

Unfunny Poster
[b]The Wolf[/b]

Jung-hoon and Ji-hoon ran through the woods just outside of their hometown of Osan, South Korea. The young boys enjoyed playing in the thick wooded area not far from their modest home each day after school. Each day they would head to the woods after school, and this wet November day was no different.

"Race you to the waterfall," Jung-hoon shouted as he sped past Ji-Hoon.

"Hey! Not fair Jung-hoon," cried the younger Ji-hoon as he picked up his speed to catch his older brother.

The boys shoes squeaked as they slipped on the wet leaves as they ran down the path towards a modest waterfall that fed into a small creek. This served as a boundary that helped divide the woods in half. The boys huffed and puffed as they reached the waterfall, their competitive nature meant they were not likely to slow down until they were sure to have won the race.

Jung-hoon reached the edge of the waterfall first and triumphantly raised his hands as he stopped near the edge of the cliff that overlooked the creek. However, Ji-hoon was not so quick to stop, and slid on the wet leaves yet again, losing his footing and stumbled into Jung-hoon, knocking both of them over the cliff. Jung-hoon was able to quickly grab a low hanging tree branch and secure his footing his twelve year old muscles straining to keep him upright. His younger brother, however, was not as strong. Desperately, Ji-hoon tried to grab hold of a branch of his own to stop his momentum but his hand was too weak to firmly grasp the branch. Jung-hoon shouted in agony as he saw his brother disappear past rocks lower down the cliff.

As he scrambled back to the edge, Jung-hoon frantically tried to catch sight of his brother. When he finally saw him terror struck into him as he could see his brother lying motionless on the edge of the creek, his body contorted this way and that.

"Ji-hoon!!" echoed throughout the immediate area as Jung-hoon descended the cliff and headed towards the creek. Soon he reached the bottom and moved briskly toward the body of his brother. A light gray mist now covering the area where the body was laying. This was an oddity given the time of day but Jung-hoon didn't have anytime to consider this as he raced to check on his sibling.

Once he finally made his way to the bottom of the cliff, Jung-hoon sprinted towards Ji-hoon's motionless body but suddenly stopped dead in his tracks. Standing next to Ji-hoon was a large white dog. Jung-hoon thought it may be a stray Jindo and continued to make his way towards Ji-hoon. It was only when the dog lifted his head up to look at Jung-hoon did he stop a second time, this time letting out a gasp of fear. The animal standing next to Ji-hoon was not a dog, but rather a wolf and looked at Jung-hoon inquisitively before bolting deep into the wooded area by the creek. Once the animal was out of site, Jung-hoon immediately went to the side of his brother, checking for any sign of life. Ji-hoon was unresponsive, and his body was already cold. Jung-hoon refused to leave his brothers side until their parents found them later that night.

20 year old Jung-hoon looked up from the Korea Times and wondered. The article in the paper was just like previous ones from 1980, 1984, and 1988. Every four years there would be an article detailing how a boy from the Osan area had been found dead along a creek that ran through the woods just south of his parents home. Always occurring in November, local authorities could not determine why this pattern had formed or what it meant. Some, mostly the jaded elderly type, had speculated it was the spirits punishing naughty children but nobody really paid much attention to those sort of theories. Plus, Ji-hoon was a good kid if a bit loud at times but who wasn't at four? Authorities were cautioning people to stay away from the wooded area, with the police having promised to patrol the area in hopes of ensuring any children who may get lost can be found before the worst could happen.

Jung-hoon rubbed his eyes and contemplated the article. He wondered about the first strange death when it had occurred in 1980, when Ji-hoon died. The second happened in 1984 while he was in high school, this time a young girl just a little bit older than Ji-hoon was when he died. Finally there was this most recent incident, again a child around the same age as his brother had been suddenly was found dead in the woods. This was too specific of a pattern to be passed off as accidental.

As he finished his coffee, Jung-hoon decided that he had to address his nagging curiosity. That weekend he drove to his old neighborhood and parked next to his family home. With the death of his parents a year prior, the family home was now owned by a young family. Jung-hoon paused as he looked at his old home, knowing that the young children now living there could be at risk to whatever caused the deaths of those children.

After a few moments, Jung-hoon headed into the woods following the paths he had once played on with his brother. Eventually he reached the wooded area where he had last seen Ji-hoon. Once again, he descended from the top of the waterfall to where he had held his baby brother all those years prior. Tears rolled down Jung-hoon's cheeks as he looked at the

place where his brother drew his final breathe. Guilt rushed through Jung-hoon, he should've done more. He should've been quicker to catch Ji-hoon. He should have not started that silly race. He should have...

As Jung-hoon blamed himself a rustling came from the woods adjacent to him. A white wolf stalked its way towards Jung-hoon, baring its teeth as a low growl rumbled from it. Jung-hoon didn't run, instead he stared at the ground and spoke to the animal.

"Ji-hoon, it's me Jung-hoon. I have come to talk to you brother."

The growling slowly stopped, but still the wolf bared its teeth as it looked at Jung-hoon.

"It's been you hasn't it? You're the one killing the children who have come into the woods. Your soul has been twisted by your anger that your life was taken so young. Please, you have to stop this, they're just children. They don't deserve to die, just like you didn't deserve to die all those years ago."

Jung-hoon eyes were fixated on the wolf.

"If you don't let go of this anger, you will never have peace. You are better than this. We mourned for years after you passed. I did too. We loved you."

With its head hung low, the wolf let out a soft whine. Jung-hoon was convinced that the animal had to be Ji-hoon. Somehow. The real question was if he was able to get through to his brother.

"Please brother, you need to let go. Mom and dad are calling to you, can you not hear them? Please, join them and you'll finally find peace."

The wolf looked up at Jung-hoon for a moment. The two locked eyes as the wolf's color started to change. The white fur started to shift darker until it eventually reached a deep gray. Once again, a light mist formed as the wolf trotted back towards the woods. Jung-hoon shivered as he watched the animal leave, he wasn't sure if any of this was real or if he was so grief stricken he had developed some sort of psychosis. Ultimately, he didn't care. If he was able to help his brother one last time, then that's what he did.

As Jung-hoon made his way back to the top of the waterfall's cliff, he peered back trying to catch a glimpse of the wolf. To his surprise, only his footprints remained where he and the wolf had stood face to face.

Chili's Thoughts:

Not a great effort. I have to believe that you know that. This piece is riddled with clunky prose and technical errors that even a semi-careful editing pass would've caught. As for the conceit of the story... it's not bad. The problem, however, is that we only see snippets of the parts that actually matter. Who's quest is this? The wolf kid arguably seems like a more interesting character, and he also gets the arc. Why aren't we following him?

Decent idea, poorly executed on a technical and creative level.

DM/Loss Candidate

Lazy Beggar
Workout

"We'll be in touch."

He didn't even look up when Stacy thanked him. She left knowing he wouldn't be in touch. She didn't know why she had even applied for this job. She wasn't remotely qualified. She didn't know why they had bothered to bring her in.

She waited at the metro station on a busy platform. Her train arrived and a mass of people flooded out, including an overweight woman. Stacy tried to ignore her smell as she passed. She saw two suited men give each other a look. The men got on the same carriage as her.

"How does some let themselves get like that?"

"I don't know. You could smell her from the otherside of the station."

The two men laughed. Stacy looked at her legs. They stretched her skirt and she couldn't look away from the cellulite that spread across her thighs. She had to resist the urge to check if she didn't smell too. Her cheap clothes didn't allow for much airflow and interviews always made her perspire.

Her stop came and the two men moved to the doors. She remained in her seat. The next stop wasn't far and the walk could do her some good.

She walked down the street, averting her eyes when people passed her. As she waited for the lights to change, she looked up and saw a billboard advertisement. "Workout with Jane Fonda. Get fit in your own living room with Jane!" Now there was a body worth envying! But

more than that, the smiling movie-star fitness expert seemed sincere. As if she really wanted to help her. She crossed the street, wondering what it would be like to have a body like Jane's.

A little while later, Stacy realized she had been walking for too long. She had walked a few blocks beyond her apartment. She checked her watch and saw that she didn't have much time until she had to pick up Rebecca from school.

"How'd it go?"

Stacy shook her head and smiled at her daughter. "*We'll be in touch*," she quoted, "Learn anything exciting today?"

On their way home, Rebecca energetically narrated her day in great detail. Stacy laughed and gasped at her daughter's story, interjecting with questions when they were needed. But her latest failed interview lingered in her mind.

That night as Stacy worked her shift at the diner, her uniform felt tighter than usual. She felt her skirt struggle against her thighs as she wiped up the spilled coffee and food debris the last customer in the diner had left. It was almost 2am and she her shift was meant to have ended at midnight, but a rush had caused her to stay and help. Her boss hadn't so much asked her to stay as told her. She put on her coat and had her hand on the handle when her boss came out front.

"Before you go, can you answer me a question, Stacy?"

He was carrying some important documents and was too busy looking at them to look at Stacy.

"Do you like cold coffee? No, I didn't think so," answering for her, "And neither do our customers."

She apologised without really knowing what he was referring to and left.

When she got home, the TV was blaring and Rebecca was asleep on the sofa. She turned the TV off and got a blanket for her. She went to bed exhausted and dreading tomorrow.

The weeks passed with Stacy working at the diner and going to a smattering of interviews and working more at the diner and never hearing back from anyone.

One evening when Rebecca was at a friend's house for dinner, Stacy sat in front of the TV eating a microwave meal. She never bothered to cook if Rebecca wasn't there. As some show she wasn't paying attention to ended, she saw herself in the black screen and looked away. She was going to have to buy a new uniform at this rate and here she was watching other people live fictitious lives. The adverts started, offering false promises and empty hope. Then Jane Fonda appeared with that honest smile and quiet conviction. Become a better person she demanded. Somehow with kindness in the command. Have a better life she promised. Stacy knew they couldn't afford the videos, never mind the VCR machine to play then. But she had to see what Jane was offering. So she called the number and gave her card details. She would have them in a week they assured her. She felt lighter at work that night. Her shift felt less arduous as if only pleasant customers were out that night.

The tapes arrived and Stacy waited another week before she put the VHS in the machine. What if nothing changed? She didn't have any of the fancy, bright leotards like Jane, so she wore some ill-fitting t-shirt her husband had left behind and some old tights that were too shabby to wear at work.

"What are you doing?" Rebecca asked.

"Trying to improve myself."

She hit play, and the music offered change.

Jane appeared on the screen, folded over at her waist, touching her toes. She raised her head with grace, like a blossoming flower, and asked, "Are you ready to do the workout?"

Stacy had thought she was, but after ten minutes of strange shapes that hurt more than Jane let on and a lot rhythmic counting, she lay on the floor and thought she might have a heart attack.

"Is that how you improve yourself, mom?"

Stacy lay on the floor with the tape still playing. "- 6, 7, 8. Don't forget to breath -" She wasn't going to forget. The only thing Stacy was aware of was the need for oxygen. She eventually got up and turned the tape off. She had failed just as she had feared, but she knew she'd last longer next time.

During the following weeks, Stacy worked out with Jane and her posse of slender friends. She knew Jane's lines now and could last the full duration of the workout.

One evening she sat alone in the kitchen eating a proper meal. The phone rang.

"We're sorry to inform you -"

Another rejection, but Stacy was sure they were being genuine when they had said they'd keep her details on record. The next one! She knew it. She got ready for work. At least she didn't have to worry about buying a new uniform now.

She had noticed that her boss had said very little to her recently and that evening it was no different. It wasn't that he had mellowed and found some consideration for others, he had just increased his vehemency against the other servers.

"You disgusting slob! Clean that mess up, you idiot!"

Katrina, a young server who was new at the diner, had knocked some food off the counter. The crashing plate had brought their boss storming out of the back.

Katrina was on her hands and knees cleaning up the mess, and he continued to hurl abuse at her. Katrina was sobbing now. Stacy was in the middle of taking an order, but walked away as the customer listed off his demands.

"Hey, I wasn't finished!"

She walked up to her boss who looked at her in surprise. Stacy slapped him and let him know that he was a piece of shit. His bewildered face made him look pathetic. She had almost left by the time his wits had returned, but he didn't manage to fire her before the door slamped shut. It was only 9pm. Rebecca would still be up.

"You're home early."

She hesitated in telling her what she had done. How were they going to eat or pay rent now? She told her daughter that she didn't have a job now. Rebecca turned the TV off and hugged her. Stacy told her everything and Rebecca listened. She laughed at the slapping and said, "I don't know anyone who deserved that more."

Everyday she scrolled through the classified ads, looking for anything now she'd lost the diner job. She found a secretary job she wasn't qualified, applied, and few days later was asked to come in for interview. It couldn't have gone better, and Stacy actually believed they would be in touch.

On her way home, sitting on the train, she saw two women snickering at another woman who was struggling to get off because of her size. It was still two stops away from Stacy's

but she decided to get off anyway. She asked the people to move, so she and the other woman could get off.

On the platform, the woman thanked Stacy and speculated that they people would have never moved if she hadn't said anything.

"I don't have the confidence to say anything," the woman said.

"If it's confidence you need - "

When Stacy got home, she changed into her shabby workout gear and popped the VHS in the machine.

"Are you ready to do the workout?"

Damn straight she was.

Lots of problems here. Too many too count. You started 34 sentences with "she" and that was a quick count. Apart from that... I guess nitpick, there's a lot of issues here. You didn't proof this, or if you did, you didn't do so carefully. Lots of technical errors and hardly any action whatsoever to carry the story. I don't really know what's supposed to be interesting about any of this. It's... a fine thing for a person to go through but we don't earn any of the catharsis you're trying to summon up for your characters.

DM/Loss Candidate

QuoProQuid
Call and Response

"Investigators closed their case into the Office of Pennsylvania Treasurer R. Budd Dwyer. Dwyer, who made national headlines after his televised suicide last..."

"...Tower Commission is expected to produce its findings into the alleged arm transfers. The White House dismissed..."

"The bomb exploded, seriously wounding the store owner. Salt Lake City police are asking for tips—."

Terry turned the dial. The rig gave a sharp electric pop and the transmission disintegrated into silence. He flashed a smile at Eddie, rigid on Terry's bed, his mouth forming a small 'O.'

"Pretty fuckin' neat, right?"

Eddie sprang from the mattress, shaking the house as he landed on the carpet floor. Miniatures rattled on their shelves. A small, painted Revolutionary War soldier toppled into a pile of dirty laundry. From the bottom of the stairs, Terry could hear his mother yell a polite warning before walking back to the kitchen to eat the rest of her rotisserie chicken. His mom hadn't been able to get to work due to the storm.

Outside, they could hear the wild screams of children as they slid down a nearby hill. Terry had never understood the appeal.

"Neat would be an understatement. Gosh," said Eddie as he looked up and down at the ham radio's corroded exterior. "Better than a trip to Disneyland."

Terry smiled. "Yeah, I had to practically *beg* my mom to let me keep it. Dad got most of the parts from military surplus, but the wiring was shot. I think mice got into it."

Eddie grimaced. "Ew, gross."

Terry giggled. For all of his smarts, Eddie was astonishingly bad at hiding his squeamishness. During the Christmas pageant in the first grade, he had run off stage, screaming, after some girl vomited. Last year, they had snuck into a showing of *Aliens*. Eddie's horrified wails had brought out a pimply-faced usher, who had escorted them out of the theatre. Terry never asked about it, but he was pretty sure Eddie had nightmares for weeks.

Eddie wiped his hands against his pants. "What's the range on this thing? Can you get stuff from, like, China?"

Terry held up a finger and flipped the machine back on. He'd been waiting for this moment. Planning the reveal. The machine belched out watery static as he spun the dial outside the AM/FM radio band. Then, with a magician's twirl, he pulled out a receiver.

"Hello. Hello. This is K3TCR testing from Erie, Pennsylvania, United States. I repeat, this is K3TCR testing."

The machine gurgled and croaked. There was dead air. Hairs stood up on the back of Terry's neck. He glanced at Eddie, nervous. Seconds passed. Then—. "Hello, K3TCR, this is AA4JR

reading... loud and clear from sunny Christchurch, New Zealand. How you doing up there in the U.S. of A?"

"Oh man, that's sick," whispered Eddie as Terry thanked the man and signed off.

Terry nodded, trying to repress his smile. "Extremely sick."

"Can I try?"

He stopped, caught off balance. In hindsight, it seemed obvious that, after showing it off, Eddie would want to play around with his radio.

Terry swallowed. "Uh, sure. Knock yourself out, just don't go—."

Eddie grabbed the dial with uncharacteristic vigor and spun it. The machine whirred. Small snippets of broadcasts bounded through the room. There was a flood. A French woman sang. They heard snippets of Chinese. Something beeped loudly. Then, there was a voice shouting through static like someone shouting in a rainstorm.

"Odin, dva, tri! Odin, dva, tri! Cosmonaut... Yelena Bykov... Can't... Mayday! May—."

Eddie spun to a different frequency. A band played on.

"Hey! Hey! Turn back!" Terry shoved Eddie aside and turned the dial. He grabbed the receiver. "Hello. This is K3TCR listening. Do you read?"

Through the noise, there was a gasp. She shouted something Russian. Then, her signal gave out.

Eddie didn't arrive until noon the next day, his backpack bulging and snow caked to his jeans.

Before he could say anything, Eddie opened his mouth.

"Sorry," he said. "My dad made me shovel the driveway and I had to stop by the library to pick up..."

He unzipped the bag and overturned it onto the bed. Out came a small flood of books and papers. Terry picked up one labelled "Easy Russian Phrase Book." A sticker on the side promised "Over 700 Phrases for Everyday Use!"

"I think the librarian thinks I'm a communist now, by the way." Eddie said with deadpan seriousness. He smoothed out a rough cover with a rocket and a series of indecipherable lettering on it. "You sleep okay?"

Terry nodded, but felt exhausted. He had put on his pajamas inside out and backwards to make sure there was another snow day, but the school had called the night before. Worse, his mother had used it as an excuse to "bond with him," heating up frozen pizza and turning on a movie. When he told her that he was more interested in playing with his radio, her face crumpled.

Before going to bed, Terry had spotted her sitting on the couch in the dark alone and had spent the whole night feeling guilty and restless.

Terry cleared his throat. "You think she's in range now?"

"I dunno. Only one way to really find out."

He flipped on the radio and turned the dial, scanning back and forth across the band they had found before. "Hello, hello. This is K3TCR reading from—."

The static erupted into a series of cries. "Listen. Listen. Come in." The woman on the broadcast shouted something in Russian with an intensity that made them both jump. Terry turned down the volume and listened for the sound of his mother's feet on the steps. "Bad English."

"Uhh..." Eddie grabbed the phrase book off the desk and flipped through it. "Tell her..." He paused. "Amerikantsy. We are Americans."

"I think it's pretty freaking self-evident that we're Americans."

The woman's voice broke through the wall of static again, shouting static-ridden phrases in broken English. Her signal seemed to be getting weaker.

"Just tell me... Just..." Terry massaged his temples. His heart thudded in his chest. "How do you say where are you?"

After flipping through the pages, Eddie told him. There was a pause on the other end of the line.

"Ship. Circle moon. Hot." Eddie translated.

"Okay. That's progress," said Terry. "How did she get there? Why?"

There was a long, rambling response interrupted by sobs and panicked heaves of air. The only words they could pick out were "sorry," "test," and "Reagan."

"What do you want us to do?"

Eddie leaned over the book, but there was no need for translation. Amid the pops and crackles, the woman began to shout. "Help. Send help. Please, God, help."

"Look, if you'll just listen—" Terry said, squeezing the cord of the kitchen phone.

The voice on the other line of the telephone was sharp and venomous. "Oh, I'm listening, and, frankly, I think it says a lot about your generation's lack of respect for authority—."

"But if you'll just listen! Please, there's gotta be someone with a telescope or someone who can turn on the radio for five minutes to—."

"The congressman has better things to do than deal with crank calls. Call this line again and I *will* report you to the local police."

"But—."

There was a loud slam and the line went dead. Terry pushed his head against the kitchen wall and closed his eyes. The low drone of the dead connection filled his brain.

"We could try the White House again?" Eddie said in an attempt to be helpful. There was a rifling of pages as he went through the phonebook. "Or... NASA?"

"The White House didn't even pick up the first time. NASA is just going to tell us again that they appreciate our interest in space but that they can't respond to every request, yadda yadda."

"What about the Soviet embassy? Though, actually, I'm not really sure if they'd even be listed in the phonebook."

"I think that would get us put on a list somewhere."

"Oh." Terry could hear Eddie slump in his seat. "What now?"

They sat in silence. At the time, it had seemed so easy. All they needed to do was get on the line with someone, anyone. The president. Their congressman. Instead, they received nothing. The silence was worse than ridicule.

Behind them, a door jangled.

"Oh, hello, Eddie, Terry. I didn't expect to see you two down in the kitchen." Terry's mom set a set of grocery bags down on the counter. She looked back and forth between the two. Her eyes narrowed. "What's got you two down in the dumps and why are you on the phone?"

Terry put the phone back up on the rack as warmth spread into his face and his vision blurred. He could feel his coolness cracking, could feel Eddie's wild look, but he didn't care. "Mom..."

The woman did not speak much. Her signal faded in and out as she repeated the same phrase over and over in Russian. "Hot. It's hot. It's so hot."

Terry sniffled. Eddie stared at him, alarmed at the sudden emotion in his friend. "Mom, she's going to die."

Terry's mother sat on the bed and pressed her hands against the sides of her face. It was odd seeing her in this setting, among his dirty laundry and toys. She usually only went as far as the doorway. "I knew it was a bad idea to let your father bring this into the house."

"I don't know what to do."

"Honey, I don't think there's anything we can do."

"But... that's not fair. She's going to die and we don't even know anything about her."

"But her life is not your responsibility."

"Well, whose responsibility is it, Mom?" Terry shouted. There were no more screaming children among the hills. The world seemed dead and quiet. Eddie's eyes darted back and forth between the two. "Because Eddie and I spent the whole day trying to call people and we couldn't even get someone to look."

There were great, fat tears in his eyes now that he hated. His room was a swirl of colors, then, there was something pressing against him. A hand brushed over his hair. He wrapped his arms around his mother.

"Honey, it's hard to change things and sometimes people die. That's just the way life is."

They could hear the sound of labored breathing in the static now. Eddie sat against the wall, his head buried in his knees. Terry laid across his mother's lap.

"Hot. It hot."

There was a loud gurgle of static. She wept something incoherent.

"Please."

Her voice was soft and throaty, barely audible over the crackle of the radio.

"Help."

There was nothing but pops and crackles as snow continued to gather outside.

Oy. I liked every part of this until the ending. I didn't need a happy ending, but this was just such a fizzle and it picked up such ET, Stranger Things notes that I wanted at least some kind of moment at the end. Maybe this was intentional, if it were I'd argue heavily against this choice. Ultimately, I guess the kids learned a lesson in humility? That's fine and all, but what made this a good story? The prose, dialogue, and the overall handling of the point in time was well done enough to keep this on the upper end of things, but unless nothing else special gets submitted the best this can do is an HM and I'm not sure I'd fight for it.

HM Candidate

Crain
Hiding

Stevie spent another Sunday sitting at that dumb Macintosh box that Dad bought. He sits there, hour after hour, flying around a crummy looking helicopter in a purple desert listening to beeps.

"Are you trying to become Chunk? You'd actually be better off practicing your truffle shuffle than sitting here for another weekend." I threw at him, like I was spiking a football.

"Shuddup Robbie, you don't even want a turn." He mumbled without turning around.

That wasn't the point dweeb. He keeps doing this. Just running away and hiding when something goes wrong for him. Last time he spent weeks going to the movies after school watching Rocky or Rambo or whatever else they had playing, only coming home late after dark. Mom and Dad put a stop to that after he got kicked out for hiding out in The Goonies for a whole Sunday (On one ticket). He was trying to avoid them because he failed some classes. I don't know what he's hiding from this time though.

I went and grabbed a real football, and actually spiked him this time. "Who're you hiding from?" I asked, nicer than the thumped shoulder would suggest.

Stevie swiveled in the chair towards me, rubbing his shoulder. He kept looking down and mumbled "Jimmy". After a little more poking, prodding, and one carefully executed power bomb, down the hall, and onto his bed it turned out this Jimmy kid embarrassed Stevie at football tryouts. Now he makes fun of him every time he sees Stevie around.

"So you're not even going to try and get better?"

"Noooo. The only winning move is not to play." He whined, throwing a pillow at me. I put him in a headlock and gave him a noogie.

"You idiot, how many times did you watch that movie? And you still missed the point? The computer didn't win by not playing," I say, taunting him, and let him go, "Tell you what; If I beat your score at that helicopter game you have to come to the high school football practice, with me, for a month. We'll fix you up and then Jimmy'll never even be able to touch you again."

Stevie didn't say anything. He got up, walked back to the den and started the game up again. After a few screens of beeps and garbled mess on the screen he flew over to a green

block and let it destroy the chopper. I patted him on the, non-spiked, shoulder and told him I'd pick him up after school on Monday.

"Thanks" Stevie said, quietly, as I left the room.

Alright, Crain. One of us is out of our gourd. Either this story transcends my comprehension or it's a tight hot mess. I really don't know what to say about this. Thranguy writes good crazy stuff though from time to time so maybe he'll be able to parse it.

Deferring HM/DM/Win/Loss stuff to other judges. I don't understand this story and I won't respond to it.

ThirdEmperor's For the Millionth Time, Be Careful What You Wish For

Simon sat on the doorstep, his shoes flashing as he clicked his heels. The sky was chalk blue and wavering in summer heat, full of clouds strung out into long wriggling wisps. From the heat shimmering horizon at the ends of his vision where the sidewalk and asphalt pinched into a single point, there was a gleam of metal, and Simon leaned out to the very edge of his seat, wiggling his fingers and willing it to be.

"Be the mail. Beeee the mail."

It took seventeen wishes, three red and two blue and one powder blue, two butter yellow, one ugly beige, four beetle green, a black car like a hearse that belonged to old Miss B., and his parents -

"Howdy Simon."

"Yeah."

"How was your day Simon?"

"Yeah."

- before it WAS and Simon rolled off the edge of his seat onto the soles his sneakers with a clap, running forward to take the package from the mailman's hands, and heading through

the doors past the gauntlet of nagging from his parents up the stairs to his room and his bed -

He paused to breathe in the cardboard smell of new Things.

- and tearing open the packaging to extract from the death-clamp of bubblepak a Wish-A-Wand Really Works As Seen On TV No Batteries Necessary.

It was slender black plastic capped with white and utterly unimpressive. It came with a small manual that was, as Simon flipped open the first and only page, a disappointment.

'Be careful what you wish for.'

There was a knock on his door. "Simon?"

"Would you just go away!"

The next night Simon and all his friends were clustered around the glow of the screen, faces pale-lit, eyes aching, chip fragments ringing their mouths, the impressions of the boxy controllers' edges pressed red into the skin of their hands.

"So when are your parents coming back?" Matthew was affably fat, like the ur model that all other pudgy, glasses-wearing demi-Milhouse kids were following; he asked questions and he meant them, not like Simon's parents, who he knew only bothered out of some vague sense of parental responsibility.

"Maybe later."

"Maybe?" Matthew's eyebrows went up.

"I bet his parents ditched out. I heard this one kid, his parents just packed up and left, and a week later he realizes they aren't coming back." Chris was the con of Matthew, the flipside of the coin. Tall, handsome, jerk. Too much asthma to be a bully. Altogether they were more or less friends, or at least willing to settle for each other out of a lack of better options.

"Shut it."

"I'm just saying." Chris balled up a chip wrapper and shot for the trash. When he missed, they booed and he shrugged and nobody went to pick it up.

"Hey, wanna come over again?" Simon leaned across the aisle of the bus to grab Matthew's shoulder. His house loomed outside the bus windows, dark and empty.

"Uhh..." Matthew made desperate eyes to Chris, who leaned over the top of the bench seat.

"Dude." Chris said. "We've been over four times, and your house is a mess. When are your parents coming back?"

"Did they really ditch you?" Matthew asked.

"No!" Kids at the back were starting to yell for Simon to leave, go, get lost, but he stuck around a second longer to sneer. "They'll come back when I let them."

When the bus rolled off Simon was left alone with his empty house, going room to room grasping carefully through each doorway and finding the light switches by blind groping, banishing the *possibility* of monsters lurking behind each darkened threshold.

There were too many possibilities lately. Simon's brush with magic had only left him feeling less powerful than before, drowning in a world where anything could be real, especially things that scared him. Roaches scuttled from the piles of trash, chip wrappers skittering across the floorboards as the fans came on. Every movement was a split second nightmare and a dawning relief. The creak of the house settling as the heat of day rolled into night had always been comforting before.

Simon found the TV and buried himself as deep as possible in fantasy, sitting hunched over the controller, but there was no running. His mind refused to click with *Super Mario Bros* and slide out of joint with reality. The stairs loomed in the corner of his vision.

It was time to use the wand again. It was time to get his parents back.

The stairs creaked all the way up and down from his room. "Light," Simon whispered, and the wand began to glow as he headed for the basement. Faint croaking echoed up the rickety wooden stairs. The light switch was on the very bottom, and somehow, the pale glow of the wand with its shifting indefinite colors, so much like the light of a TV seen projected against a far wall, provided very little comfort.

Step by step, Simon braved his way down. Glossy amphibian eyes stared at him accusingly from an upside-down fish tank.

"Mom, dad. I'm gonna let you turn back into people, but..." Simon's eyes were going shimmery and hot at the edges. "You've gotta promise not to be mad!"

"Hey, whaddaya know. They came back!" Matthew tucked his hands in his jacket pockets and whistled. The house was clean, and smelled of Lysol, Simon's mom clattering away in the kitchen. Only Simon was still out of whack, with deep circles under his eyes.

"Hoo boy, I bet you got *whooooooped* when they saw that mess." Chris slapped him on the shoulder as he ambled past towards the kitchen.

"Matthew, I've gotta-" But Simon didn't get to finish his sentence before Chris had started to shout and wail.

"Holy shit. Holy *fucking* shit!" He came out of the kitchen running, bashing against the wall and upsetting the little side table with the phone which began to buzz in a harsh mechanical tone as it spilled to the floor with a crash and came off the hook.

"Now, honey-"

"Get that thing away from me!"

Simon's Mom was coming out of the kitchen. The Mom kind of skittered along the edges of the wall, never fully in view, a bland smile on its face. It made the rattling of plates and the hum of a vacuum cleaner as it came out, fuzzy and out of focus. It was if The Mom could only exist at the edges of things, always there but never given much attention. A long distorted arm stretched out, ending in a broom, and swept the fallen telephone into a fleshy scoop of a hand.

"Jesus *fucking* shiiiiit." Chris was going for the door. Matthew got one look at The Mom and was ready to follow, but Simon tackled him to the ground and pinned him there, slapping him.

"It's not going to hurt you! It's my Mom!"

"That *thing* is not your mom!" Matthew shouted, decorating Simon's face with spittle, and Simon began to cry.

"Play nice now." It said in its toneless, vaguely happy voice, retracting back into the kitchen.

"Yes, yes it is! I- I got this wand, and I wished them into frogs, and I thought it would be as easy as wishing them back but-" He was blubbing now, and had Matthew pinned under a rain of tears. "But it wasn't. I couldn't just make it go *back* I had to figure out how to put them together and- and I think I *missed* something!"

Unsatisfying endings seem to be the running motif this week. This wasn't bad. It was an easy read and for the most part had a good feel about it. I guess I wanted to see more of the cool stuff. Either see him use the power more or dive further into like... what happened to his parents and what's he going to do. Why did this end here? This is not an ending.

No Mention

Antivehicular's
Rainbowland

Half of Lookingglass Heights was moving away, and the neighborhood yard sale stretched to the horizon, dotted with neon signs: EVERYTHING'S \$1, FREE FURNITURE, LOOK LOOK LOOK. There were far more sellers than buyers, and Stephanie's yard hadn't had a visitor in almost two hours. Who could blame them for passing her by, though? The yard was covered with her mom's stuff, still coated in five years of dust from the spare room, and her old things that Dad had insisted needed to go. None of Dad's records or golf stuff, even though she couldn't remember the last time he golfed or played music. Nothing valuable at all to anyone but her, and nothing she could do about it but sit at a card table and try not to think about Mom.

At least the money was hers, though, what little there was of it. If she was lucky, Stephanie would have enough for the Trapper Keeper she'd had her eye on at the stationery store downtown; even if she didn't, she supposed she would have some for folders or erasers, the flower-shaped ones with a texture like frosted glass. There'd definitely be enough for erasers, and Stephanie guessed that was something to look forward to.

The stranger showed up in mid-afternoon, when Stephanie was disconsolately counting the cash box and wondering if she should just pack things in. She was a tall, lean woman in a peacock-blue power suit, with crimped peroxide-blonde hair and big dark sunglasses. She looked like California. What was she doing in Nebraska? As much as Stephanie wanted to

ask, she kept her mouth shut for the minutes that it took the stranger to browse, before the woman approached her card table. "Pardon me, dear, but how much is this little fellow?"

In her hands was Porthos, Stephanie's old stuffed penguin, the one she'd argued hardest to keep and had hoped the most wouldn't sell. With his thinning black fur and pilled yellow felt beak, who could want him but her? "Um," said Stephanie, "he's a quarter. All the stuffed animals are a quarter."

The woman slipped a hand into her bag. "I don't have any change. Would you accept a trade?" She was smiling as she withdrew her hand, and she was holding... a Trapper Keeper? No. *The Trapper Keeper*, with its brilliant neon landscape of mountains capped with glittering snow, a cyan river running through the valley as the sun set in brilliant pinks and purples.

"Wait," said Stephanie, trying to put together words. "Who are you? Are you, um, do you know my dad?" She couldn't imagine her dad putting together a weird prank like this, but who else even knew what she'd wanted? It had to be Dad.

"Just a friend, of you and of your friend here," the woman said. "Let me help you both."

"Um. O-okay." Stephanie stood up to take the Trapper Keeper. This was too weird, so weird she was almost tongue-tied, but it didn't feel bad. It wasn't like anyone smuggled drugs by giving away Trapper Keepers at yard sales, right? "Just... could you take good care of Porthos for me?"

"Of course." The woman smiled again and nodded, and Stephanie caught a glimpse of peacock-blue eyes beneath her sunglasses. "Enjoy."

Stephanie's new Trapper Keeper was the talk of her class for the next week, but it was hard for her to feel proud, knowing how much her classmates needed a distraction. Mrs. Havelka's fifth-grade class was disintegrating, right alongside Mrs. H herself. They were reading *A Wrinkle in Time* again, after they'd told her they'd done it in fourth grade, and Social Studies was all "independent thinking and reading" while Mrs. H went to the teacher's lounge. Homework was getting thin on the ground. "Your time is more valuable than that," said Mrs. H, and Stephanie wasn't too dumb to know why. Mr. Havelka worked up at the Air Command, alongside Stephanie's dad, and she and Mrs. H saw the same writing on the wall.

Whenever the fear came, the leaden weight in her heart when she looked up at the sky and watched the fighter-jet flyovers from Offutt, Stephanie took her Trapper Keeper from her bag and traced the outline of the mountains with one finger. She'd never seen real mountains, and she didn't think she ever would. It wasn't like they'd ever leave Bellevue. If she got to college, that'd be... 1993. What were the chances she'd see 1993?

The Friday afternoon of that first week, Stephanie let herself in and went straight to her room, leaving the lights off as she made her way through the house and up the stairs. Dad didn't like her wasting energy, even if he wasn't there to see it. Inside her room, she dug through her jewelry box until she found Mom's old high-school ring, hidden in the secret drawer. She slipped it on her finger, letting the cool weight of the white gold center her, comfort her. It was okay. It was Friday -- two days on her own. She'd get through. Time to start on homework.

When Stephanie pulled her Trapper Keeper out of her backpack, the smooth surface felt faintly warm to the touch. Something shimmered in the neon landscape's sky, and the sun seemed to sink below the horizon. Stephanie's stomach lurched --

And she was there, standing in the lime-green grass of the river valley, staring up at the gleaming mountains. Standing next to her was Porthos, half her height; his feathers were an iridescent blue-black, and his icy-blue eyes shone. "Stephanie!" he cried, in the squeaky voice that she'd always imagined. "You made it!"

"Porthos? Where am I?"

"This is Rainbowland," said her old imaginary friend. "We've been waiting for you. Let's go explore!"

This wasn't right. There was no magic. There was no Porthos. This was dumb kid stuff and Stephanie was probably dreaming or something, but...

"Yeah," she said. "Yeah! Let's do it."

Stephanie let Porthos lead her through the river valley and into the forest beyond, where fat pink flowers lined a path through ancient cedars and wide-eyed deer stopped to watch them pass. Rainbowland glowed, and the soft sunset light stretched on forever, until at last Stephanie's eyes were too heavy to go on. She awoke on her bed, at nearly midnight in a dark house, and yet her heart felt strangely light.

It'd be okay. She'd see Dad sometime this weekend. Until then, she had Rainbowland.

"Jason," said Stephanie, "I have to show you something."

After two weeks exploring Rainbowland, all brilliant color and shifting infinite landscape, she'd decided it was time to share it, and Jason Golden was the first one she'd thought of. She'd tracked him down in his fort in the old drainage ditch outside the subdivision, where the high yellow-brown grass hid his little lean-to with its tarp floor. She'd brought popcorn saved from the last Friday party -- Jason had been in detention again -- and that had gained her entrance to the fort, however grudgingly. She and Jason hadn't spoke in a week and a half. Stephanie didn't even remember why he was angry.

"What is it?" he said, and she pulled out her Trapper Keeper. "Oh, your dumb folder?"

Stephanie inhaled and told herself to be patient. He always got like this when his dad and brothers were deployed. "No, it's... it's magic," she said. "Touch it." She held out the Trapper Keeper, and Jason took it, eyes beginning to widen. He almost smiled. He touched it.

Nothing happened.

The moment shattered, and Jason was squinting at her. "What? Was it supposed to change color or something?"

"No, it's --" No, she couldn't. If it didn't work for him, how could she explain it? How did she know she wasn't just imagining things, that something hadn't broken loose inside her like Mrs. Havelka? "It's nothing. Just my dumb folder."

"You're weird, Steph," said Jason, but his face was softening again. "You wanna go play catch?"

"I guess so." At least they could share that. At least that was something.

When the air-raid sirens crashed into Rainbowland, Stephanie and Porthos were wading through a vast wildflower meadow, gold and burgundy and blue. She froze at the sound, and Porthos stumbled into her legs from behind with an indignant wak. "What's wrong, Stephanie?!"

"Don't you remember this sound? No, I guess you wouldn't. I wasn't bringing you to school anymore when they started doing the drills." Duck and cover. Curl up tight somewhere

hidden, or get to a shelter. As if it'd help. Stephanie forced herself to stay upright, watching the royal-blue skies for a sign.

"It's okay! You're safe here!"

"But..." Stephanie could feel points on her skin burning: Mom's ring on her finger, Dad's old keychain in her pocket. The half-heart BEST FRIENDS necklace from third grade, whose other half was with Jason Golden. She touches the ring --

Her vision was filled with dark purple haze. Beyond is a steel door, locked and barred. The edge of Rainbowland, the beginning of elsewhere.

Wherever Mom is, she couldn't follow. She reached into her pocket --

An underground control room, monitors flashing, alarms blaring. Her father at his console, white-knuckled, red-faced. Someone running. Someone else screaming --

No, not there either. She grasped the necklace --

The drainage-ditch fort, where distant sirens wail. Jason, huddled up in the dark. At once, she knew that she could be there with a thought.

"No," said Porthos, who must have known too. "Please, don't go! I need you. *Rainbowland* needs you."

"Porthos, I have to try --"

"We could only save so many. It's still not enough. Please, please, please!"

"I'm sorry, Porthos," Stephanie said, and clutched her necklace tight to will herself to the fort. She found her footing in the field, where blazing trails in the sky told her what she already knew. The bombs. Dad had said the Russians knew the Peacemakers were coming.

She crawled into the fort, where Jason sat just as she'd seen him; light glinted off the dog tags around his neck, right next to his half of the BEST FRIENDS heart. He clutched Sarge, his plastic stegosaurus, whose fins were still purple and pink with Stephanie's old nail polish. "Jason," she said. "Take my hand."

He didn't ask why. He reached out and took it, and she focused on Rainbowland in her mind, waiting for the lurch for one heartbeat, two --

She landed in the field again, still holding Jason's hand. Next to him, Sarge stood, ten feet tall, fins pearlescent. Porthos, she realized, was clinging to her leg.

The sirens surrounded them, and the deep blue sky flashed crimson and flame-orange. As the sky lit up, Stephanie was able to make out figures in the distance: other kids and their friends, each clutching some precious thing, their key to Rainbowland. They weren't alone, but... Porthos was right. It couldn't possibly be enough.

Stephanie hadn't cried, *really* cried, since Mom, but she wailed out a big throaty sob even before she felt the first tears hit her cheeks. Jason trembled, one hand in hers and the other on Sarge's neck, and then he joined her with a thin wail. All around them, the voices of the children of Rainbowland went up in a unified cry as the sky washed red and the horizon burned.

Rainbowland was here for them. Nothing else would ever be.

Hm. Well, I guess this was a story? I'm somewhat confused by the role some of this stuff plays. The mysterious woman kinda just seems like an explain away sort of mechanic and I don't know why she's doing the things she's doing. The whole escapism during a time of conflict thing isn't exactly new and I'm not seeing you bring anything novel to the concept. This is fine, but it doesn't do much to grab me.

No Mention.

CascadeBeta's
Five and a Quarter
Word Count: 1777

"Look, Zo never ended up coming here. She must have gone straight to the club. If I did, I would have gone with her. I loved her so much. I never wanted anything to happen to her."

Joseline Cross rubbed her chin. She had been working on the case of Zoya Kozlov, a young hotshot from the Liberal Democratic Party of America. Zoya had been described as charismatic, idealistic, and was extremely popular with both Americans and Russians. She had been planning to announce her bid for Florida Senator until she was tossed off of the roof of *Angel Klimaksa* and ripped her heart out on the Washington Avenue bus stop shelter. Joseline was running out of time, and Jack, Zoya's boyfriend and Joseline's former partner, was the primary suspect.

"I don't buy it, Jack. People saw her come here." Joseline walked to the table overlooking the Miami sunset over the coast. A storm was approaching, but the sun still managed to

pierce through the thickening clouds, giving the world a salmon glow. "Do you understand the gravity of this? This isn't about some dope fiend getting cut for his pocket change, or some kids robbing the corner store. The Reds are going to rip through with a vengeance because she was one of theirs. They'll haul anyone associated with her to Siberia. Including you."

He stood motionless.

"Everyone knows that you were with her. It doesn't take a genius to realize that you're going to be next. You know that, or have your senses been dulled so badly by retirement?"

Joseline threw her tan raincoat and slipped the holster with her nicked ASP-9 back over her shoulder. She'd hated carrying, but her line of work got a lot more dangerous after the surrender. As she headed for the door, she heard Jack sigh.

"Wait," he said. She turned back to him. "Okay, fine. She gave me this."

He gave her a black five and a quarter floppy. It had a circle with a line dashed through it in permanent marker.

"She gave this to me, and said if anything ever happened to her, to give that to someone we trusted."

Joseline stifled a chuckle, but she took it and flipped it over. The only distinguishing feature was the strange marking on the label. "I guess she trusted me more than I did her."

"Let me help you," Jack started, but Joseline held up the disk as if to block his voice.

"Absolutely not. It's not safe out there. Lay low until we can figure out some way to get you out of the country, because if there's trouble, I'm probably not going to be able to get back to you. There aren't many safe places left in a Red world, but we'll find something."

"President Gorbachev and Sovereign President Goldwater today reaffirmed the Treaty of New York, despite a terrorist attempting to disrupt the proceedings-."

Joseline turned off the television. It had gone from harmless background noise to annoying propaganda. She had been staring at the floppy for the past ten minutes, gin left untouched on the desk next to his still unpowered computer. She'd been shot at, beaten, been in car accidents and nearly thrown off a train, and yet this piece of flimsy plastic was drilling a well

into her stomach more than any of that. Someone was willing to kill for this, and she wasn't sure if she should crack open this safe.

She shook her head, then slid it into the slot and flipped on the computer. The machine hummed and a sharp beep squawked from the internal speaker. The screen flashed on. Random letters and characters began to scroll down screen like an out of control typewriter. Then, it stopped. The screen flashed and filled with the circle symbol.

ERROR 464 - UNABLE TO ACCESS DIRECTORY, USER LEVEL 0

Joseline ejected the floppy. It was an anticlimax, like seeing an underwhelming film. She hoped that she would have gotten lucky, but Zoya was paranoid, and rightfully so if the chalk outline was any indication. Still, she wasn't exactly a computer hacker, but Joseline knew who she might have reached out to.

The cuffport slid open. "Jos?"

"Gerald, I need your help," Joseline pulled the neck of her coat tight. The rain had picked up far more than she had expected. Even in the alley, the rain whipped through like it was in a wind tunnel. That wasn't the only reason why she was looking over her shoulder. It felt like every shadow had a thousand eyes, and they were all trained on her. The cool blue neon which bathed the alley from the Beachport Hotel sign out front did little to comfort her. Zoya's floppy felt like a sunbeam in the middle of midnight. She even felt uneasy enough to stop at Jensen's, both to spy on the surrounding areas as well as pick up payment for Gerald.

The port slid shut. The sound of latches and locks ran down the door before pulling open. Joseline hurried inside. The room was lit from a soft, single bulb hanging from the ceiling which left a glum shadow across the room. The walls were cement and unfinished, a plain bed, and the floor was littered with papers, books and magazines. A pair of box towers hid the door away from sight. The only spot in the entire room that was clean was around Gerald's computer desk. The desk itself was spotless, with a white computer resting atop emblazoned proudly with the letters IBM. The monitor was on, with green text glowing. Next to it, a old fashioned rotary phone was wired into the computer, with the handset off the hook on a pair of metal holders.

He was a squat man which showed off his unusually early balding. He waddled over to the computer and dropped into his wooden rolling chair. He shifted into a spine bending posture, leaning back as far as he could go while resting his head and shoulders forward

over the desk to clack away at the keyboard. He was the type of guy that was born at exactly the right place and time, and had exactly one thing he wanted to do.

"So, what brings you to my hobbit hole?" Gerald said. Joseline had asked him about once about how he ended up living in the back room of a hotel. He bummed off their business connection and could raid the breakroom fridge, and in return, Gerald 'creatively inserts' advertising for the hotel into the daily propaganda. She wasn't sure the deal was worth it for the owner.

Joseline tiptoed between clutter and pulled out the floppy. "I need you to get into this. It's time sensitive, so the quicker you can help me, the quicker I can be on my way."

"Hey, don't let that stop you. I appreciate the company," Gerald looked up at her and thumbed his large square glasses. "That being said, I want to know what's in it for me? I could always use a favor from someone on the right side of the law."

Joseline held up the six pack of Miller, with the unspoken addition of her silence.

"Good enough," Gerald snorted. He snatched the floppy from Joseline and slapped it into his computer. The text on screen wiped. The symbols started filling the screen, but Gerald responded with a furious assault on Joseline's eardrums, and it was washed away as quickly as it had appeared. Lines of code waved down the monitor.

"Aha," Gerald exclaimed, "Very clever, using a Skipjack encryption. Luckily the boys from Milwaukee already managed to expose that little exploit, and using the retired Russian alphabet as a key, too bad for my autotranslator-"

"How much longer?" Joseline asked.

With a flourish of his index finger, Gerald pushed one last button and said, "Done, and-whoa."

Russian text flashed on screen before being replaced with English: OB LEVEL ACCESS GRANTED, ACCESS MNOGO MISSILE SYSTEM? Y/N

"What is this? What does this mean?" Joseline's heart suddenly ramped into overdrive at the word missile.

The color had drained out of Gerald's face. He popped the floppy out of the drive and lept out of his chair. He ripped the phone cord out of the wall, and grabbed the modem. He

shattered the beer with his foot. He jumped up and dropped the modem into the top box on top of the stack. Joseline grabbed the floppy.

"Why didn't you tell me that was OB?" Gerald yelled.

Joseline stepped back to the door, "What?"

Gerald cut her off, "I thought you were looking for something harmless, some kid locked your case file or something, not to bring the whole goddamn Soviet army down on my head!"

This time Joseline felt her color drain, "What do you mean?"

"I mean that was OB level access, top of the top secret, like for Gorbachev's eyes only! And the thing about those kind of programs is that they phone home when accessed! So the KGB just got a warning that some fat *Amerikosy* is trying to wrench control of the nukes!"

Joseline looked at the disk in disbelief. How did Zoya get this? What purpose could it serve? Almost immediately, she answered her own question: in the hands of freedom fighters, it would paralyze the entire Soviet Union. They could fight them on their own terms, with mutually assured destruction.

"Get out!" Gerald yelled, but Joseline was already out the door. She broke into a sprint and ran for her car. Her legs couldn't push her fast enough. Every stride felt a mile long, and her entire body felt like it wanted to rip itself apart. She turned out of the alley and looked for her sedan. She panicked when she couldn't spot it, before realizing it was still where she had left it. She jumped inside. She struggled trying to put the key in the ignition. Her hands wouldn't stop shaking. Her body wouldn't stop. The key clicked in and she floored it. A truck nearly sideswiped her as she sped through a red light. Every part of her wanted to just skip town and head for the docks. Open sea would be safer than anywhere on land.

But what about Jack?

She slammed her hand on the wheel. She couldn't go back. She told him she wasn't going to be able to help him. The cops, or worse, would be at his apartment by now. He's on his own, but she knew that wasn't true. She cursed before turning around. Changing the world would have to wait.

Alright, another non-ending. I don't know, this is fine. Nothing new here and nothing to get me excited about reading it. There's a fair bit of technical woes in the piece that make it a clunkier read than it needed to be so you may have lost some goodwill through that.

Proofread more, make your dialogue an extension of the characters, and stop just asserting truths in your story that we're just expected to accept. Earn your shit.

Trex's
Stupid Punk

Kenny needed bail money. Of all the Horse Boys, he was my best friend. One time when we were kids, Kenny let me sleep in his bed for a month because my dad beat the shit out of me with belt until the belt broke and then he kept going with his hands and I thought he was gonna kill me if I ever went home. I was maybe eight.

One time when we were older, there was supposed to be this fight and we fucking showed up for that. The whole gang. People called up cousins, people they did drugs with, random dudes they meet at shows, folks they knew from stints in juvie or in youth homes, everybody. And everybody came. It was nuts. Whoever we was supposed to fight must have seen us, fifty something guys all decked out with piercings and spikes and mowahawks and shit, and decided it wasn't worth it. We had a party in the parking lot until the cops came.

We called ourselves the Horse Boys because we did drugs in an abandoned warehouse off of Old Horse Road and 52nd. We thought we were cool. And that we were tight with each other.

But then Kenny needed a thousand dollars for bail. And that's what this story is about. He needed money and we didn't show up for that. At all. I didn't show up for him. That's my point. The fucking eighties was when everything started costing money. You could swing a fist for free but everything else took cash. And his parents didn't help since he was a junkie and we... I guess we just didn't want to. So he sat in jail for a month waiting for his trial to start while we got high. Shortly after he was arrested, I remember being super stoned and looking at the rest of the Horse Boys and thinking... Kenny probably still has drugs in his room. And I decided to rob his house. He was my best friend.

Like the rest of us, Kenny lived with his parents except when he didn't.

I hadn't been to his house in a long, long time. But I found the spare key. Same place. Inside the fake rock next to the legs of the lawn ornament angel we'd blown apart with firecrackers. I got caught trying to open the backdoor by his sister. She was sitting on the roof in a lawnchair.

Stacey was so sexy. Thick, curly brown hair. Long eyelashes. Long legs. Always wore these

crop tops. Always pink. She was the opposite of punk. Of me. I always thought me and her would get together eventually but she was still maybe a year away from wanting to disappoint her father and I was nine months out from almost ODing on heroin and getting shipped out to Cali for rehab so it never happened.

Anyway, so Stace was like, "Uh, what are you doing?"

And I'm like, "Uh, what are you doing?"

You know, just being a dick or whatever. I didn't even know who I was talking to yet. But then I looked up and I realized it was her and then I realize she actually was doing something weird. It was like midnight, right? And she's sitting on the roof and she's surrounded by all these aerosol cans. I'm thinking spray paint.

I said, "Stacey, are you doing drugs? Because if you wanna get high I can hook you up with some shit way better than huffing paint."

She made this face like I was a fucking moron. Scrunched her nose up. "Uh, no," she said. "Like, science called and there's totally gonna be a new ice age if we don't do anything about it." She pressed down on the nozzle of a can. Shot it straight into the night sky. Hairspray. Not paint. "We all gotta do our part," she said.

"Or get a coat."

She rolled her eyes. "Are you here to rob us?"

"No," I said. "I mean, not the family. Kenny, yes."

"You're too late," she said. "Carlos hit us up two days ago."

I said, "Motherfucker. I should kick his ass for stealing from Kenny. Kenny's my best friend."

She said, "Well, he's still in the house. Uncle Rob's doing his Vietnam thing."

I said, "Oh, shit."

She said, "Yeah. He moved upstairs after Kenny got arrested. Carlos must've surprised him. Whoopsies."

I took off my belt and wrapped it around my fist. It had spikes. Real ones. "Do your parents know?"

She shook her head. "They don't pay attention to anything, you know that. I think they're just happy Uncle Rob is being quiet."

I looked down at my knuckles. One time when me and Kenny were kids, Rob placed his wallet in my hands. It was right before he shipped off to go to war. He told us to buy ice cream everyday and think of him. Especially if he died. But only part of him did. Then he came back and spent some time in jail for assaulting a police officer which I thought was rad.

Kenny said he was crazy now.

"How is he doing?" I asked. "Is he actually crazy?"

She shrugged. The hairspray mist drifted down over the orange glow of the backdoor light and it made everything kinda sparkle like a fairytale. "He's hard to live with," she said. "He has nightmares. Even when he's awake. It's like, hello, you're not a POW anymore. Wake up already. It's been, like, ten years. Get over it."

I told Stacey thanks and I went inside. I knew which stairs creaked and which didn't. I could have been silent. I called out to Rob anyway. It seemed safer. He appeared at the top of the stairs. Shirtless. Camo pants. Boots. Hair down past his shoulders. An unlit cigarette hung off his bottom lip. A half-empty bottle of rum in one hand. A pistol in the other.

I said, "Hey, I'm Kenny's friend. I don't know if you remember me. I was living here for a little while. Before you went off to Vietnam."

He blinked. "Oh," he said. "Yeah. I think so. Maybe."

"You gave us ice cream money before you left. Thanks, by the way."

"Oh," he said. "Oh, yeah, you. Yeah. You're welcome, man." He started to smile but he stopped midway through it. "What's the belt for?"

I looked down at my fist. "Nothing," I said.

He said, "Uh-huh."

I said, "I was going to try and swing on you. Seems kind of dumb now."

He said, "Uh-huh."

I said, "Do you have my friend up there? Or another cigarette? I could use a smoke."

"Yeah," he said. "I got both. Come on up."

I sat on Kenny's bed next to his uncle. Carlos was tied to a chair on the other side of the room. There was quite a bit of blood. What looked like cigarette burns. Pliers.

"You like Marborlos?" Rob asked, handing me one.

I said, "Yeah." He pulled out a zipo and lit mine and then another for himself. We smoked in silence. You know, my dad beat the shit out of me but Kenny's parents were, like, just absent. Mentally absent. How did they not know there was some dude getting tortured in the room next to them? That's crazy.

"Hey Carlos," I said. "It's me. I'm sorry you're getting tortured but it was kinda fucked up that you came here to rob Kenny while you knew he was in jail."

Carlos nodded but didn't say anything.

"You should apologize to me," I said. "Kenny's my best friend."

"I taped his mouth," Rob said. "So he couldn't scream."

I said, "Oh." Sitting so close to him, I could see that Rob had similar burns all over his body. Just older. Plus other scars. Nasty long ones. Old ones."Well, nod if you're sorry."

Carlos nodded.

I said, "I forgive you."

"That's good of you," Rob said, exhaling a cloud at a Dead Kennedys poster that was taped to the ceiling. "Forgiveness is good. You gotta learn forgiveness." He closed his eyes.

I said, "Can I take Carlos with me?"

Rob scratched his eyebrow with the tip of his pistol. "What kind of ice cream did you buy?" he asked.

"Chocolate Eclair Colonel Crunch," I lied. We'd spent all the money at the arcade.

"Anything else?" he said.

"No," I said. "That's my favorite."

"Will you go buy me some?" he asked.

I said, "What? Ice cream? It's, like, midnight, man. Nowhere is open."

Rob stood up. He tucked his gun into his belt and he reached into back pocket and he flipped his wallet into my lap. It was full of money. "Chocolate Eclair Colonel Crunch," he said. "One for me. One for you. One for Carlos. See if Stacey wants one, too."

"Yeah," I said. "Sure. I guess I could grab it all in the morning."

"Do that," he said. "And then you can leave with your friend."

There was \$700 in the wallet. Almost enough for bail. And if all the Horse Boys pitched in like forty bucks we'd have it entirely. I said okay and I left through the backdoor. The world smelled like hairspray. Stacey waved at me with her free hand. Her hairspray curled up towards the moon and the stars.

"See ya later," I said.

But I didn't. I spent all the money on drugs and I got high in an alleyway behind a Burger King. And I thought about killing myself for the first time.

OK, well I guess that's a realistic ending but it's certainly not one that does much of anything. The voice in this is strong, but that's to be expected coming from you. Apart from that, I'm not finding anything particularly engaging or novel here. I like that you went with a generally unlikable protag though.

Maybe HM, maybe.

A Classy Ghost Desperate Measures

“There’s something wrong with your police station,” Pat said from the door.

Antoine put down his pencil and ruler and looked up from the blueprints he was drafting. “What do you mean, something wrong?”

Pat took a few steps towards the drafting table. “I was looking up its dimensions for the fire station I’m working on and the measurements don’t add up.” He put his hands on the edge of Antoine’s drafting table and looked him in the eye. “Ant, there’s no way it’s working.”

“Show me, I got the plans right here.” Antoine reached for a roll of paper in the shelves behind him. He unrolled it on table.

Pat came around the table and pointed at a spot above the interrogation room. “See, the beams aren’t crossing at the right angle.”

Antoine picked up his tools, took a few measurements and ran the numbers on his calculator. He leaned back in his chair and ran his fingers through his hair. “Shit, it’s due for its first inspection soon, and I’m up for a bonus. How bad do you think it is?”

Pat shrugged. “It’s been slowly building up, like it’s supposed to, but I think it’s doing it in reverse.

Antoine stood up. “Okay, I think I can fix it.”

“You look nice tonight, Officer Branson,” Terry said.

Branson put his coffee mug down on his desk and looked at him through the bars. Terry had sounded weird... he had sounded *sincere*. An hour ago Terry was spitting and swearing, the same

as he always did when he drank too much and ended his night at the station. Branson turned down the volume of the small TV on his desk.

“What was that, Terry?”

“I said you look nice.”

“Okay.”

“Officer Branson, I got something for you,” said the perp in the other cell. Branson looked over at him. He couldn’t remember the guy’s name; he had been brought in after a fight broke out in an arcade earlier.

“Here, I been hiding this but I think it’s best if you have it.” He held a sharp sliver of metal outside the bars. Branson walked over and cautiously picked up the makeshift knife.

“I also think you look nice,” the perp said.

Branson looked at the two prisoners. “Are you guys high?”

Antoine and Pat stood in front of the door leading to the office’s supply room. It was a wooden, and plain. Antoine looked at Pat.

“You know the words?”

“No, not the current ones. I haven’t needed anything in a while.”

“Well, alright...” Antoine reached in his pocket and took out a small leather pouch. Inside the pouch was an eyedropper and a small vial of water.

“Is that- holy water, you have fucking *holy*...!”

“Shh, yeah, keep your voice down! And stay back.” Antoine held the vial at arm’s length and turned his face away, removing the cap. He shook the contents out over the door. The wood scorched and smoked where the water hit it. Letters appeared and flashed crimson for a split second. Antoine carefully put the vial and pouch back in his pocket. He opened the door.

“I can’t believe you’re a waterhead. Getting high off that shit melts your eyeballs.”

“Whatever, don’t judge, it just came in handy.” Antoine walked inside the room and looked through the contents of the shelves.

“What’re we looking for?” asked Pat.

“Hellstone rod, size 1-B.”

Pat nodded. “Yeah, that’ll work. Gonna have to put it real close to the beams though.”

Antoine bent over and picked up a dark red, marbled cylinder off a bottom shelf. “We’ll figure it out.”

Lee sat at the police station’s front desk, bored. It was a quiet night. He shifted in his seat and felt the weight of his gun on his belt. He didn’t really need that, did he? It’s not like he was going to shoot anyone. He took the gun out of the holster and looked at it, then tossed it in the trashcan next to the desk.

“Excuse me.”

Lee looked up. He hadn’t noticed the man walk in.

“Hi, can you help me?” Pat said. “My car was stolen, I’d like to file a report.”

“Alright sir, lemme get you the forms.”

While Lee was busy rummaging through his papers, looking for the right forms, Antoine snuck by on all fours, further into the station. Antoine knew exactly where to go, having designed the station himself. He’d just have to walk by the cells, get in the interrogation room, climb on the table, unscrew the vent, pop the rod in the ceiling and get out. If he was quick he could be out in a few minutes.

There were only a couple more officers on the floor tonight. It wasn’t difficult to sneak by them by staying low to the ground, both of them were distracted by the news on a television in the corner. The cells were a different matter. The officer in charge of watching the cells was standing in front of them, singing pop songs with the two prisoners.

“Pat was right, this is bad,” Antoine muttered to himself.

Branson noticed him crouched around a corner and stopped singing. “Hey bud, how’d you get in here?”

Antoine stood up. “I uh, I’m maintenance. Gotta check the vents in the interrogation room.”

Branson smiled. “Now I’m afraid I don’t believe ya, buddy. You know, sneaking into a police station is mighty suspicious.”

The two officers that were watching TV had noticed the scene and were now blocking the way out, smiling as well.

Antoine realized he was caught. “I’m sorry, I must have made a mistake. I’ll just walk back...”

“No, friend, you’re gonna stay with us! Now, if you’ll please walk inside this cell.” Terry moved away from the cell door and sat down while Branson unlocked it.

Antoine didn’t move, but neither did the cops. He noticed none of them had guns in their holsters. He took a step towards the two officers blocking the way, but they just stood there, arms crossed. He decided to try and push past them, and while they didn’t grab him or push him back, he was completely unable to get by. Antoine got back on all fours and tried to squeeze between one of the officer’s legs. He managed to get an arm and his head through.

“We’re not gonna hurt you, but we’re not gonna let you leave either friend! Whatever reason you had for sneaking in here was probably criminal and we gotta keep you around.”

Antoine ignored him and struggled to squeeze further between the officer’s legs.

“Is the issue that the cell’s too crowded?” asked Branson.

“Oh, if that’s a problem, I don’t mind moving!” said Terry.

“Aw, shucks, thanks Terry. You’re a swell guy.”

“No problem Officer Branson, I’m happy to help a friend.” Terry exited the cell and stood in the middle of the room.

Antoine realized that he wouldn't be able to escape between the officer's legs and sat back on the floor. He was at an impasse. The officers were clearly not going to hurt him, but they wouldn't let him leave either. He stood up and looked at Terry. "Hey you, come here."

Terry smiled at him and came over. "Hey, what's up new friend! Want to play a game?"

Antoine grinned back "Yes, sorta."

He grabbed Terry by the throat with one hand and shoved the hellstone rod in his mouth with the other. Terry's eyes immediately went round with terror, his screaming muffled by the rod. Antoine spoke words in a strange dialect. The rod began to shone bright red and smoke poured out of Terry's mouth and ears. Antoine spoke louder and faster, and the rod shone brighter. After a few seconds, a searing flash of light burst out of Terry's eyes and all the officers fell unconscious. Antoine threw Terry's body against the wall, where it crumpled to the floor in a heap. He spit out blood.

Pat walked into the back of the station "That guy at the front desk just fainted, what happened?" Pat looked at the comatose officers, and the dead man crumpled against the wall. "You used an incantation?! You're in a lot of shady shit man. Where'd you learn that?"

"Same guy who sells me my water."

Antoine looked at the TV in the corner. The news were on.

"Hold on, turn that up."

Pat walked over and turned the volume up. "... authorities have announced that the Berlin wall doesn't mean anything anymore, and it may now be breached by anyone who wants to leave."

"The Berlin wall..." Pat looked back at Antoine. "Didn't you do a bit of work on that?"

Antoine sighed. "There goes my bonus."

I don't know what to make of this one. The ending is on the better end of things for this week because at least there's some semblance of a punchline or an intention. Apart from that, there's proofing problems, unclear action (both on a technical and motivational level) and overall I'm not sure how all of this is connected. It ends up kinda becoming a weak heisty story I guess? I don't know, this was fine.

No Mention

Kaishai
Greed Is Good

"Right, Mark, in words of one syllable: sell all the shares. All of them. Now!" Tricia dropped the phone receiver into its cradle, then closed her eyes and waited for her stock trader to complete the deal. She knew the moment he succeeded. Fresh power crackled through her body, starting in her heart--some Wall Street wizards said they felt it in their heads first, but her bond with money had always been one of love--and spreading until threads of light made Jacob's ladders of her fingers. Safely alone, she threw up her hands and flung sparks to the ceiling with a joyous whoop.

The phone rang. "You're the best," she told Mark with feeling, then hung up: he had plenty else to do, and so did she.

First things first.

Tricia punched in a long-familiar number. As soon as the line clicked open, she said, "Ollie, my love, I've just offloaded all the university's Wal-Mart stock. Ten thousand dollars for the medical school and a hell of a surge for me. When can we meet up to work?"

"I've got a problem, Trish." Ollie broke into coughing before she could ask why his voice was so rough. Her nails scratched scars into her desk pad calendar in her alarm. "Some son of a bitch is draining the Isenberg trust. Almost all the liquid stuff is gone into thin air."

"Damn," Tricia whispered.

Ollie Anderson was a friend from college days, a man as gifted at portfolio management and financial magic as she. But all the power he gained by making money for his clients went straight into keeping himself alive. He had the virus, courtesy of a blood transfusion three years before. Normally his smart trading gave him the juice to stay stable while he and Tricia tried to create a cure, but if someone had undercut his most valuable portfolio....

Ollie coughed again, and Tricia's veins iced over. "I'll be right there." She hung up before he could say anything else and hit the door of her office at such a clip that it slammed back against the wall. "Cancel my appointments," she called to her secretary.

Tricia's pumps clacked down the tiled floor. Like her blood-red suit and closer-to-God curls, she wore them to tell the world she was powerful, capable, and competent, and yet she didn't feel any of those things during her white-knuckled drive to Ollie's bank.

She marched into his office and stood in front of his desk, forcing a thin smile. "Power lunch," she said. God, those hollows under his eyes! "Let's get out of here."

"Wait a second." Ollie rolled his chair toward a filing cabinet and pulled out a folder. His hands shook. Tricia moved to take it from him, but he slapped her fingers away, glaring. "Don't make me feel weak. It won't help."

"Don't wear yourself down before we get the money back, or I'll kill what's left of you."

"Yeah, yeah. With what? Penny-stock parlor tricks?" His mocking grin quickly faltered, and she grabbed his shoulder--gently--and gave him a share of her Wal-Mart power. Ollie's breathing eased even as he said, "You shouldn't do that."

"Of course I should. Now come on."

They took Tricia's Corvette to Ollie's condo, riding the elevator up. He pulled away the rug that covered the spell circle he'd cut into the floor, the middle of which was filled by engravings of an unfinished pyramid and the Eye of Providence. Previous rituals had scorched the wood; the air over it smelled like copper.

Ollie opened his file and rifled through it until he found a voided check. "One of my payments for managing the trust," he said. "Trish--" He sucked in air. It moved through his throat and nose without a rattle, but his expression stayed grim. "I think you're going to have to do the heavy lifting."

She just shook her head and drew her talismans from her breast pocket: a Krugerrand, for gold; a Silver Eagle; and a worn and folded bill, the first dollar she'd earned. Arranging them around Ollie's check in the center of the circle, she held out her hands and shut her eyes. "*Follow the money*," she whispered with voice and mind.

The lightning crackled between her fingers again. With her inner eye, she saw it--saw it extend from the tips of her nails to the cash on the floor, then to the check and *through* it, seeking its source and fellow tributaries. It zipped through New York, invisible except inside her head. There, it darted to Wall Street, to Morgan Stanley, to Goldman Sachs and smaller buildings. But it was in Chase Manhattan that it lingered, and she fed the spell more power until it gave her the name on the account there.

"John Ewing," Tricia said.

"*Ewing*? I figured it had to be someone I work with, but Ewing's never shown a hint of power."

"Maybe he's only an ordinary man, Ollie."

"Ordinary and stealing from my trust? Mine?"

Tricia touched his shoulder, bony under his suit jacket. "You've had a lot to distract you."

He raked both hands through his hair. She'd never seen him defeated before, not even by his diagnosis. Now he stared into empty space, back bent, shoulders fallen, so that she could barely recognize the man to whom she'd been so attracted before money and magic had eclipsed lesser loves.

"You remember the trick you showed me once?" Tricia asked him. "Spinning the coin?"

He blinked and refocused. "You don't think... God, I wouldn't know whether to laugh or cry if that worked."

"Either's better than the alternatives."

"You're right. Yeah. I've got the bastard's address in my Rolodex--give me a minute."

This time Tricia drove them to an apartment building in Westchester, and not an especially nice one. John Ewing would, she suspected, have plans to move up soon. For now his name was still listed beside an intercom button. She buzzed; no one answered.

Ollie produced his own Krugerrand and pressed it against the door. The lock clicked open. "The great opener of ways," he said as he shoos her in ahead of him.

Ewing's apartment squatted in the basement. Tricia used the same spell to crack its lock, and sure enough, moving boxes lined the walls inside--though there didn't seem to be that much in the place to pack aside from basic furniture and a far-from-basic IBM PC. The man himself sat at the machine, whipping around to face her as she walked in. "What the hell?" he demanded. Then he saw Ollie and sprang out of his chair.

Ollie flashed the Krugerrand. "Sit back down, Ewing."

"I'm calling the cops!"

"No. You're going to look at the gold. Gorgeous, isn't it? Money's got to be the most beautiful thing in the world to you." Ollie spoke in a low monotone. He balanced the Krugerrand on his finger and set it spinning with a flick from his other hand, and the coin glittered with light reflected from the computer screen.

Ewing sank back into his seat, his eyes never leaving the Krugerrand.

"So beautiful. So mesmerizing. You'll do anything to have it and you'll always heed its whispers. Listen, Ewing. Hear it speak?"

"Mmm." Ewing was already dazzled. No wizard, he, Tricia thought: just a snake, clever but too weak to master his greed.

"You took the Isenberg money," Tricia said at the same soothing level, and Ewing nodded. "Put it back again."

"Nnn--"

She put the weight of her power into her voice and struck him with it. "Put it back!"

In a trance, Ewing turned to his computer. His fingers tapped keys, called up screens that flew past before Tricia could read them in full. But she saw the name of Ollie's bank again and again. Whatever Ewing did was beyond her comprehension--something that would have to change--but Ollie's sharp intake of breath and sudden laugh told her the result.

Tricia cocked an eyebrow at Ollie; Ollie nodded, smiling wide. Before Ewing could shake off his enchantment, she placed her palm on top of his PC and sent all the energy she had left from the Wal-Mart sale through its circuitry. A spray of sparks flew out of the vents.

Ewing still sat there, waiting for more orders. Ollie delivered them. "Forget every password you know, forget we were ever here, then sleep."

Tricia had to support him on their way back to the car. Erasing memories was a terrible drain, but a smile still livened up Ollie's face--he was a man without fear for just a few minutes, and she hugged him hard before she got in the Corvette.

Maybe they would have shared more than a hug, if more had still been possible. Maybe Ollie thought so too and that was why his smile was gone by the time he'd buckled his seat belt. "I'll

have to postpone our next trials until I get another surge," Tricia said, shifting the car out of park. "At least you shouldn't need magic to fire Ewing."

"Nothing could be easier than that." Ollie sat in silence while buildings rolled by. Finally he said, "All we do is buy time, Trish. And probably not much more of it."

We'll cure you, Ollie-- But Tricia pressed her lips together to keep in the words. Some things might be beyond money to fix. Beyond magic. So instead she reached for his hand and said, "Buy low and sell high. That's what we do."

His fingers curled around hers, and for once the warmth in her heart had nothing to do with money.

Cool cool. A story with neat things that has stuff happen in it... and hey a good ending! Not a whole lot to complain about, except that I think you may have been trying to show us early that there's magical stuff going but I wasn't sure if your invoking metaphor or just being dramatic in your writing. Kind of made it confusing and I wasn't sure what the thrust of the piece was until the magic became more apparent. If you specify things a bit more, up front, it would be easier to detect and would strengthen the piece considerably, imo.

HM/Win Candidate

Newtestleper

Count your nuggets before they're dipped

Des Drummond stood behind the counter and surveyed his cathedral of plastic, glass and brown tile. The carpenters had been out for a week, and the shiny franchisee from Auckland had retired to his room at the Park Royal for the night, on Les's dime of course. It was silent, but he could feel an ancient electrical pressure in his ears, like the sound inside a seashell. He took off his shoes and laid them on the counter, as if the click of his heels on ceramic crack the place in two. He felt tender. A few steps away, behind the fizzy machine - the soda fountain - was a button that would illuminate the acrylic tower outside, cast the light of his humming yellow beacon across an island. He hadn't let them test it. His was the first McDonald's in Christchurch. His.

It had taken Des a while to develop a taste for the food. The mayonnaise and bread were too sweet, the cheese like yellow rubber. They couldn't make a boiled egg. And why you'd need dehydrated onions when they were ten cents a pound down at Neville's he didn't know. He didn't

know what that was in kilograms - that was one thing the yanks got right. He still preferred a roast on Sundays, but he could stomach a cheeseburger, quite liked the battered chicken pieces called nuggets, and had no qualms eating a medium fries all to himself.

But he was nothing if not practical, and if there was anything that carpet manufacturing had taught him it was the value of getting stuck in, of knowing your business better than the next fellow. He knew a correctly dispensed ice cream - soft-serve - as well as a nicely cut multi-level pile. He knew a Big Mac from a McFeast. He slid one foot over the floor as he stalked the dining room on his final check, feeling the places where errant specks of mortar snagged the fibres of his sock.

The opening would be grand. Tomorrow a baying crowd of Linwood barbarians would be unleashed upon his red-capped regiment of servers and cooks. He puffed out his chest with confidence and pride in the perky youngsters that he'd trained. Never had his work chairing the board of the Lion's club been so richly rewarded as when he saw the speed with which they constructed and packaged quarter pounders.

Wool prices were falling, and carpet profits were rising. But the business of flooring had taught him never to stand still. The world wouldn't leave Des Drummond behind. He locked the doors behind him, looked up at the great, dark golden arches, breathed in deep, and strode across the car park, shoes still in his hands.

I mean... what is this? It's barely even a vignette. I don't quite get what it is you're trying to capture or trying to say with this piece. It's fine, it reads OK, but you're just talking about how a guy is and what he feels. Meh

DM candidate

Yoruichi
Going Home

Acrid smoke and the screams of the wounded chased her as Brea sprinted along the battlements. What have I done? she thought, her breath coming in ragged sobs. Cold wind rushed up the castle wall and through her hair as she slid to a stop at the very edge, teetering over the precipice below. She looked back; more soldiers were chasing her, and the ones trying to protect her were dying. All because of her. No more, she thought, and let herself fall.

Her scream crashed in her ears as she tumbled through the air. *What have I done?* Her power rushed unbidden to her, pushing against the air as she fell, stretching it, clawing at it with desperate fingernails. A tiny snick, a tear; she ripped at it, forcing open a gap between herself and the ground that was rushing up to consume her. With sheer force of will she tore open the fabric of the sky, and vanished.

"I'm telling you it's too cold today," Brea said, spinning her copy of Scientific American around to face Robert with one hand and spooning multi-coloured cereal into her mouth with the other. She jabbed a finger at the article she'd been reading, fluoro bangles clacking on her wrist.

"I still think the launch will go ahead," Robert said, his chair creaking like an angry duck as he rocked it back on two legs. They'd scoured the second hand stores together to furnish their first flat. Their ancient oak dining suite was their proudest find, though the chairs creaked and the table was propped up with beer coasters to stop it wobbling.

Brea smiled at him. Robert had curly ginger hair that she loved to run her fingers through, and was wearing his favourite NASA t-shirt. When she escaped her home dimension she never would have imagined that she'd end up living in Florida with someone as sweet as him. How different her life would have been if she'd stayed. The sole carrier of a great power, a prized weapon jealously guarded, a beacon for conflict and pain. I hope they never find me, she thought.

"Besides, we both took the day off specially. Please Brea, let's go."

She leant forward and planted a kiss on his cheek, the beard he was trying to grow faintly scratchy against her lips. "C'mon then," she said.

On the bus to Titusville Brea snuggled against Robert, his arm around her shoulders. She blew a pink gum bubble at the disapproving stare of the blue-rinsed old lady sitting opposite them, making Robert laugh.

A moment of *wrong* in the sky outside the bus window caught her eye and Brea went rigid with shock. Like someone pressing outwards from the inside of a balloon the pale blue sky went white where it was being stretched. A dark mass of colour swirled at the point of the intrusion, pushing at the boundary between worlds.

“Babe are you ok?” said Robert.

She smiled at him, nodded, fighting to keep her breath steady as her heart pounded against her ribs. When she looked back out the window the sky was once again blue and clear.

Robert was grinning like an excited child as they joined the crowd in Sand Point Park. The air was full of puffy clouds of frozen breath and the smell of hot coffee. Portable stereos blared the radio coverage of the build up to the launch, competing with the high pitched laughter of a group of elementary school kids as they ran screaming around the adults’ legs. Total strangers nattered like old friends as they lined up at a cart selling coffee and doughnuts.

“Buy us some?” Brea said, nudging Robert in the direction of the cart. As he walked away she scanned the sky, searching for ripples or other disturbances. She clenched and unclenched her jaw, fearful of what she might be bringing down upon them.

By late morning Brea’s sense of dread had deepened in exact proportion to the rising excitement of the people around her. The sky showed no signs of intrusion but she could *feel* it. Like eyes boring into the back of her head she could feel them looking for her, searching for a way through. But they needed a hook, something extraordinary to grab onto from the other side to tear a way through the barrier between the worlds.

“Nine, eight, seven, six, we have main engines start...” came the voice from the radio, the rest of the countdown drowned out by jubilant cheers as a cloud of white smoke billowed up from the

distant launch pad. People clapped and whooped as the Challenger rose impossibly from the earth on its plume of fire.

Brea felt the eyes leave the back of her head and snap onto the rocket. No, she thought, not that! You'll kill them! But as she watched, gripping Robert's hand, ripples appeared across the sky and converged on the point where the shuttle's nose was pressing into the blue. Brea's heart pounded in her ears. She'd always known they'd come looking for her, but not like this. Please not like this.

The sky around the point stretched, turning white then black as a tear ripped open and a burst of energy engulfed the rocket. Flames bloomed orange against the deep blue sky. Brea saw them unfurl in slow motion, like a flower opening in the sun. They curled up the side of the shuttle, a death sentence sprayed in red and gold on the shiny white metal. Beside her Robert stood frozen, squinting up through his knock-off Wayfarers, gloved fingers wrapped tight around hers. She watched tiny beads of ice fall from his eyelashes as he blinked, infinitesimally slowly. Closing her eyes against her tears she pressed her lips against his, and vanished.

She arrived in the crew compartment of the shuttle with the shockwave from the explosion pressing like a pent up tidal wave into her back. The crew were all staring straight ahead, information on what had just occurred yet to reach them. She could name them all; their bright, hopeful smiles had been staring at her for weeks from the poster Robert had pinned up in their flat.

"Breanna, what are you doing?" said her father's voice as he materialised beside her, lips pressed into a tight line of anger.

"I've got to save them!" she said.

"Save them? Why?" said her father.

"Because it's my fault! It's my fault you're here, like this..." Brea said, a sob escaping her throat. The shockwave pressed against her, forcing her to take half a step forward.

Her father loomed over her in the cramped space, the cape of his formal regalia sweeping around his feet. "No. You escaped me once but now you must return to where you belong!"

The shockwave was creeping close to the first astronaut, the skin on his cheek compressing as the wave of pressure advanced.

Brea shook her head. "I'm not going back," she said. Gritting her teeth she loosened the restraints on her power and gasped as it surged into her veins. After so many months of disuse the feeling was at once intoxicating and terrifying.

"Enough of this! We have but a moment before the gate closes," said her father, reaching for her.

The pressure wave was lapping around the head of the astronaut now, poised to crash through his skull and obliterate everything its path. Orange light danced around the cabin as the explosion neared its peak.

Ignoring her father Brea focussed desperately on the crew. Energy crackled against the advancing force of the explosion and tendrils of swirling colour like oil floating on water wound around the still bodies as she bound them tightly to her and lunged back towards the earth.

Splinters of blue crashed around her as her father's hand grasped her wrist. "You will not defy me Breanna!" he shouted over the rising shriek of the tortured sky, dragging her back towards the tear.

"I won't let them die because of me!" Brea grabbed her father's arm and bound the waves of energy woven around the crew to it. His eyes went wide with shock as he realised what she was about to do. But it was too late. Reaching inside herself she yanked at the roots of the power. White hot agony shot through her body but she screamed and yanked again, severing it from herself and hurling her father and the crew backwards into the tear.

The explosion ripped through the shuttle, smashing through the seven empty seats.

Robert looked with surprise at the tears coursing down her cheeks. "Brea, are you..." but the rest of his sentence was drowned out by the collective gasp from the crowd at the distant puff of the explosion.

"...obviously a major malfunction..." came the voice from the radio, penetrating the moment of silence, the indrawn breath, before they were hit by the realisation that something was very, very wrong.

Brea buried her face in Robert's chest. What have I done? she thought. There was no going back now. But she felt lighter, free, for the first time in her life. She wrapped her arms around Robert as he stared at the two new trails spiralling across the sky.

"They'll be ok Brea," he said, voice wavering.

"I know," she replied. She lifted her tear-stained face to his and kissed him. "Let's go home," she said.

Ehhhh, OK. I guess I kinda liked this? I'm not one for stories that just kinda take an event a provide an out-of-nowhere explanation for them. But, I guess it's OK? At the very least, a character faces their past/weaknesses so you accomplished that much. This wasn't fully polished, but then, many entrants were this week. This is a pretty solid No Mention for me, but if it connected with someone, I could see it HM'ing and I wouldn't fight that.

No Mention

Sebmojo's
Aro Street Gothic

The old house burnt fast, like it was in a hurry to get to the good bit. Even though it was a big house, hungry flames were licking the bones when Tania got there. It was surrounded by a circle of rubbernecks, and she wheedled her way in with the help of her bony elbows. The flashing red lights of the fire engines lent a carnival atmosphere to proceedings.

"Cripes," she said.

"It's pretty, isn't it." The man speaking was tall, with a shock of dreads. He had a blanket around his shoulders.

"Yeah," she said, and laughed. "I mean it's terrible but at least there's some entertainment value out of it. I mean look at these people, they'd be home watching Radio with Pictures if this hadn't, uh..." She trailed off, looking at his feet. He didn't have any shoes. And the overlong bottoms of the tartan pyjamas he was wearing were wet and dirty.

She looked up at his face, lit by the firelight and pulsating red fire engine light. "Is it your house? It is. It's your house. Oh, god, I'm so so sorry."

His face was immobile, like an Easter Island statue, for a moment. Then the corner of his mouth quirked up, and down. “It was a good house. Maybe this is what it wanted. Blaze of glory, sort of thing.” For a moment all the expression left his face, like it was draining down into his legs.

“What happened?” Tania asked. The two firemen who’d been soaking down the neighbouring house twitched their hoses to the side, on some unspoken signal, to douse the remaining flames.

The man shrugged. “Candles, a cigarette, who knows.” His shoulders slumped. “The old girl’s gone now. Better find a motel for the night.”

Tania felt a pressure inside, like something inside her was a little bigger than she had internal space for. She opened her mouth to let it out: “You could come and stay with me?”

He looked down at her and his little smile felt like the sun rising. “Really? I don’t want’ to be a bother, I don’t even know you.”

She made a ‘pshaw’ gesture. “Sally moved out last week and we haven’t got round to posting an ad yet. Do you have anything you need to, uh...” She looked at the blackened remnants of his home.

“What you see is, unfortunately, what you get. I’m Quentin.”

“Sorry. We’re in Adams Terrace, up the top. A few stairs. Oh, I’m Tania.” They were walking down the long curve that led to Aro Street. She reached over and shook his hand. It was warm, and firm.

The next day it was howling, blustery winds making Tania’s little wooden house shake and creak. She lay in bed after waking, staring blearily at the stained ceiling. There was something... oh, yes. Wine. She’d sat up with Quentin, drinking wine. And smoking a joint. She smiled, and stretched. It felt almost like cheating, profiting on misfortune. Still, he’d probably find somewhere else soon enough. Tania lay starfished in her warm bed for a moment, then puffed out a gusty sigh and swung her legs around and on to the floor. Breakfast.

Quentin, it seemed, had the same thought. As she opened the door to the tiny dining room he looked up from the stove. “Ha! Just in time. Scrambled eggs, bacon, mushrooms, coffee?” She was gaping at him and he frowned. “Oh dear, you’re a vegan aren’t you?”

“I really, truly, bizarrely am not. I am the last non-vegan in the Aro Valley. So yes. That would be lovely.” She pulled out a chair.

“It’s a nice house,” said Quentin. “Why did the last guy leave?”

“Girlfriend.”

Quentin nodded. “Well. This is sort of forward, but if you’re looking for flatmates... I can cook. Breakfast.” He deposited a plate in front of her. “Voila, he said frenchly.”

“I should be all cagey, but actually some rent would be great. You’re in.” She took a bite. “Oh. Mm. How are you at dinners.”

Quentin was in the middle of a self-deprecating shrug when someone knocked at the door, hard. Rat tat. Tat. Tat tat tat.

His face froze for a moment. Then he pushed back his chair, carefully, and stood up. “I’ll get that. Flattie.”

Tania took a sip of the coffee he’d poured for her. That was good, too. Goodness. She should spend more time rubbernecking. Over her left shoulder Quentin was having a hushed conversation with whoever had knocked at the door. Something about that seemed odd. She looked, puzzled.

The door was at the top of a long wooden staircase up from the steep street, next to the kitchen bench. She saw Quentin’s back hunched over, his dreads swaying as he muttered. In the doorway was a woman, dressed in tatters and beads. Tania considered leaving it to Quentin, then thought it was unfair, for all he was clearly used to Aro Valley weirdos. “Hi,” she called out. “Are you looking for Timothy?”

Quentin turned and stood aside, a strained expression on his face.

“It’s, there’s, I’m really sorry. This is a friend. She.. lived in the house. With me. Could she stay a day or two?”

Tania caught her breath at the sight of the woman. Her face was too big for her head, and she had a headdress like some kind of down-at-heel nun with a fondness for the Sisters of Mercy. The

woman raised her right arm, bangles quivering with a rattling noise. "Flames, engulfing, blackness," she said in a conversational tone.

Quentin whirled and held his hands up, palms out. "Stay there for a moment, Belinda." He stalked over to Tania. "I'm really, really sorry - Belinda's a little odd, but she has a really good heart. Would it be too much of an imposition for her to stay for a day, maybe two? I feel obligated. I'll help her find a place."

Tania hesitated, then nodded. "Why not. Sure. She can stay on the couch."

Quentin looked at her, his face unreadable. "That's amazing. Thanks so much."

Nine weeks later, things weren't going so well.

Tania came out of her bedroom to find, again, a careful arrangement of black jellybeans in front of her door. Thanks, Belinda. The ashtray in the living room was full of butts, and she didn't smoke. All her duvets had gone missing. Tania knocked on Quentin's door. There was no answer. "We need to do the bills, Quentin," she called. Silence. She tried the door, but it was locked, from the inside.

"He's charcoal," said Belinda. She was standing in the kitchen, in front of a mound of dirty dishes. The dishes were crawling with ants.

Tania walked, carefully, to the bench. "Why is he charcoal, Belinda." She had a test tomorrow. She hadn't slept last night, kept up by the thuds and squirts of Quentin's acid house.

"He burns up people and leaves the bones." She reached out to the tap, and ran her finger along it.

"That's a beautiful metaphor, and I appreciate that it's personally meaningful to you after the house fire, Belinda, but it's not..." Tania felt a sob building up and stamped on it. She wasn't going to cry in front of this fucking weirdo, who she hated so damn much. That was just not going to happen.

"House fire?" Belinda's eyes were rimmed with shadow, and they were wide. "What house fire?"

Tania blinked, with an infinite vegetable slowness, like a flower closing at night. "Didn't Quentin live in the house that burnt down, with you? On Entrance Street, top of the valley?"

Belinda shook her head, left, right.

Tania stared for another moment, then nodded.

"Fine. Excuse me." In seven righteous strides she was at Quentin's door. She pounded on it. "Let me in, you fucker, you house-stealing fucking liar!" Bang. Bang. Bang, bang, bang, and the door suddenly opened, and a hand reached out and yanked her in and she sprawled on the floor.

The open door closed behind her and she heard a key in the lock. It was dark apart from a dim monochrome flickering in the corner. She scrabbled her way up the wall, felt her way up to the light switch, turned it on.

The room had been stripped bare of furniture, covered in duvets, nailed to the wall at six inch intervals. In the corner was her old tv, scrolling static dimly visible. Tania looked around. There was no way out.

Through the door, she heard the squeedle and thump of 'S Express'. She slid down the wall and hugged her knees. Flatting, she thought, really was no way to live.

I mean come on, is that really supposed to be a punchline? This is just a E/N room mate story. You told it well and all but what was its function? Meh.

No Mention

Friks's
The Chain

In 1986, 6.5 million U.S citizen joined hands for 15 minutes in a massive charity stunt. They paid ten dollars to reserve a place in line and linked hands with strangers from coast to coast. When the 15 minutes were up, millions of citizens released their hands from the chain, rubbed their wrists and laughed aloud feeling good about themselves.

The chain broke down piece by piece except for 180,013 people standing in-between Richmond, Virginia and Columbus, Ohio. After the event, for still as of yet unknown reasons, these unfortunate men and women were unable to let go of their partners.

The victims only recalled a crawling sensation on their palms and wrists during the event in question. Their hands had fused together and with no medical solution in sight, they had remained standing together, hand in hand, for two weeks.

“Chris, it’s your shift. Wake up.” Rich said.

Christine moaned in pain as Ivan and Rich pulled her to her feet. Her neck and shoulders were stiff as boards from hanging loosely between the two men. Ivan yawned and tugged absently at the continuously growing mass of callused skin, rigid muscle and threading bone that had formed around the hands of every person in the line from Ohio to Virginia.

It was a horrific situation so Ivan had taken upon himself to suggest rules for the now inextricably linked community.

The first rule was that every other person would support sleepers and switch off when necessary, the second was that any information learned about their situation should be shared down the links in both directions, the third rule was to stay where they were. If people started trying to force the line to move, the whole chain of humans was liable to fall on their faces.

Rich coughed and went limp with exhaustion. Christine and Nasim, the young woman on Rich’s right grunted as they supported his swiftly slumbering body. The same changing of the guard occurred throughout the chain.

Ivan was an extraordinary old man when terror ensued from the discovery of their mutual fleshy bonds, he’d radiated a quiet amiability that over time flowed down the line and calmed the most frightened and paranoid. People found solace via his rules except for some like Bertie, five links down from Chris, whose hair had turned white from rampant fear.

Ivan was polite enough to show concern for Chris before nodding off, “You alright to stand for a while?”

After the last week, she had thanked god she had gotten linked to Ivan and not someone else like Bertie. “I’m alright, Ivan. Has FEMA been around with the breakfast cart yet?”

Ivan shook his head, his overgrown mustache comically swaying with his motions. “No. They sent out doctors early this morning in Richmond. See if they can shrink down whatever is growing around our hands.” Ivan went limp and snoozed. A breeze started up and rustled the long grass in the empty pasture they stood in.

A voice down the line yelled, “They’re still checking on the links in Richmond. I heard they tried chemo, but all it did was make the people sick.”

A voice further down yelled, “Fuck! I could have told them it wasn’t cancer! Tumors don’t sprout in 15 minutes.”

Bertie yelled manically, “How the fuck would you know! This *thing* trapping me here isn’t natural so how can you say that natural laws apply to it!”

A quiet rage ran through the chain. Bertie’s outbursts became more and more aggravating as time went on. Chris had at first sympathized with him, she had a fear of germs and the initial discovery of what was trapping her here had sent her into hysterics.

Lately, however, she’d become more relaxed and felt a sense of solidarity rather than horror at her new community. She empathized with the comfortable members of the chain rather than Bertie. Ivan had said that people can pass energy to each other, both positive and negative. He said that the chain would survive if they united in positivity. Chris wholeheartedly believed that.

Chris ignored Bertie and said “Good morning Nasim,” to the cocoa-skinned Iranian who’d she’d become fast friends with.

Nasim smiled, bright and white, and said, “Good morning Chris. Did you dream anything good?” Nasim loved talking about dreams and visions. She had told Chris that joining hands was a gut decision she’d made after buying dream catchers from a native reservation 4 miles from here.

“I dreamed FEMA brought us bacon and eggs. It sounds sooo good.”

“I’d prefer a cinnamon roll myself.”

Bertie, his bloodshot eyes centered on Nasim, screeched, “How the fuck can you all be so calm! Aren’t you still hearing them?”

Chris shushed him and said, “Calm down. You’re making us uncomfortable.” The people down the chain nodded in agreement. Chris felt a comforting warmth radiate inside her head like the chain had momentarily beamed positivity into her soul.

He shook with uncontrollable rage, “Bullshit! Chris, you said you heard them two days ago. Couldn’t sleep at all is what you said, felt like things were crawling into your mind! What happened to that?! It’s still happening to me!”

Chris closed her eyes and breathed in and out finding a comforting place to draw strength from. The chain did the same, Chris felt them pass the stress from her through the links and others lifted their share of her anxiety. She felt wonderful.

“Maybe you need to take a cue from Ivan and try and connect with your links,” Chris said.

Bertie said, “What! I don’t give a shit about them! I want out!” The two men on both sides of Chris narrowed their eyes. He was a weak link, he hadn’t even remembered their names.

Chris distantly remembered the constant nightmares. Hearing voices getting progressively louder in her head, seeing long strands of foreign nerves crawling up her arm and into her mind. She’d wake up sweating and screaming for help. It wasn’t just her. She heard similar screams from Nasim, Ivan, and Rich.

“I do remember, Bertie,” Chris said.

Bertie yelled, “Yes! You remember! Haven’t you noticed that people have stopped talking to each other? Ivan claimed he got news about emergency services but I didn’t hear anything come down the chain from Ohio. How did he know? Something’s happened to them! This *thing* around our hands is getting into our heads, changing us. We have to stay alert and keep it out of our minds.”

The wind whipped up, clouds had rolled in and distant thunder echoed. The chain ignored Bertie and communed with itself. Chris looked back and forth and every head beside hers and Bertie’s was staring ahead with eyes glazed. Chris thought she could hear voices.

Nasim, this is going to be a cold front. Rain and unseasonal sleet are coming. What should we do?

Nasim this is Emilio. I’m about ten links away from you. I’ve heard things from the end of Virginia. They found a way to keep themselves warm.

Emilio! This is Brianne. We've heard the same thoughts on our side.

Bertie looked back and forth, everyone had stopped talking and stared off into space. This was the second time it'd happened. He shook the men on either side of him, trying to jerk them awake.

“Hey! Wake up! It's happening again.”

Chris felt left out, she tried to open her mind up. Breathing in through her nose and sending her yearning thoughts into Ivan and Rich, she called out, imagining her mind as a beacon in the darkness.

Nasim? Can you hear me? Chris felt a gate open inside her and hands reached into her and caressed her spirit. She was truly part of the chain. She singled out Nasim and felt her breathing, her emotions.

I'm glad you've gotten closer to the chain Chris. We are all very glad to have you. Me and Emilio have been connecting and think we can increase heat to the rest of the chain by absorbing weaker links.

I understand. Chris was telepathically linked to them. It felt like a huge weight was pulled off her when she wordlessly communicated with her new friends.

Bertie couldn't believe it. He was all alone. Chris was zoned out just like the rest of them. He yelled into the pasture, “Is anyone out there!?”

His cries for help went unheard, FEMA wouldn't arrive for another two hours. The deep nagging fear of something crawling into him was bristling and setting off alarms in his mind.

“HEEEELP!”

Chris, Nasim, Emilio and every awake member of the chain closed their eyes and entered a deep trance. Bertie felt something course through his hand and static ran through his skin. The growths on his hands pulsed and grew. Rashes and hives upturned themselves from the flesh of his bare arms.

“Fuck...No no no!” The growth crawled up his arms and folded over his agonized face. His body was suspended and crushed inside the burning hot mass of percolating viscera. The chain

regained consciousness and heat dispersed through each of them. The rains came and splattered the soft ground into mud. Chris and her newfound friends felt toasty from the extra heat Bertie's body had been sacrificed for.

Chris said to Nasim, "I feel so at peace now. This is so amazing being close to everyone."

Nasim giggled, "I know! I hope we can all stay like this."

Bertie's body shrunk inside the growth as it was stripped and stretched through all the bodies of the chain until all that remained was a twisted knot of nerves and muscles. The chain agreed that shifts would have to change now that three weak links were used up.

There were problems with this. Too many characters, some clarity issues, flat prose, and a relatively unfocused story. The good news, however, is that this is a nifty idea and it's handled relatively well. The potential I see in this story is it being told from a first person POV with just one character dealing with it. I can imagine it being a much stronger, clearer, entry that way. But, what we have here is still OK. Not bad, could see it HM'ing if the other judges are willing to overlook some of its shortcomings.

HM