He could try to touch her hand, she the same.

He - "More?" (aggressive)

She - "Please." (energetic)

They resume dancing and then stop abruptly.

He - "Dip?"

She - "Yes, please." He drops her abruptly backward her head almost touching the floor. They straighten and arrange themselves.

She - "Carry."

He lifts her body erectly as she is, her arms at her side and carries her to one side of the room and puts her down.

She - "Another more."

He lifts her and carries her to the other side of room, (this time more haphazardly) she under his arm, neither have expressions (matter of fact). He puts her down.

He - "Touch me?"

She puts her hand on his cheek and slides it under his chin. She drops her hand to her side.

He - "Kiss?" (urgently)

She - "Please." (quiet but with interest)

She kisses his cheek.

He - "Sway?"

She - "Please."

They gently rock, swaying, facing each other, arms at sides, bodies close, foreheads on each others' shoulders.

They stop and stand quietly face to face.

He - "Walk?"

She - "Please."

They walk quickly around the room side by side. They end up at her chair, she sits quietly, no expression. He walks to his chair and sits. Both look straight ahead.

End.

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AT THE DANCE (VIGNETTE II)

Performer

(takes place in a barren room)

(solo performance piece depicting a woman struggling with sincerity, hiding behind an exaggerated facade)

She walks to center of room (arms at sides) and turns to face front, bringing hands slowly together, as if preparing to sing.

“I am a performer.” She says without expression, flounces hair, pats cheeks, runs fingers along eyebrows and outlines face then lips and smiles. Ready.

“I sing,” (she opens mouth in exaggerated O).

“I act,” (she shows her profile Brando like, side to side quickly, then yells “Stella!” and sharply crouches in bouncing sobbing motions, quickly recovering front).

“I dance,” (she does a little tap dance in place), she stops, bringing hands together. Composed. Quiet.

“My front,” (brushes skirt down then up to cupping breasts, starts quarter turns).

“Side,” (hand on hip, other in air).

“This,” (facing back of room, protrudes behind slightly, looking over shoulder).

“And this,” (flirtatious, faces front).

Picks up skirt in one hand and says,

“Elegant walk,” (she walks a few steps, head high holding skirt in front or side).

“Downtrodden,” (walks, arms at sides, flat feet pattering along).

“Cheerful,” (lightly on balls of feet, both hands up).

“Silly,” (knees in, feet out to sides).

Turns to face front. Composes, holds hands.

(She makes an O with mouth as if in dialogue, eyebrows lifted, head tilts side to side in interest, listening, then furrows brow shaking head, then smiles sweetly).

End

AT THE DANCE (VIGNETTE III)

(Part I: a woman hides her anxieties/phobia through exaggerated movements)

Foot Shootin'

Woman is seated in middle of a barren room, having a dialogue with an imaginary person, gesturing wildly. A monologue.

(any time of day)

Her hands at her temples, then out to the side, pointing, patting the air, strangling self, feet lift off the ground...

“Always performin, showin off, hiding, never know which me gonna be waitin, the one lookin for a closet or the one that escapes, whew, even for them! Demons. Full tilt bein unleashed, kicked in the head! People! Stay home why don't cha?(she lifts her leg to the side leaning back in the chair), “Always worry I forget the words, have a blank out mid sentence... nothing worse, embarrass. Rather have root canal then go to a party. People, always people. Lost boyfriends too. Even his retirement, couldn't go... birthdays, babies, funerals, don't go, don't go (shakes her head). Never could shake it since I was a kid, disappointin people, myself. Help her get things ready for a party, soon's they start arriving I'd disappear... cry when they were comin over,” the family, probably when I started bein so entertainin 'n all, honing my 'performin skills.' Maybe they won't remember... look em in the eye.” Maybe.

Foot Shootin' II (2nd scene, same room)

The effects of phobia on a relationship

(same evening)

Man and woman are standing in the middle of a room, arms at sides.

Him - “Ready?” (lifeless)

Her - “Nah.” (she stands)

Him - “Soon?”

Her - “Dunno.”

Him - “When?”

Her - “10?”

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Him - "7?"

Her - "Maybe."

Him - "Yes, no?"

Her - "Unlikely."

Him - "Then."

He walks away.

Quiet. Door close. Herself.

She starts walking in long zig zag movements as if imitating a plane, arms out to sides. Feeling the air.

Her- "Nah, I'll stay home, no one'll notice, bake a pie. Purple sweater, likes that one. I'll put it on. Be okay."

She's asleep in a chair when he comes in.

(He walks up to her)

Him - "Nice."

Her - "Ask?"

Him - "Give up. Tired."

Her - "Yeah."

Him - "Tired."

Her - "People. Always."

Him - "Rattle cage?"

Her - "Nah."

Him - "Safe?"

Her - "Yeah."

Him - "Try?"

Her - "Nah."

Him - "Okay. Goin."

Her - "Close door. Leave money. Me."

(He walks away, she starts walking in a large circle, arms at sides, tilting to one side then the other, airplane, freedom.)

End

AT THE DANCE (VIGNETTE IV)

(two rigid women trying to communicate an idea using sparse language)

Strait Lace

Standing on either side of the stage, two women in long black dresses with hands folded in front of selves.

#1 - "Something?" (woman starts walking towards other one in scuttling manner)

#2 - "tell!" (other woman meets her half way in same light scurrying manner)

#1 - "Perhaps." (scuttling away in a new direction)

#2 - "I'm all." (she walks alongside her or slightly behind)

#1 - "Nother." (new direction)

#2 - "Ears." (meet to brush ears, listening)

#1 - "Nothing." (go in circle and meet)

#2 - "Certainly." (stand still)

#1 - "Seem so." (walk together)

#2 - "Might." (walk away and stop)

#1 - "Of course."

#2 - "Didn't?"

#1 - "Or not."

#2 - "Certainly." (walk towards and stop close together)

#1 - "Child."

#2 - "Many?" (heads together)

#1 - "Naturally."

#2 - "Tea?"

End

Close Encounters of the Fifth Kind

by H. Christian Schramm

Streaks of flame-sheathed meteors cross the sky, burning and breaking apart before hitting a molten-red sea. A pure silver dart, smaller than the rest, holds together while those around it disintegrate, until it gracefully ‘pops’ in two, leaving a small cloud of fog in its wake. The fog dissipates as the endless bombardment continues.

MILLIONS OF YEARS LATER

“...We look for worlds, and when we see one that is promising, we shoot a capsule.” Hal held up a small silver object resembling a fountain pen. “Sending a full ship through space is difficult and it cannot hold the appropriate fringaform equipment, which takes many lifetimes. So in advance, we send a collection of tiny life, which does the job. They withstand greater acceleration, don’t need nutrition, tolerate heat and cold, and are ideal to help make the way ready for us. You may call us ‘The Connoisseurs.’”

The aliens who crashed their saucer-pod into my backyard and were now standing in my living room were halfway through their introductions before I could begin to comprehend what they were saying.

“Capsules travel faster than ships, and they arrive at their destinations millions of your ‘years’ before us. Our capsules travel at ninety-nine percent the speed of light, but our ships only travel at ninety-six percent. To us, we sent the capsules two of your ‘weeks’ ago to a number of promising planets. Halfway across the universe, we chose the planets that appear to have the best progress. Beny picked this planet as a winner, with the large expanses of fresh water, long stretches of coastline, seasonal variation... just the right amount of radiation.” Hal turned to Beny. “This is going to be your best work and I can’t wait to sample the most complex life forms the galaxy has produced.” Beny, the scientist to Hal’s politician, beamed—literally—with pride.

Hal reached out his hand. Still in shock, I extended mine for the most important greeting in human history that was not to be. Hal grasped a bottle of Scotch from the bar, smiled, and slurped it down.

The Connoisseurs, it turned out, were total lushes.

They started in with Highland Park, moved through Glenmorangie, and were then drinking—gulping, actually—a second bottle of J&B.

“You sheeee,” said Hal, “the unique climate of this (hic) biosphere makes for shuperb microbes. This really is the besht ever.”

“—They... blended the microbial product!” Beny exclaimed. “Why didn’t we think of that?”

Hal suddenly remembered his host.

“On behalf (burp) of the peoples of Fringg, we present you with this tool, which will make you the king of your planet.” He winked at Beny and held up a small metal box. Beny turned quickly to join an important and oft-performed ceremony. “I give (hic) you the gift of ffire”. Hal pushed a button and a small flame appeared from the top of the box.”

The aliens’ kingmaker was a Zippo.

Beny leapt onto my coffee table. “Mastering fire, you are ruler of your people.”

Hal assumed a regal tone. “In return for this gracious gift, we expect you to repay us by giving us three hundred—”

Beny was waving his arms, and twisting his head in a motion that clearly meant ‘more.’

“—FIVE hundred bottles of whisky.”

As a sign of understanding, I produced my cigar lighter. The jet blue flame mesmerized the aliens. As Beny’s jaws dropped, Hal shouted, “I will trade you SEVEN HUNDRED bottles for your flame device!”

Beny was sitting on my floor, hugging his reverse-knees to his back, purple tears streaming down double cheeks. Hal was not giving him an easy time.

“Flame Box? Flame Box? We should have offered him heat box. (aside to me)You’d love the heat box; you put your food in it and push a button and it makes the food hot without fire or flames or anything and it’s only—” hand motion indicating a circa 1980 microwave, “—this big!”

Beny searched for an alibis. “But when we checked planetary progress, the lizard things were in charge. They love fire! ALL LIZARDS LOVE FIRE!” (Clearly, the voice of experience) “I didn’t expect hairy things to be running the place.” More sobs. “You are too mean to me, I have created what is the best whisky in the universe. I chose the planets that bring the finest spores to our palates.” For what I expect was not the first time, Hal tenderly put three arms around his companion and, having drunk the house dry, both began pipe-organ snores.

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With triple-increasing shocks from Aliens, Intoxicated, Belligerent—I had hardly spoken. Now, some twenty minutes later with hung-over Connoisseurs in my living room, I was able to ask some questions.

“Do you mean to tell me that the meaning of life on this planet is to produce... Scotch?”

Hal began, “Of course not, don’t be silly..”

Beny was back to life, jumping on my sofa. “The purpose of all life everywhere is to produce Scotch!” He contemplated the empty bottles. “And we will have no more to take with us.”

Feeling sorry for their plight, and astonished by their ineptitude in equal measure, I asked, “But you are an advanced people? Don’t you have something to trade?”

Hal was beaten. “We’re advanced...ish. Your chemists are much better at making alcohol than ours—that is clear.”

I replied, “Actually, it makes itself. There’s this stuff—yeast—that creates it if you just let it sit for a while.”

Beny’s two lowest jaws dropped, causing him to fall over face first.

Hal perked up. “They could not be too advanced if their fusers are this bad.” He held up a gold pen from my desk. “Shall I dispose of this waste?”

Thinking fast, I replied, “Um, actually we collect... fusion waste... it... uh, is a game to see who has the... most, um, waste.”

Beny was also seizing the opportunity and stood up. “We will trade you—“(winking at Hal) “Equal weight Scotch for waste.”

One hour and 50 bottles later, they were loaded up (and I do mean loaded up—they drank two bottles before takeoff) and gone. I gave them my lighter as a token of good will, which sparked a round of dancing. Now I have no Scotch, but a room filled with Fring-quality gold and a local liquor store owner dying to know what kind of party I was throwing on a Wednesday afternoon at 3. And whenever I see stories about crashing UFOs, I take them seriously.



A Birthday in Potemkin

by Michael Kuntz

Isaac Brown and his wife, Stephanie, drove along the twisted, tree-lined highway just outside the city limits of Potemkin. Stephanie was behind the wheel, squinting through her bifocals and the rainy windshield in order to see the fast-approaching curves in the road ahead.

“We’re going to be late,” Isaac grumbled. He scratched his balding, middle-aged head as he looked out the passenger window. It was a nervous tic he had developed somewhere in his late thirties and, despite the fact that his father was bald, and his father’s father before him, Isaac blamed the nervous scratching for his increasingly reflective crown.

Stephanie sighed. “Do we really have to do this stupid thing?” she said. “I mean, it’s just one more in a long line of birthday parties and we see her literally all the time. We’re like, her best friends. Couldn’t this be one of those things where everyone else gets her attention for the afternoon? You know I haven’t had an afternoon to myself in months and you’ve been putting in so much time at the office trying to wrap up those big accounts. I bet you could use a little R and R.”



Isaac didn’t say anything. He contemplated the possibility of skipping the party. It had always bothered him when somebody promised to attend a function and then blew it off at the last minute. The value of a commitment just wasn’t what it used to be when he was growing up. But at that particular moment he understood the temptation. He had just worked back-to-back seventy-hour weeks and truth be told, it was a tempting offer to bow out. Not to mention, as with all of these kinds of gatherings, there were definitely going to be people there whose company he could not stand.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Everyone is expecting us there. How long do you think she’d hold it against us if we didn’t show? And what

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would your mother say? There can't even be a precedent for this sort of thing."

Stephanie drove on. The party had already begun and they were still ten minutes away. She was fully prepared to turn the car around, but needed her husband on board to share responsibility for the decision.

Isaac fiddled with the little plastic vent on the dashboard that gave the false impression you could direct the airflow in any meaningful way. He pressed a little too hard to the right and the tiny handle broke off. "Aw, geez," he mumbled.

"What's that?" his wife asked.

"Nothing," Isaac replied.

"Stop picking at what's left of your hair."

"I'm not even touching my head," Isaac lied. "You know I've got that under control."

They were now five minutes away. The trees raced past his window as Isaac scratched furiously at his scalp. His wife was right. Hadn't he already done enough people pleasing for one lifetime? What was one more stupid party at which to make an appearance? Dandruff flakes and stray hairs piled up on his lap. He brushed them onto the floor.

"If we skipped this thing," Stephanie continued, "we could drive in to the next town over. I could drop you off at the alley. Remember how much you used to love bowling on Sunday afternoons? It's been a long time, but maybe some of your old buddies are there today?"

Isaac was warming up to the idea now.

"And I could go to the spa. Get myself all pampered. You know how relaxed I get after a day at the spa." She reached over and placed a hand on the inside of his thigh. Isaac smiled. He knew just how relaxed Stephanie became after an afternoon at the spa; it made her downright horny.

Stephanie slowed the car. The turnoff to the house was coming up on the right. The destination came into Isaac's view. The driveway was full, and parked cars spilled out onto the shoulder of the highway. "It's now or never, Isaac. Are you with me?"

Isaac took a deep breath. "Do it," he said.

Stephanie grinned, stepped on the gas, and the couple sped past the house. Their car disappeared around a bend in the road where a sign warned drivers to go slow—there are children at play.

Meanwhile, at the party, a group of family and mixed acquaintances were gathered around the birthday girl. They all smiled as they sang, “Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday dear Suzie, happy birthday to you.”

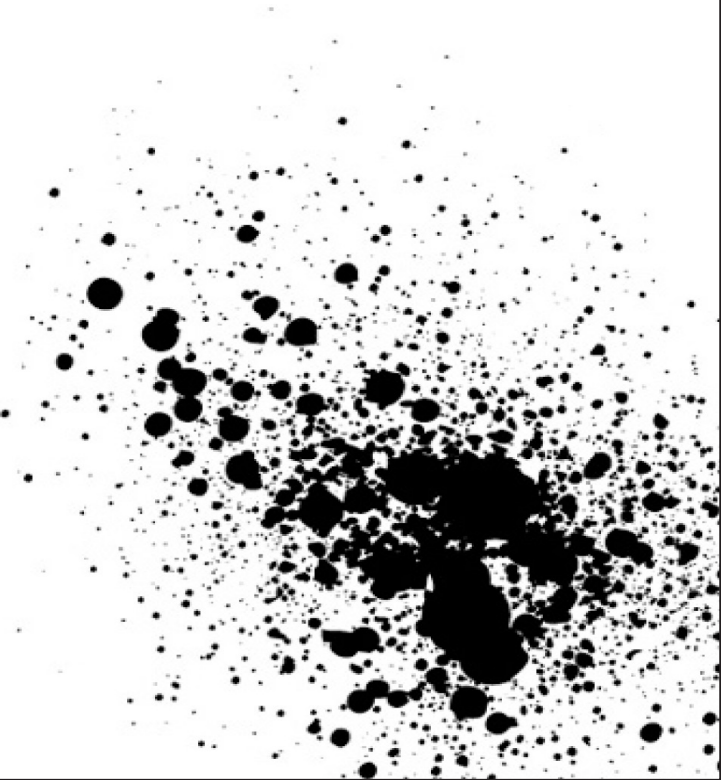
With the candles dripping wax on the frosted cake in front of her, Suzie straightened her new pink party dress—the one her grandmother had made for her. The party goers shifted awkwardly as she sniffled back tears.

“Oh Suzie,” said her grandmother. “I’m sure your parents will be here any minute. Why don’t you blow out your candles so we can eat cake?”

Suzie managed to collect herself and delivered a half-hearted puff at the candles. Four of the little flames went out. Her bottom lip quivered. A few grown-ups shuffled to the back porch and lit cigarettes.

“It’s okay, Sweetie,” her grandmother cooed. “Try again.”

Suzie leaned forward and blew out the fifth candle.





Kristen F.
Brooklyn, NY
👥 22 friends
★ 3 reviews

★★★★★ 2/4/2015

A few years ago, W Hotels and Intel Corporation held a short film competition called Four Stories. The challenge was to write a 10-minute screenplay that took place in one of four selected W Hotel locations (Maldives, Doha, Mexico City, or Washington D.C.) and featured Intel's Ultrabook™ as a central component to the story. Like a good majority of the entrants, I chose Washington, D.C. I still don't even know where the Maldives is.

My script was about a man in his thirties who had come to the hotel to commit suicide and a young teenager who was staying at the hotel with her parents, while she toured prospective colleges in the D.C. area. Bored, the girl wanders the hotel at night and discovers the man standing on a chair in one of the hotel's conference rooms with a noose around his neck. Her unexpected arrival stops him from jumping, but he refuses to tell her why he was about to kill himself. The precocious teenager informs him that a high percentage of people who unsuccessfully attempt suicide try again within hours of their original attempt. She places him on suicide watch, therefore setting up the rest of the short film and its title, "On Watch". The two characters stay up all night, exploring the hotel, and having small adventures, since the girl is unwilling to let him be alone.

Obviously, this script had no chance in hell of winning. Four Stories was basically a contest to write a commercial and no one was going to choose the story where a guy comes to the sponsor's hotel to hang himself, is prevented from doing so by one of the most annoying character tropes around -- a Wes Andersonesque, irritatingly precocious child, and also, while their relationship is entirely innocent, some might perceive the dynamic between the teenager and the grown man as one that has sexual tension, like the writing group I workshopped this script with did. Also, my incorporation of the Ultrabook™ was dubious, I simply had the teenage girl character carry the laptop with her at all times, as a tic that showed her academically overachieving personality.

Even though I knew I had no chance of winning, during the time I wrote the script, the prospect of actually making this short film seemed very real to me. My mind checked in for days at the W Washington DC Hotel. I looked up as many pictures as I could on the website to visualize where my characters would be wandering around, incorporating specific parts of the hotel in the story. The girl dined with her parents at the J&G Steakhouse (which has since closed). The girl chased the man up the dramatic spiral staircase, when he tried to get her to leave him alone. Near the end, after having stayed up all night, they watched the sunrise from the rooftop terrace.

From my Brooklyn apartment, on my computer (a MacBook Pro, not an Ultrabook™), I roamed the streets around the hotel on Google Streetview. I even considered going to Washington D.C. for the weekend and exploring, if not staying, in the hotel itself. I was certain that actually being in the hotel and writing some of the script there would bring authenticity and energy to my entry. Deciding that to be financially impractical, I settled instead on exploring the W New York - Union Square Hotel that was in my own city, as if W Hotels everywhere had some common aura that would hold the key to winning the competition. I can't even remember if staying at the hotel was included as part of winning, but I also daydreamed about staying there during the few days of the shoot, and having my own meta-adventures around the hotel with some Washington D.C. friends, when we weren't filming.

Clearly, when presented with a project, I find it hard not to throw myself in it fully, even when the stakes are very low and the chance of success even lower. If the ultimate goal of every brand or product is to be embedded in a consumer's lifestyle, or to be seen as an essential part of the consumer's lifestyle, what could be more ideal than who I was for those couple weeks in 2012, a girl (within the coveted 18-34 demographic) who thought of the W Hotel non-stop, who spent hours imagining it as a fantasy place where dreams came true (both the dream of winning the contest and the narrative fantasy of the script).

The issue, of course, is that I was never there and still have never been there. Can you review a place you've never been? Can you review a place you've never spent money? If the best reviews come from passionate and personal experience, there is no doubt that, in my own way, I had a rich experience at the W Washington DC Hotel. I'm still thinking about it three years later. So yes, this place gets five magnificent stars. Yes, I enjoyed my stay. And yes, I'd stay here again, for the very first time.

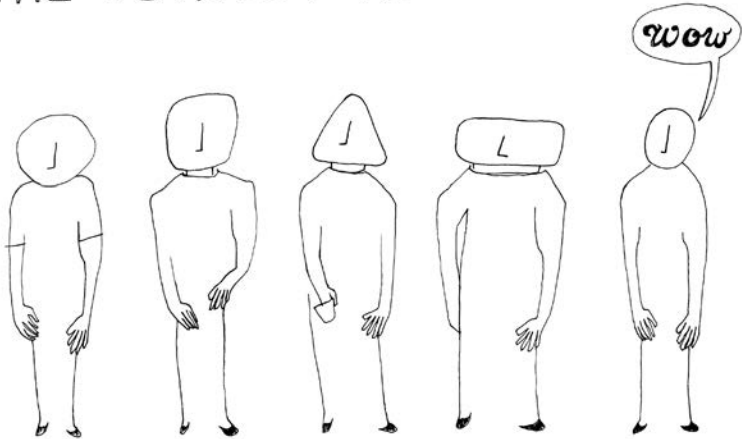
Was this review ...?



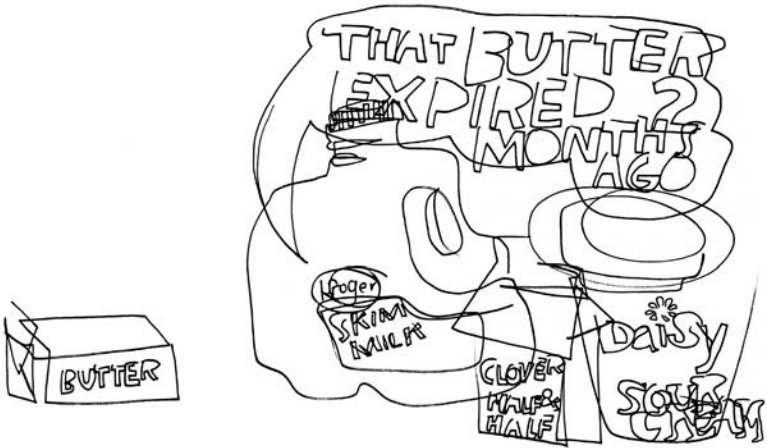


May 5, 2010: Yeah, stomach acid lingers
Mark Addison Smith

THE PERFECT HEAD SHAPE IS OVAL

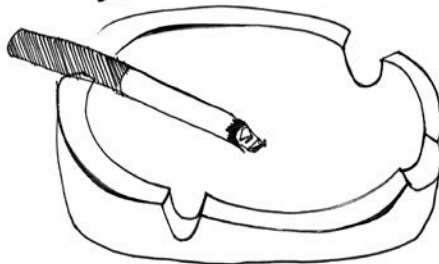


May 5, 2012: The perfect head shape is oval
Mark Addison Smith



May 5, 2014: That butter expired 2 months ago
Mark Addison Smith

YOU
DEFINITELY
really
ACTUALLY
SHOULDN'T
be.



May 5, 2013: You definitely really actually shouldn't be
Mark Addison Smith



May 5, 2011: That's a simple name
Mark Addison Smith

```

/* this_is_not_a_poem.c
 *
 * NOTES: My life has changed some since I
 * lived with Used Gravitrons. I loved my
 * time with it, its contributors, and its
 * readers. But maybe even more, I love that
 * it lives on, what it's become, and where
 * it is now.
 *
 * I decided to write a silly toy, a print
 * statement in C that reflects somehow the
 * kind of writing I've taken on recently.
 * It's a tribute to a favorite painting of
 * mine.
 *
 * And!!! It is the 5th anniversary of this
 * fantastic rag as well, so as a nod to that
 * remarkable thing, the mark this little
 * program leaves on the operating system
 * after running is that marvelous number.
 *
 * Cheers!
 * Shea Newton, February, 2015
 */

#include <stdio.h>

int main()
{
    char buff[512];

    snprintf(
        buff, sizeof("a poem") + 1,
        "%c%c%c%c%c%c",
        0xB1, 0x20, 0x70, 0xBF, 0xB5, 0xBD
    );

    fprintf(stderr, "%s\n", buff);

    return 5;
}

```

Things I Am Not
(A Used Gravitrons Six-Pack Story)
by Rob Williams

Beer 1 - I am not Franz Kafka

I quit writing fiction because I hated trying to come up with the plot. I was convinced that before I started something I ought to know where it was going to end. Otherwise I would just wander, or halt suddenly and permanently, and either way the reader would doubt me.

I'm not very good plotting my life either. I've never been one of those people who saw his life having a certain arc. A career—no way, I'll copyedit your magazines for a decade, but I will not be part of the staff at this company and no, I don't want any of that obscene triple-chocolate cake you bought for Liz in marketing's birthday. A wife—no, I don't even like having a girlfriend who wants to hang out more than twice a week, let alone one who wants to move in and spend every day for the rest of our lives together. And kids—well, the less said about them the better. I hear measles is a thing again.

But once I started writing anecdotally—dramatizing brief, fully formed scenes from my own life—I started enjoying it again. There was the time as a kid I argued with my mother about the meaning of the word “gangbang,” the time I thought gay men throughout New York City were obsessed with my beard, the time I moved to China for a girl I'd met on the Internet and hardly knew. I am a character myself, so why not just write about my own life? It eliminated the plot conundrum too. I can structure a story retrospectively, dress up the past up a bit, make it entertaining.

The future is unknown, so how can it be written? What is this thing people call “imagination”? Can it be found in a bottle? Or six?

Beer 2 - I am not F. Scott Fitzgerald

The first time I quit drinking, I was 29. No alcohol at all until three years later, in China with that girl from Internet, as I tried to pass my discomfort off as enthusiasm. That was three years ago, and it's nearly time to stop drinking again—the nights are getting longer, the mental days off because of a hangover more frequent. But not tonight. Tonight, five more beers as I dredge up the past, insisting stubbornly that the plot of this story is unknowable—or at least unknown.

Is six beers enough to get me drunk anymore? I can't even feel the first one yet, but already I'm anticipating the end, wanting more.

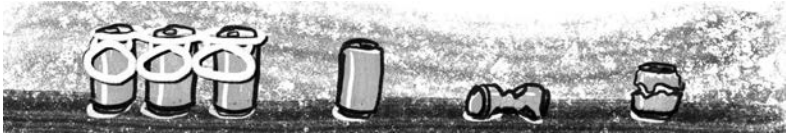
One of the things you hear about writers is that they are drunks—but also that you shouldn't drink while you write. The reason for the former, of course, is that writers are usually trapped in their heads, and it's nicer when there's a little booze sloshing around up there. The raft of creativity needs a little buoyancy. As for the latter, I suppose the warning there is that while alcohol opens up a window of creativity in the mind (to use another well-worn metaphor), it's a window that closes quickly as you continue drinking, until you either turn away in disgust or wake up hours later bloody and confused with glass in your knuckles.

Of course some people write prolifically while drunk. They must. And if they don't, someone ought to.

I'm never quite so impressed as when someone tells me he "doesn't get hangovers." What are you, a god? Someone give that man a pen and paper. Tell us what other mysteries your brain contains.

If on the other hand a woman tells me she "doesn't get hangovers," I run. No, actually, I raise my eyebrows in a flirtatious manner, sidle up to her at the bar, date her monomaniacally for a few months, tell her I love her, have some kind of preposterous falling out—then run.

Beer 3 - I am not a "feminist"



When I said I couldn't feel the effects of the beer yet, I spoke prematurely, since I am only two beers in and already can't resist the miasma that is THE MOST CONTROVERSIAL TOPIC ON THE INTERNET: "Feminism." I put it in scare quotes because, really, what does the word mean in 2015?

(Aziz Ansari, oh wise one, I'm looking at you.)

I have a lot of female friends. So many, in fact, that I've sometimes wondered if I have too many—they might outnumber my male friends 2 to 1, and, like, is that weird? Do I dislike men? Do they dislike me? Perhaps women are just better at making plans, and when we do get together they talk more, so it feels like there are more of them.

But there I go again, making generalizations about women—social, talkative, fun. Someone reading this right now is probably getting righteously pissed at the gall of this WHITE MAN. (*ALERT, ALERT*)

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Or maybe not. If this only appears in print—not the Internet—or if I only read it aloud, there will be no frothing hordes of politically correct scolds. It's only on the Internet that CERTAIN OPINIONS ARE VERBOTEN.

So when I say I'm not a “feminist,” it does not mean I think women aren't equal to men or that they shouldn't be allowed to do or say certain things—I only mean that I do not like being told what to do or say either. And I certainly don't like being told what to think, or what ideological opinions to have. Am I crazy or have “feminists” become just the kind of dogmatic prescriptivists they once rebelled against?

Maybe it's only the Internet that makes me feel this way.

Beer 4 - I am not a gadget

I've never had a smartphone. I can't remember exactly when I got a cell phone, but it was some primitive version of the same primitive flip phone I have now. It was 2000-2001, sometime between my junior and senior years of college. I remember still having an answering machine in my dorm room in 2000 when I spent a weekend in jail for drunken disorderliness and “criminal possession of a forged instrument” (a fake ID) and came home to a long, lovely message from the girl I'd been drinking with when I got arrested, whose feet I'd been massaging under the table not 20 minutes before the fracas with the cops landed me in handcuffs. But I remember having a cell phone in 2001, talking to my father in Rochester from the steps of Barnes & Noble under the World Trade Center on September 10, then not being able to get in touch again the next day amidst the chaos.

My friends call me a Luddite. Or do I say that about myself that, boastfully? Either way, we affectionately agree.

I think about it sometimes—getting a smartphone—mainly because it will make traveling easier when I finally flee New York City. But then I remember that when I look at the Internet I feel compulsive and unhappy. Why would I want that feeling in my pocket with me at all times? In order to even write this story—or essay or whatever it is—I have to keep my browser closed. Otherwise the pull of the red “notifications” button on Facebook is too strong. (I literally just opened my browser to check it, telling myself it was OK because it was “research.”)

The Internet has changed the world, and I was right there as it happened. I was the perfect age—post-Gen X, pre-Millennial, caught in between two worlds. Technology is the new religion, so is it blasphemy to say I hate the new world? I probably hated the old one too, I just can't remember it anymore. I was too young when it changed.

Maybe I'm nothing more than a contrarian. However the world is or was, I would want it to be different. But not in some PC way where we all "check our privilege" and offer "trigger warnings" every time we open our mouths. In many ways, the world is not messy enough.

I heard writer/TV personality/restaurant owner/professional raconteur Eddie Huang described as "an iconoclast" the other day and became jealous. When will people speak of me in such reverential terms?

It feels like saying you dislike the Internet is pointless—especially if you can't quite articulate why. Perhaps the fact that EVERYONE IS ON IT is reason enough. I heard the other day that there are more people on Facebook than there are Catholics in the world (1.3 billion Facebook users vs. 1.2 billion Catholics). If everyone else is doing something, there is reason to be afraid.

Beer 5 - I am not your boyfriend

The Internet is where my ex-girlfriends live. They pop up on Facebook—until I "hide" them—or in my email, asking for updates—passive-aggressive inquires as to whether I am "still alive."

You wily bitch—are you using my fear of death to attempt to manipulate me? If I ignore this email, will you reciprocate? Our relationship died years ago, our love was a sham, it's long past time to move on.

Do relationships ever end well? Let me consider my breakups, in order:

1) You dumped me in middle school, without explanation. Later, one of your girlfriends told me it was because I was "a bad kisser." Then I made out with her, your friend, on a class trip, in a hotel room in Montreal. I got her shirt off—the first naked breast I ever felt—before a teacher pounded on the door and put a stop to our furtive groping. The boys called her "Nickel Ho," a play on her last name, but you were probably the first girl I ever loved. It was middle school, so who can be sure. You got married, had a few kids, and are much heavier now. (We are friends on Facebook.)

2) You were my girlfriend in high school and the first year I was in college. Sex felt like an awkward ordeal at first (for me), but eventually I lost my virginity to you. When we broke up, you accused me of using you "for practice"—to which I responded, "Uh, I guess?" I was 19 and definitely needed it. I'm pretty sure you moved back to Israel and joined the army, then who knows what. Likely you are now married too. (We are not friends on Facebook.)

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3) You were my first girlfriend in college and while I remember how great it felt flirting with you as we walked home from creative writing class, I also remember how terrible it felt when you told me you'd cheated on me with my former roommate, gotten pregnant, and had an abortion behind my back. Over copious amounts of tequila, we both agreed there was no coming back from that—at all. (We are not friends on Facebook.)

4) We dated briefly while I was in college. You were with me the night I got arrested for drunkenness and having a fake ID. I broke up with you after you told me you had HPV. It was before there was any kind of vaccine. All I knew was that “human anything virus” sounded too scary to deal with. I always regretted it. I felt shallow and like a coward, especially after you got married and had kids. Now you're separated and we're “friends” again. One night last month, we kissed drunkenly on a snowy street corner in Brooklyn, then didn't know what to say to each other for weeks. (We are friends on Facebook.)

5) You were my second girlfriend in college and my on-again-off-again girlfriend for much of my 20s. We broke up so many times, I can't remember them all, but I do remember the time I picked up some things at your apartment and got home to discover you'd put a phone book and some frozen pork chops at the bottom of the bag. One time you also put all of my things, including my computer, out on the street, and when I came over in a panic to get them, you told my friend who was helping me that I took supplements to boost my sexual performance. He shrugged and started loading boxes in the car. Now you teach yoga in the Midwest and are always posting online about how “zen” you are. (We are friends on Facebook.)

6) You were someone I met on the Internet in my mid 20s. We tried dating a couple of times and even boned twice, possibly three times, which led to arguments, and we eventually decided we would work better as friends. Now you are one of my best friends—one of my favorite people in world. (We are friends on The Ol' FB.)

7) You were someone I met on the Internet in my late 20s. I felt like I loved you more than anyone I'd ever met in my life, but our relationship was a disaster. We both drank too much. You were so emotionally unstable and insane that I called the police on you, blocked you on every conceivable piece of electronic communication, and moved out of the neighborhood. I stopped drinking for the first time not long after we broke up. I hadn't heard from you in years, but you sent me an out-of-the-blue message on OKCupid the other day. I hope it will be the only one. (We are not friends on Facebook.)

8) We met on the Internet—a pattern is developing here—when I was 30. You were the first person I tried Dominance/submission with, and vice versa. We were never monogamous. It was one of the best relationships I've ever had. We broke up when you moved to Iowa for grad school. I think we both regretted it. I saw you two years later, in China, but I was reeling from another breakup then—with the girl I'd gone to China to be with, of course—so it didn't work out then either. You paired off with another guy almost immediately after that, and now you two live together back in the U.S. I hadn't talked to you in about a year, but you texted me unexpectedly a few weeks ago, and we had lunch together. You declined my offer for sex. (We are not friends on Facebook.)

9) We met on the Internet after I'd been doing the D/s sex thing with strangers for about two years. We fell for each other immediately, and I moved to China to be with you. It ended up being one of the worst experiences of my life, but you acted hurt when I didn't want to email with you afterward. I stopped returning your messages a year ago and hope to never talk to you again. (We are not friends on Facebook.)

10) You broke my decade-long streak of primarily getting involved with women I met on the Internet. We met at work, in the claustrophobic office of a publishing company neither of us believed in, and you were my girlfriend for two years after I got back from China. You are one of the gentlest, most sincere people I've ever dated, and you provided stability in my life when I needed it. I came to resent that stability and dumped you unceremoniously twice in course of two years. But it seems like we may still be friends yet (at least on Facebook).

Beer 6 - I am not a New Yorker—any more

Well! That was a lot of time spent ruminating about my ex-girlfriends—did I get them all? I'm trying to tie up loose ends here after 17 years in New York City—that's nearly half my life. Another year and will be exactly half my life. But my mother, back home in Rochester, has cancer and I'm worried about her. I could go home, hover around her, worry and cry, or I could buy a used car, drive it to Alaska, write and take photographs every day. This would give my mother something much better than my gloomy presence around the house. Indeed, she can travel too—through my renderings of my own experiences. I love her. I love everyone. All of my girlfriends on that stupid list who I wronged or who wronged me. All of my male friends who I never write anything about because I take them for granted and they don't confuse me as much. I can't decide whether I feel old or young. Both at once, probably, as I always have. It gets more dire every day. There are no more beers to drink or pages to write.

Ride Through

by Dave Allwine

“You’re awake.”

My brain was at half mast but with one eye open I stared down the pillow.

“I have yogurt and coffee.”

It was an empty sentence muffled by empty walls. With a switch I threw myself up and out into time.

Morning. Work. Train. A train ride that always felt like the last. I’ve made it five years now. Five long years of a subway that didn’t even know the fear it smacked. Could today be the last?

“He’s gone,” he’d say.

“What was it?” she’d ask.

“I think it was his mind... see... you can tell by that little bump nestled into his skull.”

“Did you know him?”

“Can’t say we lined up till now.”

Thrown into the wind. Ashes to Ashes. Dust to Dust. The air would spread. The noise would fade.

I drank my coffee and skipped out on the dairy. Grabbed my sunglasses for safety, pulled my hood up, hat on, then veered into the world.

One step. Two step. Normal. You are normal. Everyone notices how normal you are. Don’t look at the faces. The unwritten rule. One step. Tawhoo step. That step felt a little off, but you got away with it. Down Down Down. Normal Normal Normal. Swipe Swipe Swipe. Normal Normal Normal. Down Down Down and clear.

My periph counted five on the train platform. Don’t look at their faces. Unwritten rule. My inner little drummer started pedaling his bass while I stared at the ground. Dut Dut Dut Dut. You’ve done this for five years. Dut Dut Dut Dut. Five years. Dut Dut Dut Dut. Normal. Everything is normal. Dut Dut Dut Dut. Just like the rest.

Train. Ding. On. BuBump. I grab a train pole.

Five more found their way into my world of glances. World of blurs.

I accidentally touched one.

“Sorry, mate.”

No one was there but the little drummer.

The Five Unexpected Consequences of Being Dead That Will Absolutely Shock You

by Morgan Ferrine

There is no word in the English language that truly describes the feeling of your mom shrieking in horror at the sight of your enthusiastic erection. But it has to be, hands down, the worst way to realize you've died. Because no matter how much she loves you, or how sympathetic she will ever be to your condition—she will never, ever, ever be able to unsee your battle-ready love-muscle.

I should probably back up a little bit. My name is Tyler, and I'm dead.

Maybe. To be totally honest, I'm not sure what my situation is. Two weeks ago I was a 21-year-old college student visiting my parents over the summer. Then sometime between Sunday night and Monday morning at 9:17 am, I became a non-corporeal college student stuck between the world of the living and the afterlife. And unlike most 21-year-old college students, when I strolled into my parents' kitchen at 9:18am looking for a fresh pot of coffee, my mom got a very vivid presentation of how I felt about the hot freshman girl I was dreaming about.

Ghosts, well, have trouble with pants. More on this later. But what's more important (somehow) is that when most people die, they leave their stupid dead body here for the rest of us to deal with. I didn't. All I left behind was a pair of unoccupied pajamas and the ability to look my mom in the eyes.

And no, I have no idea how that's possible.

What I do know is that there are a few things about being dead, or dead-not-dead, which take some serious adjustment. So in case you ever find yourself in the position of waking up dead, here are a few things you'll need to know:

1. Physics doesn't physics right.

Remember the last time you bumped into something? Seriously, think about it. Now cherish that moment, because after you die you can't do that anymore. Moving things in the afterlife is done by subconsciously concentrating electromagnetic force toward what you want to move, creating a physical field, or something like that. In layman's terms, this

means you can move things as long as you're paying attention to what you're moving. Otherwise you pass through it like a cameraman on a porn shoot; present but unfelt.

Sounds great, right? Wrong. Because now everything is really, really hard.

Take drinking a cup of coffee, for instance. Normally you pick up the mug, take a sip, then go about your merry day. Not anymore. Now you pick it up, take a sip of that warm, bitter elixir and spray it all over the floor. Why? Because no one thinks about what happens to things you eat after you eat them.

But while this can be annoying, especially to any pets who happen to be next to you, it's not the worst.

The worst is when you suddenly discover part of your body is floating through a piece of furniture. This is because the moment you think you should be feeling something, all that subconscious electro stuff flips on and suddenly you do. And then you're stuck in the furniture until you can forget that your arm is lodged in, say, a granite counter top. When you find yourself in this position (and you will) don't try to pull free whatever body part you got stuck. It's like one of those toy finger traps, only made out of granite, and bolted to the floor. You will lose.

Instead, position yourself so that, if your arm were free, it wouldn't be idiotically stuck in the furniture. Then wait. Eventually you will get so bored you'll start thinking about something asinine, like 'how can people think bumble bees shouldn't be able to fly? They obviously can. All you need to do is look at a bumblebee flying and...'

Boom. Body part comes free and you're good to go.

You can accelerate this process if you have any of Bob Ross's magical painting tutorials.

But this problem doesn't just affect you and furniture in the immediate area, it affects everyone around you. Which brings me to the next point.

2. Even though you're a ghost, nobody wants to see your penis.

Which is a shame, because lots and lots of people are going to see your penis. Or lady penis, respectively. It's not that you suddenly become a spooky pervert when you get booted from life. You are the same weird pervert we've all come to know and love... except that you have to be constantly thinking about the clothes you're wearing or they'll immediately fall off, and as mentioned before, everyone will see your penis.

But, don't worry! There is hope. All you need to do is learn to wear

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clothes again. It's best to start small, only using the bare minimum amount of clothes required to remain legally decent. I say 'legally,' because I chose a sock. While not the most stylish choice, the sensation of having an elastic sports band wrapped around your manhood is weird enough that it's not too hard to constantly notice. It's probably important to point out here that while wearing only a gym sock IS better than nothing, no one wants to see that either. Also, cats will attack it like it was made of pharmaceutical grade cat nip. And dead or alive, seeing a cat fully extended mid air in murder-mode, flying towards your fun-bits is fucking terrifying.

Eventually, with a bit of practice, you'll be able to wear clothes again like literally any person ever. Just be cautious, because even the slightest distraction can leave you swinging in the breeze, naked as the day you were born. Or more naked, really, since there is more of you to swing in the breeze.

Oh yeah, and while we're talking about being naked, start going to the gym. Now. Because...

3. You only keep what you're used to.

As we've discussed, when you're dead you spend a lot of time naked. Now in popular entertainment, when people die and come back as a ghost, they look amazing. Young. Youthful. Wearing that Iron Maiden tee shirt that they love so much. Being a ghost seems pretty awesome.

That's all bullshit. Your body will be the same, sad travesty that stepped out of the shower this morning and purposely avoided the mirror. And as far as I can tell, it's going to stay that way forever. I've only been in the afterlife for a few weeks, but I have yet to come across one ghost gym or a miracle diet for the dead. Maybe this isn't such a big deal for people who don't stick around and go off to whatever comes after this, but for those like me, who have to wander the earth hoping that you remember you're wearing pants, it's an issue.

So unless you look in the mirror and go, "Fuck yeah, this shit is a gift from the gods!" go to the gym. Or at least start eating less pizza.

Everyone forced to be around you will appreciate it.

4. Interpersonal skills

One great thing about being dead, is that dealing with people gets easier. Wait. No. It doesn't get easier. It gets really fucking weird. Because when you're a ghost, you can hear other people's thoughts. This is a nightmare for two reasons.

One, people are fucking weirdos. And until you learn to ignore it, you get a front row seat to every weird, kinky, disturbing thing that runs through someone's head. One-on-one, this can be manageable. But waiting in line at your nearest Starbucks feels like being trapped in a Caligulan fever dream. If you mashed up 50 Shades of Grey, Winnie the Pooh, and Martha Stewart's Guide to Cooking with every infomercial you've ever seen, you might come close to recreating the experience.

And two, unlike charming Hollywood movies like "What Women Want," most people don't spend most of their time thinking in fully formed, cohesive sentences. It's more of an insane free jazz of half-thoughts, base wants, and whatever pop hit was last on the radio. "Hey, I just met you, and call me crazy pickles bananas Bill's a cunt doo dop doo dop I wonder if dogs like sex but the president would be shot!" This sounds like a journal entry by a deeply schizophrenic person who's replaced their meds with Mentos and cough syrup. But it's not, it's an almost a word-for-word transcription of a local pastor's bored thoughts as he supervised a bake sale.

This isn't unusual either. Pretty much everyone has thoughts like these. But while it's perfectly normal, it's also deeply unsettling when someone walking behind you starts thinking about how hard it would be to kidnap you and keep you in a sex dungeon.

I wish there was something I could tell you to do, some tools I could give you to help block the psychotic ramblings of idle minds. Unfortunately, you just kind of have to learn to ignore it. Eventually, it will fade into the background like Santana's career. It's still there if you look, but normally you don't even notice it.

Whatever you do though, don't respond to people's thoughts. It freaks them the fuck out, and usually results in a lot of yelling and angry denials, sprinkled with threats of physical violence. It's about this time that the whole episode will get overwhelming and all your clothes will fall off, which while unseemly, is actually surprisingly good at de-escalating the situation.

5. There is an afterlife. There are afterlife creatures. And they all suck.

You might have been wondering how the hell I know some of the more scientific ins and outs of being dead, when I've only been this way for a few weeks. Well, it's mostly because of Greg, AKA the Grim Reaper, AKA Shut the fuck up that's not my name.

Greg is a dick. Which is why I'll continue to call it Greg even though it visibly twitches every time I do. But unlike most of the afterworld, Greg

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is a dick in that loveable, 'I've got some serious anger issues and possibly some unsettling habits but am otherwise kind of a good guy if you look hard enough under the right light,' kind of way.

The rest of the afterworld is a soul-crushing, bureaucratic nightmare. Normally this is where some writers would compare it to something like the IRS, DMV, or some other notoriously cliché place where things don't get done. I won't. Not just on principle either. That would be like comparing the least tasty dish at a five-star Michelin restaurant to the fiery shits of a celiac sufferer who gorged himself on white bread and rotten cat food.

Yes. It is that bad.

Earlier I mentioned how I didn't have a body. That wasn't just a little confusing to me, Greg had never seen anything like it either. So Greg took me to see the people who could help. Not out of the kindness of whatever pumps bloodlike stuff through its veins, mind you. He wasn't allowed to leave me until some box was checked.

To say that I don't know what happened next would be, well, enormously accurate. We ended up somewhere dark, sticky, with a lot of screaming, and for some reason I kept being hit in the chest with a living, furry brick with claws. Twenty-four hours later though, I had a few answers from Greg on how things work here, and the 'higher ups' had no idea what happened to my body. They said they'd look into it, and I should have my answer in ten to twenty. Years. And then Greg left without saying goodbye, which, after all we'd been through, was a little hurtful to be honest.

So I guess I have to hang out around here until I can officially be classified as dead, and to quote Greg, "Try not to show your cock off too much."

The Fifth Paw

by Michael Frazer

Bear was a collector. Bear was a collector of misdeeds and sundry items. Bear knew better than to ask the others for intervention, so he left them alone for most of the time. Extended hibernation. Extended isolation. Bear took what he could get. So vaguely yet irrevocably human of him. But to be human meant to be part of something, to be part of the others. Or was that to be mammal? Either way, Bear wasn't certain he wanted to belong. But to collect, goddamn that meant something. To accumulate was to discover was to find. Bear didn't want the items so much as what they contained.

Wandering through the claustrophobia of the city, paws matting down the concrete like so much clay, the asphalt river a meandering symmetry, veins of the metropolis, Bear misstepped. Or, maybe not. His tracks extended for miles behind him, and one extra paw ahead. A lone paw, not a print, lay on the ground, left in a puddle of rippling cement as if someone had forgotten it there, or perhaps dropped it out of sheer negligence. It was too causal, though, to be an accident. The lone paw, inert, pointed inward,



into the city scape, into the windowless buildings, cement blocks jutting miles into the sky. Somewhere inside these blocks were the others, and for once Bear was glad they were windowless.

Bear inspected the paw. Warm as if living, fur softer than his own. It smelled of petrichor, but the city knew no rain, nor drought for that matter. Ice cold asphalt was enough. A voice echoed around a corner, and Bear tensed up, anticipating. You could never hear the footsteps of the city. He looked, but no one came. It was just like them to be another substance, or none at all. Still, he stood waiting. Nothing.

Bear wrapped his scarf tighter and pocketed his find. Because he knew this paw would last him through the winter. Because he knew this paw, lost on someone else, was more him than any part of himself he already possessed. Because he knew his own paw would leave one day, and when that day would certainly come, he would be prepared to face the coldest winter of his life.

SORUM 5

by Dave Gordon

It was 5:55 am on Monday morning and, on his way to work, Jay was able to freely speed through the empty Los Angeles streets. Every morning, Jay passed the time on his commute by pretending he was driving the roadways as a single cell traveling through the veins and arteries of a giant. Any of the cars he passed, they were fellow cells working together with him to keep his imaginary host alive. Today was like any other day and his mind started to drift from simple distraction into his work in a cancer laboratory.

All is fine—smooth sailing ahead—until one little cell fucks it up by becoming cancerous, Jay thought. It's strange and bordering on absurd how something that should be working for the good of the whole can just end it all with one error during replication. It's like what if that Pontiac over there, or that station wagon, just accidentally detonated an atomic bomb while changing lanes and blew up the entire country? For no reason?!

The most important responsibility of Jay's internship at ARC Labs required him to arrive early to set up the lab equipment and make coffee for the senior researchers before they got in at 6:30. But today, he noticed the erratically parked Tesla belonging to Martin Blackspot spread across two different spaces. ARC Lab's director of operations must have returned early from his research expedition to the Amazon at some point over the weekend.

ARC Labs was one of the nation's leading, privately owned bioengineering companies. Its focus and its strength was finding creative ways of fighting resistant cancer strains. Within its state-of-the-art corridors there were rumors that some of the largest pharmaceutical companies were trying to buy out the small operation made up of 10 highly-trained scientists.

But Jay didn't think about that as he entered the lab to find it completely torn apart. Martin was in his office, rifling through papers and causing general chaos of what was usually very well kept. As Jay turned the lights on and began switching on the equipment, he found the desks in a state of disarray. Everything was cleaned off, everything was gone. The only untouched workspace was Jay's.

Without his morning coffee, Jay was too dumbfounded to move. Even at his desk, he could hear Martin shouting and rummaging around his office. Jay stood frozen, as the reptilian portion of his brain slowly cranked to figure out what his next move should be.

And then, as if his thoughts were broadcast across the empty walls of the office, his computer woke up from its nightly slumber with an alert. It was an email from Martin. There wasn't anything in the body of the message, only the subject line: "Come see me."

A panicked thought ran through Jay's mind, Could I be getting fired? He felt his heart sink with the possibility. The MIT grad who didn't go to parties and worked every summer for free in bio labs and doctors' offices just to get the experience to land an unpaid internship at ARC Labs saw his entire young, budding career already falling apart. His dreams of winning the Nobel Prize by the time he was 30, looked to be over before his 23rd birthday. With that thought hanging over his head, he began the solemn march to his boss' office.

Jay knocked softly on the door and the raucous and racket on the other side came to an abrupt stop.

"Come in." Martin didn't even look up from the piles of paperwork on his desk. Jay scanned the room, trying to take it all in. His boss had a reputation for being very clean and neat, almost to a fault. If a lab space wasn't cleaned properly, if anything was mislabeled or disorganized, there would be hell to pay. And that hell was what Jay called Martin's "death stare," a stare that would cut through you and tell you that he wasn't angry, just "disappointed." Today, however, was different; the walls were covered with topographic maps from jungles in Brazil and Thailand that weren't there a week before. Small vials of mysterious organic samples were cluttering the small space still available on Martin's desk. Nothing was marked. Nothing was organized. And in the corner of his office was an unfurled sleeping bag and clothes spilling out of a rucksack.

Has he been sleeping here? Jay thought as he turned his attention to his boss and mentor.

Martin looked nothing like he did before his exhibition. His clothes were beyond unkempt, and it didn't look like he'd showered or cleaned himself in weeks. His hair, beard and fingernails, normally closely-groomed, were overgrown like weeds in a forgotten garden. Martin's eyes were bloodshot red; if he was sleeping in the office, he wasn't getting much of it.

As always, Jay waited for Martin to speak first.

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“I need you to do something,” Martin scooped up some of the vials and containers that were on his desk. Jay gave them an inquisitive eye as Martin dropped them into his waiting hands. Inside the glass jars were what looked like small mushrooms and other fungal samples. “I need you to take these samples, extricate the proteins to be stable enough for airborne consumption.”

Out of habit, Jay began nodding his head without really understanding what was being asked of him. “Sure, but what exactly is this stuff?”

“Stuff?! This stuff is a fungus called *Ophiocordyceps Unilateralis*. It was shown to me by local Brazilian tribes deep in the Amazon who have been using it for centuries.” He rattled one of the small containers. The spores inside were almost as light as air. They floated and swirled around their enclosure hitting the glass walls, threatening to escape. “These people have virtually zero contact with modern humans and modern medicine. But this fungus, and the tea made from it, has kept the entire tribal population cancer-free throughout its history. That’s right. Not one recorded case of cancer. Ever. I’m willing to bet everything that we can extract proteins from the fungus to make a serum that will attack malignant cancer cells. Here take a whiff. Smell the potential.”



Martin screwed the top off of the container and stuck it under Jay’s nose. He paused for a brief moment, then closed his eyes and took a deep breath. But he didn’t smell anything; not even the potential that Martin alluded to. The fungus was odorless. Martin shut the lid of the container and gave Jay a big smile.

“Be careful with all of these samples, they’re too precious to waste. It’s a fungus, sure, but it’d be more accurate to call it a parasite—an ant-parasite to be exact. And while keeping the tribal colonies of Brazil healthy, this little guy has been known to destroy entire ant colonies.” Martin went on to describe how the fungus’ spores float through the air until they attach themselves and get absorbed through an ant’s exoskeleton. The fungus then releases proteins that work their way up through the ant’s nervous system and eventually take over its behaviors and motor functions. And from then on, for the rest of its short life, the ant becomes an agent of the fungus. “The fungus then has the infected ant use its mandible to attach itself to a leaf or branch at an ideal height and temperature to support the growth of the fungus. The ant is still alive, but only for about five more days. Because

it's at that point that a large stem sprouts out from the back of the ant's head and shoots more of the fungal spores into the air. And then the cycle continues and the fungus thrives. Some call it the 'zombie fungus.'"

"And you're thinking that we can manipulate this fungus to somehow fight cancer?" Jay began feeling uneasy that he just took a giant whiff of what people refer to as a zombie fungus. "And it's not dangerous to humans?"

"Jay, didn't you hear what I've been saying?" Martin became more fervent. "The Awá tribe, the same one that I stayed with down in Brazil—my new família!—they've been using it for centuries to keep the entire population cancer-free. Theoretically, we should be able to use the same proteins and compounds that turn an ant against its own colony to turn cancerous cells against itself. The cancer would help us in the fight against cancer! Especially when you consider that ants are far more sophisticated biologically than single cells of cancer. The goal would be to put those chemical compounds into a sort of medical ventilator or inhaler, make it cheap and available to treat people all over the world. I just need you to help me make this theory into a reality."

"My help? I don't even know where to start." Jay answered in a whisper, more to himself than Martin.

Martin smiled, offering some comfort to Jay by slapping him on the shoulder. "You're all that's left. I let everyone else go over the weekend. They came in yesterday to get all of their stuff. Their key cards won't even work anymore. It's just you and me, buddy. Locked in for the discovery of a lifetime."

Jay left the office with his head spinning like a centrifuge. Martin went back to the disorder that his office had become.

Back at his desk, Jay began working. His first task was to get a closer look at the proteins of the fungus. Hours of understanding its chemical makeup turned into days. He went through all of the fungal samples, paired them with different types of cancer samples, until he finally reached a solution. But he knew it wasn't one Martin would want to hear. The fungus would never be able to latch onto cancer the way it takes control of ants. The cancer cells are too simple, its RNA is too chemically weak to be manipulated by the fungus. Instead, the fungus appears to seek out richer, more complex cell structures.

After double checking and triple checking his work, he went to tell Martin his findings. He realized that it had been days since he even saw Martin. When Jay opened the door to Martin's office, he found it even more of a disaster than before. The piles of paper had become mountains, and in their valleys flowed the contents of overturned beakers. It appeared that

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Martin had not only left, but he left in a hurry. On his desk, Jay discovered scraps of paper with figures and detailed drawings that attempted to demonstrate the process of how to stabilize the fungus. In red pen, Martin left a short note to his intern:

Jay. If you haven't figured out by now, the fungus will never be able to attach itself to cancer cells. Focus the remainder of your energy on the formula below. If my calculations are correct, adding these chemical compounds should make it stable enough for an aerosol spray. I call it, Serum 4.

He circled the compound in large, red pen.

Jay began scratching a small, itchy bump on the back of his neck just above the spine as he worked through the steps outlined in Martin's note.

And then he went to work. His eyes narrowed in focus. He stopped eating and sleeping. The thick hair on his head grew down to his shoulders. He had never been able to properly grow a beard, but now, it was sprouting out thick and wiry.

Though he looked like he had aged twenty years in only a few days, Jay was still the same inexperienced intern. Trial after trial, and failure after failure, Jay wasn't able to find a way to synthesize the fungal compounds the way Martin described. Time was running out along with the fungal specimens that Martin brought back from Brazil. Maybe he was still searching for Martin's seemingly unobtainable approval, because something deep inside kept pushing him on.

On the fifth day, with only a few milligrams of fungal samples left, Jay was finally able to replicate the spores similar to Martin's prediction. Well, there was one difference. The compound Jay was able to create was stronger, more potent than the one Martin outlined in his instructions. While Serum 4 would only be stable enough for a few hours in the air, Jay calculated that his new serum would be able to stay airborne for days, even months!

Jay carefully injected his compound into a highly-pressurized aerosol canister that would effectively shoot the compound high into the air. On the side of the canister Jay wrote: Serum 5.

Jay was hungry and physically he felt like he was being ripped apart. His legs were shaking from cramps, it felt like a fire was spreading down his spine, and yet he still dragged his failing body to the staircase that led to the roof of ARC Labs. Each step up sent shockwaves of sharp and precise pain, like needles throughout the joints in his legs, but he still climbed higher. At the top of the staircase, Jay opened a small door that led to the open air. That's when he saw the collapsed body of Martin, his arms wrapped tightly

around the flagpole that stood high in the middle of the roof.

When he got closer, what Jay saw was barely Martin at all. Martin's skin appeared thin and flaky, as fragile as burnt paper. At his elbows and other joints, the skin had peeled to give way to tiny stalks of white fungal shoots. Out of the base of where his neck met his back, a large stalk shot straight in the air which had flowered into a white, spherical pod that was bobbing in the breeze. Martin's face was frozen in a silent scream.

The bump on the back of Jay's neck began to burn and itch terribly. When he went to pick at it, he found the hint of a stem trying to poke through.

Standing over Martin, Jay took out his aerosol can full of his potent Serum 5 and began spraying it into the air. The spores flew out in an iridescent cascade until the canister was empty and Jay smiled. The corners of his mouth cracked as his formula dissipated into the air. He looked off to the south towards San Diego, where the fungal spores would head once they were caught by California's coastal winds.

Jay laid down next to Martin and took hold of the same flagpole. As he waited to expire, he looked out at the hazy horizon and was happy to have sacrificed himself for the good of his species.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

Michael Frazer collects words he finds on the sidewalk, stores them in his pocket for the winter. If they don't make for a story, they sure make for cheap fuel. Low on words? He's happy to share: @micfrazer

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Mark Addison Smith drawings are part of an ongoing archive of daily-illustrated conversation excerpts, entitled *You Look Like The Right Type*. All works are India ink on paper and incorporate direct-quote dialogue. (YouLookLikeTheRightType.com)

Shea Newton loves you but wishes you had better taste in pants. He's not a great example of good taste but glob, you know can do better. He wishes he read stories more often and looks back fondly on the days he read yours daily. He's currently writing a text adventure dungeon crawler in his spare time but it's the kind of thing that may never be done. If it ever is, he'll let you know.

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Cat Baldwin (editorial illustrations): “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day? Thou art more lovely and more temperate.” See her work at catbaldwin.com

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thecarbonbasedmistake.com was created 03.30.75 by **Marc Calvary** and takes the form of zines & books & photography & writing & blasphemy & art & design. Besides the main project, a series of books and zines under the umbrella name of the carbon based mistake, Marc finds the time to do other projects by being annoyingly anti-social. Current side projects include the Art Exchange Program, an annual zine contest awarding grant money and prizes in an attempt to encourage others to continue to make art, a pin-up style adults-only photography and design project called cherrypepper, and a charity organization under the unlikely name of the Reformed Church of Satan, which actually has nothing to do with the devil.

Dave Gordon works as an advertising copywriter. While attending the University of Arizona, he was awarded with the Fred N. Scott Prize for fiction. He currently lives and works in Brooklyn.

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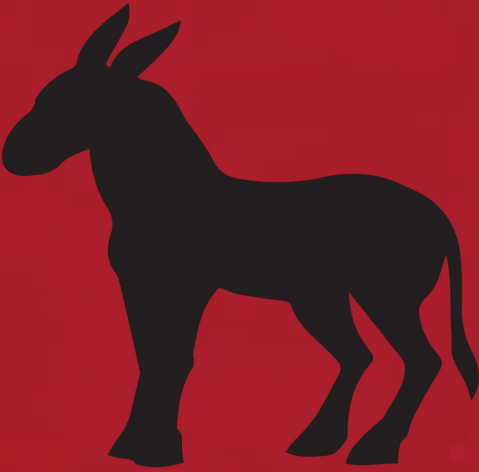
Dave Allwine: Born in a non-linier, non subjective point of view. His life is more like a big ball of wibbily wobbly timey wimey... stuff. daveallwine@gmail.com

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