

# PANDORA

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# Letter from the Department Head

You never know what you're going to get when you open Pandora's box, but you can guarantee it'll be a rich experience. An opera singer in a hot air balloon ... an eccentric shopper in a grocery store ... a storm brewing on a country walk ... I love the excitement I feel when reading for the first time what our creative writing students have been working on this semester. The quality of the contributions being so high, it is easy to forget that most of the work we are reading here has been produced by students writing in a language that is not their mother tongue. Thanks go to Patricia Bartholomew who, through her expert tuition and individual guidance, helps her students maximise their writing potential. Thanks go to our students who, through their hard work and perseverance through the complex stages of the writing process, are able to craft such beautiful short stories and poetry for us to enjoy here. This magazine is surely an inspiration to those out there who have not yet tried their hand at writing – the VHS can help find the right course to get you started!

Julia Shirtliff  
Director of Studies, English

## **PANDORA**

**PATRICIA BARTHOLOMEW, EDITOR**

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# Up, Up and Away

By Juergen Kruse

The last tufts of the cirrus clouds have gone, and the pale-blue sky is slowly changing its colour to this cerulean blue that announces the hoped for spell of fine weather, and as the sun has already turned the stiff morning breeze into wafts of warm air, there is no longer any doubt that the forthcoming spectacle at Place Louis-le-Grand will be a success.

Place Louis-le-Grand is the perfect venue for our venture. Situated on the peninsula framed by the rivers Rhone and Saone just before they meet in the town centre, it is one of the biggest town squares in our country. The forthcoming event needs space, if only because of the huge number of spectators.

Since early morning, the people

of Lyons have been flocking in by the thousands to witness the start of the hot air balloon La Gustave. The balloon bears its name in honour of king Gustav. The Swede is sitting at the right hand of our Royal Highness on the wooden grandstand erected in front, but at safe distance, of the take-off site. The royal entourage occupies the rest of the grandstand. I see queen Marie Antoinette and two of her daughters; the archbishop in his crimson robe is there, then some nobility whose names I don't know, and a small but nevertheless impressive military retinue of both monarchs. It's being reported that the Swedish king is here to buy a West Indian island from France. Sweden wants to establish her own market place for the slave trade. The



"Floating Over the Clouds" Mixed Media by M.P. Olinger [www.mpo-art.com](http://www.mpo-art.com)

country is already the major supplier of iron chains and selling everything from a single source will certainly increase the profit. However, it is not a commoner's business to discuss state affairs, especially not when one country prospers and the other is on the brink of bankruptcy.

I am Jacques Fleurant. I'm an artist. Yet, I'm still working on my artistic breakthrough. Nevertheless, I'm a man of independent means. My prudently invested inheritance allows me to devote my time to my new passion: ballooning. I'm a balloonist. My companion is Madame Thible. She hasn't disclosed to me her motives for taking part in such an unladylike adventure, but I had to accept her anyway. Sad but true, all men I asked declined.

We are dressed for the occasion. I wear a mock gondolier's uniform: black trousers, a blue-white striped shirt under a navy-blue sailor's vest and a black broad-brimmed hat. A moss-coloured hunting bag slung over my shoulder and a riding crop under my arm complete my outfit. Madame Thible is dressed as the goddess Minerva. She wears a Roman helmet with a stylised owl on its crest. A white toga reaches down to her ankles. The toga is elaborately draped around her body and fastened with a clasp above her bosom.

The cannon shot rings out exactly at noon. The hustle and bustle on Place Louis-le-Grand dies down. His Royal Highness nods, the Grand Master of Ceremonies lifts his baton, and we two balloonists bow and scrape in their direction. Then we proceed past the guard

of honour to the balloon moored in the centre of the place. There, we bow again before we get into the gondola. I climb on board; Madame Thible enters through the door the basket weavers have cut into the gondola.

What an amazing contraption a hot air balloon is: The bag has a diameter of twelve meters. Its envelope consists of sackcloth. Inside, the cloth is lined with a thin layer of oiled paper; outside it is covered with a fishnet of cord. In the bottom of the bag is a one-meter wide opening. Underneath hangs a stove-like device looking like an oversized chafing-dish in which a fire burns. Its heat rises through the opening into the bag and heats its air. The hotter the air inside becomes, the more the bag swells up. When the bag has finally formed up into a globe, the balloon rises into the sky and flies as long as the fire heats the air in the bag. As long as the crew in the gondola want to fly, they keep the fire burning. If they want to land, they extinguish the flame and the air in the bag cools slowly down. The balloon begins to lose height until it finally lands at a, let's hope, safe place.

La Gustave is ready for lift off. I look at the golden flourishes on the sky-blue bag that show the twelve signs of the zodiac and hope they are the right charts for a trip through the skies. "Cast off. Let's get going," I hear myself shouting. The ground crew loosen the thin ropes that tether the balloon to the ground, and as it rises, at first slowly, then quickly gathering speed while turning around like a carousel, Mme Thible sings the overture of *La Belle Arsène* with a vigour and

clearness I've never heard before. Before I forget: Madame Thible is an opera singer presently engaged at the Soufflot, our local stage. She sings the lead in *La Belle Arsène*, one of these romantic fairy-tale operas that have recently become so popular.

Our gondola is a round wicker basket, hip-high and with little elbowroom. It's held by three hemp cords suspending from the bag. The chafing-dish swinging closely to and fro above the middle of the gondola makes it difficult to keep the flame under the opening of the bag. Often, the fire comes so closely near the cords that they get singed. Almost the whole bottom of the gondola is covered with our supply of fuel. It's a heap of charcoal but also wet rags and damp sawdust. The theory goes that smoke helps to keep the balloon buoyant. I'm sweating and my mouth has become dry. Both my hands clasp the rim of the gondola. I think of Monsieur Lenormand and his jump of twenty-six meters from the observatory tower in Montpellier some months ago. The umbrella-like contraption he had invented slowed his fall and carried him safely down. I read that he had named his instrument parachute, and that they were already planning a jump from a balloon with a dog as passenger.

I notice Madame Thible observing me, probably asking herself why the gentleman doesn't feed the fire. After all, he had volunteered for the job. Doing the job herself, she says, "Look, Monsieur Fleurant, how uniform our town looks from above. Can you tell me who's rich and who's poor under this jumble of ochre tiles?" Then she leans out and points with a sweeping gesture to the ever faster receding human

civilisation. "From up here, it seems as if all were equal down there." I don't respond.

The balloon doesn't rise anymore. Instead, it floats steadily in a south-westerly direction. Still scanning the ground, Madame Thible asks, "Do you know, Monsieur Fleurant, why the peasantry in our rich country are getting poorer and poorer every year? The big forests are the reason. The landowners do not allow felling trees to win arable land. The nobility need big forests for their favourite pastime. Hunting, just for fun, is the sport of the aristocracy." I prefer not to react.

We are flying almost forty minutes now. Our fuel has been used up. *La Gustave* begins to sink. During the whole flight, I haven't changed my position. Now I feel my stiff and cold body. I manage to sit down on the floor of the gondola. Like the pilot of a ship singing out the depth of the water, Madame Thible calls out the altitude, roughly estimated, of course: six hundred feet, three hundred, hundred, fifty, thirty, and then three heavy bumps, a shriek, and Madame Thible leaves the gondola by getting hurled out. I wait a moment, get up, brush off the specks of charcoal and sawdust from my trousers and step out of the basket. It's time to think about my report to the academy and what I will tell the newspapers and all the distinguished personages whose guest of honour I will soon be. After all, I am the first man who flew longer, higher and wider as any other human being before.

# Just Shopping

By Ellen Willson Hoover

“I’m going shopping,” Madeleine chirped down the empty hallway. She jangled her keys, waiting for a response. “I should be back in an hour,” her voice echoed down the hall until a head popped around the corner. It was Andrew. “Oh, yeah, what kind of shopping?” He responded, stepping into the hallway with a jaunty air. “Oh, just grocery shopping,” Madeleine shrugged as her right thumbnail picked at the grooves of her house key. Andrew’s smile froze in place as his gaze sunk down to her twitching thumb.

“You look really nice, do you want some company?” Andrew edged closer, his hand rubbing the back of his neck. “Don’t be silly!” Madeleine’s hand reached to her pearl necklace, then moved to her

short, sandy blonde hair, which she started fluffing. “You need your rest—it’s been such a heavy week for you, with retirement and all...” She smiled and leaned over to give him a kiss. “It’s really no prob—” Andrew started but Madeleine was already halfway out the door. “By darling, see you in a bit!” and with an air kiss, she was gone.

Cruising down the El Camino Real, Madeleine eyed the rearview mirror repeatedly. Sometimes Andrew followed her and that always ruined everything. Placing another coat of Powder Rose lipstick, she puckered and smiled at the mirror. Piazza’s Fine Foods was only five minutes down the road. She went there at least 4 times a week and just loved how





“Groceries” Photo by Joscelyn Campbell

courteous the employees were to her, unlike that dreadful Albertson’s where you actually have to bag your own groceries. Imagine that! Madeleine huffed to herself and pulled her Volvo wagon into the store parking lot.

After smoothing her floral shift dress, Madeleine picked a grocery cart and glided into the store. “Good afternoon, Mrs. Blythe,” called out that sweet Henry who always works at the first cash register. “Hello, Henry,” Madeleine trilled and sa-shayed toward the produce section. “Your favorite just arrived this morning, Mrs. Blythe,” Mike, who stocks the produce, appeared from the lettuce section and pointed toward the prickly pears. “Oh, you are such a dear for remembering, Mike.” Mad-

eleine blushed and shimmied toward the fruit.

As she turned toward the dairy aisle, Madeleine sucked in her breath and sighed. Can’t she get her act together? Her eyes rolled as she watched a 30-something mother loading 2 gallons of milk into the cart while issuing unheeded reprimands to her older boy and girl who were trying to climb into the cart. The baby, sitting in the cart warily eyed their progress. “Here, here you little monkeys,” Madeleine rolled up to the side and swiftly pried them from the teetering cart. “Thank you, Mrs. Blythe,” breathed the younger woman. “My pleasure, Brooke. How are you today?”

“Fine, just a little frazzled.” Brooke brushed her hair out of her eyes which suddenly darted to the side. “Adam Thomas Hawkins!” Brooke lunged toward the boy who had opened a carton of yogurt straight off the shelf and was licking the lid. “I guess we are buying this today,” fumed Brooke who placed the yogurt carton into cart. Madeleine smiled sympathetically.

“Mrs. Blythe, would you mind waiting here with the children, while I run back to get some bananas?” Brooke turned tired eyes toward her.

“Of course, dear.” Madeleine gently grasped the baby’s pinky finger and started singing “One, two, buckle my shoe.....” The older ones were trolling the aisle for more yogurt. The coast was clear. Madeleine continued singing “.....Three, four, shut the door.....” and with her other hand, swiftly reached into Brooke’s purse. In one graceful arc, she pulled the wallet out and placed it into her own purse. The baby’s eyes bulged. She raised a chubby finger and yelled “No!” and Madeleine continued to sing ...”Five, six, pick up sticks....” The baby stared.

Brooke dashed back “Thank you, Mrs. Blythe.” Madeleine dropped the baby’s pinky finger and gripped her cart.

“So sorry to race off Brooke, but I just hate to leave Mr. Blythe waiting. Poor dear just doesn’t know what to do with himself now that he’s retired from the firm,” Madeleine fluttered.

“Goodbye, Mrs. Blythe. See you soon.” Brooke smiled. Madeleine passed by the baby but avoided eye-contact.

“No, no!” the baby pointed and shouted

as Madeleine tried to casually speed away.

As Madeleine propelled down the bread aisle, the baby’s shouts turned into sobs. Beads of sweat popped out on her forehead and she tossed a loaf of Wonder Bread into the cart. Her mind went blank and she didn’t know what else to get. The baby’s sobs grew louder behind her and she lurched over to the pasta aisle where she dumped in 4 boxes of spaghetti. She sped toward the front of the store and stopped to throw her hands onto the first thing she saw, a box of condoms. After that, Madeleine nearly rocketed toward the cashiers and swiped a bottle of tequila that was on display.

Madeleine instinctively headed toward Henry’s station but halted. The line was long and he was doing a price check for a customer. *Shit.* Madeleine frantically turned her cart toward the other cashier. *The new guy.* Her shoulders slumped but fresh screeches from the baby jolted her forward and she got in line behind one other shopper. As she unloaded her goods on the belt, she caught a whiff of her own armpits. “Flop sweat, “ Madeleine whispered. She drummed her fingers on the cart handle until it was her turn.

The teenage cashier with a nameplate “Jason” scanned the bread and spaghetti and his bored expression turned to a grin when he got to the condoms and tequila. “Whoa, someone’s gonna have a good time tonight!” His grin faded as he met Madeleine’s stony gaze. “Or not,” Jason raised his brows and started bagging the goods.

Brooke and her traveling circus pulled up behind Madeleine. “No, no,

bad!” the baby screeched and pointed at Madeleine, who looked perplexed and played with her pearls. “Darling you must be tired, let Mommy get you a lollipop,” Brooke cooed as she reached into her purse. Jason The New Guy paused to answer his mobile phone

“Heeeyyyy, what’s up?” Madeleine’s spine straightened, and she shot him what’s been described by her friends as The Look of Death. “Dude, I gotta call you back,” Jason returned his phone to his pocket. “That will be \$31.53 ma’am.”

Suddenly Brooke erupted behind her. “My wallet! I just had it. It’s gone!” she called out to the store. Henry’s head snapped up and he swung into action, vaulting from his chair to step in front of the front sliding doors. “Call the manager!” he shouted to Jason who drawled into the intercom, “Fred, we’ve got a problem up here.”

Madeleine reached for her pearls and stepped back to console Brooke. The manager flapped his way from the back office, and swiped his keycard to lock the front doors. “Sorry, folks we have to have a brief lockdown until the police get here. We’ve had quite a few cases of theft lately.”

The customers murmured at one another and the baby, in-between licks of her lollipop, pointed and sniffled at Madeleine. Flashing police car lights

soon spun throughout the store reminding Madeleine of the one time she and Andrew went to a disco, while on vacation in Acapulco. “Mrs. Blythe,” Brooke interrupted her reverie, “Can you please watch the children again while I speak with the police?” “Yes, yes, dear,” Madeleine fluffed her hair and stepped toward her waiting nemesis. “What’s this?” she whispered to the baby as she reached into her purse and handed the baby the wallet. The baby stared at Madeleine and clutched the wallet. Madeleine lifted the baby’s soft pink blanket to partially cover the wallet. “You naughty monkey,” she simpered and stepped a half pace away.

Brooke returned. “The police are asking for any sort of identification I might have but I’m sure everything is in my wallet.” She dug through her purse and the baby handed the wallet toward her. “Mama.” Brooke’s eyes widened and she brought her hand to her mouth. “My goodness, sweetheart, where did you find that?”

“Oh, how I love a happy ending!” Madeleine beamed and waved goodbye to Brooke and the baby and pushed her cart out the sliding doors. The sweat had dried and Madeleine couldn’t help smirking to herself. *Hey, Jason, I never paid for my groceries!*

But, then, there was Andrew, waiting in his Jaguar, watching. *Oh, there he is, always spoiling a good time.* “I’ll see you at home,” Madeleine sniffed at his open window and pushed her cart toward her Volvo.

# One Last Walk

By M.P. Olinger

Melinda walked the green lane for the last time in mid-autumn. For a while she had had the suspicion that Brian kept a blonde, pony-tailed secret. That day she confronted him head on. Until that moment she hoped that it had been a mistake, but without further ado he owned up to his little aside.

“What do you want, he argued with a smug smile, you’ve got a good life. So what’s your problem?”

“You bastard,” she retorted, while throwing one of the silver candlesticks into his arrogant face. She would gladly have killed him, but instead she slammed the front door, and marched out of the house. She was fuming with rage, and she needed to calm down. She needed to clear her head. She needed to talk to her best friend Daniela. She stormed out of the house without keys, determined to walk to her friend. Daniela owned the mill at the outskirts of town. Walking the six miles along orchards and fields to her friends place, would settle her emotions, she thought.

She heard the church bells strike five as she set off. Without her mobile to call Daniela, she hoped to find her friend at home. The moment she reached the green lane she quickened her steps. After half an hour she passed the small paddock with the

old barn. The derelict building nestled, submerged in the lushness of weeping willows, poplar and pine trees. Every shade of green caressed her vision, as the natural vegetation in all its glory embraced the wooden shed. Two majestic oak trees stood proudly nearby, their branches swaying in the wind, their golden brown leaves bristling against the sweltering evening air. While the gurgling river nearby exhumed freshness, Melinda felt for a moment tension shifting from her shoulders, and she stopped in her tracks. Like her, the old barn stood rooted to the spot, inhaling stillness and exhaling memories of battled storms. Jewel-like, the derelict building stood flaming green in the hazy afternoon; it’s peeling walls illuminated by the shimmering light of the dying day. The aroma of life transported by the hot air, the scent of ripe berries, apples, and plums wafted through the fields, tickling Melinda’s senses. She took a deep breath, and turning towards the river, she continued on her journey. Butterflies, and bees danced for their food around wild flowers, and an army of wasps kept fighting for food supremacy around

rotting plums and decomposing apples.

Nothing is forever Melinda thought, and with each step she felt the pain of betrayal like an arrow cutting through her heart. It was one thing being suspicious, but it was an altogether different matter being faced with the truth, she thought dejectedly. Suddenly the path forked and the lane's edge, thick with Chestnuts and oak trees, narrowed to a foot wide path. Melinda hadn't walked the green lane for some time and she was surprised how overgrown the lane had become. Dense foliage created a dark tunnel of branches for her to go through, and as she bent her head, squeezing past twigs

and brambles, she disappeared into the shadows. Thorns scratched her arms, and her hair got caught in the thorny brambles. As she freed herself, she heard his heavy breathing before she saw him. Her heart thudded against her ribs, as the figure approached. It was only when he drew nearer that she recognised Vasco, the mill's labourer. He had come all the way from the mill, shuffling and puffing along the lane. The lane's narrow passage was too close for comfort, and she turned her eyes away. She shifted her gaze, and he kept his eyes fixed to the ground. The thriving atmosphere, which just moments ago had spoken of life and



"The Green Dale" Acrylic by M.P. Olinger [www.mpo-art.com](http://www.mpo-art.com)

possibilities ripe to be plucked from the sky suddenly altered, as a gust of cold air swept through the valley.

The mill was still some distance away. Melinda quickened her steps. She heard old Vasco coughing, as his steps faded in the distance. She shortly wondered about his life. From her friend she knew that he had fled his home country many years ago, and that his wife and children had been killed in political upheavals. Occasionally he walked along the green lane, went into town and drank himself into oblivion. That's probably where he is heading. To drown his pain, his solitude, she thought in a moment of compassion. As she pondered on the old man, she continued her journey along the river. He always looked so forlorn. Next time I will stop, I'll approach him, talk to him. Maybe I'll just acknowledge him, a smile in his direction? Maybe next time? "Next time I will talk to him," she declared to the trees. That thought lifted her mood, and for a moment she stopped feeling sorry for herself.

By the time she reached the mill, it was suppertime. But she was told that her friend was not around. Disappointed she went to the back of the mill, and watching the huge wheels turning and churning water in a continuous flow she lingered. She felt soothed by the natural rhythm of the turning wheels. So what if Brian had a blonde aside, she thought defiantly. She was still in the prime of life. She would file for divorce and find a way to make a new life for herself. While watching the wheels turn, she suddenly

felt a chill. It had become windy. The sun disappeared while dark clouds formed, hanging low over the dale. A low rumbling sound rolled over the valley. Intending to be home before the storm hit, she headed back.

She walked briskly. It took her under an hour to reach the old barn again. The storm was drawing closer and she could see lightning zigzagging in the distance. Approaching the paddock with the old barn, she ducked this time carefully under the overhanging brambles. The barn merging into the semi-darkness, stood deathly still. Melinda felt melancholy treading on tender feet around the place. Drawing nearer she noticed deep indentations, like wounds running along the outer walls. With its front doors cracked wide open, the barn looked desperate. She heard a squeaking, grinding noise coming from inside, and like tasting the last notes of Mozart's Requiem, the realisation of her husband betrayal cut right through her. She caught her breath, leaning with one hand against the paddocks gate. There was no room for doubt anymore. There was nothing gained in closing her eyes from the truth this time. There was no turning back. Her marriage to Brian was well and truly over.

Soon autumn would give way to winter. She would leave her marriage. She didn't like change, and she shook the rising panic off. The thunderstorm had gained momentum, approaching the valley like a speed train. The smell of rain hung in the air. Fat charcoal grey clouds were ready to open their floodgates. As she turned away from the barn to hurry home she stopped in her tracks. She hesitated a

moment. If she would run all the way she might be home before the storm broke. But she didn't. She never knew what pulled her, what made her go inside the old barn that day. Maybe it was the storm, waiting to hit any minute, the rolling dark clouds hanging over the green lane urging her to go inside. Maybe it was the squeaking echo coming from the derelict building? A continuous squeaking, grinding sound calling out to her.

It was the noise she later told the police. It was this continuous grinding, shafting hum that drew her in. In all those years that she had walked the green lane, she had never actually set foot inside the old barn. Once inside she realised that it was much higher than she had anticipated. She was surprised to see a staircase running along the wall, leading upwards. Due to the lack of light it was sombre and gloomy. A musty smell hung in the air. Melinda shivered. By now the howling wind had gained power, snaking its way through broken windows, twisting its way up the dilapidated narrow staircase to the attic. The continuous shafting and grinding seemed to come from above. Melinda called out, "anybody around, hello, anybody here?" Silence filled the space, only her words kept hollering against the blackened, humid surroundings. After a moment's hesitation, she walked towards the staircase. Carefully, on her toes, she crept upstairs. Each step resonated with the eco of thunder in the otherwise dead silence of the barn. With her boots barely touching the dusty steps, she followed a pattern of big, heavy shoe indentations, all the way to the loft. Between each step Melinda

held her breath listening into darkness, listening for the squeaking, shafting echo, listening into the near silence that emanated from the mouldy walls. Melinda shivered as she walked over spider webs, slimy bird droppings, and fresh mouse droppings. With each step up, the stairs narrowed. With each step up, the stairs steepened. With each step up, the light faded. She heard the wind howling through the cracks, branches bending and breaking. All the while diffused light and lightning created fluttering patterns along the staircase. The storm had broken. Her heart raced. She reached the top facing a closed wooden door. She hesitated as the grinding, squeaking and shafting hum had become clearer and louder. The shafting rhythm kept mirroring the echo of a pendulum in it's regular beat. She held her breath. She closed her eyes, not wanting to go any further, yet at the same time, like on automatic pilot, she reached for the rusty doorknob. As she turned the knob the pounding in her ears smothered any other sound.

She never heard her own scream, as she pushed the door fully open, swirling up layers of dust, and a flock of fluttering pigeons, disturbed by her entrance. Then she saw Vasco, the mill labourer. He was hanging from the wooden beam. His body slack, turning, twisting, and swaying gently in the twilight. His eyes wide open, staring past her into eternity.

By spring Melinda had moved abroad. She never walked the green lane again.

# The Cheat

by Núria Obradors

“If you weren’t Patrick’s wife, I’d totally chat you up.” This simple statement, delivered in a seemingly nonchalant tone, caught me so much off guard that I froze for a whole second. What had he just said? He had to be joking.

“Oh, c’mon, Leonard”, I dismissed him, rolling my eyes at my empty beer mug, rather than at him. I wished Patrick was back with the drinks already. How had I ended up sitting alone with Leonard in this corner of the pub when two minutes ago we’d been six people at the table? I backtracked the recent events. The moment Patrick had gone with Dan to get drinks for all, Meg had decided to go to the loo, and then John had gone outside to take a call.

It was one of the rare occasions that I’d find myself hanging out with Patrick’s mates from the Gardening Club. I couldn’t care less about plants, but Patrick loved them, and he took pleasure in the group gatherings. These normally took place on Friday evenings, so if I wanted a date with my husband after a week’s work, I’d pick him up there. I usually had to wait for him, though, and it was from these brief en-

counters that I had met most of his fellow gardeners.

With time, Patrick had become friends with a few of them —like Dan and Meg— and they’d occasionally go out someplace, but I’d only join twice or thrice a year, as most of the times they’d talk about plants or gossip about the club. This was the first of those occasions that Leonard and I had turned out to be in the same party, though. Same for John, whose face I’d seen before but whose name I had learned only today. Leonard’s face and name, however, were very well registered in my memory since Patrick had joined the club. He was no eyeful, mind you. He was lean, with big blue eyes, and a cute smile; but he was also short, ghostly white, had a huge nose, acne scars, and basically looked like a dork. So why did I find him so attractive then? It wasn’t as though I were stuck in hideousville and he were the least ugly of the lot. I knew a good number of handsome to downright hot guys from this and all the social circles I belonged to; my own Patrick was quite fetching. And yet there was something about Leonard,





something that made me lust after him despite the ugliness and the dorkiness. Maybe it was the nose. I had a major crush on Adrien Brody, after all.

“Really, I would”, he insisted. I had to look at him. He was leaning closer than I was comfortable with, his blue gaze intent on me. “You’re joking, are you?” I asked.

He just kept smiling. “No, I’m not. C’mon, Stephanie, don’t take it wrong, I mean it as a compliment”.

“You’re drunk”, I said. It was a lousy reply, admittedly. He smirked.

“You don’t know that.”

“And you don’t know me. At all. You’re just chatting me up like I’m some

random chick you—”

“Alright, I’ll give you that”, he interrupted. “We may be only on nodding terms, but I do happen to like what little I know of you”.

Great. First he was disguising his flirting with conditional mode, and now he was pretending to know enough of me as to fancy me. ‘Cause I wasn’t neither foolish nor vain enough to believe he was coming on to me just because of my looks. I’ll admit I’m prettier than plain, but I’ve never been so drop-dead gorgeous or overtly sexual as to elicit spontaneous advances from men, least of all my own husband’s mates. I was getting

really annoyed. What was taking Patrick so long, anyway?

I must have looked more bemused than vexed, because Leonard carried on.

“I’ve the feeling you’re a strong woman. That you’re always there for your man, but without being clingy. Like, you stop by the club or come to the exhibitions like a devoted wife would, but then when we go out or stuff, you just make your own plans most of the time— Patrick mentions it. It’s like you know how to be there even if you’re somewhere else. You’re cool with your man having a hobby you don’t give a damn about, not because you don’t care about him, but because you do. I’ve seen lots of people whose partners complain about the time they devote to the club, but Patrick’s never whined about you nagging him about that, and I know that that is not a good argument per se, but the way his face lights up when he sees you through the door— that is. He’s a very lucky guy to have a woman like you.”

His voice had grown lower. I wished that the heat I felt in my cheeks was not a blush, tried to convince myself that if it was, it would not show in the dim light of the pub. How the bloody hell could he tell all that? And that wasn’t what mortified me the most, though, nor the way his eyes kept glancing at my lips. It was the fear, the shame, of being so transparent that someone with whom I’d barely crossed words till that night could read me as well as the people with whom I had an actual relationship; people who, unlike him, had the right to know me. Had it been one of those people telling me what a freaking awesome woman I was, I’d either thanked them mod-

estly or brushed it off with a joke. But it was Leonard. Ugly, dorky Leonard. The same I’d imagined huffing and puffing on top of me— Or at the bottom. In my fantasies, I’d pant and moan too, but there and then in real life, it was helplessness, not pleasure, that caused me to breathe hard. It dawned on me that in that moment, he did not look like a dork at all. I realised that I never had thought of him as anything else but a two-sided picture, showing awkward Leonard and his little flower pots on one side and stallion Leonard from my mental porn clips on the other. Now he was tearing the picture up, filling the big gap between the Leonard I saw and the Leonard I imagined by showing himself as the man I had always failed to see in between.

“Please, Leonard, don’t— Just stop saying these things, ok?” I begged, rather than demanded. He twitched his mouth, pinned me down with his pale blue eyes.

“Why? What would’ve you said to me, if you weren’t taken and I’d actually asked you out, what do you think you’d answer?” Didn’t he know it by now? Well, I had had it. If he could pretend to be that thick, so could I.

“How the hell do I know, Leonard!? What if? what if? That’s just too many “ifs”! If I weren’t Patrick’s wife you wouldn’t have the feeling I’m this or that because you know what? All those qualities you see in me, you’re seeing them through Patrick’s account. In fact if it weren’t for him you and I would’ve never even met, so just shut it,

will you?”

He let out a sigh.

“You really don’t know, or is this disquisition your way of avoiding the real answer?”

He knew. Goddammit, he knew. I was numb, I felt stupid, I felt angry at myself that he had somehow sensed my attraction and that in spite of my mind being flooded with nightmarish images of all the ways this was wrong and all the ways it could get infinitely worse, my lips were tingling. Time was stalling. I could not hear the music. All I was aware of was Leonard’s gaze locked on me like a falcon’s on his quarry. I felt him draw nearer. I had to do something. He was barely four inches away. A stolen kiss was not really cheating, was it? And how dared I ask myself that? Three inches. I felt his body heat on my cheek. Two. I had to get out of there. One. Get out, get out, get out, get UP!

I stood up so violently that I hit my hipbone hard on the rim of the table, making the glasses rattle. I ignored the pain and stepped sideways to get out from the bench, and in that moment Patrick, Dan and Meg turned up, all laughing and carefree.

“Look whom I found by the bar!” beamed Patrick. Sure enough, tagging along were a lovely couple from the club with whom Patrick and myself used to hang out but who had moved out of the city. I greeted them quickly and excused myself to go to the ladies’ room. I needed to cool down, though it was not easy in the disgusting state in which the toilet was. I went back after

a few minutes and I sat next to Patrick, not even looking at where Leonard was sitting.

“Are you ok?” I heard Patrick ask.

“Hmm?”

“Are you ok? You seem a bit... off”, I realised I was holding his arm and leaning my head on his shoulder. I looked at him, searching for any sign of suspicion. I found none.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just a little tired.” He smiled and planted a kiss on my lips.

“We may go in a little while. I was hoping to catch up with the guys a bit.”

“Of course, honey, don’t worry” I said. He thanked me with another kiss. I soon learnt that John had had to leave after the call, and the others had just got distracted with having met long lost friends. I managed to keep my cool for the extra hour or so that we spent at the pub, although I spoke little more than monosyllables and I didn’t let go of Patrick’s arm. I needed to feel him, physically feel him, to show Leonard and prove myself that everything was right between us. As the minutes went by, I felt less angry at myself and more at Leonard, and by the time we said our goodbyes, only a dull sense of annoyance was left.

Several weeks passed before I found myself once more in the familiar headquarters to pick up Patrick for dinner and a movie. I poked my head into the meeting room to let him know I’d arrived and retreated to the entrance hall to wait for him. I heard a door open behind me. I turned around and saw Leonard coming out of the men’s room. We both stopped dead for an instant before deliberately

greeting as usual. Leonard made as if to go back into the meeting room, then turned to me.

“Listen, Stephanie, about the other time...” I looked at him all defensive. “...I’m sorry”. I didn’t answer. “You were right. I was a bit tipsy and I just blurted out a lot of things I shouldn’t have said. You were upset with good reason, and for that I’m sorry.” I weighed him up.

“And by ‘that’ you mean upsetting me?”

“Yep” he said fervently.

“Just for that?”

He nodded. “I’m sorry I upset you”. I could not suppress a small chuckle.

“Okay, then, I accept your lame excuse for an apology.” I conceded.

“Thank you”. he said, giving me a knowing look that quickly changed into

a sober expression. “And thank you for not telling on me”.

I shrugged. “There’d be no point to it”.

He acknowledged me with a nod and made to go inside again.

“So... Are we cool?” he asked.

“We’re cool.” He smiled, pushed the door open and vanished behind it and from my daydreams.

Later that night, as I sat in the dark cinema revelling in the sight of Adrien Brody rambling through the Rajasthan desert in his underwear, it dawned on me. Leonard had cheated. By bringing a theretofore harmless fantasy to real life, he’d ruined it. But not Adrien. I felt a rush of gratitude for him. He knew his place, and would have never had the insolence of putting me into such a disagreeable position.

# Tempting

## Flash Fiction by Helene Lebold

Arny shook his head. How beautiful his hair was! Perfectly dry-blown, shoulder-length, a perfect cut, as if he could afford to see the hair-dresser every day. I have always envied people with straight, big hair, and whenever I look into the mirror I feel that nature hasn’t been very generous with me. Arny’s eyes had meanwhile got a sparkling expression telling how much he indulged in being admired.

I wondered what he might look like in ten years time. Not that smart, I thought, his face doesn’t keep what his cared-for hairstyle seems to promise. It was exactly in that moment that Arny came much closer and looked deep into my eyes. “I’ve got wonderful stuff,” he whispered, and “I’ll make you a very good price.”

# Not Important

by Beate Fritz

Calling her had cheered Mr. Dashing up. His girlfriend was so sweet. He longed to see her tonight. Standing on the balcony he was reluctant to hang up. The shrieking laughter of his wife and his nasty kids seemed so far away. A quiet breakfast – impossible as every morning. Mr. Dashing smiled supercilious about his silly wife. He had never expected her to believe all his “Tales from the Arabian Nights.” With unexpected ease he had constructed most fantastic stories, as incredible as only real life can be. The critical part was to remember one’s lies. Thank god, he had such a fantastic memory.

In the office area he singled out Smallhead, one of his employees.

“How often did I tell you! You always make the same mistake,” Mr. Dashing complained without bothering about a good morning. “You don’t seem to understand how I want this report.” Angrily, he pointed at the latest sales report. Picking up a marker from his employee’s desk, Mr. Dashing underlined, crossed-out and rearranged the document.

Throwing back the report, he raised his voice, “I can not accept

your poor performance. Honestly, I lose patience. On this position, management needs good, solid work, clearly focused on the essentials. This is important.”

Mr. Smallhead ducked his head, looking pale and uncomfortable. His white shirt showed revealing spots around the armpits. While keeping his head bowed, the employee seemed to have nothing better to do than to gaze at Mr. Dashing’s watch.

“Don’t stare at my watch! Just get your task done,” Mr. Dashing hissed in a low, over polite tone. “You will hardly be able to own collectables like this watch if you continue working like this.”

Mr. Smallhead’s face went red with shame. He did not look up. It seemed to Mr. Dashing as if his employee was shrinking in his chair, obviously feeling highly uncomfortable. Mr. Dashing smiled his arrogant smile, not willing to give such an unimportant person another thought.

Mr. Dashing himself was proud of his meteoric rise within the company; feeling superior to others that often struggled for years to work up their way into higher management. He liked to wear exclusive items like his expensive Philippe Patek watch and showing off his success seemed part of the fun. Mr. Dashing basked in the envious stares shown towards him. Although a little

stout, he was still considered a handsome man in his late forties with a head full of black hair. Mr. Dashing was the clear favourite of the boss. To make it worse for the jealous ones, even some members of the supervisory board supported him openly.

Humming a little melody, Mr. Dashing ambled to his office. He greeted the top secretary politely. For her, Mr. Dashing always made time. This elegant lady in her late fifties was the grey eminence, the valued assistant of the executive director. He was the head of sales, to whom Mr. Dashing and his boss were reporting. The chief's secretary knew nearly everything and saw to it that everybody respected her importance, clearly confusing her own position with the power of her boss. However, the top secretary herself spoiled the impression of her superiority by flirting with younger men, sometimes giggling like a schoolgirl. Mr. Dashing was only too willing to please the secretary

by paying sophisticated compliments. He stepped back to open her door and took the stack of papers she had been carrying. Everybody could hear them laughing. Mr. Dashing was known to be of great charm, reserved for important people only.

In his office, Mr. Dashing leaned back into his comfortable chair, feeling the soft dark leather. Ohh - how good. His pleasant mood was disturbed by the phone. Reluctantly, he studied the unknown number.

“Dashing, sales manager Germany,” he bellowed.

“This is Mr. Pittipoint. I am your wife's lawyer.”

A sudden premonitory feeling emerged in Mr. Dashing's mind. For him, the voice of the lawyer seemed unnaturally loud.

“Lawyer?” he echoed.

“Your wife has filed for divorce on the grounds of adultery.”



Mr. Dashing felt as if he had been beaten. Instinctively, he thought of his two children. Their vivid pictures popped up before his mind's eye. A shiver ran along his spine. He had difficulties concentrating on the lawyer's monotonous voice.

"Your wife doesn't want to see you for the time being. Mr. Dashing, she has had enough."

Mr. Dashing's hands started shaking.

"Your two children also do not wish to see you for some time." There was a short break as if the lawyer expected some objection. Devastated, Mr. Dashing was unable to utter a single syllable.

"I will send you a letter with your wife's demand for monthly payment. She asks you not to make it a long process..."

Mr. Dashing was not able to take in more. Was it already last judgement day for him?

The other raised his voice. "Please tell me where I can send the letter to? Or shall I forward it to your office?"

Mr. Dashing shivered again. Had his affair really been worth while? He wasn't so sure any longer. Completely pale, he slammed the phone down and tried to steady himself. Coffee – oh coffee. Time had suddenly come to a standstill. How could he go on? Looking up, he noticed the sun still shining brightly from a blue winter sky. The weather was still gorgeous. While his whole world had been smashed, everything else seemed unchanged. Unexpectedly, he had a sensation of being minor and unimportant. That certainly

could not be true. Not him.

That very moment, his boss, Mr. Bulking, bursted into the office, yelling. "What the hell have you been doing? I have been waiting for more than 15 minutes. Besides, being incompetent you are also late."

Mr. Dashing tried to get back to his senses, registering the unnatural silence in the open-plan office. In that moment, his personality cracked in two halves: a well functioning part and a picture of misery. He needed to be alert, pushing his emotions aside. The large figure of his boss filled the door frame. Mr. Dashing managed to get to his feet, ushering Mr. Bulking into his office, and shut the door. No one else needed to hear him being punished. It was bad enough that the manager's glass offices showed every move or visitor. Mr. Dashing hated that caged feeling like being an animal in the zoo. His employees all seemed busy. He frowned in frustration: no easy victim to let off some steam. He was sure these useless and unimportant people just pretended to work. They were hiding their malicious joy. He hated them all.

Mr. Bulking bellowed in rage: "Do you think you can do what you want? Think that you are above everybody? Your success has obviously gone to your head. Just acting superior is not enough. I need you to be good at the job."

Wasn't his boss overdoing it? Mr. Dashing suddenly smelled the other man's fear. What a funny figure his boss represented in his expensive suit, rather looking like a bear who had outgrown his

clothes. It was well known that Mr. Bulking had made many mistakes. His star was certainly falling. Would he even have to leave the company? Mr. Dashing realized in a flash that if Mr. Bulking was ousted, he as his favourite, would have a hard time staying above order. Could he keep his position? Yesterday he would have agreed light-heartedly, but after that phone call fear had crept into his mind. He had to find allies among the board members. Important supporters. A message popped up on his mobile. Annoyed, he recognised the number of his mistress.

“And one more thing,” Mr. Bulking started anew. “I don’t like you standing on the balcony with your mobile phone. Like a schoolboy, giggling and grinning. That doesn’t suit the Company’s sales manager. You can use other phones to talk to your mistress.”

Mr. Dashing was complete perplex, briefly registering the other’s pleasure. It was rare that his boss could silence him that easily.

Mr. Bulking continued, “Everybody knows that you have a honey on the side. I hadn’t thought you would be that careless. Bets are running for your wife’s finding out soon.” His voice got a spiteful note: “Such a smallish woman with no real beauty. Nobody can understand your fascination.”

Mr. Dashing filled with rage. He had been so proud of his mistress, being the important one whom she had chosen. Her appearance had been all his pride. Mr. Dashing shook his arms so that the white cuffs of his shirt became visible. Exclusively designed cuff-links showed. He knew

his boss and waited for the expected look of pain. Even in his current state of mind, Mr. Dashing could find subtle ways to answer a meanness. Mr. Bulking reacted as expected and seemed to be highly irritated by the piercing look of Mr. Dashing’s brown eyes. How should Mr. Bulking know that he had just been re-categorized by Mr. Dashing into the unimportant section.

Mr Dashing smiled, feeling superior again. He knew Bulking’s envy of his own ease in tailor-made suits, exuding an air of stylishness. If he chose to, Mr. Dashing was a brilliant conversationalist with whom Mr. Bulking could not keep up either. Despite his high position, Mr. Bulking’s boss sometimes looked like a misfit among his peers.

Throughout the rest of his working day Mr. Dashing ignored any private messages on his mobile phone. It was often one number. What did his girlfriend want? Did she not comprehend that he might have other things to do? She probably had never come to know the power player, that he actually was. All day, he could not get the lawyer’s voice out of his head. He had always thought that those things only happened to others. Mr. Dashing needed all his mental power to get through his black day, trying to behave as usual. Every other thought had to wait. With his mind in turmoil, Mr. Dashing’s interest in his girlfriend had vanished into thin air. She was already history – another unimportant person.



# Amee and the Toad

By Selina McPhee



Amee McPherson was beautiful and smart  
But plagued by the beating of her lonely heart  
For many a day had she searched for a man  
Who would fulfill all her dreams and ask for her hand.

Then one day a storyteller passed by on the road  
Filled with adventures and stories on his load.  
But the one that Amee enjoyed the best  
Was the tale of “The Frog Prince” who was kissed by the princess.

The tale told of a frog who fetched a golden ball  
For a beautiful princess who when playing, let it fall,  
Into the well that was so deep and black,  
That the frog said “I’ll get it, I’ll be right back.

But first princess promise me that I may,  
Live with you, dine with you and in your bed I may lay.”  
She did. But after the ball lay safe in her hands,  
Gone were her promises, forgotten the demands!

But her father forced her to keep her word  
To share her plate and bed with frog....regardless how absurd!  
That night the frog turned into a handsome prince,  
With beautiful green eyes and the kindest of grins,  
Who told of how he was under a witches’ spell.  
And of course, like all tales, they live happily and well.

“Oh” Ameer cried, “if only that could be”  
That a frog be a prince. That could happen to me!!!”  
So out she ran to search through the land  
For the frog that she’d kiss and he’d ask for her hand.

Unfortunately for her, she was living in Aussie. Aussie = Australia  
There were lots of snakes, kangaroos, lizards and mozzies,  
mozzies = mosquitos

But frogs they were fewer, one had to look round,  
Look under logs, around ponds, after rain....on the ground.

One gloomy day, the skies were adark,  
A storm was approaching and as she walked through the park,  
Her eyes to the ground, again no frog in sight!  
What was she to do.....oh what a plight!

But wait....on a rock near the pond, all aglow, last sunray,  
Was a handsome fern-green frog, she could not look away.  
She had to look twice, was that a crown on his head,  
Was she going so crazy and belonged in her bed.  
For you see, it’s like this....little did she know,  
That what looked like a crown was actually a gold bow,  
From a girl who that day had played in the park,  
She’d run around fast, and the bow did embark,  
And strangely landed on the head of the frog,  
That was sitting nearby , right next to a dog.

She grabbed the frog. Not a moment to spare.  
This was her prince, no doubt, and with flair,  
She puckered her lips, for her very first kiss,  
And on its lips a luscious kiss she dismissed.

But stop!! Being so near she became such a fright,  
For fern-green it was not, more like green of the night.  
And handsome, she admitted was far from the truth,  
And in panic, aghast, she cried out: “Oh struth!

struth = Australian for eg. “oh my god”

What have I done, I’ve kissed a toad,  
And an ugly one at that.” She ran on to the road.  
She didn’t stop fleeing afraid the toad was behind.  
Her lips were swelling, a G.P. she must find!

G.P. = doctor

Dr Splitt, she was lucky, he listened hard.  
He nodded his head and wrote things on a card.  
He treated her lips and then said with a sigh:  
“A toad is a toad, but a frog....a prince, no no, oh my!  
Don’t kiss frogs or toads, your prince they won’t be,  
For a prince who’s a frog, will never make you happy.  
A man is who you need, accept yourself for what you are,  
You’re a beautiful person, one can see that from afar.”

And lo and behold, a few days hence,  
She was happy with Rob, the man who’d fixed her fence,  
And now there’s a new story upon the storyteller’s load.  
The one where a girl named Ameer kisses a toad near a road!

# Sexy, No Thanks

by Núria Planas

She was in her upper-forties, yet she looked fine; more than just fine. Maybe the reason was because sport was and had been her whole life. Even her mom used to tell her that she had learned skating before walking. Sport for her was like a magnet: try me, try me. And suddenly, she would find herself practicing roller blading, or tennis, or baseball, or track-and-field, or skiing, or lifting weights emulating body-builders' hard breathing.

Consequently, in her upper forties her body was still firm and she did not have the feeling yet that either her boobs were drooping, or she needed one those "prosthetic" panties to push her bottom up and to hide her stomach. At her age, she was in much better shape than many of these young, couch potato girls.

However, she had never enhanced her body's curves. She did not have any interest in being dressed in ei-

ther tight pants or dresses, or wearing make-up, or using one of those hundred feminine tricks to look younger, more beautiful and even smarter. She liked to wear comfortable pants and shirts with which she could walk fast, or sit without crossing her legs, or lying on the floor without being worried if she was showing some parts that could arouse the male beast's instincts.

Lately though, in the last three, or four years a fantasy has been taking form in her mind. She did not know why. Maybe... being closer and closer to the menopause made her envision that suddenly, she would wilt as roses and other flowers do. Her skin would wither turning like sand paper, her boobs would droop irremediably, fat from her stomach would pop out, plop-plop, from underneath her shirt, her hair would fall out in three days, and more and more wrinkles would make their presence known around her mouth, eyes and forehead. Great!!

One day I want to look very sexy, extremely sexy. Her fantasy was becoming

more and more powerful.

Even though she had never been fascinated by masochist events, she had always admired actresses and models. They were brave enough to squeeze their bodies into those killing dresses – where one must feel like the stuffing of the turkey for Thanksgiving Day –, to wear those tiny shoes with high, thin heels – risking one’s life –, and to wear make-up and mascara being careful not to laugh so much, otherwise, bye-bye make-up. At the same time, those women were able to coordinate their arms, legs, buttock cheeks and head’s movements to give an appearance of being sexier. How did they manage to walk on top of those heels without falling and to do crick-crack, crick-crack so the cheeks of the buttocks could go alternatively, up-and-down, up-and-down? How did they manage at the same time, to swing their arms back and forth slightly without hitting themselves? And, without forgetting that they were able to move, faintly, their heads right-left, right-left while the ends of their hair bounced gently in the air – without going into their eyes – and smiling all the damn time that the performance lasted! That was indeed unbelievable!!

However, at some point she would do it as well. She would jam her body into one of those tight dresses that insinuated all one’s feminine curves no matter what, even if that meant not to be able to inhale and exhale properly. And, she would squeeze her wide and ducky-type feet into those black leather high-heel shoes. And of course, that

day she would wear contact lenses, leaving at home her thick and myopic glasses.

She could by now imagine being at a party where all the women would be green with envy and gossiping, who is she? Do you know her? Buff, she is not so gorgeous... As she would walk, all men’s lower lips would fall down leaving their mouths half-open, while they would drool with that lost look. Oh yeah, she wanted to feel like a desired, sexual object. Her husband’s friends and colleagues would admire him for possessing such a hot and gorgeous babe. Even his boss would promote him (by the way, why? well, it didn’t matter, but it seemed great!). And, she would play accordingly: she would flirt, rolling down her eyelids – by the way, wearing lots of mascara on her eyelashes –, pursing her fire red lips – like Angelina Jolie does all the time –, and smiling while showing her two rows of straight, white teeth.

Finally, the gods had listened to her desires. One afternoon, after her husband had arrived home, he told her that his firm had organized a party for employees and clients (important clients such as the director of Citibank, the manager of BWM among others) to the most chic place in the area, The Old Opera House, and... the spouses of the employees had been invited as well.

That would be the occasion!! She was so excited: Patty Donovan wearing her black tight dress, with a significant cut out in the back and walking with her sexy shoes. Patty Donovan the sexiest woman in the party; hundreds of masculine eyes resting on her buttocks, while she graciously, moved it: right-left, right-left.

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“Come on, Patty! Come out!”

“No Matt, leave me alone!” I answer to my husband. “I wanna die!”

“But... Pat you don't wanna die here, do you?”

“What's wrong dying in the bathroom near the toilet? It's the best thing that could happen to me after what I did tonight...”

“Oh come on Patty, it wasn't so bad!”

“Bullshit! Don't come to me with this story!! You don't believe it and you only say it to make me feel better.” I start crying without consolation. My husband's kindness towards me after such disaster drives me nuts. “It was bad, Matt, very bad!”

“Well..., maybe you're, somewhat, right. Maybe, not everything went as it was supposed to go.”

“You see? You see? You, yourself are telling me that my behavior was absolutely embarrassing for you...”

“Patty, I didn't, exactly, say that. Come on, open the door!”

“No, I don't deserve to live. I just destroyed you, your career, our family and ... Tell the kids goodbye..!”

“Oh come on Patty. Stop that nonsense!”

“Your boss will fire you, and with my tiny salary how will we keep paying the mortgage, food, schools and...?”

“Sweetheart, nobody will fire me, OK...?”

“...and what about the kids' college? I'll starve myself to death.”

“Come on Patty, you are not

going to do this. You cannot even stay for more than two hours without putting something edible in your mouth!”

“Oh! Well..., then I'll tear off all my skin and I die from shock due to the self-inflicted torture.”

“All right, but can you open this door?”

“Tell the kids to forgive me for what I have caused!”

“The kids don't have to forgive you, BECAUSE YOU HAVEN'T DONE ANYTHING WRONG!!”

Hearing my husband's words makes tears and more tears rolling down my cheeks. I cannot even think about what happened. “Don't you understand that you deserve a better wife and the children a better mom?”

“Patty, that's enough!! Open this damn door right now or I'll break it down. I wouldn't like to kill you with this stupid door.”

As I am standing up and about to open the door, with a painful flash back, I remember, detail by detail, the whole event.

This morning, before Matt left for work, he told me that the best thing would be to meet him directly in the chic place around 7 o'clock. “What are you going to wear?” “I am not gonna tell you. It's a surprise!” “Ha, ha,” I scoff feeling tears down my throat. Definitely, that was a big surprise.

So, after fighting for more than two hours getting sexy, I arrived to The Old Opera House and uh, oh a flock of stairs was separating me from the entrance. Breathe deeply and take it easy, I told myself. Trying

to make that noise crick-crack, crick-crack with the heels, I climbed up the stairs and hurray, everything went great until I reached the last, stupid step: I twisted my ankle almost falling on the ground and feeling that the cut of my dress got bigger. Oh my God, I am not showing my panties, am I? A nice, handsome and young concierge came quickly to help me, but, feeling so embarrassed I hit him, clumsily, with my purse on his face as he was helping me to stand up.

After, stammering a so... sorry and a tha... thank you, I kept walking towards the entrance not daring to look back. From time to time, in a subtle way, I brought my hand to the rear to check that I was not showing anything that I was not supposed to show. However, the dress was so tight that every time that I did this movement, I contorted the body in such a way, that I am sure that people might have thought that I was suffering from one of those freak, corporal ticks.

Finally, I was in the hall and I could see Matt at the distance. Trying to swing slightly my head letting my hair, softly and freely, play in the air, I managed to reach him. I could see his face of a-s-t-o-n-i-s-h-m-e-n-t as he saw me. Holy shit Patty, you look great!! But no; I am sure that he did not think that, because just in that gracious moment, the end of one of my hairs went into my eye and made one the contact lenses pop out from my eye. Ouch! I squinted at the person that Matt, at that precise moment,

was introducing to me. Nice to meet you, I said with a weirdo look. Did he think that I was trying to flirt with him, or... that I was a geek, or both things? When I heard that he was the General Director of Citibank, I almost choked with a canapé that I just inserted in my mouth. As I started coughing, tiny crumbs from my mouth blew directly into his face.

Thank God that Matt is an angel and saved the situation. I do not even remember how he did it. I only remember finding myself walking through the hall, while Matt, gently, was embracing my back with his arm. My eye was really hurting... wait a moment. I closed and opened my eye several times, because I had just realized that I hadn't lost my contact lens, rather it had been misplaced in the upper part of my eye. Hoping that my contact would slide down in the center of my eye, I closed, tightly, the eye, and feeling the contact in its place, I opened again my eye, at the same time that I screamed mumbling, It's here!!

"Yes, I am here," somebody said kindly. "I'm glad that you are so excited about meeting me," he said, as he was offering me his hand. He was the Honorable blah, blah Deputy Prime Minister of... who knows! From that point, I tried to drink as much as possible, pass out, suffer from an ethylic intoxication and forget the whole, damn party. However, it did not work: I did not drink and, consequently, I did not pass out, and I did not forget *the* party.

"Matt, I'm not coming out!!"

# The Grande Hotel

By Brian Fisher

As they walked together they did not speak. Then they could hear the noise of the surf, a sound which immediately set off a chain of memories for them both. To him came a flashback of his happiness the first time he had come to the hotel half a lifetime earlier and to her a jumbled kaleidoscope of images of the coolness of the hotel's marble floors, its elegant broad staircase, the chandeliers, the wall hangings.

The first wind-blown grains of sand were now gathering and settling near the edge of the pavement and collecting like small snowdrifts at the side of the road. They passed a few landmarks they remembered from the past: the slim deco designed cinema with the ice café next door, the metal signpost reading on one side "To The Grande Hotel"

They had discussed this trip for several months. They knew what to expect, they knew times would have changed many things. They doubted if the reality of the

changes could damage those first memories they still held and they hoped this visit would revitalize their hopes for the future.

They continued walking, then rounding a corner, standing ahead lay the Grande Hotel. It was not a large building with its four floors and semi-circular front and small gardens facing towards them and its back pointing out over the surf washed beaches stretching off into the distance.

As they walked the final meters towards the hotel the sun went behind some clouds and she was aware that what she was looking at needed to be seen in the same way that a photographer may need to tighten the focus of camera lens to understand the image being looking at.

They walked up the short row of steps from the garden into the entrance foyer of the Grande Hotel; they crossed





Photo this and next page from: <http://www.depers.nl/cultuur/568051/Wonen-in-een-witte-olifant.html>

the threshold into the hotel. They stood just inside the hotel in the lobby. Beyond the spot where they stood some areas were lit only by shafts of filtered sunlight coming from somewhere above.

She turned to the right and saw the majestic frame of the broad sweeping staircase which she remembered had carried them to the ballroom and dining area. She looked up to where the chandelier had thrown its light on arriving guests once like themselves-the fine Persian carpet, the tapestry?

Now she was more conscious of her surroundings: so many children running around, laughing, shouting, playing, a bouncing ball being kicked against a wall, a bucket falling, women, youths all passing before her like extras on a film set, a bicycle tyre being repaired, the spanner falling on bare concrete, the splashing of water and a gentle smell of smoke from small open fires.

She turned once more to look at the skeleton of the staircase. She had really wanted to ascend it again. She treasured a snap-shot she kept of them both dressed and smiling in their newly-wed finery posing on this staircase with its richly polished mahogany floor treads and polished balustrades and the tall and broad well polished oak doorway leading to the dining area behind. She turned to him and said she missed seeing all the polished wood. He smiled wily and replied that polishing the floor boards had probably turned out to be the best thing to do as they possibly ignited more easily and burned well in the cooking fires built in the elevator shaft after the elevator had been removed to provide a natural chimney.

He stood on the bare concrete of the foyer watching two young boys play football using the doorway to the old billiard room as their goal and realised this Grande Hotel, this former dream palace

for travellers breaking their sea journey Northbound or Southbound if even only for a few days was now playing a new role.

Hundreds of families, two to three thousand people, now lived in this building; children were born here; families lived their lives behind the curtained doorways of rooms 22 and 27 and 36 and 39 and the like and more, or on the first floor in room 131 or one of the other one hundred and fifty like it, or the top floor in 442, 448 where no glass on the windows or wooden doors would be a problem in winter. People died here and were carried through the former dining room on their last trip. People together, argued, fought, and stole and loved and lived and died right in this Grande Hotel.

The man and the woman turned towards each other, and simply nodded, then turned on the naked concrete of the hotel

lobby and walking back down the steps into sunlight, then continued through the broken garden with its bushes carrying drying clothes and continued on up the street. They walked past the old metal sign which read Grande Hotel but neither turned round to read its words. They stopped at the ice café and the art deco designed cinema. They hadn't noticed it on the way down to the Hotel but a torn cinema poster still hung outside on its facade from the week that the cinema the ice café and the Grande Hotel had been abandoned. The paper of the poster had rolled down from the top and it hung like a wave and again they were aware of the surf still rolling against the shore behind the Grande Hotel.



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