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Opening Extract from...

Fishbowl

Written by Bradley Somer

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Fishbowl

Bradley Somer



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For B. Tyler

Fishbowl

1

In Which the Essence of Life and Everything Else Is Illuminated

There's a box that contains life and everything else.

This is not a figurative box of lore. It's not a box of paper sheets that have been captured, bound, and filled with the inkings of faith, chronicling the foibles and contradictions of the human species. It doesn't sport the musty smell of ancient wisdom and moldering paper. It isn't a microscopic box of C, G, A, or T, residing within cell walls and containing traces of everything that ever lived, from today back through the astral dust of the Big Bang itself to whatever existed before time began. It can't be spliced or recombined or subjected to therapy. It's not the work of any god or the evolution of Darwin. It's not a thousand other ideas, however concrete or abstract they may be, that could fill the pages of this book. It's not one of these things, but it's all of them combined and more.

Now we know what it isn't, let's focus on what it is. It's a

box containing the perpetual presence of life itself. Living things move within it, and at some point, it will have been around long enough to have contained absolutely everything. Not all at once, but over the years, building infinite layer upon infinite layer, it will all wind up there. Time will compile these experiences, stacking them on top of each other, and while the moments themselves are fleeting, their visceral memory is everlasting. The passing of a particular moment can't erase the fact that it was once present.

In this way, the box reaches beyond the organic to the ethereal. The heartbreaking sweetness of love, the rending hatred, the slippery lust, the sorrow of losing a family member, the pain of loneliness, all thoughts that were ever thought, every word ever said and even those which were not, the joys of birth and the sorrows of death and everything else will be experienced here in this one vessel. The air is thick with the anticipation of it all. After it's all done, the air will be heavy with everything that has passed.

It's a box constructed by human hands and, yes, if your beliefs trend that way, by extension, the hands of God. Regardless of its origin, its purpose is the same and its structure reflects its purpose. The box is partitioned into little compartments in which all of these experiences of time are stored, though there's no order to their place or chronological happening.

There are compartments stacked twenty-seven high, three wide, and two deep that house this jumble of everything. Melvil Dewey, the patron saint of librarians, would cringe at the mere thought of trying to catalog the details of these one hundred and sixty-two compartments. There's no way to arrange or structure what happens here, no way to exert control over it or systematize it. It just has to be left a mess.

A pair of elevators connects all of these compartments. Themselves little boxes, each with a capacity of ten people or



4,000 lb./1,814 kg., whichever comes first. Each with a little plaque attached to the mirrored wall near the panel that says it's so. The irritating pitch of the alarm that sounds when there's too much weight inside also says it's so. The elevators trundle tirelessly up and down their dingy shafts, diligently delivering artifacts and their custodians to the different levels. Day and night, they shuttle to one floor and then to the next and then back to the lobby. There's a staircase too, in case of fire or power outage, so the custodians can grab the artifacts most dear to them and safely exit the box.

The box is a building, yes. More specifically it's an apartment building. It sits there, an actual place in an actual city. It has a street address so people who are unfamiliar with the area can find it. It also has a series of numbers so lawyers and city surveyors can find it too. It's classified in many ways. To the city it's an orange rectangle with black crosshatching on the zoning map. "Multi-Residential, High-Density High-Rise," the legend reads. To many occupants it's a "one-bedroom apartment for rent, with underground parking and coin laundry facilities." To some it was "an unbelievably affordable way to experience the convenience and excitement of downtown living. This two-bedroom, one-bathroom condo with uninterrupted city views must be seen to be believed," and is now home. For a few, it's a place to work on the weekdays. For others, it's a place to visit friends on the weekends.

The building was constructed in 1976 and has hobbled through time ever since. When it was still new, it was the tallest building on the street. Now that it's older, there are three taller ones. Soon there will be a fourth. For the time, it was an elegant and stately building. Now it seems dated, belonging to a period in architectural history that has its own name, a name that was not known at the time it was built but is applied knowingly in hindsight.

The building was renovated recently because it was in much need. The concrete was painted to hide the spalling cracks and compiled graffiti. The drafty windows and gappy doors to the balconies were replaced to keep the evening chill outside and the temperate air in. Last year, the boiler was upgraded to provide adequate hot water for washing up. The electrical was updated because building codes have changed. It was once a building entirely full of renters. Now, it is a condominium where most people own but others still choose to rent out their suites to offset other investment risks, to "diversify their portfolios."

The building fulfills an Arcensian mission of carrying everything mentioned thus far, housing the spirit and the chaos of life and those beings in which they reside, through the floods and to safety every time the water recedes. Depending on where you live, this box may be just up the street. It may even be within walking distance from where you read these words. You may drive past it on the way home from work if you work downtown but live in the suburbs. Or you may even live there.

If you see this building, pause for a second to ponder what a marvelous arcanum it is. It will sit there long after you turn the last page in this book and long after we are dead and these words have been forgotten. The beginning and end of time will happen there within those walls, between the roof and the parking garage. But for now, only a handful of decades old, it's a growing marvel in its nascent days and this book is a short chronicle of its youth.

Spelled out above the front door, bolted to the brick in weeping, rusty black metal lettering, is the name of the building: the Seville on Roxy.



2

In Which Our Protagonist, Ian, Takes a Dreadful Fall

Our story doesn't begin with a goldfish named Ian's perilous plunge from his bowl on the twenty-seventh-floor balcony where he, for as much as he can comprehend, has been enjoying the view of the downtown skyline.

In the long shadows of the late-afternoon sun, the city is a picket fence of buildings. There are dusty-rose glass ones, reflecting a Martian sun. Others are gunmetal-blue mirrors, and still others are simple brick-and-concrete blocks. There are office tower thrones proudly wearing corporate logo crowns, and there are hotels and apartment buildings, prickly with balconies ribbing every side of their vertical space. All of them have been shoved into the ground, into a grid that brings some order to their apparent incongruity.

Ian looks out over this megalithic flower garden of skyscrapers and sees only as much wonder as his mind can muster. He's

a goldfish with a bird's-eye view of the world. A goldfish held aloft on a concrete platform with a god's perspective, one that's lost on a brain that can't fathom what it is looking at, but by that fact, the view is made even more wondrous.

Ian doesn't take his plunge from the balcony until chapter 54, when a dreadful series of events culminates in an opportunity for Ian to escape his watery prison. But we start with Ian for a few reasons, the first being that he's a vital thread that ties humanity together. The second is, with a fish's brain capacity, time and place mean little because both are constantly being rediscovered. Whether he takes his fall now, fifteen minutes from now, or fifteen minutes ago doesn't matter because Ian can neither comprehend place and time nor comprehend the order that each imposes on the other.

Ian's world is a pastiche of events with no sequence, no past and no future.

For example, just now, at the beginning of his career as a Cypriniforme skydiver, Ian remembers that his watery home still sits there on a thrift-store folding table with flaking green paint. His bowl is empty now, save for a few pebbles, a little pink plastic castle, a fog of algae on the glass, and his roommate, Troy the snail. A rapidly growing length of empty air spans the distance between the bowl and its former resident. It doesn't matter to Ian that this event doesn't actually happen until chapter 54 because he already forgets how it came to be. Soon he will forget the bowl he spent months living in. He will forget the ludicrous pink castle. With time, the insufferable Troy will not just fade to a memory; he will disappear from Ian's experience all together. It will be as if he never existed at all.

While falling past a twenty-fifth-floor window, Ian catches a glimpse of a middle-aged woman of considerable size taking a step across the living room. The glimpse, a fleeting flash in the mind of a creature with no memory, has the woman

wearing a beautiful gown, her movements as elegant and graceful as the drape and flow of the fine material she wears. The gown is a stunning shade of red. He would call it carmine if he knew the word for it. The woman's back is to Ian, who admires the tailored cut of the gown and how it accentuates her voluptuous form and the valley of her spine between her muscular shoulder blades. She's in the process of stepping around a coffee table. The way she moves betrays a level of shyness and a hint of terror. Her toes point slightly inward, her knees touch lightly together. Her hands are clasped on one side, one arm held apologetically across her belly and the other resting on her hip. Her fingers are knotted into a nest.

There's also a round hulk of a man in the center of the living room. The man has an arm outstretched to her, thick hair on his thick forearms, sporting a blissful look in his eyes. His face is calm, which is in contrast to the anxiety shown by the woman. A hint of a smile curves his lips. He wears the look of how a loved one's embrace feels.

All of this is a flash, an inert moment as Ian passes the twenty-fifth floor on his approach to terminal velocity. With a goldfish's sensibility, Ian cannot fathom the oddly divine nature of the existence of this constant velocity. If he could, Ian would wonder on the beautiful and quantifiable order that gravity imposes on the chaos of the world, the harmony of a marriage between a constant acceleration and an ultimate speed that all objects in free fall reach but don't breach. Is this universal number divine or simply physics, and if it's the latter, could it be the work of the former?

Having very little control over his descent, Ian tumbles freely and catches sight of the expansive pale-blue sky above and hundreds of fluttering white sheets of paper, twisting gracefully through the air, graciously flitting and swooping after him like a flock of seabirds to a trawler. Around Ian, swirling in the wind,

are exactly two hundred and thirty-two pages of a dissertation in progress. One of these floating sheets is the title page, the first to fall and now teetering on a breeze below all the others, upon which is printed in a bold font "A Late Pleistocene and Holocene Phytolith Record of the Lower Salmon River Canyon, Idaho," under which is an italicized "by Connor Radley."

Their descent is much more delicate than the clumsy, corklike plummeting of a goldfish, which evolution has left ill prepared to pass a rapidly decreasing number of floors of a downtown high-rise. Indeed, evolution did not intend for goldfish to fly. Neither did God, if that's what you believe. It really doesn't matter. Ian can neither comprehend nor believe in either, and the result of this inability is the same. The cause is irrelevant at the moment because the effect is irrevocable.

As his world pitches and spins, Ian catches flashing glimpses of pavement, horizon, open sky, and the gently swirling leaves of paper. Poor Ian doesn't think how unfortunate it is that he isn't an ant, a creature known to be able to fall a thousand times its body length and still hexaped on its merry way. He doesn't lament the fact that he wasn't born a bird, something that is obviously lamentable at present. Ian has never been particularly introspective or melancholic. It's not in his nature to contemplate or to lament. The core of Ian's character is a simple amalgam of carpe diem, laissez-faire, and *Namaste*.

"Less thinking, more doing," is the goldfish's philosophy.

"Having a plan is the first step toward failure," he would say if he could speak.

Ian is a bon vivant, and given the capacity to ponder, he would have found it a statement of the language's character that English has no equivalent descriptor and had to steal it from French. He's always been happy as a goldfish. It doesn't dawn on him that, with the passing of another twenty-five floors, un-



less something drastically unpredictable and miraculous happens, he'll meet the pavement at considerable speed.

In some ways, Ian is blessed with the underanalyzing mind of a goldfish. The troubles associated with deeper thought are replaced with basic instinct and a memory that spans a fraction of a second. He's more reactionary than plotting or planning. He doesn't dwell or ponder at length about anything. Just as he realizes his predicament, it blissfully slips from his mind in time to be rediscovered. He sleeps well because of this; there are no worries, and there is no racing mind.

Alternately, physiologically, the repeated realization of the terror of falling is quite draining on a body. It's the rapid-fire release of adrenaline, the repetitive pokes in his flight response, that stresses this gold-encased nugget of fishy flesh.

"Now, what was I doing? Oh my, I can't breathe. Oh shit, I'm falling off of a high-rise! Now . . . what was I doing? Oh my . . ."

Blessed indeed are the thoughtless.

But, as was pointed out earlier, when he was tumbling from the twenty-seventh-floor balcony, before he got here to the twenty-fifth, our story doesn't begin with Ian.

3

In Which Katie Approaches the Seville on Roxy on a Vital Mission

Our story begins about half an hour before Ian takes the plunge. It starts with Katie, Connor Radley's girlfriend. That's her standing at a pharmacy door two blocks up the street from the Seville on Roxy, looking out at the late-afternoon sun. She rests one hand on the handle, but instead of opening the door and leaving the store, she looks up Roxy. The sidewalk bustles with shoulder-to-shoulder pedestrians, and the road is clogged, bumper to bumper, with the mounting rush hour traffic.

There's a construction site next to the pharmacy, in front of which a billboard reads, "The Future Home of the Baineston on Roxy, 180 luxury suites now selling." A clean line drawing shows a boxy glass high-rise building bracketed by green trees, with people walking by the front. The trees and people are abstract sketches compared with the clarity with which the building is depicted. A sticker splashes across one corner of the

billboard. It reads, "40% Sold." It peels and curls a bit at the edge, which makes Katie wonder how long it has been up there. Her eyes are drawn to the people in the sketch, anonymous and blurred with movement, bodies filling space more than people living lives.

The construction site had been busy with gawking workers wearing hard hats when she entered the pharmacy ten minutes ago. The air smelled like burning diesel and concrete dust. She ignored their gazes. She could hear them talking but only caught enough lewd snippets of their conversation to inform her that she was their topic. It was enough to make her feel uncomfortable but not enough to inspire her to confront the pack of them about their impropriety, had she been able to muster the courage.

The site is now deserted, and the machines are all quiet. A solitary figure stands at the chain-link gate. He wears a blue uniform that has a "Griffin Security" patch on one shoulder and the name "Ahmed" stitched on the chest. There's a chair beside him with prolapsed orange sponge billowing through a rip in the covering.

Katie is a beautiful young woman with short brown hair, kohl-encircled pale-blue eyes, and a sharp chin. She hasn't been contemplating the street as much as waiting for the workers to grab their lunch boxes and leave. She pushes the pharmacy door open and steps into the street, her petite frame encountering the soft, round one of a mountain named Garth.

Garth is a scruffy, unshaven man who wears concrete-smeared work pants and a hard hat. He smells of physical labor, of sweat and work and dust. Garth has a backpack strapped to his shoulders, and he carries a bulging black plastic bag in one hand. With the other hand he reaches out to steady Katie as she takes an uncertain step back, ricocheting off of his bulk.

"Sorry," Katie mumbles. She's slightly embarrassed, but her

mind is elsewhere. She's distracted by her task at hand to the exclusion of the world around her.

Garth smiles. He's ever conscious of his size and how intimidating he seems to those who don't know him. His default reaction is to try to defuse any ideas that he's a threat.

"It's okay," he says and stands in an awkward silence for a moment, seeing if Katie will say anything else. When she doesn't, he nods to her and carries on his way.

Katie watches Garth cross the street against the light, dodging the cars merging into traffic. He moves up Roxy in the direction of the Seville, his shuffling steps hurried. She waits in front of the buzzing neon pharmacy sign, not wanting to seem like she's following him and not questioning why she cares if it would appear that way. She mills about long enough to make Ahmed from Griffin Security eye her suspiciously. Katie doesn't notice Ahmed finger his walkie-talkie and drop his hand to his utility belt, resting it on his holstered 240 Lumen Guard Dog Tactical Flashlight. Indeed, Katie doesn't even know a flashlight could be tactical or what would make it so.

Standing in the traffic noise washing over the street, Katie thinks of Connor. She thinks of when they first met at the university. He was the teaching assistant for a class she was taking, and she had attended his office hours with questions about an upcoming exam. They went for coffee afterward and talked about everything but the class. Connor is handsome and charming, and she was flattered at being the center of his attention. He seemed so interested in her mind and thoughts. She immediately felt a connection with him, a chemistry that made her wonder if love at first sight could be real. It still seemed unbelievable that it could actually exist when all this time she had suspected it may just happen in romantic comedies and novels. Katie then thinks of the physicality of their relationship over the past three months, less a few days. Katie told him that she loved



him, and lying in the tangle of sheets after a heated bout of lovemaking, he had merely grunted and was seemingly asleep.

In hindsight, beyond their first coffee together, there have been exactly two homemade dinners, three movie dates, and eight binge-drinking bar nights of booze and dancing (unlike most men, Connor is an amazingly sensual dancer, his body seeming to respond to her feelings). The rest of their time together has consisted of a near nightly rooting in Connor's apartment.

Katie is aware of her affliction of falling in love more quickly and for fewer reasons than most need. It's not that she doesn't realize the heartbreak this has caused in her life, but she refuses to quell her romantic heart because it brings her joy as well. She thinks back to the string of men she has happily introduced to her family, having them over to dinner to meet her parents and her sister. She remembers the immersive, warm comfort of everyone talking, everyone laughing around the table. Then she remembers the number of subsequent family dinners she has attended alone, either having called it off for one shortcoming or another or having been told that it was not her, it was him. These end in quiet conversations with her mom and sister, late in the night, tending to her broken heart while her dad sleeps in his chair in the living room. Above their quiet whispers around the kitchen table, they could hear TV proclamations from the living room, from "Jesus is the answer" to "Call the PartyBox now, hundreds of beautiful singles are on the line waiting for you."

Katie's sure there are other people in the world with her ability to fall in love. She sees her affliction as a good thing and refuses to become jaded by her many rejections. Her belief is that love doesn't make one weak; it does the opposite. She thinks that falling in love is her superpower. It makes her strong.

Today, she's intent on finding out if Connor Radley loves her back.

A horn bleats from the traffic on Roxy and jolts Katie from her reverie. She blinks, looks up the street, and doesn't see Garth lumbering anywhere amid the herd of pedestrians. She decides that she has waited long enough. It's time for reckoning. She will either get reciprocation of her feelings or go back to her apartment alone, eat the junk food she has just prepurchased in the pharmacy, purge Connor Radley from her thoughts, and start fresh tomorrow. With this firmed resolve, Katie sets off along the crowded sidewalk. At the corner, she waits for the light to turn in her favor and then crosses the street.

Ahmed of Griffin Security lets his muscles relax now that the threat has passed. There's a tinge of sadness that he didn't get to try out the moves he practiced with his tactical flashlight while standing shirtless in front of his bedroom mirror. He removes his hand from the flashlight's holster, and his fingertip slides from the corrugated plastic surface of the walkie-talkie button.

Katie cranes her neck and looks up at the twenty-seven floors of the Seville as she approaches.

He's up there, she thinks, in the concrete box at the top.

She can see the underside of his balcony and the little glass square of his apartment window. Then, too soon, she stands before the intercom keypad at the front doors. The doors are locked against vagrants, and beyond the street reflected in the glass stretches the lobby. It's dimly lit by rows of fluorescent lights and looks sad and empty.

Katie presses four buttons on the apartment intercom and waits while it rings. A few seconds pass before the speaker pops to life. There's a trembling inhalation, and then a timid voice comes through.

"Hello?"



Katie's distracted by a little boy bumping into her thigh. She looks into his surprised face until a man runs up and grabs the child under the arms.

"Gotcha, kiddo," he says and the child squeals and laughs at his dad. They carry on down the sidewalk.

Katie turns back to the intercom panel and hangs up. Wrong apartment number. She checks the directory. She had dialed Ridgestone, C., by accident, just one digit off and one line under Connor's. She runs her index finger across the names to double-check his buzzer number and then pokes the four numbers for Radley, C. The intercom rings twice before an answer comes through.

"Yep," Connor's voice crackles within the small grated speaker in the intercom box.

"It's me," Katie says.

There's a burst of static and then silence. Connor's voice blares through the speaker, much louder than before. "Who?"

"It's Katie."

There's another burst of static. It sounds like something being dragged over the mouthpiece on the other end.

The door buzzes, and the lock clicks.

4

In Which We Meet the Villain Connor Radley and the Evil Seductress Faye

Connor sits on his balcony, wearing only his sweatpants. The concrete is cool under his bare feet, the soles of which are coated with a layer of dust and sand. It's a refreshing feeling, moderating the warm afternoon air. The plastic lawn chair in which he sits is sticky with sweat, so he peels his back from it by leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees.

One hundred and twenty pages are stacked in his lap, and a ballpoint pen hangs from between his lips. One hundred and twelve pages have been stacked atop Ian's fishbowl and weighted down with a half-full coffee cup to fend off any errant breezes. Ian's bowl, in turn, rests on a folding card table, which is sidled up against the railing in the corner of the balcony. All of these items combined, coffee mug on paper pile on fishbowl on folding table on top-floor balcony, form a quiet shrine to the origin story of their being.



Connor is on the balcony because, in his small studio apartment, he feels the walls stifle his ability to edit. The place is too small for his thoughts. He's working through the first round of comments on his thesis, which he received from his adviser, and he's on a self-imposed deadline to finish as quickly as possible and get the hell out of grad school. Connor finds it easier to think in the open air overlooking the expansive views offered to him from the balcony, so it has become his office. He has his lawn chair, a garage sale find and throwback to the seventies. It's made of hundreds of brown, burnt-almond, and dusty-green plastic tubes woven over an aluminum frame. He has his splintery, weathered card table, and he has Ian. Oh, and he has his coffee cup that reads "Paleoclimatologists do it in the dirt." A clever gift from Faye . . . or was it Deb who got it for him? Maybe Katie?

Connor glares at the page in front of him.

Each printed letter is a simple symbol meaning nothing on its own. Combined, the letters make words that also mean little without their neighbors. All of these words together, however, convey a greater meaning, detailing the assumptions of the statistical analysis used in his research. On its own, the section is interesting, as noted by the jottings of his adviser in the margins, but it grows more meaningful when considered in the larger context of the thesis. Likewise, without context in world prehistory, the findings of Connor's study, about the impacts of paleoclimatic fluctuations on the ancient human inhabitants of Idaho, would be less interesting than they inherently are.

But right now, Connor isn't thinking in such economies of perspective; he's busily learning more about less, losing the context of the big picture by trying to figure out what his supervisor had scrawled diagonally across an equation. His brow furrows. He thinks it reads, "Awkward. Do better." He ponders what such a vaguely savage statement could mean.

It's math. Math can't be awkward and, by its nature, is either right or wrong, so how could he do better? Connor chews on the end of his pen and shoots a glance past Ian to the buildings beyond.

Ian doesn't ponder any of this. He doesn't have the capacity to. He resides permanently in his bowl on the folding table overlooking the city for a reason. Connor tends to become bimaniacal when working on his thesis. His attentions focus to an unhealthy degree on editing and satisfying a chafingly powerful desire for sexual satisfaction. Connor feels embarrassed to be naked in front of the fish and definitely can't perform under his unblinking stare. For Ian's part, he's uninterested in Connor either way, clothed or naked, masturbating or copulating.

The cordless phone rings. Connor hears it, and Ian feels it as a frequency through the water.

Connor retrieves it from beside Ian's bowl, pokes the talk button, and holds it to his ear.

"Yep," Connor says into the receiver.

"It's me," comes a hollow voice, the static indicative of someone standing at the building's front door.

Connor isn't expecting anyone, and he can't place the voice. It's a female voice. It's definitely coming from the front door. The traffic noise rising to the balcony and that coming through the phone, the noisy motorcycle Dopplering past and the horn honking, all reach his ears in relative synchronicity.

"Who?" he asks.

"It's Katie."

Connor clasps his hand over the mouthpiece and says, "Shit."

Then he presses "9" on the cordless to release the lobby door and hangs up the phone.

Connor straightens the papers in his lap and then adds them to the stack atop Ian's bowl. He replaces the coffee-mug paperweight, less fearful of a smearing coffee ring stain than of a freak

breeze kicking up and blowing the papers over the balcony railing. He stands and hikes up his sweatpants.

"Sit," Connor tells Ian as if he were a dog and not a goldfish.

Connor always wanted another dog. He grew up in the suburbs, a lonely boy in a neighborhood populated primarily by retirees, so his dog, Ian, had been his best friend. They had spent long, idle summers together, hanging out in the backyard or playing in the culvert that ran through a green space behind the house. Ian always waited for Connor after school. He seemingly knew what time the bell would ring. He occasionally misjudged it, however, and Connor would see him through the school window, sitting by the bike racks, sometimes waiting for hours.

Then, one morning, the school bus ran Ian over. Connor had been so devastated his parents didn't risk buying him another dog because they weren't sure he would survive its eventual death. So through the rest of his summers, Connor had read comics in the backyard or halfheartedly played in the culvert alone.

Connor had told Katie this story. She made that sympathetic smile that said "You poor thing" and "That's so cute" and "I feel for you" all at once. Then she bought him the goldfish Ian as a companion, to temper the memory of his traumatic loss.

"Here's someone to share your time with when I'm not here," she said, smiling her beautiful smile and presenting him with the plastic bag containing Ian.

Deep down, subconsciously, Connor has grown to believe that Ian the goldfish is spiritually linked to Ian the dog, perhaps even to the extent that the fish is the dog reincarnate.

The Seville on Roxy doesn't allow dogs or cats or Katie would have bought him one, he is sure. Pets are only permitted with the approval of the building superintendent, a globe of a man named Jimenez. And Jimenez never approves pets except for

single fish in small bowls. He believes that animals don't belong inside, all pets are unclean, and large fish tanks pose too great a threat of leakage to the building and its occupants. Hence the limit of a one-gallon bowl.

Connor grabs the cordless phone and slides the balcony door open. He steps into the apartment. It takes a moment for his eyes to adjust from the sunshine. The air feels cool on his back where it had been sweating against the lawn chair.

After a few moments, he looks to the crumpled heap of pillows and sheets that crown his mattress and says, "You have to go. Right now. My girlfriend is coming up."

Connor crosses the room, trips on a beer bottle on the way, staggers a bit, and then recovers. He shakes the bed. "Get your stuff and go. I'll call you later." He waits a moment before whipping the sheets from the bed and dropping them to the floor.

Faye moans and rolls onto her back. She lies before him on the mattress, unashamedly naked, unabashedly exposed, and unbelievably sexy. She blinks at Connor in the bright afternoon light.



5

In Which the Stoic Jimenez Tries to Fix the Elevator Despite Being Completely Unqualified to Do So

Jimenez leans back in his chair and sighs. He pushes the front two legs from the floor, leaving it to totter on the rear two. The chair creaks a loud response to his shifting weight. The little room that serves as his office is hot and loud and white, lit by old fluorescent tubes that hum overhead. There's a plastic placard embossed with the word "Maintenance" on the door, which is open, though it does nothing to freshen the stagnant air.

In the next room, the massive boiler burner sparks and roars to life every fifteen minutes or so. Behind its rusted metal grille, a blue jet of natural gas flame heats a vat of water for the occupants of the Seville on Roxy. The jet ignites with a pop and whomp. The noise can be heard through the painted cinder block walls, and it reverberates within the vent that runs between the two rooms.

Jimenez finds the sound of the mechanical monster next

door both comforting and marvelous, a clockwork dragon heating a cauldron for the masses.

That machine is the heart, pumping blood through the building. It provides unquestioningly and is overlooked by all but Jimenez. The hot water travels through the radiator pipes that send waves of heat into everyone's apartment on the cool fall evenings. That water comes streaming out of the showerhead in the morning when tenants wash up for work and in the evenings when they clean themselves before bed. It washes their dishes and their clothes. It fills their buckets when they mop their floors on weekends. It's in the room with them when they have friends over, and it sits quietly in the pipes while they sleep, waiting for the next time it is called to use. It's a civilized and forgotten servant.

Like the boiler, the Seville on Roxy would slowly become decrepit and fall apart if not for the attentions of the stoic Jimenez. Like the boiler, Jimenez is an essential and oft-ignored component of the building's civility, without whom it would devolve swiftly and without recourse. Both reside in the basement, and both are heartbreakingly lonely.

At the moment of listening to the boiler ignite, Jimenez folds his meaty hands, hairy fingers interlocking. He stretches his arms over his head, exposing the musky smell of his armpits, to which he gives a quick sniff in a matter-of-fact fashion. If anyone had been with him, watching in his small office, his manner is one that says, "Yes, I did just sniff my armpits, and the results are mixed. On one hand, I smell. On the other, I worked hard all day and deserve to stink a little."

There are just two service requests left, each written on a little square of paper and skewered on a metal spike that sits by the old rotary phone on the corner of Jimenez's desk. Even though his workday technically ended an hour ago, Jimenez is not one to leave service requests unattended. Also, he loves the

order he brings to the building. Like the boiler, his work goes unnoticed and unappreciated, but he takes pride in everything working smoothly, in making every resident's life a little easier.

He lets the chair drop back to all four legs and pulls the last two service requests from the spike.

The first one reads, "Leak under kitchen sink. Apartment 2507." He stuffs that one in his pocket. The other he crumples and throws into the garbage can. He knows what it says. He has been putting it off all day, and now its time has come.

With a sigh, he stands and grabs his tool belt from its hook near the door. He straps the belt on as he walks down an ashen-walled, dimly lit basement hallway and pushes his way through the stairwell door.

As he trudges up the stairs, amid the jangling clatter of the tools hanging from his belt, Jimenez ruminates on why he doesn't mind working late. Often, he stays in his basement office late into the evening, hours longer than he's bound to by his job description. In exchange for his work, Jimenez receives a modest salary and a subsidized apartment on the third floor. Over the years, he has more than earned his balcony over the parking garage entrance, his view of the alley, and the summertime smells emanating from the Dumpster that sits under his bedroom window.

He knows the answer. He works so hard because he's lonely. There's no one to go home to and no reason he shouldn't stay late. Here, he feels needed. Here, he feels important, though few think of him when he isn't fixing their leaking faucet or mopping up the overflow from a clogged toilet.

I would only be missed if I wasn't here, Jimenez thinks. People would ask, "Where's that guy who always fixes stuff?" and, "Where's the super at? My sink is backing up with stuff that smells like old milk."

Jimenez reaches the landing, pushes the door, and steps

through into the lobby. He stops and looks across the expanse of space to his adversaries, the elevators. One stopped working months ago and has been sitting with an "Out of Order" sign ever since. The other stopped working sometime this morning. It returned itself, empty, to the lobby level, and from then on it has sat there, unmoving. It still opens with a cheerful bing when people press the button. The doors slide closed after they board, but when they press the button for their floor, it sits motionless. Luckily, the door still opens to release them again.

Jimenez grew tired of the calls coming in from the residents and wrote a note in felt marker on one of his service request forms and taped it to the door. The note reads, "It don't work. Fixed soon. Use the stairs."

After taping up his note, Jimenez called the building manager.

"Marty, it's Jimenez. The other elevator's broke now too."

"Fix it," Marty said. It sounded like he was eating potato chips.

Jimenez thought for a moment. He knew very little about how elevators worked. "What if I can't?"

"Then I'll call someone who knows how. You give it a shot though," Marty said. "Technicians, man, those guys are expensive to hire out. Call me back. Let me know how it goes."

About half an hour ago, Jimenez was procrastinating by watering the plants in the lobby. He watched that homeschooled kid from the fifteenth floor cross the lobby from the stairwell. To Jimenez, the kid seemed nice enough, never caused any trouble, never vandalized the stairwell or threw stuff off the balcony. But there was something different about him, something missing.

As Jimenez watered the plants, the homeschooled kid shuffled across the lobby from the stairwell door and pressed the elevator button. The door binged and slid open. The kid shuf-



fled inside. The door slid closed. Jimenez watered a few more plants and then grew curious about what the boy was doing in the unmoving elevator. He put down the canister and waited. Eventually the door slid open and the kid came out, looked around, and asked, "Excuse me, this isn't my floor. Where's my place?"

"Use the stairs, kid. Elevator's broke."

Jimenez has been putting off fixing the elevator all day. The stack of service requests dwindled by the hour as Jimenez worked his way through them. The lint trap in the Coin-O-Matic dryer isn't stuck anymore. The fire door to the stairwell on the seventeenth floor is no longer jammed. The pee smell on P1 has been dealt with and on and on until there were but the two request forms left. He has postponed this moment the best he could, but now it is time.

The door to the stairwell lets out a hiss as the hydraulic arm eases the door shut behind him. The latch clicks as Jimenez takes his first slow steps across the lobby, contemplating the elevator while he approaches. The tile floor glistens, and the blower unit circulates fresh air through the vents. Outside, through the security door, the traffic noise is hushed. Jimenez's hammer swings on a loop in his tool belt, thumping its dead weight against his thigh.

What tools does someone need to fix an elevator? Jimenez ponders and hikes his weighty belt back up onto his hips.

What's even wrong with it? Jimenez wonders as he presses the elevator button.

The doors slide open with a whisper, revealing the elevator's mirrored compartment. Jimenez glances at his reflection. Behind him, at the lobby door, he spots the big guy who lives up on the twenty-fifth floor. He wears a hard hat and carries a big black shopping bag. Jimenez pauses to nod an acknowledgment at the reflection of the man. The man nods back.

How hard can fixing an elevator be? Jimenez thinks as he steps into the compartment and starts to unscrew the brass screws on the panel.

The doors slide closed.

Jimenez leans the cover against the wall and then pokes around in the panel randomly, looking for some clue as to how the contraption works or what's wrong with it.

What can possibly go wrong? he thinks. It already isn't working, so it can't get any worse, right?



6

In Which Petunia Delilah Feels a Peculiar Twinge in Her Nethers

With three weeks remaining until her due date, Dr. Ross instructed Petunia Delilah to avoid strenuous activity and anything else that might raise her blood pressure or agitate her. He said she's suffering from hyper-what's-it and should not take unnecessary risks with her health or the health of her baby. She couldn't salt her food, and Dr. Ross established a diet for her that is composed of equal parts of bland and boring. He gave her two lists of food, one on a green page and one on a red page. While his lips were moving, Petunia Delilah scanned the red page of forbidden foods and could only think how badly she wanted a fucking ice cream sandwich. And there it was on Dr. Ross's red page. Surprisingly, they are quite high in sodium.

Petunia Delilah has been horizontal all over the apartment. She lies on her back on the floor whenever the tingling numbness sparkles down her left leg. It's some pinched nerve, and she

curses it. She lies on the couch, shifting as frequently as she flips channels in search of some fabled "good" daytime television show. She lies on the recliner out on the balcony, usually in mid-afternoon, when the sun is hot and before the rush hour traffic builds and too much noise percolates up the side of the building for her to enjoy the air anymore. She doesn't lie there often now though because it's difficult to get back on her feet without something to pull herself up on.

Right now, she lies in bed, propped up by a mountain of pillows and reading a dog-eared paperback. It's an old science fiction story in which the impeccably mannered heroes speak in complete sentences without contractions. Petunia Delilah likes to rub the brittle pages between her thumb and forefinger when she turns the pages. She likes the smell of old glue and yellowed paper because it's like touching the past.

Petunia Delilah stops reading and looks questioningly at the ceiling because she feels a peculiar twinge in her nethers. She knows they're down there, her nethers, somewhere where her legs meet her torso. They're there even though she hasn't seen them in a month unless aided by a mirror, her belly having grown too swollen and unwieldy for her to see them on her own.

And there it is again, the peculiar twinge. She cocks her head to one side and lowers the book to rest on her stomach.

She scootches to the edge of the bed and swings her legs to the floor. With a grunting effort she gets up and waddles from the bedroom to the bathroom, legs spindly and knees splayed like those of a cricket.

Dr. Ross prescribed bed rest after she passed out at her desk at work. She hadn't been doing anything strenuous, just the usual intake documents and registry, and the next thing she remembers is being in the hospital. The gap in consciousness between the two was a clumsy jump cut, not so much disturbing as it was awkward.

Apparently, the funeral home where she worked was abuzz with the news of her collapse. Of course, the first assumption about a nonresponsive body in a funeral home is that it has suffered death. In Petunia Delilah's case, an elderly couple attending the service of one of their recently departed friends knew better through their own hardened experiences with the reaper. They called the ambulance and stayed with her until the paramedics arrived.

The elderly couple, with no pressing engagements after the funeral service, even visited her in the hospital. They brought her flowers and chatted with her for an hour, their manners as impeccable as any hero's in an old science fiction book.

The funeral home director visited shortly after her collapse as well. He told her quite sternly and concernedly in his characteristic, mockable monotone, "You are on leave, Petunia Delilah. For your own good. Have a happy baby, and we will talk soon."

And so began the incarceration in her one-bedroom apartment.

Petunia Delilah turns sideways in the small bathroom. She unbuttons her nightie to her midsection and looks at the profile of her undercarriage in the medicine cabinet mirror. The skin is stretched and bulbous with some discoloration, nothing untoward; nothing has visibly changed with those peculiar twinges. She smiles, rubs a hand over her belly, and then buttons her nightie up again.

Danny, her boyfriend, affectionately refers to her belly as her fuck bubble.

She has looked at herself this way several times today, the peculiar twinges from her nethers sparking her hope of labor, a hope for the end of her discomfort and the even less bearable boredom.

The twinges have been happening since early morning. They

woke her up, and she roused Danny in hopes that it was the start of her labor. They lay side by side, in the early-morning quiet, the city breathing softly outside the bedroom window, holding hands in quiet anticipation of the day to come.

But nothing happened.

Danny went to work, and Petunia Delilah read a book.

Petunia Delilah doesn't fear giving birth or the baby. Her midwife told her a truth: women have been giving birth for hundreds of thousands of years without modern medicine. It happens. If anything, Petunia Delilah is so purely excited for the experience that there is no room left for trepidation.

"With positive thoughts and calm emotion, giving birth is easy," Kimmy, her midwife, said. "Some of the things you think, they actually change your body. Good thoughts release biochemicals into your blood that can make the pain a happy experience. Thoughts become things."

Petunia Delilah isn't afraid to be on her own when her contractions start. In fact, she has longed for the experience and the cherubic company of the little one who will follow. She has had ample time to construct elaborate, gauzy fantasies of baking cookies and breastfeeding and nurturing because she has been horizontal for weeks in the one-bedroom apartment. She will kiss Danny every day when he comes home from the construction site. Danny will kiss her back and then kiss the baby on the forehead. They will eat supper together and laugh together and make such a great family.

Anyway, if she was to go into labor, Danny works just a few blocks away, pouring concrete for the Baineston on Roxy. He could be home in a few minutes. Petunia Delilah and Danny got new cell phones so she could call him if she needs anything. She glances at the wall clock above the toilet and thinks his shift will be over soon. He'll probably go for a few drinks with the guys though, before coming home.

Petunia Delilah turns from her reflection in the bathroom mirror and ambles into the kitchen. She opens the freezer and stares at the box of ice cream sandwiches for a moment before opening it. She runs her index finger over the stack of tightly packed sandwiches inside, entranced by the smooth, rhythmic bump of one sandwich to the next. Each wrapper emits a crackly static as she tickles it. They cool her fingertip, the chilled plastic silky to touch.

Six individually wrapped fucking ice cream sandwiches in my freezer, she thinks. And I can't even have one.

Petunia Delilah folds the box's cardboard flap closed, slams the freezer door, and turns the electric kettle on.

No coffee, no caffeinated tea, just these shrub clippings, she thinks.

She fingers through a ceramic jar of herbal tea sachets when it hits, the most peculiar of the peculiar twinges she has ever felt. She drops the jar. The base chips, and a spray of powdery ceramic ejecta stains the counter near the sink. The jar rolls noisily to one side and then back halfway again.

Petunia Delilah instinctively reaches down and cups her belly. She drops her hand lower to where it touches wet fabric, deceptively wet as the temperature of the fluid makes it barely distinguishable from her own skin, but there's an undeniable weight to the fabric that wasn't there moments ago. She watches a rusty puddle spreading on the linoleum from her feet and wonders why it's not clear, like Kimmy told her it would be.

My water broke, she thinks. It's happening. The baby's coming. I have to call Danny. Our baby is on the way.

Petunia Delilah and Danny have resisted Dr. Ross's encouragement for ultrasounds, amniocentesis, and even the scheduled C-section he recommended given the smallish nature of Petunia Delilah's pelvic girdle and her family's history of birthing trouble. They didn't want to learn anything from the doctor.

They wanted to give birth naturally, without painkillers or radioactive pictures of their baby in her womb.

After all, as Kimmy the midwife pointed out, women have been giving birth for hundreds of thousands of years without modern medicine.

Not for the first time, Petunia Delilah wonders if it's going to be a boy or a girl. Kimmy says it will be a boy based on how she's carrying the fuck bubble. For some reason, Petunia Delilah is sure it will be a girl. She just feels it. She hasn't told Danny, and she hasn't told him she likes the names Chloe, Persephone, and Lavender. There will be time for that after.

With arms outstretched and legs a bow, walking like she had just dismounted a horse after a weeklong ride and propping herself against the walls like a drunk, Petunia Delilah makes her way to the bedroom. She can't help but smile as she gropes for the cell phone on the nightstand.

As another twinge shoots through her nethers, Petunia Delilah winces. It's an uncomfortable feeling but not as painful as she was led to believe by the baby classes they had attended. She speed-dials Danny. The phone rings three times before going to voice mail.

"You've reached Danny's phone. Leave a message."

Petunia waits for the beep and says, "Danny, the baby's coming. Where are you? Come home. Call me. I'm calling Kimmy."