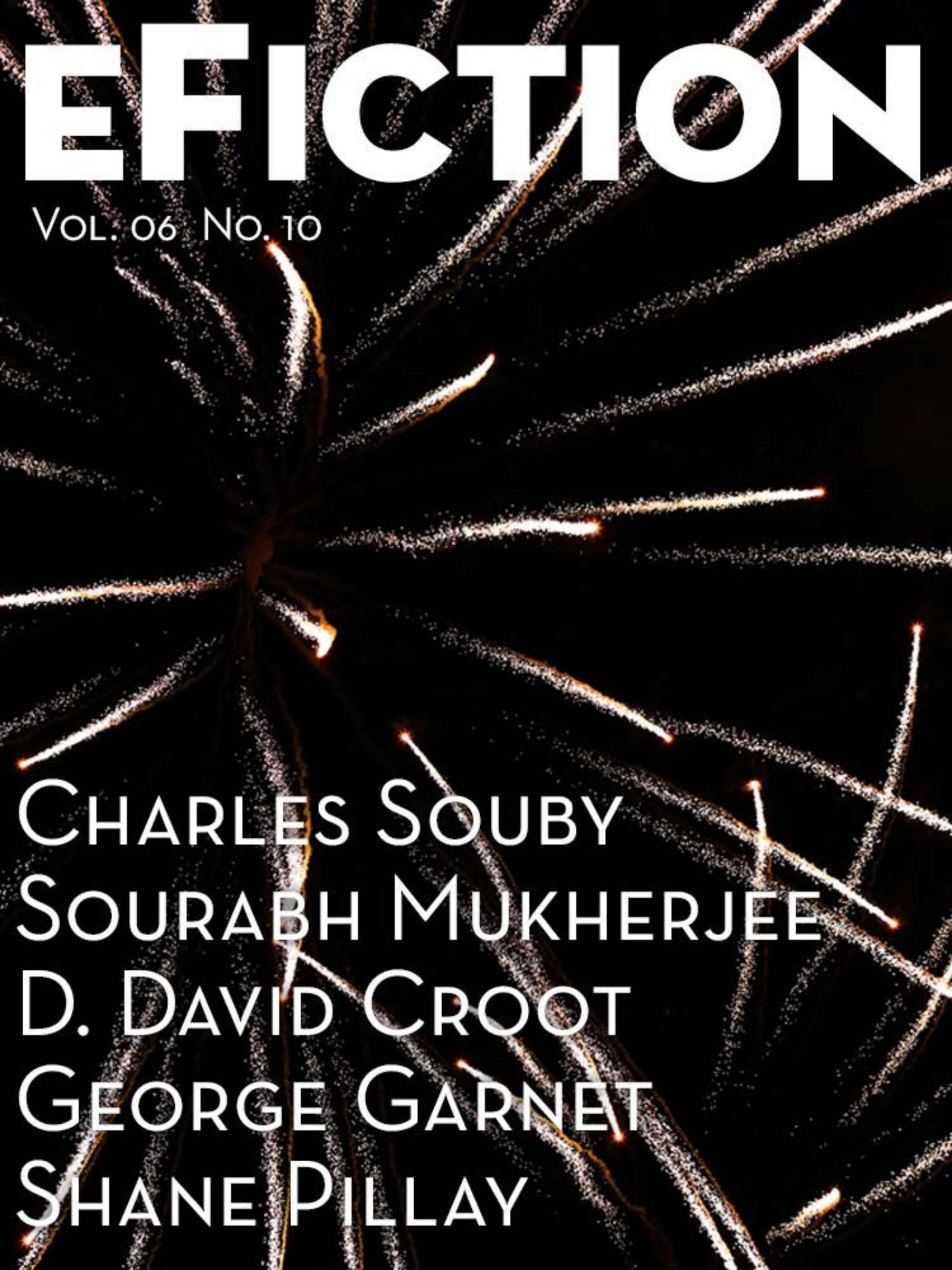


EFICTION



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THE PLAID GOLF PANTS

Charles Souby

Charles Souby is an author living in San Rafael, CA. His second novel, “A Shot of Malaria” was released in April of 2015 and has been well received. He has had poetry and short stories published in *eFiction Magazine*, *The Opening Line*, *Bohemia*, *5 Poetry*, and *The Saturday Evening Post Online*. He is currently working on his third novel, *Call of the Wild Revisited*.

Apparently, when the police first arrived, the standoff was already intense. Mr. Duffy the dry cleaner was out in the backyard yelling up at the second story window.

A half hour earlier, while he was dropping off shirts and pants to Mrs. Rosewood’s preferred delivery spot just inside the garage, little Margaret snuck out to his truck. She grabbed a pile of clothing and ran inside the house locking the door behind her. Duffy figured it was simply a juvenile prank and ran to the back door and started hammering the doorbell incessantly. He continued until he heard pounding on the second-story window and discovered Mrs. Rosewood holding the clothes and waving down at him. Assuming that she would now run downstairs and deliver the clothing back to him, he sighed and said, “Oh, thank God.”

To his surprise, Mrs. Rosewood held up a can of lighter fluid and a torch, threatening to burn all the items (including a plush mink stole) unless Mr. Duffy returned a pair of her husband’s golf pants that he claimed he never received. She mimed the words, “i want the

golf pants,” in a clear and exaggerated manner so he would know exactly what she was talking about.

Duffy reported all this to Inspector Roland McDermott who was dispatched to the scene because he was the town’s lone hostage negotiator and this was the closest they had ever come to a hostage situation.

McDermott’s captain thought McDermott would be delighted to finally get some work in his trained field, but Roland was less than thrilled.

“I didn’t sign up for shit like this,” he told the captain as he grabbed his jacket and walked out the door of the police station.

When Roland arrived, two uniformed officers were standing on the back gravel driveway with Styrofoam coffee cups in their hands. Steam was rising from the cups as one of them took a sip after nodding at McDermott. Mr. Duffy was still standing looking up to the second floor window where Mrs. Rosewood had her arms folded around the clothes as she smiled down on him in smug confidence. Duffy looked back at the two cops and pleaded, “Do something! This is my business she’s messing with!”

“Are you insured, Mr. Duffy,” one of the cops asked.

“Well, yeah, but this kind of thing’s still bad for business.”

The officer pointed at Roland who was approaching them and said, “Well, McDermott here is a hostage negotiator. If he can’t bring her down, then we’re gonna have to storm the place and take her by force. Quite frankly, I doubt she’s gonna set the clothes on fire because it would probably burn her house down.”

McDermott stepped up to one of the cops, the taller of the two. “So who reported this thing?” he asked. He then pointed at Duffy like he was answering his own question.

The cop shook his head. “The next-door neighbors did, but we’ve

ordered them to stay inside. They heard the screaming and apparently thought Duffy here was a rapist trying to get at the occupant.”

“That’s a damn lie!” Duffy said. “Her little girl stole my clothes. You’ve got to do something about this.”

“Calm down, sir,” Roland said. “What’s the woman upset about, anyway?”

“She bought some stupid golf pants,” Duffy said, “apparently for her husband’s birthday. She claims she needed to get them fitted properly; he’s one of those weird sizes between full and obese. I never saw the goddamn things, I swear, but she says she dropped them off at my shop. The lady’s bonkers, officer.”

“*Detective*,” said McDermott.

“Ok, *detective*. Now get those clothes back before she ruins them.”

“Tell me exactly what happened here.”

Duffy proceeded to explain the business about the girl sneaking into his vehicle and grabbing the stack of clothes.

“Where’s the daughter in all of this?” Roland asked.

“Fuck if I know. She’s probably tied up downstairs until the crazy bat needs her for her next psychotic mission.”

“Mr. Duffy, an attitude like this doesn’t help the situation at all.”

“I’m not the one holding a stack of clean clothes hostage, Detective.”

“Does she have a phone number I can call?”

Duffy pulled out his cell phone from his pocket and began scrolling through his customer contact list until he found her name and handed the phone to McDermott. Roland held Duffy’s phone up in front of his face with his left hand while he began punching out the numbers on his own phone with the thumb of his right. He then handed Duffy’s phone back to him.

The number rang a couple of times as he looked up at Mrs.

Rosewood. He could see her lay the clothing down in front of her against the windowsill and reach into her pants pocket sheepishly and pull out her phone.

“Hello,” she said.

“Hello, Mrs. Rosewood?”

“Yes, that’s me.”

“Hi, I’m detective McDermott.”

“Oh hi! How are you?”

“I’m fine thanks, Mrs. Rosewood. How are you?”

“I’m fine.”

“It seems we have a bit of disagreement here.”

“Yes.”

“Would you be willing to come down here and talk with us?”

“No.”

“You’ll be perfectly safe, I promise. We are, after all, the police department.”

“I know what’s going on, Detective. Mr. Duffy has you all in his back pocket.”

“Actually, ma’am I’ve never met Mr. Duffy before. I don’t think anybody here has.”

“It doesn’t matter. People like him have connections to City Hall. If I turn over these clothes he’ll just deny his guilt and skate by and I’ll lose Ronnie’s new golf pants. I paid good money for them at Macy’s.”

While Roland was talking, Duffy seemed to awaken and suddenly called out to the cops. “She dropped the clothes! You’ve got a clear shot. Shoot her!”

Roland turned to Duffy and shouted, “Shut the fuck up!”

As he was yelling, Mrs. Rosewood grabbed the clothes with her right hand and pulled them in front of her while she cradled the cell phone between her ear and shoulder. She picked up the lighter fluid

and began to lift the spout with her left thumb in a slow, deliberate manner.

“No. Please Mrs. Rosewood, you don’t want to do that. Let’s see if we can find a way out of this.”

“I’m not gonna be target practice for those kill-happy cops!”

“Nobody’s shooting at anybody, ma’am. Mr. Duffy lost his head. We’re mature and trained policemen. We don’t take orders from an agitated bystander.”

“Bystander?” Duffy said. “My livelihood’s at stake. She might as well be squirting that lighter fluid on me. This is a form of assassination. Hell, it’s *character* assassination.”

McDermott looked over at the two uniformed officers. “Could one of you get this man out of here.”

“I’m being held hostage! You can’t do this!”

One of the cops stepped over to him and put his left hand on Duffy’s upper arm and started tugging. Duffy tried to shake him off.

“You don’t want to get into it with us, sir,” the cop said. “Believe me. It’ll go badly for you.”

Duffy grumbled but acquiesced to the policeman’s grasp and was escorted down the driveway and outside of a squad car, which was parked on the curb of the street. Meanwhile the sound of a fire truck siren could be heard ringing through the neighborhood. In the distance, neighbors began approaching Mrs. Rosewood’s property. Rolad turned to the other officer. “Rusty, I need you to do crowd control; I’ll take it from here.”

The cop sighed. “Anything you say, Detective.”

McDermott looked back up at Mrs. Rosewood. “It’s all settled, ma’am. It’s just you and me. Let’s talk about this like friends, okay?”

“I don’t know you.”

“Well this is a good time to get acquainted. But first, I need to

know your daughter's safe."

"She's safe unless Duffy gets his grubby hands on her."

"Well, can I see her?"

"She's not here."

"Where is she?"

"She's on an errand."

"You swear she's not in the house with you?"

"Yes, I swear. Why would I lie?"

"No reason. So tell me, do you like golf, Mrs. Rosewood?"

"My husband likes golf. Anything that's good for Ronnie is good for me."

"I bet he's a nice man."

"He's a wonderful man; a good husband; a good father."

"How would he feel if he was here right now witnessing this, Mrs. Rosewood?"

"He wouldn't understand, but that's besides the point."

"Is it Mrs. Rosewood?"

"Yes. He's a modest man who could never admit his own worth. But I know it; and Margaret knows it too. That's why we have to do this."

"Is Margaret your daughter?"

"Yes. Look, there's no way to prove Duffy took the pants, but I remember placing them in the pile with a note and little markings on the waist and cuffs. I've never trusted that man anyway, but he's the only tailor in town."

"They must be mighty fine pants then, huh?"

Mrs. Rosewood put the lighter fluid down and grabbed the phone from out of the crook in her neck.

"Oh you've never seen anything like them—Scottish plaid on a soft cotton fabric. They're the only ones I've ever seen like that. And

the only ones on the rack.”

“You like plaid, do you?”

“Yes. Ronnie and I went to Scotland on our honeymoon. It was the only cruise we could afford that September.”

“Sounds like a memorable trip.”

“We spent our first night in a real live castle near Edinburgh. Oh, and you know, they don’t pronounce the ‘burgh’; they say ‘*burrow*.’ Anyway, the next morning we were awakened to the sound of bagpipes. It was the most exotic experience.”

“Wow, that sounds very nice, Mrs. Rosewood. And I didn’t know that thing about the ‘burrow’.”

The roar of the fire truck reached its crescendo as it rolled up out front. Roland looked down the driveway as one of the cops, the taller one, Henry, waved the truck to a stop and a couple of fireman jumped off the side. Moments later the fire chief screech up in a red Crown Victoria.

“What’s all the fuss?” Mrs. Rosewood said.

“Oh it’s the fire department. We have to call them just in case. We wouldn’t want you to catch fire or burn down your nice home.”

“Oh no, it’s okay. I’ve got this all figured out. I have a pale of water here by my foot to throw on the clothes as soon as they’re ruined.”

“You know water can spread lighter fluid and make the fire expand out of control.” Roland didn’t know why he said that. He guessed maybe it would make her realize she’d gone a little overboard and surrender.

“You’re making that up,” she said.

“I wish.”

“Well, I’ve committed myself to this. If I back out now I’ll look like a fool.”

“Mrs. Rosewood, in all sincerity, if you set your house on fire, you stand a much better chance of looking like a fool. Believe me, I’m a hostage negotiator and I’m not supposed to be talking like this, but we’re friends now, aren’t we? I can tell you the truth.”

“If we were friends then you’d believe me about the golf pants.”

“Mrs. Rosewood, the cost of a burnt-down house has got to be more than a stolen pair of trousers don’t you think.”

“The house won’t burn down, Detective. I’ve got control of the situation.”

“Maybe, maybe not. And what about all those clothes? Should you put other people’s property at risk because of the behavior of one man?”

“He’s got insurance. He can reimburse them.”

“Mrs. Rosewood, I beg of you to please come down here and let’s talk this thing out face to face.”

“Not on your life! Your marksmen will have to shoot me out of here. Then we’ll see how Duffy feels. That son of a bitch will probably relish in my death. There’ll be nobody around to make him feel guilty about his new pants. He can wear them freely out on the golf course whenever he pleases.”

As she was finishing her sentence the shorter cop, Rusty walked up the driveway and got McDermott’s attention. He pointed to his watch and mouthed “times up!”

“Oh for God sakes,” McDermott said.

“What?” Mrs. Rosewood said.

“Not you ma’am, I was talking to one of the officers.”

Roland looked over Rusty’s shoulders and saw three additional police officers wearing flap jackets; one had a crowbar.

He shook his head forcefully, but Rusty ignored him and turned back to the three SWAT team members and pointed to the front door.

McDermott turned and looked up at Mrs. Rosewood. “They say I can’t negotiate with you anymore. You’ve got to come down.”

“They’ll have to drag me out through the fire, Detective. I’m sorry. In this story, the underdog wins.” She shut off her phone and put it in her pocket.

McDermott waved to get her back, but she ignored him and picked up the clothing and the lighter fluid.

Roland turned to Rusty, “Get in there fast!”

Rusty gave the order and McDermott could hear the front door being cracked open. He ran down the driveway and around to the front door. He followed the men as they raced up the stairs just across from the entryway. Mrs. Rosewood was standing at the top of the staircase on a landing in front of the window. She had just set the torch to the clothing and a little flame burst up from the pile on the floor. One of the officers pulled her away as the other one looked into the bucket and saw that it was water. He picked it up to pour onto the fire, but Mrs. Rosewood screamed.

“No, no! It’ll spread the lighter fluid.”

The officer stopped just before the first drops of water sprinkled out. “What the hell is in this?”

“Water,” she yelled.

He shook his head and proceeded to pour it on the clothes and the flame quickly sizzled out as McDermott reached the top of the stairs. Three firemen in full gear, one with an axe and two with extinguishers, came charging up the stairs behind him and began foaming the burnt pile of clothes. The hallway smelt of steamy smoke and there was a black carbon stain on the ceiling above Mrs. Rosewood who stood with a police officer holding her.

“We need to check the house out just to make sure everything’s okay,” a fireman said.

“Do what you have to,” Roland said. He turned to Mrs. Rosewood. “Ma’am, we need to take you downtown, I hope you understand.”

“Yes, I understand. And it was worth it.”

The officer who had been holding her back started to reach for his handcuffs, but McDermott stopped him. “That won’t be necessary, will it Mrs. Rosewood?”

“Oh my, no.”

She and the group of policemen proceeded down the stairs and out the front door. As they were stepping outside, Roland heard a cry from the front sidewalk by the street. “Mommy, Mommy, I found them!”

Little Margaret was running to the door with a pair of plaid golf pants. Suddenly, Duffy broke away from the policeman who was holding him by the squad car.

“Why you little brat! Give those back to me.”

He started chasing after her as she ran up to the door and pulled herself behind Detective McDermott. Duffy tried to reach for her, but Roland grabbed him and then one of the uniform officers pulled Duffy back while reaching for his baton.

“Mommy, they were in his office,” Margaret said pointing at Duffy. “One of the workers there took me right in and pulled them out from under a stack of newspapers. He was hiding them.”

“*Who* took you into my office?” Duffy said.

“I don’t know, but she said she was from Asia.”

“Leta—that whore. I’ll deport her so fast!”

“What about the pants,” Mrs. Rosewater said. “What were you doing with my pants?”

“Those are *my* pants, goddamn it. I paid for ‘em!”

“Then how come they were tucked under a bunch of newspapers?” Margaret asked.

“It’s none of your bratty little business where I keep my clothing.”

Mrs. Rosewood lunged toward Duffy and had to be restrained by one of the officers.

“Look,” Roland said. “We can work this stuff out at the station. Rusty, handcuff Mr. Duffy here.”

“Handcuff *me*? I was the goddamn hostage. On what charge are you dragging me down to the station?”

“Sir, you’re disrupting a police investigation.”

Mrs. Rosewood smiled. “I knew it would all work out! Oh Detective, you *are* a friend after all. Let me introduce you to my daughter Margaret.”

“Hello, Margaret.”

“Hello, sir,” Margaret said.

“You’re a hero!” Mrs. Rosewood said. “A true to life hero!”

Margaret tugged on his pants.

“Will you come over for a barbecue when my dad gets back?”

“That sounds very nice, Margaret. Let’s talk about it down at the station. We’ve got some business to take care of.”

“I get to come?”

“Yes, you’re an important part of the investigation, dear.”

“That sounds fun!” She jumped up and down.

“It’s a lot of fun. It’s what I live for.”

BEYOND A DEATH WISH

Sourabh Mukherjee

Sourabh Mukherjee is the author of the immensely popular e-books *Nargis Through my Summers and Loves Lost*. His e-books are now available in print in one cover - *Romance Shorts*. He has been featured in Flokka's list of 30 all-time great quotes on soul-mates (<http://www.flokka.com/soulmates-quotes/>) and also in <http://topfamousquotes.com/quotes-about-soulmate/>. His story 'The Girl of my Monsoons' won the Golden Pen award in the Monsoon Romance Contest 2014. Connect with him at <http://www.facebook.com/authorsourabhmukherjee>

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When good old Raghu Nath stepped on the roof of Tower C of Central Plaza Apartments in the Alipore area of Kolkata, the sky had already taken on a purple hue. It was early December and the days had been steadily losing hours to the nights over the last few weeks. The cold wind swept through his snow-hued thin hair, chilling him to his bones. His frail body shivered under the layers of warm clothing. It was not asking for much if someone wanted his last few moments to be comfortable, was it?

For several minutes, Raghu looked listlessly at the world around him—rooted to where he was standing near the edge of the roof, a

few feet from the boundary wall. He saw the light slowly fading away from the sky; he saw trees surrounding the apartment complex tossing their heads in the wind with leaves that were yellow and shriveled; he saw street lights that looked like tiny dots along the busy road ahead; he saw the weekend crowds, mostly from the suburbs, flowing out of the zoo that was nearby. It was time for the animals to sleep. Homebound birds in regimented flocks livened up the melancholy dusk with their last songs of the day as their trajectories made strange patterns on the purple canvas of the sky.

Raghu lost his father in a train accident when he was two. His mother worked round the clock to make ends meet. She stitched dresses and made candles when she found time from cooking in a working women's hostel, traveling by train to the city and back to her single-roomed rented house in the suburbs every day of the year. Everything that had been worth anything in the household had already been sold.

Raghu was determined to make the most of the scant opportunities his mother could afford for him. He never missed school, he coaxed his teachers into helping him with his studies, and he never repeated a class. There was never enough to eat, electricity was unheard of, the roof leaked in the monsoons and the creaking windows failed to keep the chill at bay during winters. But, Raghu's life in that run-down single-room house next to the railway tracks away from the din of the city, had a purpose which made every tomorrow worth waiting for.

And in spite of the circumstances, his mother never forgot to make his favorite rice-milk pudding on his birthday. That was, perhaps, the only happy memory of his childhood.

The local club would often organize late night shows of movies in one of the fields in the neighbourhood. A run down projector would beam on a crumpled piece of cloth, with gaping holes here and there, Bollywood movies with stories of larger than life heroes whose rags-to-riches journeys filled Raghu's young eyes with dreams. In most of those movies, his favorite sequence used to be the one where the hero, after getting his first salary from a porter's or a mechanic's job,

would invariably buy his old mother a *saree*¹, lovingly wiping her tears of happiness. Diwakar Mitra could not wait to get his mother *that saree*.

Raghu completed his education in due course of time and took up a job in the city. Her travails had taken a toll on her health and his mother had fallen incurably sick during Raghu's last years in college. In a tragic turn of events, she passed away a week before Raghu could buy for his mother that coveted *saree* with his first salary.

With luck on his side, Raghu's hard work and honesty paid off and he made a decent living over the years and managed to provide his only son with privileges he could not dream of in his early years.

The son, Alok, was presently a respected official in a position of authority in a bank of repute. His wife, Ria, made dresses - just as Raghu's mother had, or so Raghu thought—but the dresses Ria made were meant for models and movie-stars, they were stitched by girls she employed, and she came on TV every week. Well, they called her a fashion designer.

The problem, however, was that Raghu's world had been reduced to a room in his son's apartment. His opinions were considered outdated and irrelevant, his choices did not matter, his values were in constant conflict with those of his family—if the people who shared the same address with him could indeed be considered family - and more often than not, Alok and Ria made humiliating attempts at hiding him from their social acquaintances. He had been reduced to nothing more than an embarrassing presence in the household.

Raghu's wife had passed away several years back, and was to be found only in faded photographs in unkempt photo albums stacked away in a crowded shelf on one of the walls in his room. Luxuries in the house side-stepped his room, but Raghu was happy that the roof did not leak and the windows did not creak and there was an electric fan for the summer—though no one remembered his birthday any more. The rice-milk pudding was sorely missed.

Life had been sitting heavy on Raghu's shoulders and for the first time in years, he off late did not find a reason to wake up.

Raghu did not blame anyone for his predicament. He had been difficult himself and his actions had been impulsive and unreasonable on several occasions.

But he did not blame himself either. As days rolled into months and months into years, Raghu realized that he had, perhaps unconsciously, fallen behind everyone else in the race to keep up with a fast-changing world and there was no way he could catch up anymore. Perhaps he did not want to, either.

His life would perhaps have followed its own doomed but irreversible course, had he not overheard a conversation between Alok and Ria the other night.

His room opened to the dining area, which in turn, was an extension of the living area of the apartment, separated by a curtain. The television was in the living area and the plush sofa set took up most of the available space there.

On weekend nights, Alok and Ria would stay up till late, watching movies and getting drunk. The noises from the TV, the loud conversations, the boisterous laughter, and still later, the drunken outbursts would keep Raghu awake. On some of the nights, there would be inebriated fights between them. On others, there would be embarrassing noises when their carnal urges took over as they could not wait to get into their bedroom.

The previous Friday, Raghu woke up from a slumber when he heard the couple shouting at each other over their drinks. There, of

course, was nothing unusual about that. Raghu assumed the argument was, like every other weekend, about a girl in Alok's office, or, a male model of ill repute Ria had been working with. Raghu could not care less.

And then he heard them mention *his* name. He threw off the blanket and sat up on his bed. They were talking about the medical reports.

Raghu had not been keeping well and had got some tests done the week before. The tests had been suggested by a doctor, pretty much the same age as him, who lived in the same apartment complex and would often join him in his morning walks around the premises. Raghu had secretly been hoping that the disease, whatever it might be, would finally draw the line on his miserable existence. He had forgotten that the reports were due that very Friday.

Alok and Ria had apparently seen the reports and it seemed that there were indications of cancer in Raghu's liver. And they were discussing expenses. Doctors' fees, hospital bills, probably the need to have a nurse in the house to look after him round the clock—the likely expenses seemed to intimidate them.

Raghu simply wanted to know how many more months he had. He had, over the years, lost count of the humiliations he had been subjected to under that roof. But what he overheard that night surpassed them all. He felt like walking out and apologizing for having fallen prey to the lethal disease. But he was wiser. There was no point talking to a drunken couple counting their coffers.

The last thing he wanted was to have that couple lose sleep over the expenses for his treatment. As tears welled up in his eyes, he slipped back under the blanket and made a decision.

Raghu was very close to the iron railing. He had decided not to look down and weaken his resolve. Yet, his eyes were instinctively drawn to the hordes of people outside the zoo. He could not see their faces from where he stood, but he knew those were happy faces. What was it about human beings feeling happy about other living beings in confinement?

Raghu raised a tentative right foot on top of the railing when he noticed turmoil on the road below.

A speeding truck had come to a halt, a child right in front of it. He saw the mother had stepped down from the pavement and had run to the middle of the road, without a care in the world, to pull the child back from the way of the truck. She could have got run over herself!

There were people running in from all directions and other cars and buses fell in line behind the truck even as some of their drivers stepped out and ran ahead.

Raghu took his foot down and walked further down the roof from where he could have a better view of the proceedings on the road. Heads had come together in a circle and for a few minutes Raghu could not see anything else.

And then as the heads receded, he saw the woman emerge from the crowd, holding the boy in her arms, his hands and feet hanging loose. He saw men holding her and guiding her to the safety of the pavement.

The woman sat down on the edge of the pavement. One of the men, perhaps someone from the family, passed an arm around her and gave her something to drink.

The crowd in the meantime had broken open the door of the truck and pulled the driver out, beating him up mercilessly. Every driver in the city feared mob fury and the worst nightmare of every driver on Indian roads was coming true.

And then he saw the boy slowly get down from the mother's lap and sit down next to her on the edge of the pavement, resting his head on her lap. The mother pulled him closer and ran her hand on his head and back, as some of the men offered him water to drink, and some others dabbed water on his face and neck.

The world before Raghu became a blur as tears rolled down his eyes, even as he finally breathed. The boy was alive—he had probably lost consciousness from the shock of an imminent death under the wheels of that speeding truck.

Raghu realized that for those few moments, he had been unconsciously praying for the life of that child and when he saw the boy safe and alive, it seemed to him that the beauty of life had been unfurled before him in all its indelible glory. Who was he to leave a scar on that beauty through the reckless and heinous act that he was about to carry out a few moments back?

The mother and the son, now trudging slowly along the pavement to the nearest bus stop, reminded him of his own childhood.

A series of images flashed before his eyes. He could see his house by the railway tracks, twisting and turning like a pair of snakes up to the horizon. Every time he heard a train passing by their house, he used to run out to wave at the passengers. His mother, on the days she was home, would keep an eye on him, looking up from her sewing machine every now and then. And every time she thought he was too close to the tracks, she would leave her work to drag him back into the safe confines of the house.

As the first stars of the evening showed up on the clear December

sky, Raghu looked up teary eyed at the heavens. What would his mother have thought, had he gone ahead with his contemptible act a while back? Who was he to take his own life—a life he owed to his mother, her blood and her sweat?

Raghu stepped out of the roof, ready to take another shot at life—however short and rough the rest of it was destined to be. After all, there was also a grandchild on the way. Alok had informed him a couple of weeks back.

He would tell Ria that very night to cut down on her drinking. Raghu was still the man of the house, after all.

EVERYONE NEEDS A FREDRICK

D. David Croot

D. David Croot has been published by The Atlantic Monthly and publications such as Punchnel's, and more.

It was my last shift. Then I had a week off. I started at 9 in the Am. It is now 10:30.

“Aren't you bored?” Fredrick my colleague said.

He had this little jog he did when trying to give himself energy, like he needed the toilet. He had spiky hair and lacked a life of his own.

“Don't boring people get bored?” I replied.

“You always say that. How can you not be bored? Nobody comes in here except old woman and we can hardly seduce them?”

“If that's your thing.”

“They'll get done as pedophiles?”

“You're thirty and I'm twenty-eight. I think we'll be okay.”

I hadn't had sex in over a year. The longer it went on the more I felt I did not need it. There were the odd occasion when a woman walked in who was pure sex and her whole demeanour and body screamed don't talk to I've got nothing to say, just look and gaze and appreciate. The illusion is usually spoiled by a kid running in, “Mommy.” Is enough to destroy any boner. Or a boyfriend. Usually a jughead so hench and muscly he can't move his neck and when he speaks those monosyllabic sounds I feel sorry for him. Then I remember he has *her* and a job at a gym probably, a car that starts most of the time and we all put our boxers on one leg then the other.

“It’s not *them* I am worried about?” he said. “I’ve worked here ten years and it’s gotten so I can’t remember any other way of life. My memories are all of this place. The rare nights we go out and get blasted spending the next six months talking about it like we have become best friends with Johnny Depp or Ryan Gosling or slept with the holy Grail that is Scarlett Johansson.”

“Don’t tell me you like the Marvel movies?”

“Only on mute.” Then he elbowed me, “if you get what I mean... she’s in a tight suit and keeps bending over. She plays it dominatrix style is what I am trying to say.”

“Oh right.” I say nodding my head, “I get what you mean.”

“There, was that so hard to admit?” he pats me on the back.

“Subtlety is an art form you have yet to even consider.” I replied.

“Is that what you say to all the milfs?”

I told him I like the movie, the Graduate not for the message or the direction not even for Dustin Hoffman moreover it was the Darling Anne Bancroft. One time I told him.

“Ya got me.” The only way to get Fredrick to shut up was to agree and not react.

“Ya ever shagged any milfs? Have ya, have ya. The christmas party I remember the Christmas party...oh the joy...”

He did not stop until a late lunch. It was still 10:47.

Fredrick had lunch with a girl he had been seeing. By the way he described her, she must’ve been a pre-pubescent which left me feeling uncomfortable. If it wasn’t for the fact I knew he was prone to the hyperbolic I would have reported him. Deep down, real deep down is a guy who doesn’t know who he is and has learnt to talk to and about women through sites like Unilad, watching shows like Inbetweeners and awkward sitcoms where ever third word is vagina and gash.

One more hour to go. 4:00. A grey haired woman with a thyroid

problem came in seeking advice. I offered her a pay as you go 3rd generation iPhone for next to nothing, she scowled then ran away. Told me her son would beat me up.

It's written in to my contract if I don't try and sell something during the first thirty seconds of a conversation I can be reported. Three reports then it's a violation. Four violations then it's a review with the manager. After two or more reviews with the manager well needless to say... needless to say.

Fredrick ghosted in behind me, gave me a faux wedgie(he touches my underwear and says wedgie followed by, "I wouldn't do that to you, would I?")

"Have you ever used dating websites?" He asked. "It's just that I think you should..." then he pauses for a second, scratches three day stubble on his chin and his pre-forming whiskers, "it's a lot easier to get laid when you know what both people want. The tension is taken out of the equation and we can both relax in each others company and just be ourselves."

He see's my questioning look. "...and it doesn't have to be just sex. You could find a wife or a long term partner who shares the same interest as you."

He see's I have bitten if only slightly. Stupid eyebrows raising against my will.

"Go on then, what are the best websites?"

He has written down a list.

"Ticks mean yes."

"And the crosses?" I ask.

"Is still a yes just less of one. It's the ones that have nothing next to their names you should avoid. For instance did you know grinder was for men of the homosexual(you know he pulled a face) persuasion. That was an interesting conversation. After we got over the

awkwardness of, ‘are you Jenny’s chaperone’ to which he showed me his drivers license, he paid for dinner also. I wish I was gay.” He said, “Men are so much easier to get along with...” then he gave me his wholly thought out philosophical view on why being gay would suit him if only he could get used to the sex and feel of a man. Half arsed observations stolen from forth rate comedians. I had to laugh because he tried so hard.

“Go on take it.” He said.

“No thanks I’ll remember.” I said.

“TAKE IT.” He begged, “I don’t need it anymore I’ve found the one.”

His talk about the one killed off the rest of the day off.

5:05 I was on the bus home to my crappy apartment filled with cats who were not mine and bird crap on the windows from what I can only presume is a concentrated attack on my side of the building. Every morning without fail I am awoken to the sound of shit hitting my window. I now sleep on the settee. Currently I am working my way through Fassbinder’s Berlin Alexanderplatz. I had become infatuated with Franz Biberkopf. He is the German (non)working class mans Tony Soprano.

I boiled some pasta and grated some cheese on the top. Treated myself to an eight pack of Magners pear cider and began my week off.

It was not long before my phone buzzed. I hated mobile phones. Who wants to be contactable anywhere? Sometimes I get up and I just walk. Walk anywhere. Don’t answer and come back in three hours time to find I have missed people I once referred to as friends or family coming over. The more time that passes, I find I have nothing in common with blood or school chums. You read books, watch new wave film-makers and you don’t mature or change, you just become slightly different and you don’t want the same stilted conversations

over and over again.

“Who yer bangin?”

“Yeah I’m bangin...”

“She’s real dirty too...”

I don’t think I knew anyone I openly liked anymore. Perhaps it wasn’t in me anymore. More likely than not I was the problem. I humour people rather than related to them on their level, wherever that may be. They mistook my staring at them for listening then act surprised when I don’t remember their birthday or art exhibition they have a portrait in.

It was only a text so I looked at it. I already knew who it was from. And yup he was reminding me to check out the website ‘I cud b getin laid tunit.’ Maybe even love. “Go on, live outta ur skin fr once,” I could hear him saying.

I thought this to be quite a pleasant sentiment. *Live out of your skin*. He cared enough...oh it was followed by a picture of his naked new found love. She was young but certainly legal. There were pubes. And of course no picture sent to me by Fredrick was complete without a gaping erection looming largely into focus. Behemoth!

I can’t shake the image of his girlfriend from my mind. She was almost beautiful. How does he keep doing it? She’s probably as thick as a house of mortar and bricks. But, did it matter. Every week he had someone new, while me and my mind grew and expanded exponentially and I was nowhere with nothing.

I type in putlocker on my xbox one and watch a Woody Allen movie I haven’t seen before. Crimes and Misdemeanours. There are advertisement around the movie and one attracts my attention before I can full screen the movie after it has loaded in high definition. I don’t want to but I accidentally click on the link.

The screen flashes. Milf’s in your area DTF. Fredrick has informed

me numerous times this means Down To Fuck. I recognise the domain name from his list. It had a tick meaning at least some of the women on here were legit.

I ignore the first popup of want to chat and try to find somebody I know. No dice. I try to pick up an ugly one. If they are not perfect they are likely to be alive and real and I can at the very least talk to them and partake in something new.

I don't recall the last time I genuinely had fun. Maybe when I was sixteen and it was all new...I must expand what I do. I must find the new. I finish my Forth Magners or was it my fifth and she gets back to me. She writes in clipped english as though she is foreign or dumb and this almost puts me off. I keep her talking until she asks me where I live. She can't come here, it's a shit tip that I am embarrassed to be seen in. The last time I brought a woman home I broke all the lightbulbs with my fist while she was in the toilet and in the morning I apologised profusely for the smell alone. I never did see her again.

I gave her the address of the manor house on billing avenue.

"Ill b rit over"

Naughty naughty I say. Then my wife will see. There is a two minute wait, whereby I open another Magners and watch a bit more of the Woody Allen. The next time I check back she has left her address. Urging me to cum ovr qvikly.

I contemplate putting I'll be over in a jiffy but that sounds like premature ejaculation so I leave her guessing. I walk slowly to the place. It's only a twenty minute stroll and the night air sobers me up and keeps me calm. I jump once at a cats meow but that's it. I see no soul roaming the street only the reflection of myself in the odd passing car.

The first sight I see is of bins. Many many bins. I am looking for the number 69. And now I really think it's a lie. An automated

response from a retarded computer. Programmed by a man who gets his jollies by sending horny adults to meet up with unwitting prey.

I hear more cats screeching and I can't help but want to run away. Then no! I can watch woody Allen or David Lynch anytime. If I knock and she is hideous or doesn't understand I simply turn around and nobody loses. I am embarrassed but not shy.

I approach the door and before I knock she appears before me, dressed in a slip arm atop the door, finger in her moisturised lips. She's actually quite a fox. She is an upside down coca-cola bottle with age in all the correct places. Think an Auburn Marilyn Monroe ten years past her prime.

"Come in," she beckons.

Does she mean the bedroom or... *follow her?* I let her lead. She offers me a drink and I scan her book collection.

She returns with a bottle of white wine and two glasses, "I really shouldn't," these are the first words that register with me. She has great tenderness masked by an appearance of strength, or maybe I have drank too much already, "I know how fattening white wine is but I just can't help myself. Say when." She bends down real low and I realise I am lost for words. This has never happened before.

"You like Joyce?" I asked, my voice croaking in the process.

"I've read him if that's what you mean?"

"I've always thought can anyone really like Joyce or most of the so called classics. Take Dickens for instance."

Her face lightens, dimples glisten, "He's such a bore isn't he? Victorian prose is archaic and in need of translation I say."

We sit down on a cream settee and laugh into each other eyes.

"You have a beautiful figure." I say.

"What?"

"Before, your first comment I meant to say you have a superb

figure. I think I am nervous I don't know what this is.”

“It's whatever we want it to be.”

Her house was small. It was clear she filled it with what she enjoyed. Pictures of poets. Signed first editions...it was clear there would be no resemblance to the interiors of her house than with the neighbours that surrounded her.

“Do you mind if I look through you collection of vinyl?” I ask.

She laughed pouring a sprinkling of her drink, “That's not my collection. I've got a lifetime full in the loft. That's just what I'm into at the minute.”

“Oh I get it. You have a kind of blue, Blonde on Blonde, Bryter Layter and all the albums that make you look good and educated down here, and keep yer Blonde and Status Quo upstairs for no one to see your penchant for power pop.”

“You got me,” she stroked my back softly, I could sense she was checking me out and then it kinda stopped. We have overstepped a boundary. In getting to know one another and making it personal, the spark had gone and now sex would almost feel wrong. Still, she had on the slip and whenever she sat down or moved it got higher and higher. I was over thinking things perhaps.

“Do you mind if I ask you a question?” I say.

“I haven't stopped you so far have I.” She replied.

She has a cosy mahogany vinyl player smooth to the touch. I don't know what sexy music is. There's music I like then music I don't. I opted for Blood on the Tracks.

“Nice choice, now what did you want to know?”

“You are a beautiful lady by sight a lone and it's clear even from our brief meeting so far you have a mind, opinions and view on the world...”

“And you want to know why I use sex websites to get laid. It's

the anonymity. A high and bye. Alleviates lonely nights. No dull chit chatting with retired widowers or divorcees with more wretched hair in their nose than on their head.”

We had stopped drinking completely and I was riveted with what she had to say. I always believed women to be of more interest than men. I just hadn’t found her yet.

“I think we all lose something when youth starts to wilt. It’s why middled aged men overcompensate by bigging themselves up and dressing like their sons. Big bellies. Talking shit they think a woman wants to hear. They become disillusioned with what they have lost.”

“And what do you suggest they do?” I ask.

“To get in to bed with me or a relationship?”

“Both?”

“Listen. Like you, you clearly had a caring mother who you listened to. It shows what love early on in life can do. You don’t feel the need to find it in every woman you come across. It’s why you haven’t pounced at me yet.”

A Simple Twist of Fate had just finished.

“That’s all very nice to know but not what I was going to ask. Everyone wants sex, it’s just that most are afraid to ask for it. I think know this...” She stroked my leg and looked up to me with sad mascara eyes. “I only wanted to know why you typed like a child on ritalin.”

“Oh that,” she balled, “I tried to sound like the kids. I am much older than I feel, you see.” Her head tilted to the side revealing a crystal neck of ivory proportions.

“How old do you feel?” I asked.

“Let’s see when did I have Cindy...” while remembering her whole mood changed. The past was her haven and I was unlocking it for her, “...Ah I know, seventeen! I still feel seventeen. Time goes by so

quickly. She's now studying English literature and Film."

"Didn't know it was one course."

"It is now."

She was too easy to talk to. She told me all about her daughter. When she lost her virginity in her mothers bed. How much of a tom-boy she was. What she wants to do with her life. Before moving on to her regrets in life. The fact she'll only ever be an appreciator of art rather than an artist was her main gripe.

"I hope more for my daughter I gave her everything I had. I am artistic whereas I hope she will become an artist."

"Whats the difference?"

"A life of happiness versus a life of regret and memories." She added, "You'd like her."

"Do I not turn you on?" I ask. "We are talking so calmly. It shouldn't be this easy."

"Oh but it should. Have you never had this back and forth before?...It could be the fact you are too nice. I don't want to ravage or be ravaged by you. I'd feel I was taking advantage."

"Hey, I can ravage."

"I'm sure you can dear. It's just..."

"Just what?"

"Do you really want to. We could do it right here and now but I wouldn't be anymore fulfilled than I am now. You are sex of the mind."

I laughed and sighed.

"What! No! Have I offended your manhood now? I can give you blowie, a hand job if you like? I could ride you fiercely..." she smiled sweetly lifting her eyelids.

"No, no, nothing like that. That sex of the mind comment might be the nicest thing anybody has ever said to me."

She slid on the floor and lay back. Breasts drooping to either side.

“Tell you what,” she said.

“What?”

“You should leave now.”

“Why?”

“So I can remember this for what it is.”

“You don’t even know my name.”

“All the better.”

I left with her daughters number. “Don’t mention this to her and you’ll be well away. I’ll remember you for quite some time.”

And I her.

I spent the next week laying about, not thinking of too much. Went to the cinemas. Disappointed with the latest James bond, Spectre was a piece of shit. Star wars was not my thing. But I saw it anyway. Come the end of the week 9 in the AM hit me like a shark bite.

9:03, I’d just taken off my coat.

“So tell me all about it,” Fred my colleague said, appearing out of nowhere, “don’t spare any of the gashy details.” He rubbed his hands together.

I opened with, “Well she was the hottest thing I’d ever seen. She might’ve been thirty-six but she could’ve passed for a teenager she was that beautiful and sensual. Oh and the things she taught me. I’ll never forget. She was out of this world. Tanned toned body. Oh and her pussy was exquisite. Butter wouldn’t melt, It’d get an erection. I can’t remember how many times we did it, one things for sure we didn’t sleep.”

Fredrick chuckled at this.

“Told ya it’d work. In my own way I am good for you. Everyone needs a Fredrick.” And he seemed satisfied at this.

THE RIGHT ADDRESS

George Garnet

George Garnet is an engineer who writes short stories in his spare time. His fiction has appeared in *eFiction*, *GKBC*, *Needle in the Hay*, and *The Lady in the Loft*.

Huge red letters, visible from the distant corner where I stand, read 27 High Street. My heart jumps. *Oh God! That's the address.*

I stare at the narrow facade. For a moment I am motionless. Something inside of me pushes me to jump and urges me to run. If only I could; but I can't. I am too heavy for that.

C'mon, faster! It's close now, you're almost there.

The building looks like an office—a wooden entry door at street level and a wide glass window. The blinds are tightly closed and only a strip of light in one of the corners betrays the presence of people inside. It might be her.

My heart jumps making me hurry down the street; but my legs are heavy, way too heavy. Moving them is hard. I am a big, fat man. Overweight. Not overweight but obese. Yes, I am obese, that's the right word. Or maybe just a fat ass? That's what others call me. I'm used to that. Fat ass. I never fight back. Maybe they are right. Fat ass. When you're more than hundred-and-twenty kilos even a simple walk is a real challenge.

Even the sweating and puffing and the dull pain in my legs can't ruin the feeling of sweet-bitter anticipation. It's not every day that you face the woman of your dreams in flesh and blood. All I have from

her is a small picture printed from a web site. Only this and dozens and dozens of phone calls over the last few weeks which I play in my mind like a broken gramophone record. The phone calls are the expensive ones where they charge you \$4.95 per minute. However, I don't regret it even for a second. I finally found love. I've searched for love all my life and what I got was only pain and disappointment; but not anymore. Like in the song I think love finally found me.

I check again. The address is the right one - the one they gave me from the telephone company. They assured me the phone calls originated from this address and here I am, puffing and sweating, standing in front and staring at the door as if it's the holiest place on earth.

I find the strength with a shaking hand to press the bell knob. Bells from Heaven chime inside.

A neon over the front door goes on and lights the spot where I stand. My heart's pounding like a hammer. It seems an eternity before I hear footsteps inside. The latch clicks and the door opens. I face a man.

I'm startled. The man, dressed in jeans and a leather jacket is bulky, with a shaven head, a goatee, earrings and a tattooed blade on his right side of his neck. I am still staring at his tattoo when he grunts.

"Yes?" He measures me from top to bottom with a sarcastic smile.

"I'm looking for Lisa." I swallow hard.

"Lisa? She is busy." The eyes of the bulk become suspicious. "Why are you looking for her?"

"We're friends. Close friends," I mumble, "Look, I had a long chat with her, I mean over the phone and I know she is living here."

"Is she? Living here? Have you met her before?" His eyes pierce

through me.

“No, we just met. We were talking over the phone and I decided to meet her.”

“What? You decided to meet her? To meet Lisa? He echoes my question with a growl. “You’re not supposed to meet her. What’s your name?”

I tell him and he wrinkles his forehead - thinking is hard business for him. The thin smile returns to his face, the sarcastic one. He crosses his hands on his chest and cocks his head to one side.

“You’re one of those guys who calls and talks to her over the phone, right?”

“Yes, but, what guys? it’s been over a month and a half since we started chatting.” I mumble.

“This is not a dating service. Didn’t you know that?” He uncrosses his hands.

“I’ve been told it is a dating service. Can I talk to Lisa, please?”

He measures me with his eyes again and his facial expression changes.

“Lisa is not available tonight. Beat it! “

“But I need to talk to her, she likes me.” My face blushes.

“You still don’t get it, do you, Jack?” He leans forward and hisses through his teeth. “Just get lost!”

“I really need to talk to her, just for a minute. Nothing else.” I try to conceal the agony in my voice. Cold sweat covers my face. “We— love each other— ” The words choke in my throat.

“The dating service is over the phone only. You get that, bozo? You don’t face the girls, you only talk to them.”

“The girls? What girls?” I ask.

“This is a special phone service, bozo. You pay for phone calls, you get only phone talk. Unless you pay more, then you get the real

stuff. The special one. You get that?”

“What real stuff? What special one?” A cold finger moves up my spine. What’s more real stuff than the phone calls, the long hours spent in talking to Lisa.

She is the whole world to me. I told her everything. I told her I was a fat, lonely man looking for love, for a partner in life. I don’t want to live alone. I want to have someone next to me. To talk to. To share warmth in the long lonely nights.

Lisa was so good to me—she listened and agreed with everything, she turned into a soul-mate. Just a voice over the phone line and a small printed picture which crumpled from being kept in my wallet. I often pull it out and stare at the black almond shaped eyes, the full lips, and the long ebony hair brushed aside.

Last week, I finally found the courage to tell her that I loved her very much. She said I was sweet and with that my heart melted. I spent my monthly wage on those phone calls just to listen to her voice—her angelic voice. If I had more money, I would spend it too - it doesn’t matter. I would give everything I have. I don’t care. I just care about Lisa.

“This is an Escort Service, dumb ass.” The voice of the shaven head snaps me back into reality.

“What Escort Service?” I mumble. “It’s not an Escort Service. It’s a dating service for matching people.”

My head started spinning.

“I need to see her right now. I won’t go away before I see her,” I say with a firm voice that surprises me. Something turns inside me. Usually, I am a soft and agreeable person, trying to keep out of trouble.

“Get out of here, you fucking loser. Get lost!” The bulky man steps forward while staring right into my eyes.

“Not without seeing her first,” My feet are firmly rooted to the pavement. No. I won’t budge. This feeling is something new, something I’ve never had before. I don’t care anymore.

The hulk jerks his head back. Malicious flames flicker in his eyes.

“You wanna see her? You really wanna see her?” He hisses in my face. “Turn around and look at the corner over there.” He motions with his head. “The girl over there, in the ‘fuck me’ red miniskirt and black top. That’s Lisa. This is your Lisa, your true love, your sweetheart. She is nothing but an ordinary hooker, you dumb fat ass. You were talking to a hooker. A hooker.” He pauses for a second, “Expansion of business. The hooker’s service into a dating one. Suckers like you, ready to pay for sweet words over the phone.” His talk is now a mixture of growling and laughing and he is having a lot of fun.

He pushes me in the chest with his meaty hand, steps back and shuts the door in my face.

I turn in the direction he was pointing at the corner of the block.

Under the street light, some hundred of meters away, stand three women dressed provocatively. Their postures betray desperation and loneliness and with the thick darkness around them my heart sinks. I don’t want to believe Lisa could be one of them.

I drag my feet towards the women at the corner. Every step, bringing me closer to the three figures, is a pain.

The two women standing look old, blonded hair, tall and skinny. The one leaning against the wall is young with long black hair brushed aside. Her red miniskirt is too short, the black top - with a too wide cleavage.

The closer I get, the harder my heart booms. With my eyes focused on the slim body in the red miniskirt, I don’t need the little

crumpled picture in my wallet to say who she is.

My hands tremble.

The women notice me and turn in my direction. One of the blonde women drops a cigarette butt and makes a step towards me.

“Hi, honey, feeling lonely? Do you need any company for tonight?” She is tall, her fur top is unbuttoned in front and her skinny legs are in white fishnet stockings.

I look at the girl leaning against the wall.

“Lisa?” The words choke me.

“Yes?” That’s the voice from the phone. Her voice.

“Lisa, it’s me, Jeff.” My voice tremble and my body feels very heavy, the weight pushing down on my thick legs.

She stares at me, her face puzzled.

“We talked over the phone— For hours— Remember? It’s me, Jeff. I think— I mentioned— that I am fat—” My voice sinks.

“Jeff ? Ah, yes, of course, Jeff.” She smiles. She but doesn’t look at my fat belly. She detaches from the wall without breaking the eye contact.

I stare at her, tongue tight. She looks great, much better than on her internet picture. I want to tell her this and much more, but I can’t. My voice is gone, as if I had swallowed it with my last words.

“Look, you’re not supposed to be here,” she says after awhile, “We only talk over the phone. Just a phone contact, nothing else. I’m sorry.”

“I understand. Can we go some place and have a chat? For a couple of minutes only?” I manage to say in almost a whisper.

“Yes, but I am working right now, I’m busy, ” she says and stops, as if halted by something.

“It doesn’t matter. It really doesn’t matter what you do for a liv-

ing,” I say with effort, “What you do is not important. I just wanted to see you, to talk to you, to tell you how much—”

“I have to stay here, Jeff, I’m sorry. This is my corner, if I move from here I’ll get in trouble.” Her voice changes as if she is going to cry.

“Just a short talk nothing else, Lisa, I’ll pay you for the time. I just wanted to tell you how much I think about you— How much I—” I don’t finish the sentence as her body stiffens while she is staring at something behind me.

“Get out of here.” A growl from behind startles me. The bulk. I turn and face him. His thick fingers are clenched into a fist.

“You’re bad for the business.” His eyes pierce through me as if I’m nothing. “Get the fuck out of here, you fat ass.” He is a meter away.

“I— I just wanted to talk to her, nothing else— If I have to pay for her time—”

“Just get lost, you idiot,” He growls and raises his hand.

I look at Lisa. Staring at the hulk she is shaking.

A vein pulsates in my temple, blood clogs into my eyes.

“I won’t get out of here before I talk to her.” I turn towards him. I don’t care what is going to happen next. I can’t worry anymore.

Without a word, he punches me hard in the face. A sharp pain cuts through my left cheek and blue circles explode in my eyes.

I instinctively reach for my face and he punches me in the chest. The fat doesn’t help me at all. The pain is excruciating and my legs give in under the huge weight. I drop onto my knees and a thousand needles shoots through my knee caps. He punches me again in the face and I drop to the ground instantly feeling the hardness of the concrete beneath.

As if through a muffler, someone screams, “Don’t touch him,

don't touch him! Leave him alone, you bastard, or I'll tell the boss why some customer calls are missing from the register." Then the voice softens: "Jeff, Jeff, it's me Lisa, Jeff."

I try to breathe, but the pain engulfs every corner of my fat body. I'm heavier than ever. I couldn't move, laying there, my broken body pinned on the cold concrete. I lose the picture.

Someone shakes me and I recognize Lisa's voice. "Jeff, Jeff, it's me Lisa. Your Lisa, please wake up, wake up. Please stay with me!"

I manage to open my eyes. Lisa, bent over me, holds my forearm. "Lisa, I'm so sorry. I just wanted to see you," I whisper and taste blood in my mouth.

"I know, I know. Please don't talk now— " She wipes blood from my face.

"Just to tell you how much—"

"Don't you see what I am? What I do for a living?" Her voice chokes.

"It doesn't matter, it's not important, " I lick my cut lips with effort. "I just want to be with you. I think about you, Lisa, all the time— I want you—" I say it and with that a truck load is lifted from my shoulders. Relief like a light breeze. I said it. Face to face. Even if I die, right now, it won't be a big deal.

"Oh dear," Lisa hugs me and her tears drop onto my face. She is kissing me. Her lips are all over my face, her body onto mine, as if we are one.

I close my eyes. Strangely, the pain is gone and I feel very light, like a feather lifted by a gentle wind.

HITCHING AND HORSES

Shane Pillay

Shane Pillay is a writer from Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Born in Johannesburg, South Africa, he has traveled extensively from Cuba to Thailand and from India to Norway. In his spare time he plays guitar in a band and collaborates on visual art projects with people from around the world. This includes the latest ones where he will produce two animation shorts with Swedish artists.

In these times people are warned against accepting lifts from strangers. You never know the type of person that sits behind the wheel. Some drivers have good intentions. But the ugly truth is that there are bad seeds in the bunch.

When it comes to hitchhiking, I adopt the following approach: don't. Fortune favours me. I own a Toyota—coloured elegant silver, leather bucket seats that cushioned the hips and a top speed of 235km/h. The car has never been driven at this top speed. But I have pedalled its engine to 160km/h during a morning run from Ashburton to the Midmar Dam. A hefty traffic fine however, ended my flirtation with acceleration. Nonetheless the car is sturdy and reliable. Therefore there was never reason to thumb for a lift from the side of the road.

But the days of my youth were different. I lived with my parents and did not own a car. My father had a small blue van. He never allowed me to drive. I had the license but he did not have the trust. Buses and taxis got me around. Sometimes I caught a lift with a friend with wheels.

There were times though, when neither taxi nor bus nor friend was near. There was this one time when a funny thing happened. Let me tell you.

I was seventeen. It was Saturday—one o’ clock in the afternoon. My friends had gone to the city. In the evening they planned a visit to a West Street nightclub. It was the hottest nightclub in the city. I wanted to join. There was a 50 note in my wallet. It was barely enough for the club entrance fee, drinks and snacks. A bus or taxi would eat my savings and leave nothing for a decent night. Since it was early, I grabbed my jacket, stowed the wallet into a side pocket, said goodbye to my parents and stepped out the yard. I walked to the end of the road, crossed a small field and arrived at a bridge. A two-lane freeway ran underneath. It was there that I stuck out my thumb and waited for friendly driver.

If it were darker, the chances of hitching a ride would be slim. Drivers didn’t take chances with strangers in the night. But the sun shone bright at one in the afternoon. A seventeen-year old innocent youth in the midday light was certain to get a lift.

Sure enough, ten minutes later an orange Volkswagen approached. It chugged past the bridge and finally slowed to a stop. I leapt up and ran to the door. The driver rolled down his window.

“I’m going to the city,” I said.

“Come in,” He replied. I walked around the car, got in the front and shut the door closed. The driver glanced at the side mirror. The road was clear. He shifted the car forward. The gears choked and the journey began.

“Thanks.”

The driver was a tall, lean man. His face was brown and his hair, thinning into strands, swept fine, oily lines over his scalp. His moustache was slight and his skin shaven clean. An old tweed coat,

striped shirt and faded trousers completed the picture.

In the back of the Volkswagen was a little boy, possibly seven or eight years old. His face was brown, just like the driver. He wore a blue dungaree that folded outwards at the hem.

“Hello,” I greeted the little boy.

“Hullo,” He replied.

The driver turned to me. “That is my son Rafferty,” He said, “I did not introduce myself. My name is Cape.”

“Cape? Like in Cape Town?”

“Yes. And yours?”

“Grey.”

“Grey? Like in the colour?”

I laughed. “Something like that. Thanks for picking me up.”

“Not a problem,” said the man, “Where are you going?”

“The city,” I answered, “West Street, if possible. My friends are there.”

Rafferty leaned forward. He stuck his head between the seats. “Why didn’t you take a taxi?”

“Don’t be rude,” said his father.

But I smiled. “It’s all right. If I don’t take a taxi, I save money.”

“Short of cash?” grinned Cape. “Life is expensive when you’re young.”

“Yes,” I said, “I’ve barely enough in my wallet to spend in the city.”

“Then how will you get home?” That was Rafferty.

“My friend has a car.”

The Volkswagen droned along the freeway at a good pace. At this rate, the city centre would be reached in ten minutes. But as we got halfway to the town, Cape flicked on the indicators and braked. The car descended a ramp off the freeway.

“Short cut?” I asked.

Cape shook his head. “I hope you don’t mind. How soon do you have to be in the city?”

I shrugged because I did not know how to answer. So I grunted and I didn’t know what I meant. Neither did Cape.

“I’m going to the Clairwood Racecourse,” He said. “It’ll take 30 minutes. What do you say?”

That was not expected. If you happened to hitch a ride, the driver would take you directly to your destination. No detours. A stopover at the Clairwood Racecourse was a detour.

“What race meeting is on?” I asked.

“Just a normal race meeting,” said Cape. “You don’t mind if I look at the horses?”

“Not really,” I replied. It was the only thing I could say.

Cape drove the Volkswagen along a narrow road. Weed bushes and small houses dotted the edges. The distant freeway ran away from view. At the end of the road was the Clairwood Racecourse. Cape turned left at the gates. The wheels of his ramshackle car tramped the beaten lane. Motor cars and vans parked alongside.

“It’s busy,” I said. It was a faint suggestion to reverse direction and get back on the freeway. But Cape didn’t bother. I think Rafferty laughed.

We passed the stables. Horses stuck their heads out the stalls and watched the cars go by. The old railway lines ran alongside the racecourse. Old railway houses stood like ancient castles next to it. Cape drove into a large ground that was swamped to the edge with cars. He found an empty parking bay and pulled the Volkswagen into the spot. We got out.

“Are you a betting man?” I asked.

“Sometimes, depends,” Cape replied.

We walked to the arched entrance. The stonework was deliberately constructed strong and worn. It gave the appearance of olden times. We sallied through the turnstiles.

Clairwood Racecourse was a marvellous place. The grounds were carpeted with grass, trimmed neat and tidy like fine hairs. Small buildings, built in a grand old tradition, stood like patchwork on a quilt.

“This place looks like a university,” I remarked.

“It does,” laughed Cape and pointed arbitrarily at the different buildings. “Look, there is the dining hall; and the library. Punters study their horses there. It’s not easy.”

“It’s been ages since I’ve been here,” I said.

“You’ve been here before?” asked Cape.

“When I was young, my father came here. I remember the turnstiles. I stole those pink cards with the blocks on them; you know the ones for betting? But my father does not bet anymore and I haven’t come here since.”

We set on a meandering pathway coloured maroon by bushels of flower. Families sat on garden benches. I reckoned men brought their families here to relax while they spent their wages at the bookmakers.

Soon we arrived at a huge building with small windows rising six storeys high. “These are the main lecture halls?” I joked.

“You got it right,” grinned Cape. “That’s the back of the main grandstand. We’ll go to the front.”

We passed a playground where children climbed swing sets and see-saws. Older children hung over the fence rails and flirted. Across from the playground was the racetrack—a large circle bordered by a white, wooden barrier. Close to the starting grid was a small, open house with dining tables.

“That’s where the rich play,” said Cape, pointing to the tables. “But come on, I’ll show you where the rest hang out. We’ll be a few

minutes, I promise.”

We walked a flight of five stairs and reached the grandstands. It was enormous; the seats rose to the sky. People fused the atmosphere electric with their shouts. They studied and waved their racing guides, pointed to the pages, argued with friends, settled on a horse, changed their minds and then changed it back again.

Cape led the way to the bottom of the grandstand and turned into a doorway. This was the home of the bookmakers. Television sets plastered the walls. There were horse videos and statistics of races. People queued at the tellers and shouted bets—swingers, trifectas, places—the whole bang lot. Cape, Rafferty and I sat at a table.

“Will this take long?” I asked.

“No,” replied Cape. “You want something to eat? Take off your jacket, relax. I’ll get something to eat.”

I removed my jacket while Cape took off his tweed coat. We hung them over the backs of our chairs.

“I need the toilet,” said Rafferty.

“You know where it is?” Cape asked. “Grey, can you go with my son? Don’t want him to get lost. I’ll look at the betting odds for the Rod Dentistry Invitation. It’s next. I’ve a good feeling. I know the jockeys.”

Rafferty got up from his chair and tugged my shirt. I nodded at the boy and stood up.

“Are you playing just one race?” I asked Cape.

“I might not play it at all,” He replied. “If the goings aren’t good, I won’t play at all. Then we leave.”

Rafferty and I walked away. “Hey,” Cape called, “What do you want to eat? I’ll order.”

“I’m not hungry,” I said.

“Come on,” egged Cape, “Have something.”

“I want a steak roll,” said Rafferty.

“Same for me,” I said.

Rafferty led the way to the toilet stalls. It was well that I went along since I too needed the toilet. It was while we washed our hands that I asked my first question.

“Does your father bring you here often?”

“To the racecourse?” He replied, “Yes.”

“Do you take bets?”

“I’m young, it’s not allowed,” He answered, “But sometimes I give a tip off the top of my head.”

We wiped our hands on paper towels and left the stall. A crowd had gathered near a television set. A terrific groan consumed the air.

“Look!” Rafferty pointed, “A four horse race, and three horses were scratched!”

“You know your horses well,” I told him.

“Yes,” He replied.

We walked back to the table. Cape clutched his copy of the racing guide impatiently. “There you are!” He said, “Wait here! I got a hot tip!”

“Did you order the food?” I asked.

“What food?” asked Cape and raced off to the tellers.

Rafferty and I sat down beside the table. The little boy’s face was glum. So was mine. It was bitterly disappointing to learn that the steak rolls had not been ordered. I contemplated calling a waiter over. But it wasn’t certain if Cape would bet all his money on the horses. Who would pay for the food then? Not me, I only had a fifty in my wallet and that was for tonight.

When Cape returned I asked about the bet.

“Next race, a swinger on number 2 and 8.”

“Which horses?” asked Rafferty.

“Golden Dice and Tubs. Come on, three minutes to start. Let’s go outside. We can see the horses run.”

Cape grabbed his tweed coat, took his son by the hand and dashed out the door. I was lethargic. My hands slipped slowly through my jacket sleeves. I tugged it down so that it fitted at the shoulders.

On the grounds Cape and Rafferty assembled by the white, wooden barrier. Rafferty climbed on top, held steady by his father. Cape saw me approach and beckoned. “You ready Grey?” He said, “This is a fantastic race.”

“What odds did you get?”

“Depends on the pool for swingers,” He said. “Numbers 2 and 8, let’s go!”

At the far end of the field the starting grid lined up. The horses moved their heads into the gates. We waited. Cape’s head bobbed with agitation. I didn’t hear the gun but I soon spotted the horses gallop.

The grandstand and the field on which we stood were opposite the finishing post. The heads of the crowd followed the horses. A voice raced over the loudspeakers at breakneck speed—it was the commentator. I didn’t understand a word, nor could I tell which horse led the pack. Soon they came around the bend and headed for the finish line. The crowd heaved forward and their voices rose higher and louder.

“Go! Go!” They shouted.

Cape did the same. His body convulsed in spasms and I feared that he would push his son over the fence. But Rafferty was just as animated. Like father, like son. The noise reached fever pitch. The horses approached, closer and closer. Some punters threw up their hands and punched the air.

“Golden Dice! Tubs!” yelled Cape, “Go!”

The horses thudded past. Their hooves stomped the earth like drums and the jockeys spurred their beasts on with urges and snaps.

The pace was furious.

“Number 8! Yes!” shouted Cape, “He’s a winner!”

Golden Dice, ahead by two lengths, raced past the finishing line. A gang of horses followed, bunched thick and heavy. We could not make who placed into the 2nd and 3rd positions.

“Tubs must place either 2nd or 3rd,” said Cape excitedly, “He must! I think he was 3rd. What do you think?”

But I did not know either. I saw horses but couldn’t make out the numbers.

“They will go to the winner’s circle,” said Rafferty. “For the pictures.”

We did not wait long. When the horses appeared, the smile on Cape’s face grew the widest it had ever been that afternoon.

“Got the swinger!” He cried, “Tubs’ in 3rd! Wait here! I’m going to collect!”

Cape hurried to the bookmaker stalls. I stared at Rafferty. “Your father won,” I said.

Rafferty nodded. “Yes.”

Now that I have learnt about swingers in horse betting, I will explain how it works. In a race you chose two horses. Both are expected to come in either 1st, 2nd or 3rd positions. If the horses do appear, then you win. You won’t know exactly how much you are going to win until after. All swinger combinations for that race are put into a pool by the bookmakers. Only those who have the right combinations receive a share of the pool money. Of course, the bookmakers take a cut.

Cape returned a proud man. His hands were stuck into his trousers. He nodded to the steps leading out the grandstands. Rafferty and I followed. I didn’t know if it were polite to ask a gambler how much money he won. So I didn’t ask.

Our exit out Clairwood Racecourse was quicker than our entry. Cape apologised for the delay. He wanted to get me to the city as fast as possible.

“No need to speed,” I said.

“I had a great day,” Cape replied. “I had a good feeling about those two horses. It would have been a huge regret if I hadn’t taken the bet. I bet 50 on them; made a good sum in the end. Take my advice though—don’t bet all your money. You could lose it in a second.”

And here Cape snapped his fingers. Behind him Rafferty snapped his fingers as well and kicked his legs into the air. Cape turned around and rubbed the boy’s head.

“Yes my son,” He said, “Yes.”

The car reached West Street a few minutes later. Cape pulled the Volkswagen along the side of the road.

“Thanks,” I said and opened the door.

“Wait a minute,” said Cape and grabbed my hand. I sat still on the seat. Cape leant to the side and reached into his trousers.

I stared. “What?”

Cape smiled at Rafferty. It was a smile you give when you share a secret with someone. I turned to Rafferty as well and smiled. But it was a weak smile. Then Cape pulled his hand out his pocket. In it he had two notes—a 50 and a 10.

“Here,” He said, “This is for you.”

I looked down at the money and then back into Cape’s eyes. “No thanks,” I said, “It’s yours.”

“I’ve made enough already,” said Cape, “This is to say thank you.”

“Thank you for what?”

“Do people need a reason to say thank you?” replied Cape, “Just take the 50 as a token of my appreciation for sitting it out at the Clairwood Racecourse.”

“And the 10?” I asked.

“I owe you a steak roll,” Cape answered, “Go buy one for yourself.”

I was seventeen and 60 was a big deal to me. So I took the money. Cape winked and Rafferty gave me a high five. I closed the door, they waved and the Volkswagen moved off. I never saw them again.

I looked forward to the evening with my friends. I had 50 in my wallet and I had the 60 which Cape had given. All cash would be squandered tonight because I was seventeen.

I unzipped the pocket of my jacket and pulled out my wallet. Then I opened it so I could add the 60.

But the wallet was empty. I stuck my fingers in and searched for the 50. Nothing. I flipped it over, expecting the 50 to fall. Still nothing.

In my other hand I had the two notes from Cape—the 10 and 50. I stared at both. The events of the past hour galloped through my mind like a bunch of blinkered racehorses. When I left home, the 50 was in the wallet. When I sat inside the Volkswagen, the 50 was in the wallet. When I got to the Clairwood Racecourse, the 50 was in the wallet. When I went to the toilet stalls...

The bastard. Thank god for Tubs. Thank god for Golden Dice.