

# New Fiction from Eddie Freeman: "Gideon's Thesis"

Gideon, a senior majoring in journalism at the University of California, Santa Cruz, fidgeted nervously. He wanted to write a senior thesis that could be turned into a podcast or miniseries. He had researched the criminal conviction of Moses West. West was imprisoned for murder. It wasn't hard to connect his arresting officer to a far-right group. Gideon had written West, and West had written back. Dr. Sandel spent four minutes reading Gideon's outline, before placing it aside.

"I don't think you have the resources to research an investigation that took place in Los Angeles. I strongly encourage you to focus on a local issue," Dr. Sandel said.

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A few weeks later, Gideon attended a party. He tried and failed to keep the attention of a woman by making up a rap about a feather in her hair. Gideon found a seat on an outside couch which featured unique stains. A man, who introduced himself as Rainbow, inhaled a blunt and passed it to Gideon.

"Have you heard about Tyler Rosenthal?" Rainbow asked.

Gideon shook his head.

"Tyler's dad is hella fucked up corporate leader. Tyler was going to expose his corruption, and his father had him committed," Rainbow said.

The two men locked eyes. Rainbow knew that Gideon had been placed on earth to uncover such a story. Rainbow wore a sleeveless black t-shirt, marked with bleach and a pair of green army pants. He smelled as though he had not bathed in weeks. His disregard for surface concerns allowed him to see a

person's true destiny.

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Relative to other campuses, UCSC was not huge. It was easy for Gideon to find Tyler on Instagram. Gideon was unsurprised when he recognized a woman named Drea in a number of Tyler's pictures. Drea and Gideon had worked on a group project together during Gideon's freshmen year. Gideon still had her number. She answered the third time he called her.

"Have you heard about Tyler Rosenthal?" Gideon asked.

"I know he took a leave of absence last year, for mental health reasons."

"I want to bring his story to wide audience. Who should I talk to?" Gideon asked.

"Tyler didn't go out much, but he lived with a guy named Riccardo."

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Riccardo agreed to meet in the apartment he once shared with Tyler. He was a tall, skinny, Latino man, with neatly combed wavy hair that stopped at his shoulders. He wore all white.

"At first Tyler was a little socially awkward. Like, he helped a woman on the bus with her bag without saying anything. He thought he was being helpful, but I could tell she was freaked out. He slowly turned into the worst roommate ever. One time he made a steak, and left it untouched in his room for days. Bugs feasted. He would stay up all night talking to himself, saying crazy things, like admonishing Owen Wilson for immoral behavior. I started seeing this woman Sarah. The first night she came over, she said Tyler was too high, and we had to take care of him. I told her it was fine, it was normal for Tyler. Sara stayed awake with him all night. In the morning, she used his phone to call his mom. His mom flew in from the East

Coast. I heard he's getting treatment and doing better," Ricardo said.

"What do you know about the role corporations, specifically the Divinity Hospital Group, played in poisoning Tyler?" Gideon asked.

"Nothing. I know literally nothing about that," Ricardo said.

Gideon had been using his phone to record their conversation. He turned it off.

"You can speak to me. I assure you, I know how to keep my sources safe," Gideon said.

"I agreed to talk to you, because I wanted to encourage people to speak out. I wished I helped him sooner," Ricardo said.

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Gideon presented Dr. Sandel with a transcript of his conversation with Riccardo, and a summary of the research he had conducted into The Divinity Hospital Group. Gideon had listed dozens of times the group had engaged in questionable corporate practices.

"If you give me enough time, I know I can prove Tyler was poisoned by his father," Tyler said.

"You can write about Tyler Rosenthal for your thesis project. But don't mention The Divinity Hospital Group. If you have to write about D.H.G, keep it to one paragraph, maximum," Dr. Sandel said.

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Gideon spent months working on his project. Gideon's older brother, Joseph, had trained as an electrician shortly after graduating high school. Joseph had been working for the state since he was twenty-one. He bought a house when he was twenty-

four. Gideon had always thought he was smarter than his brother. Their mother thought Gideon was smarter than Joseph as well. Gideon would use his thesis to prove that he could change the world, even if he never achieved financial stability.

Gideon presented Dr. Sandel with forty-five pages. His work detailed the role The Divinity Hospital Group played in the opioid crisis. He described instances in which doctors working for the D.H.G. had used medical implants which had never completed the proper trails. He told the story of a public hospital owned by the D.H.G. that closed under sketchy circumstances. Bernie Sanders had made a comment. Gideon was proud of the way he argued the C.F.O. of the D.H.G. was not above poisoning his own son. Gideon felt he had done the best he could. Dr. Sandel needed a week to read it. He summoned Gideon to his office.

“I am recommending that you take the senior exam instead of working on a thesis. I am no longer willing to work as your thesis advisor,” Dr. Sandel said.

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Gideon took the senior exam. He graduated. He found a job as a cook and continued to live in Santa Cruz. He was listening. He firmly believed the town had one great story to give him before he moved away.

He attended a party where he drank beer out of plastic cups and hung out in the backyard to avoid the noise projects playing inside. He started talking to a woman, Sophia Turpin, who he vaguely knew from school. She was a journalism student, a senior. She was working on her senior thesis.

“I am focusing on the lives of undocumented college students. These people don't have financial aid and their parents

typically aren't in positions to help. They have to try and make it the best they can."

Sophia took out her phone and played some oral testimonies.

"You're brilliant and your project is brilliant. I know Dr. Sandel, if you need help talking to him," Gideon said.

"Sandel has approved of my project. Most of the work is done," Sophia said.

"I want to help you in any way I can. Can I have your phone number and address?" Gideon asked.

Sophia shared her contact information, likely because she was drunk.

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Gideon visited her apartment the next day. He was eager to express his sober enthusiasm in person. Sophia's roommate answered the door.

"Sophia isn't here," her roommate said.

"I know she is working on her senior thesis, but that is something I need to help her with. I am Gideon."

"She isn't here."

The door closed. It is possible Gideon heard the word weirdo.

Gideon texted Sophia around ten times that week. He rode his bike past her place sometimes, but refrained from knocking on her door. Eventually, Gideon decided that he could share his thoughts on undocumented students without Sophia's help. He spent two weeks writing twenty-five pages. He listed Sophia Turpin as the first author. Underneath Sophia's name, he wrote, with special thanks, Gideon White. He printed the work out, visited his old campus, and placed the work in Dr. Sandel's mailbox.

Two weeks later, Gideon received an email in his student account from Dr. Sandel. Sandel wanted to meet.

Dr. Sandel sat behind his desk. The thesis which Gideon had written, and attributed to Sophia, rested in front of him.

“Your actions constitute plagiarism. If you were working as a journalist you would be fired. If you were still a student, you would be expelled,” Dr. Sandel said.

Sandel talked and talked. He was a bald man in his forties. He wore a dress shirt. He appeared older than he was, maybe from the strain needed to keep a university job combined with his lack of interest in fashion. Gideon realized Dr. Sandel did not know how to change the world either.

For a couple of months, Gideon worked at the restaurant, and spent his free time binging TV shows. He gave some money to a group helping immigrants from Afghanistan. He received an email from his mother about a Santa Cruz woman who helped people volunteer with the elderly. I know you want to change the world, his mother wrote.

The woman's name was Janis Brown. She had broad shoulders and long gray hair. The first time Gideon and Janis met, he found her to be a mix between a high school principal and an ex-biker. The Harley lady who wanted to live straight. She arranged for Gideon to visit a woman named Ethel. Ethel no longer recognized the face of her children. They lived far away.

Gideon met Ethel inside of her senior care facility. Everyone in her unit had memory issues. He had to pass through a locked door to enter.

She sat in a room with twenty other seniors. A Lifetime movie played on TV.

“Where are we going?” Ethel asked.

"We're just hanging out," Gideon said.

"It would be nice to go somewhere."

They sat for ten minutes.

"Where are we going?" Ethel asked again.

Gideon texted Janis. He asked if he could give Ethel a ride in his car.

Insurance companies aren't going to dictate how we care for one another, Janis wrote back.

Gideon slowly helped Ethel out of the building. None of the employees stopped him. He had to give her step by step instructions on how to get in the front seat. First her butt went down, then her feet went inside, next the seat belt.



He drove to the down town strip. Families were eating dinner outside. People of all ages were walking around. Ethel stared at the scene and her face lit up. Gideon knew he had changed the world for one person.

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# New Fiction from Colin Raunig: “What Happened in Vegas”

Since getting back from deployment, Frank had gone soft. He was still a massive block of muscle, but the edges had rounded. Too much time off. Too much food and booze. He saw it in his reflection of the Vegas penthouse suite window that overlaid the view of the pre-dawn casino lights that blighted out the stars and blazed like a midnight sunrise. Frank had woken up too early and couldn't go back to sleep—he couldn't sleep well after he drank.

On deployment in Iraq, Frank's body had been perfect. The life was perfect for it. Go on patrol, work out, eat, sleep, do it again. Just what the body needed. Out on patrol, while Frank sat in the Humvee or ran through a door or while he stood there and the guys loaded him up with extra ammo belts and gear, a tucked away part of both Frank's body and mind would be waiting for the point when they, together as a pair, would return to the FOB and he would go to the gym. When he would swap cammies for his issued olive green Marine Corps PT gear and a gallon jug of water and leave the plywood box of his bunk for the one with the stacks of weights.

Frank would slide the weights onto the bar and into each other with a clang, position himself horizontally on the bench and beneath the bar as he readied himself for the energy transfer of metal to muscles. The results spoke for themselves: in the mirror and in the eyes of his fellow Marines, who *oorah'd* his massive frame starting day one of boot camp. The bodies who had observed him, and he them.

So many of those bodies, on deployment, had been hurt, disfigured, lost. So many minds of those bodies, from

deployment, had been hurt, disfigured, lost.

Not Frank, though. No. He was all right, just hung over and tired and not out of shape, but slipping.

If Frank hit the hotel gym now, he could get in a full workout before Cameron woke up. Cameron, whose streak at the craps table the night before had gotten them two nights comped, was sprawled out on the couch—pants on, but no shirt—his half-belly half-hanging over his belt line, the tattoos on his torso like scars across his body.

Frank put on his PT gear, grabbed his room key, and slipped out the door.

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Frank and Cameron walked side-by-side, just narrow enough to manage the busy Vegas sidewalks. The sun baked them. Frank's muscles were alive with a buzzing soreness, but he hadn't done quite enough in the gym to burn off the effects of the night before. As he walked, he stared at his flip-flopped feet through his wraparound sunglasses. He thought of how his toes had their own little toe lives, every one of them.

Frank had met Cameron and his raspy, high-pitched Texas drawl at boot camp. They had been together ever since—after boot camp, infantry training, all the liberties out town, deployment, and, now, leave, in Vegas. From cradle to grave, literal or figurative—one way or another, everyone, eventually, left the Marines.

It was Saturday and was their second to last day of a long weekend in Vegas. Tomorrow, he and Cameron would drive back to Camp Pendleton, just north of San Diego. After getting back from Iraq, Frank made a quick stop to see his parents and some high school friends in Oklahoma, then went right back to the unit. Back to his routine. But then Cameron cashed in on the promise Frank had made on deployment. Frank wasn't much of a

Vegas guy, but he was Cameron's friend, and he kept his promises.

Frank made his Vegas promise the night after a squad from a nearby platoon had been out in a Humvee and hit an IED. In an instant, four died. They were alive and then they weren't. This was halfway into Frank and Cameron's 12-month deployment. The next evening on base, as the sun went down and they waited for their mission, Frank and Cameron smoked cigarettes and drank Rip It, which would get them through the night and were the sole vices that Frank allowed his body—they helped keep him alive.

That night, Cameron, his face and helmet a shadowy blur in the dwindling light, grabbed Frank by his flak jacket.

"I swear to fucking God, when we get back, we're going to Vegas," Cameron, desperation in his voice, had told Frank. "You're coming with me. And don't you die before we make it back. Or I'll kill ya."

"Okay," Frank said.

Doing so, Frank knew, meant that he couldn't die, so, the next morning, when they got back from patrol, Frank hit the gym with a vengeance, pushing weights he had never pushed before, trying to take not just the energy from the metal, but their very essence, and make it his. An IED could tear through flesh and bone, but not iron.

After a while of making their way down the Vegas strip, Cameron stopped walking and looked out over a small blue man-made lake. On other side of the lake was the Bellagio hotel, a tower of smooth concrete and tinted windows. It was built as if specifically to view from the spot where Frank was standing.

It stood in stark contrast to the charred remains of the buildings in Iraq, the ones militants had burned or bombed or

the ones the United States had burned or bombed. When Frank had driven by them in the back of the Humvee, they all looked the same: charred and black. Just as the bodies had been equally burned, so much that it was hard to believe they had once been alive and human. They might have been mothers, fathers, daughter, sons; they might have been Suni or Shiite or American. But to Frank they just were as they looked: charred black over bone.

"What the fuck?" Cameron said.

"What?" Frank replied.

"Where are the fountains?" Cameron asked. "There are supposed to be fountains."

"Where?" Frank asked.

"Where? Right fucking there. In the lake."

"All the time?" Frank asked.

"I don't know," Cameron said, upset. "I just know they are supposed to be here. And I don't fucking see any."

Frank grunted in response to Cameron.

"Hey," Cameron said.

Frank looked down at Cameron. Most everyone was shorter than Frank, Cameron especially. "What?" Frank replied.

"The *fountains*," Cameron said, incredulous.

"Must have just missed them," Frank said.

Cameron reached over the side of the wall and tried to touch the water of the lake. "The fountains restores youth to those who bathe or drink from it," Cameron said.

"We're only twenty-two," Frank said.

Cameron, not able to reach the water, stood back up. "Whatever," Cameron said. "People pee in there, you know."

Frank wondered if Cameron was talking about himself. Cameron had built up Vegas over deployment for so long that there was no telling how far he would go to achieve his vision of what it was to be here. There was Cameron's luck at craps the night before. And the woman whose hotel room he stayed at the night before that. Who knew what tonight would bring.

"Oh, look at the beautiful toes!"

Frank was surprised by a man who was bent over and looking at his feet. All Frank could see of the man was his headful of frizzy hair, like a brown brillo pad.

"They're wonderful! They are such little treats!"

Frank was confused. Cameron jumped back.

As the man stood up, two people in black came walking towards Frank, one short, one tall. The short one Frank could take. The tall one, too.

As Frank sized up the situation, and looked at the man again, who was standing now, he registered the hair, the bronze skin, the light in his eyes, a gold silk shirt over white pants, the joyfully high register of his voice, when Frank realized who it was: it was Richard Simmons.

"Is everything ok?" the shorter man whispered into Richard Simmons' ear, eyeing Frank at the same time.

Richard Simmons looked at Frank while he responded to his body guards. "Oh, I was just saying hi to these boys," Richard said.

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The Bellagio Baccarat Bar and Lounge was a cool reprieve from

the hot strip, though just as bright. The pillars were made of white and gold marble, the chairs red velvet, and there was a glass statue that looked like a blue mix of a bouquet of flowers and jellyfish and gold flames made of glass that shot towards the sky. Richard greeted the hostess by name and kissed her once on each cheek. He was directed towards a set of closed oak sliding doors, which, when opened, revealed a large, circular marble table in the middle of a room. A large blue and purple chandelier hung over it.

Frank, who felt severely underdressed, was the first to sit at the table, which had about twenty chairs surrounding it. He sat in one. Cameron sat on his left, Richard on his right. A woman in a dark blue suit and wearing rectangular glasses sat to Richard's left. The bodyguards were nowhere to be seen.

Frank couldn't really believe he and Cameron were here. With Richard Simmons.

A waitress appeared at the table, dressed in black and her thin, blonde ponytail pulled back.

"So, what'll it be?" Richard asked the table. "It's on me! It's the least I can do, for what you did."

Neither Frank nor Cameron had told Richard they were in the military, but they looked like they were, and they were.

It had been four years since Frank enlisted, right after high school in central Oklahoma. In high school, Frank had developed a smaller version of his current ox-like breadth as a freshman in high school, and had quickly been recruited by nearly every coach. He had accepted his fate with casual grace, excelling at varsity football, wrestling, and baseball, pleasing his coaches and classmates and teachers, if not himself. The glory of the field was nice, but he wanted something more. When colleges tried to recruit him, he balked at their offers. He wasn't ungrateful, just uninterested.

Frank didn't know what he was interested in—until one fateful school lunch in fall of his senior year. After Frank got his food and as he walked to find his table with his lunch tray, his eyes locked with the Marine Corps recruiter that stood by a table with an olive green drop cloth over it. The recruiter wore his dress uniform was built like a bulldog. His eyes widened at the spectacle of Frank. Frank walked over. As Frank stood there and pawed his two meatball subs off of his lunch tray, the recruiter spoke to Frank, using words like:

*Honor*

*Loyalty*

And the phrase the Marine Corps was known for:

*Semper Fidelis*—always faithful.

These words stuck with Frank. They were the words Frank would use to tell his parents when he told them his plans. Once Frank joined, they were all the words he needed to not quit and stay the course and get ready for war and, by doing so, staying faithful with his fitness. As a Marine, Frank got bigger, faster, fitter. The Marines always use a guy like Frank. And smaller guys like Cameron could use a friend like him, too.

And it had been nearly four years since Frank had enlisted for a four-year contract. In a few months now he would have to decide whether to stay or go. Same with Cameron. Frank didn't know what he would do. He wasn't sure what Cameron would do, either. Cameron was the type to stay in the Marines forever. Or maybe not. Frank had a hard enough time weighing the intentions of himself, let alone others. If he and Cameron went their separate ways, then so be it. Everything eventually ended, one way or another.

But Frank did know what he wanted to drink. "Jack and Coke for me," Frank said to the waitress.

"Make it two," said Cameron.

"Make it four," said Richard.

The waitress disappeared and left the four of them at the table. They all sat there in silence.

"Well, thank you, Mr. Simmons, for having us," Cameron said. Frank was surprised with Cameron's politeness.

"Mr. Simmons!" Richard said, delighted, "Mr. Simmons is my dad's name, and *he* didn't like being called *Mr.* either. I had to call him Sir."

"Really?" asked Cameron.

"Not Dad. *Sir*. The one thing I have in common with the military. Well, one of the things."

"Oh yeah?" said Cameron.

"You both know, like I do, the importance of being fit. I'm fit," he repeated, bringing both his arms so that his biceps were parallel to the floor.

Richard did look fit. His arms were tanned and toned, with a small amount of loose flesh that could be excused given his age, and the fact that he also seemed to be on vacation. The Jack and Cokes couldn't have helped, but then Frank was having them, too. This was Vegas, after all.

Richard gestured with his hands and scanned the room while he talked. "60 years old and I don't feel a day over 30. I have my gym still. In LA. I can't move like I used to, but I can keep up with most people. And it's fun! I put on some music and we all have a ball. But that's the first thing I noticed about you, how fit you are. But made in the real world, not just the gym."

Frank was suddenly made aware of how much time he had spent in

the gym.

Cameron motioned to Frank with his thumb. "Frank's the real fitness freak."

Richard looked at Frank. "The strong, silent type, I can tell," said Richard. "Frank, what's your routine?"

Richard turned towards Frank and looked up to meet his gaze. Frank and Richard were sitting so close to each other that Frank thought he could see himself in the pupils of Richard's eyes, in the black mirrors of his pupils. Frank grew shy under the intensity of Richard's gaze and looked away.

The waitress returned.

"Oh, thank you!" Richard said to the waitress, who put the tray of drinks on top of marble table closest to Richard's assistant, who began passing them around. The drink Frank had thought was for Richard's assistant was also for Richard.

After they all got their drinks, Richard lifted his two glasses in the air. "To the troops!" Richard said. Frank and Cameron lifted their glasses in the air and after they all clanked them together, they drank.

"Bench," said Frank, in response to Richard's previous question. "Deadlifts, clean, pullups, dips, all that."

Richard was drinking when Frank responded and was initially confused by, then registered, the response, both with deliberate movement of his eyebrows.

Now that he had answered Richard's question, Frank took a sip of his Jack and Coke. It went down smooth. He had drunk way too many of these over the past couple of weeks.

"Wow, and all the military training you do, too," Richard said.

Frank nodded. "70 pound rucks, not to mention the gear. Jumping out of trucks, hiking, running, sprinting up stairs, night missions. Really takes its toll on the body. All the stuff in the gym helps with that. But I'm kind of taking a break now. We just got back from deployment two weeks ago."

"Two weeks," Richard said. "So you really just got home, didn't you?"

Richard made eye contact with Frank again, and, as Frank met it, he was suddenly struck with a familiar feeling.

Frank had never particularly followed the career of Richard Simmons, but Richard had been popular enough at the prime TV watching age of Frank's youth that it would have been almost impossible to avoid his presence. Frank remembered the clips of people who were desperate in their situation, those who felt hopeless to make any meaningful change in their lives. Those were exactly the kind of people who Richard had wanted to help, who Richard sought out and went into their homes and sat right next to them and looked right into their eyes with genuine concern—the same genuine concern that he looked into Frank's—and took their hands into his as he told them everything was going to be *all right*. And afterwards, for many people, it was. Their lives became better. Simply because they had met Richard Simmons.

Frank broke Richard's gaze, grabbed his drink with his right hand, and took a long sip.

The waitress soon walked into the room again, holding another tray full of Jack and Cokes. Frank didn't remember anyone ordering another round. Richard flagged her down even though she was already heading to the table. Once the drinks were again passed around, Richard gave the waitress his phone and asked her to take a picture of them.

After she took the picture, and after they finished their second round of drinks, but before they all departed, Richard

asked for Frank's and Cameron's number, and he texted the picture to them.

When Frank received the text and looked at the picture, he looked at Richard, whose mouth and eyes were open and joyous as he stared into the camera and now met Frank's gaze. Richard looked happy.

Cameron, who looked as he always did for the pictures they took on deployment, had a blank face, one devoid of emotions, except for the emotion he used to look hard. It was the face that Frank would put on when they were geared up and ready to go out on patrol or when he was at the gym and about to put up serious weights.

But that's not the face that Frank had in the picture. He had the tinge of a smile and his face was relaxed. Frank didn't look as in shape as he would have liked, but, like Richard Simmons, he looked happy, too.

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"Do you think he's gay?" Cameron asked.

Frank and Cameron sat on black leather seats in the back of stretch yellow Humvee that had been promised to Cameron over the phone.

After drinks with Richard Simmons, Frank and Cameron went back to their hotel, but not before Richard asked them to meet up later that night. While Cameron began to shake his head, Frank said they would think about it, and they departed. When they got back to their hotel, Frank watched Cameron lose money at blackjack, then slots, then they went together to the hotel buffet and ate plates of meat and potatoes. When they were done, they went back to the room to freshen up, then Cameron called the number for Larry Flynt's Hustler Strip Club, which sent the stretch yellow Humvee they were now sitting in.

"Who cares?" Frank replied to Cameron's question. "Why does it matter?"

Cameron fiddled with the power windows of the limo.

"It doesn't," Cameron said. "I'm just asking, damn."

"Well, if it doesn't matter, then it doesn't matter."

"He did ask us to go dancing with him tonight."

"He was just being nice," Frank said.

"Whatever," Cameron grunted.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Frank asked.

"Nothing," Cameron said. He stared out the window.

Frank hadn't been to very many strip clubs. He didn't like to party like Cameron and the guys. They let Frank off easy because he looked like he could beat them up, which he probably could, even though he had never tried.

Most male Marines looked like Cameron, only a little taller, and lived a similar lifestyle. Pudge on top of muscle. They balanced a steady supply of cigarettes, alcohol, dip, energy drinks, burgers and fries, with pull-ups, running, cross fit, the weight room, and protein shakes. They looked like it, with thick necks and torsos that were tough, meaty, and tattooed.

Not Frank. There was no balance, only exercise. Not a drop of ink to found on him or alcohol in him. The other Marines would make fun of him for it if they weren't so impressed or scared or jealous. The saying was "every Marine a rifleman," the rifle their weapon of choice. Frank was a rifleman, too, but his body was the weapon. And the fortress. An impenetrable shell. But that wasn't why Frank worked out. He did it to feel whole. It didn't quite work, though, so maybe there was something to way Cameron did things. He'd give it a try, at

least.

The stretch limo dropped Cameron and Frank off under a giant open rooftop that was held up by green fluorescent pillars. They were ushered through the front door and entered a long, black hallway that lead to a black door. On Cameron's suggestion, they got the VIP pass, which gave them two free drinks and a lap dance, and they went through the door and into the club.

Frank entered the club behind Cameron. As soon as he did, he was overwhelmed by it all: the ivory white bar the sea of white leather chairs to his left, the poles everywhere, the pulsing hip hop.

A hand touched Frank's elbow. He turned and was met with the steady gaze of a blonde woman. Her skin and hair glistened under the light. She gestured to his right ear, which he bent down towards her.

"Vanessa," she said.

"Frank," Frank replied.

"Do you want a dance?"

"Okay."

She took him by the hand and began leading them up the stairs to the second floor. Frank looked for Cameron, who stood by the bar sipping his drink and watched as three of Vanessa's coworkers gathered around him and contended for his attention.

When Frank got upstairs he was led to a booth, where Vanessa began to give him his dance. She stood in front of him and danced and then began to straddle him. He was allowed to touch her torso as she danced for him, which he did, with both hands. While she danced, he couldn't help but notice her perfect hair and makeup, her slim and toned muscles and abs. And that look. The perfect combination of seduction and

admiration, as if he was perfect.

Frank wondered what she had done to get everything so perfect as she did. And he wondered what she would do when it was no longer perfect anymore, when her body or mind wasn't able to do this anymore, from age or exhaustion. When Vanessa got to that point, would she think that she best used her time now, or that it used her? Will she consider her life over, or that it had just begun?

Toward the end of the latest song, Vanessa leaned over so that her hair draped over him. She again spoke into his right ear.

"You're body's so hot," she said.

Frank was excited despite himself—he liked women, but this was nothing but a transaction, and he knew it.

Out of the corner of Frank's eye, he saw Cameron leading a petite brunette by the hand past Frank and Vanessa and into a back room.

Vanessa stopped dancing. She stood up, flipped her hair, and asked if Frank wanted to continue. Frank said yes. Vanessa said they should go into the back room. When she answered how much it was, Frank said that they should just stay where they were. She walked away and came back with a credit card reader. It was still too much money, but Frank swiped his card, and she started her routine all over again.

At the end of her next dance, Vanessa again asked Frank if he wanted to go into the back room. Frank said no. She asked if he wanted another dance. Frank said no. She said thanks, smiled, and walked downstairs.

Cameron was still in the back room, so Frank went downstairs and to the bar. Frank didn't want to leave Cameron, but didn't want to spend any more money on dances. He went to the bathroom and checked his phone. He had two missed phone calls

from Richard Simmons. Frank looked at the time. It was nearly midnight. Frank shot a text to Cameron to ask him where he was. Cameron didn't respond. Frank then thought of calling Richard back, but it was late, and his phone was almost dead.

When Frank got out of the bathroom, he saw a phone charging station next to the bathroom and attached to the wall. He swiped his card in the charging station and hooked up his phone. As he stood there, Vanessa and a co-worker walked by him and down a hallway. Neither of them seemed to notice Frank. In fact, no one did. Frank was in a bubble he could stand in, safe from the obligation of interaction. He would stay here.

From the hallway that Vanessa and her co-worker had walked down, a red head walked towards him. She glanced nervously from one side of the hallway to another. Her hair and makeup was overdone and she walked in heels and a black coat that came down to her knees. She held a sparkling black bag in the crook of her right arm and continued to shift her focus from one point to another as if she was scanning for something she had lost. Then her focus settled on Frank.

Frank looked away, but it was too late. She was headed right for him.

"Hey," she said. She stood right next to Frank.

"Hey," he replied.

"Sandra," she said.

"Frank," Frank replied.

She held out her phone, whose screen was black. "My phone is dead," she said. "Would you be able to call me an Uber? I can pay you." Before Frank had a chance to respond, she opened her bag, stuck her hand inside and pulled out a stack of one-dollar bills that were carefully folded in half. She held them

out to Frank. "That should cover it," she said.

Frank took the money, put it into his pocket, and touched the screen of his phone to bring up the Uber app.

"Where are you going?" he asked, and when she told him, he told her how long until the driver would arrive. She thanked him and then they both stood there, both of their bodies facing each other, but neither making eye contact.

Sandra began to shake her head as she looked at the ground. "I just failed my audition," she said. She glanced at Frank then back at the ground as she used her right hand to put her hair behind her ears. "They want me to lose twenty pounds and to get work done. I mean, I could lose some of the weight, but I won't get surgery. I didn't have to do any of this shit in Portland."

"I'm sorry," Frank said.

They both looked at each other now.

"It's different here, in Vegas," she said. "The competition. The standards. Everyone wants you to be something you're not."

"I think you're beautiful," Frank said to her. He meant it.

"Thanks," Sandra said. She said it like she had heard it a thousand times before.

Frank didn't know what to say anymore. "Don't let them change you," he said. He had heard someone say that once.

Sandra touched his arm. "Thank you," she said. She smiled and looked at him sincerely. "What are you in Vegas for?"

"Just got back from Iraq," Frank said. "Here for some R & R with my buddy."

Sandra instantly threw her arms around him. Frank, surprised, kept his arms by his side. Sandra let go and stepped back and

looked sheepish, as if she had violated his personal boundaries. "Welcome back," she said.

"Thanks," Frank said.

Frank's phone buzzed in his hand and when he looked at it, he saw that Sandra's ride was here. She hugged him again and thanked him, and this time he hugged her back.

"Thank you for helping me," she said into his ear, as she still embraced him. He inhaled the smell of her hair and perfume. "You're so sweet."

Frank was moved by her comment, and found Sandra attractive. This, whatever it was—he didn't want it to end.

"Can I come with you?" Frank whispered.

Sandra looked neither surprised or offended. She shook her head. "Not tonight," she said.

"Okay," Frank said.

Sandra hugged Frank quickly again and left. Cameron still hadn't come downstairs yet. It was just past midnight. Frank remembered the two missed phone calls from Richard Simmons. He figured it was too late now to call back.

Frank stood at the bottom of the stairs for another twenty minutes or so as he waited for Cameron to come down, and when he didn't, he ordered an Uber for himself back to the hotel.

After the Uber, arrived, a black Honda Accord, Frank sat in the back. He pulled up the picture that Richard had texted him. Frank looked at Richard's face again, the one where he had thought Richard looked so happy.

But when Frank looked at the picture now, he looked into Richard's eyes as they looked back at him and saw the sadness that no amount of acting happy could hide.

As the Uber driver drove and talked to Frank about NBA basketball, Frank tried calling Richard Simmons. The phone rang and rang and then went to voicemail.

\*

Frank woke up early the next morning, hung over. He walked to the windows and looked out as the rays of the sun took over duties from the lights of the strip. Cameron was passed out on the sofa, shirt on, but no pants. Frank hadn't heard him come back last night.

Frank put on some clothes, grabbed his room key and phone, and slipped out the door. He was on the Vegas strip in minutes.

At this hour, the streets were deserted, except for the occasional pairs of older couples or friends who walked with purpose. Frank took his time— check out time wasn't for hours. His muscles were calling for the workout he was sure to miss that day, but he tried to ignore their signals and the ones that called for food and water. He kept walking. He had spent too much time in his life sealed off, untouched by the secrets the wide world had to offer.

Frank took in the sights. The tall hotels. The fake pyramid and fake Eiffel tower. The people. He tried to think of the contrast between this and the streets of Iraq, but nothing came to him. When he thought of Iraq, he thought of working out, or of waiting to work out. Sometimes of bodies and the minds of bodies. Of the charred and black. But when his mind went to that, he thought of working out again.

Frank's phone buzzed. He took it out of his pocket and saw that it was Richard Simmons. He answered.

"Hello, Frank," Richard said to him. He sounded disappointed. Frank and Cameron had blown off Richard's invitation last night. Frank didn't want Richard to be upset.

"Hi," Frank said.

"I know it's early, but I woke up early. I had trouble sleeping."

"I'm up early, too," Frank said. "I'm sorry about last night. We did appreciate your invitation."

"What are you up to?" Richard asked.

"I'm out walking the strip."

"Oh, you are?" Richard asked. He sounded less disappointed now. "Where?"

Frank looked around him as he held the phone to his ear. "I don't know. By some hotels."

"Are you hungry?"

"I could eat."

"Come to the Bellagio. They'll send you to my room. How does that sound?"

"Okay," Frank said.

When Frank got to the lobby of the Bellagio, an open expanse of marble ceilings and floors, and rainbow colored decoration, he looked for a hotel clerk to speak to. Frank realized he didn't know where Richard's room was. Someone tapped him on the shoulder, and he turned to see a man in a burgundy coat and white gloves.

"Are you here for Richard Simmons?" the man asked.

"Yes," Frank said.

"Right this way," the man said. He stepped backwards and to the side and extended his right arm in the direction of where he wanted Frank to walk.

When Frank got to Richard's room, the door was slightly ajar. Frank walked in. Richard sat alone with his back to the

window, facing the door, and at the head of a glass dining room table in a yellow chair. When Richard saw Frank, he gave a tired smile. He wore a red sequin tank top and white pants.



“Frank. Come in.”

The place setting for Frank was at the head of the table opposite Richard. In the middle of the table, there was enough food for a platoon: French Toast, muffins, eggs, bacon, potatoes, prime New York steak, smoked salmon on bagels, carafes of coffee and orange juice. Richard hadn't touched the food yet. Frank took his seat.

“I got a little of everything,” Richard said.

“I can see that,” Frank replied.

“Shall we?” Richard asked, and gestured towards the food. A genuine glow lifted his face and body.

Frank dug in. He put enough on his plate for at least two. Richard then got some food for himself, a small portion of eggs and potatoes and bacon. While Frank ate, he poured rounds of coffee and juice and water for himself.

Frank was done almost as soon as he began. Frank then looked at Richard, who ate his food gently and took his time. This was in sharp contrast to Frank, who, now aware of that fact, was embarrassed, but tried not to show it. Richard didn't seem to notice, and was focused on the simple act of eating. Frank got some more food and ate it slowly enough that he wouldn't finish before Richard did.

“How was it?” Richard asked. Frank was in the last chews of his second round of food.

Frank wiped his face with his napkin. “Really good,” Frank said. “Thank you.”

"Of course," Richard said. He cupped his coffee cup with two hands, brought it to his face for a sip, then put it down. "Did you have a nice night?"

"We went to a strip club, actually," Frank said, who wanted the words back as soon as he said them.

Richard must have sensed Frank's embarrassment and waved away his concern. "It's Vegas. I'd be worried if you *didn't* go to a strip club."

"I was worried to tell you, actually," Frank said.

"There's nothing you've seen that I haven't. And I've seen *everything*. Did you have a good time?"

Frank thought about it.

"I don't know," Frank said. "Maybe not."

Richard gave a slight nod and a little shrug of his shoulders. He understood.

"What about you?" Frank asked.

Richard rolled his eyes and smiled as if he had already explained it to Frank. "Oh, I found the party, but the party didn't find me, if that makes sense."

It didn't, really, to Frank, but he nodded anyways. Frank was deeply aware of the bounty of food he currently held in his stomach. He wasn't going to throw up, but he was worried he might burst.

"Do you ever get tired of it all?" Frank asked Richard.

Richard put down his coffee cup. He was curious about Frank's question. He put both of his elbows on the table in front of him and gestured with his hands to the majesty of the room around him. "Of this?" Richard asked. He meant it sincerely.

Frank felt bad, that he had overstepped. "No, sorry," Frank said.

"Oh, I can get tired of this," Richard said. "It's marvelous at first—and it is marvelous—but after a while it just becomes normal. So then you look for something new to give you the feeling that the first marvelous thing did. After a while, when you get tired of all that, you just want what was normal to begin with."

"And are you tired of it now?" Frank asked.

Slowly, Richard swiveled around in his chair and looked out the penthouse window. Down below was the small, blue man-made lake. "Sometimes yes, sometimes no. Sometimes yes, but then I take a break, and then I'm good again. But the breaks have gotten longer over the years."

"I think I'm getting to that point," Frank said. "Of being done."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-two."

"Ha!" Richard's laugh rang out like a shot. He continued to laugh as he swung around in his chair. When he faced Frank, he covered his mouth with one hand and waved towards Frank with the other, as if trying to apologize for his behavior. Frank couldn't help but feel a little embarrassed. Richard's laugh trickled down into a sniffle.

"I'm sorry," Richard said. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Frank said.

"I wasn't laughing at you," Richard said. "I just —"

"It's okay."

Richard stood up, walked over to Frank, and sat in the chair

that was to Frank's immediate left. He looked in Frank's eyes, with the same gaze that had cast Frank into a spell the day before.

"You've been through a lot, haven't you?" Richard asked.

Frank looked at Richard and nodded. "And so have you," Frank said.

Richard was surprised by Frank's comment. He looked away from Frank and furrowed his eyebrows, not in disapproval of Frank, but in reaction something that only he could see. Richard stood up, walked over to the window, and looked out it. He stood there for a while.

Frank thought of when he had typed "Richard Simmons" into YouTube last night, when Cameron was in the shower, getting ready for the strip club. The first YouTube result was an hour long video of Richard dancing with a roomful of people, titled, "Sweatin' to the Oldies." Frank clicked on it and it was what he had expected: Richard and a roomful of his followers, all in leotards, dancing to the oldies. Frank exited the video and clicked on the second result, which was one of Richard's David Letterman's appearances.

In the video, Richard wore a turkey costume made of red and yellow feathers. The audience howled their approval of his costume, and Richard basked in their approval. Letterman smirked. Richard seemed to purposely annoy Letterman and Letterman responded by making fun of Richard—this was their routine. Richard then wanted Letterman to give him a kiss on the cheek, then he stood up in his red and yellow feather outfit and walked over to Letterman to try, and Letterman stood up carrying a fire extinguisher and sprayed Richard with it. Richard yelled at Letterman to stop but Letterman continued spraying him. The audience went wild. The video ended.

Frank felt conflicted by the video. Fitness wasn't about

celebrity. It was about fitness. Frank worked out to get strong and to look strong.

But then that wasn't fully true. He worked out to kill. He worked out to distract himself from killing and dying and death and the charred and the black. Frank worked out to save himself. And while it was true he would eventually leave the Marines, one way or another, it wasn't true that the Marines would leave him. Once a Marine, always one.

Maybe it was similar for Richard. His body would only allow him to work out for so long. But whatever happened, he would always be Richard Simmons.

Richard continued to stare out the window. Down below, Frank knew, were the fountains that he hadn't seen.

Frank's phone buzzed in his pocket. He pulled it out. Cameron was calling him. Frank let it go to voicemail.

Frank looked at Richard. "Hey, what's up with those fountains?" Frank asked.

"What do you mean?" Richard asked.

"Do they work?"

"Yes," Richard said.

"Yesterday when Cameron and I went by they weren't on. And they're not on now, too."

"Well, they start only after a certain time. Four o'clock, something like that. What time is it now?"

Frank looked at his watch. "Nine A.M.," he said.

"We'd have to wait for a while then."

"I'll be gone by then," Frank said.

Richard, still looking out the window, nodded.

"I've never seen them," Frank said. "In person, I mean. I've seen them on YouTube or whatever."

Richard whirled around on his heels. "You've never seen them?!"

"No."

Richard walked quickly past Frank and in the direction of his bedroom. "Frank, what are we going to do with you? Hold, please."

Richard slammed the bedroom doors shut behind him. Frank heard Richard's muffled talking. After a few minutes, Richard opened both doors at the same time. He was glowing. "I've got good news!" Richard said. He started walking.

"They're going to turn on the fountains?" Frank asked.

Richard pointed at Frank. "Bingo," Richard said. Richard walked past Frank towards the window. Frank followed.

"How'd you do that?" Frank asked.

Richard put out both his arms and shrugged his shoulders like *aw shucks*. "One of the perks."

Frank walked to the window and stood next to Richard so that they were shoulder to shoulder. They both stared out the window and onto the lake below.

"Any second now," Richard said.

"Okay," Frank said.

"What about your friend?" Richard asked. "Should we stop the parade and invite him?"

Frank stayed silent for a few moments as he thought of his

response.

“Cameron doesn’t like fountains,” Frank replied finally.

“Oh,” Richard replied. “Oh, okay.”

As Frank and Richard waited for the fountains to come, Frank could see both of their reflections in the mirror.

Richard, who looked through the window with anticipation, seemed tired, but content. Compared to the one Frank had seen in the YouTube video on Letterman, his face was older, obviously, not quite as full of youth and vigor. But it was Richard’s.

Frank then looked at himself and his rounded edges. He didn’t look like he used to. But he looked like who he was. He looked like Frank.

Suddenly, from the blue lake below, two circles of fountains of water shot up from the lake, then, in the middle of both those circles, two towers of water shot up into the sky, so high up, that they seemed like they would never come down again.

Richard gasped.

Frank looked at his own reflection. “Don’t be scared,” he said.

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**New Fiction from Jon  
Imparato: “You Had Me at**

# Afghanistan”

*“I was lying in a burned-out basement with the full moon in my eyes. I was hoping for replacement when the sun burst through the sky. There was a band playing in my head and I felt like getting high. I was thinking about what a friend had said. I was hoping it was a lie. Thinking about what a friend had said, I was hoping it was a lie.”* –Neil Young

k.d. lang’s voice carries the Neil Young lyrics on a mellifluous ride; notes keep swirling up as I crash to the ground. I’m clutching a wet dishcloth as if it were a rope, thinking about what a friend had said, and I was hoping it was a lie. I’m staring at the fringe tangled on my terracotta-colored sarong and my beaded anklet. I grab the heavy sweater I am wearing over my tank top to cover my face as I sob. My skin is the darkest it has ever been from traveling in five Asian countries during their summer. Being thrust into cold, rainy weather frightens me. I want to be back in oppressive heat. I am thinking about what a friend had said, I was hoping it was a lie. I have heard those lyrics my whole adult life, but now it means something entirely different. It means the unspeakable.

\*

I am a radical on sabbatical. I have been working as the Artistic Director of the Lily Tomlin/Jane Wagner Cultural Arts Center for ten years. When I asked my boss for sabbatical, I was shocked when he said yes. I’m taking three months off from my job. I started out in Thailand, then Cambodia, Laos, Hanoi. (Or, as I like to call it, HanNoise. It is a city without a moment of silence, a never-ending cacophony of traffic, people, and blaring intrusions of sound.) My final destination is Bali. I have learned on this trip that most of the travel agents have never left the town or village they live in. But for some reason I think I can trust this father-daughter team.

The daughter insists I call her Baby, and she calls me Mr. Delicious.

When I arrived in Bali, one of the first things I was told was that my name, Jon, meant "delicious" in Balinese. I had just come from Cambodia, where I gave a piece of my heart to a man whose long name I had a hard time pronouncing. At one point he was joking and said, "Just call me Delicious and I'll call you Mr. Delicious because that is what we are to each other...delicious." We had a brief four-day affair, a travel affair; they are so transitory and carefree, no one expects anything except the momentary pleasures.

A young girl at the travel agency loves that my name means delicious, and she thinks this is hilarious. When I tell her it also means toilet in English, I then become Delicious Toilet.

"I think you like me, Mr. Delicious, I think you do." "I like you fine, Baby; I will like you even more if you can get me onto a remote island." Baby keeps flirting with me and asking me if I like her. She is oblivious to the fact that I am gay, and her flirting seems just to be on autopilot. Her flirting is learned; nothing about it is organic. Baby's father is watching his daughter flirt. He is in on the game; all he wants is for Baby to make the sale. We are all in on the game; everyone is trying to get what they want. Nonetheless I find myself charmed by Baby. All I want is a quiet island where I can write and stare at water while I do a slow brain drain. Both Baby and her father have assured me that I will be on a quiet, peaceful island, with a bungalow on the ocean.

I want to be face-to-face with the ocean. I want a wave confrontation. I take an hour boat ride and arrive on an island across from Lombok, Gili Trankang, right next to Bali. This is an island with seven hundred people, no cars, no motorbikes, and no police. This is not a lush resort but a Rasta party island. Visitors are met at the dock by tuk-tuk

carriages pulled by very sad horses. There is poverty here, you just can't escape it. The power goes out several times a day, hot water is never guaranteed, and most bungalows have saltwater showers, very strange to the skin. Imagine someone has spilled a margarita on you and rinsed you off. My bungalow is attached to an open café with a bar painted a bright red-orange, sunshine yellow, and a deep green. The stage faces the most beautiful turquoise, sea-green ocean. Yet trash is piled up on sandbanks. You must turn your head toward the beauty, and there is plenty of it.



I am hanging out, having lunch with the reggae band and staff. They are quick to tell me that I will do very well on this island because it is filled with beautiful women. I nonchalantly say that I am gay and hope there are also lots of beautiful men. Suddenly I can feel the chill, as if a hurricane's gust of wind suddenly changed direction. Some of them are cool, but many of them are not. I quickly learn that most of the people on the island are Muslim. I have been in the accepting bliss of Buddhists and Hindus, so for the first time I need to keep a low profile about being gay. In all these travels, this is the first time that I have encountered any homophobia. The Rasta world is full of wonderful male affection—everyone calls you his brother, yet there is a homophobic and sexist element to the Rasta world that can't be ignored. It is ever-present and inescapable.

Of course, it takes hours for my room to be ready. Ganja is king here; everyone is stoned and moves at a snail's pace from the herb and the heat. They have two speeds: slow and stop. I get in the water, and I have arrived! This is the ocean I have longed for: crystal clear, warm in a way that requires no adjusting to the temperature, the color is spectacular, and it feels like flower petals on my skin. I have arrived...yet I am not happy. I miss my New York friend Roberta something awful.

She longs for water like this too.

We have always shared the ocean in a deep way; when we met, we found as many ways as we could to spend time at the ocean, and I want her here with me. I want to be stupid and silly with her, laugh and splash. The ocean floor is filled with mounds of pure white coral; you can scoop it up with your hands and have little pieces of coral rain down on you. Roberta would freak. The absence of my friend is stinging. I scoop up empty water and pour it over my head as I cry, my sobbing face plunged into the ocean and staring at the coral floor. I remember that I always take a while to get my footing on my first day in a new country. I'm thrilled to get an email from a friend I met in Cambodia, named Mags. Mags is seventy-two. She has short-cropped, maroon-purplish hair. Her hair spikes up like an eighties rock star. She wears long, flowing dresses with wild prints and tons of large jewelry from her travels. She is from Queensland, Australia. She moved to Phnom Penh, in Cambodia. Mags checked into the gay hotel where I was staying. She convinced the hotel owner to let her live there. The only woman in a gay hotel where she holds court. We exchange our lives over scotch by the pool, and instantly we feel great love for each other. Everyone calls her Mum. Her daughter, Morag, will be arriving in three days. I can't wait for them to arrive on this magical island. This lifts my spirits and just knowing I will soon have some friends on the island is a comfort.

\*

I am at a place called Sama Sama. It means "same-same" but also signifies that we are all just a little bit different, but everyone is the same and welcomed. The Rasta band is really good, and there is a huge dancing-drinking-smoking scene going on. They play mostly Bob Marley covers. They tell me it is the happiest music on earth. Yet I am in my room, I am not happy. I am trying to read or do some writing, but the sound of the band is deafening. I'm mad at the happiest music,

mad at Baby and her dad for sending me here, mad at feeling like an outcast, mad at the world. I finally give in and say to myself, "Get out of this bungalow and just embrace this bizarre scene."

I'd made friends with one of the bartenders, named Zen, that afternoon and he seemed cool. I sit down at the bar and drink my scotch with all this Rasta joy bouncing and swirling around me. I am certain I am the only gay man on the island and feel like I don't belong, like an island unto myself.

Suddenly, one of the most beautiful men I have ever laid my eyes on sits next to me. He is straight, no question about it. He is trying to get the bartender's attention. I shout, "Hey, Zen, can you get my buddy a drink?"

The beautiful man says, "Thanks for the hook-up." I learn he is from Canada. The best people I have met on my journey who aren't native are Canadians. They are open and sturdy. I will refer to my friend as Huck for reasons I will explain later. We start talking and within a few minutes the conversation is off and running. Our ideas, opinions, and insights are crashing in on us like the waves a few feet away. This guy is smart, insightful, and profound, and we are in deep, exchanging who we are with each other. We talk politics for a good part of the conversation: He can't stand Bush; Sarah Palin is an unquestionable joke—his views are so liberal. I tell him I often feel like I am what is left of the left, an old Lily Tomlin joke. He laughs and says he feels my pain. About an hour into the conversation, he hits a curveball in my direction that almost knocks me off my seat. He tells me he is a soldier on leave from Afghanistan, and he goes back to war in a few days.

Traveling around Southeast Asia, you can talk to people for the longest time and, unlike in America, they don't ask you what you do. Your work doesn't define you. I would never have thought this beautiful, sensitive man was a soldier. That

information seems so incongruous to the man I am talking to. I am so thrown and confused by this news. I turn and say, "Okay, let's break this sucker down." Like an archaeologist, I keep digging. Who is this guy?

Our conversation goes deep and wide, fast, and furious. It moves with speed and intention but always with grace. We close the bar; he is now even more fascinating to me. It is 4:00 a.m. and I assume I am off to bed. Huck turns to me and says, "Here is how I see it. We are not done with this conversation, and I am not done with you. Let's go get some weed and smoke a joint on the beach and talk until sunup." I tell him I am so there.

As we walk on the dark dirt road, following the sad horses' hoofprints, Huck says, "Where do you think we can score some weed?"

I point to an old man in his eighties with a Marley Rules T-shirt selling bottles of scotch, cigarettes, and Pringles. "I guarantee you he is our best bet."

Huck turns and says, "Come on, little buddy."

"Huck, I feel like Gilligan on *Gilligan's Island*. Why are you calling me that?"

"Oh, it's too late, that's who you are. I like calling you that."

Scoring takes all of five minutes. Huck returns with this sneaky smile on his face. "I not only got you enough weed for the week that you're on this island, but I also got you papers and a lighter."

I turn to him and say, "If you are trying to get down my pants, you had me at Afghanistan."

Mind you, at this point I have not smoked weed for eight weeks, and this is the first time on my trip I even feel like

getting high. We sit by an ocean lit by beach lamps that keep the waves sea-green while the ocean further down is a deep blue-black.

Huck and I continue to share our lives, and I learn that he had an epiphany in Afghanistan that has transformed him. After 9/11 he felt a deep need to fight against the Taliban. Canada never went into Iraq nor would he. But fighting the Taliban was something he felt he had to do. "Little buddy, this is the way I see it. I'm young, strong, and capable. If not me, then who? I don't know how else to say this, but I had to go; it is my destiny. Believe me," he said, "it is that complicated and that simple." I don't know if I agree with him. All I know is that I want him to be safe.

Now he sees how wrong the war is. Huck explains that we are fighting a losing battle. We will never build the army this country needs. He has developed a deep affection for some of the Afghanistan children, and he no longer thinks it is right to kill anyone. He is hoping for a replacement assignment where he could leave combat and become a search-and-rescue expert for the Canadian Army. Every now and then I just burst out, "God, you are beautiful!" He lowers his head, blushes, and says thanks. In return he says, "God, you are great."

He knows I'm not coming on to him; it's clearly beyond that. Yet my appreciation for his unquestionable beauty must be proclaimed from time to time. He proclaims how great I am in return, and we laugh.

Neither one of us had known this island existed, and we have no idea how we ended up here. It was never on either of our trajectories. Our conversation just glides from one thought to another. I will show him L.A., and he will show me Canada. We talk about books, his girlfriends, my boyfriends, the demise of the Bush administration, the hope of Obama, saving lives, and living them.

While we talk the night into day, the full moon stares us down, right in my eyes. It is a bluish- gray moon that looks as if a prop person hung it between two island trees. The sky begins to turn ever so slightly into its morning yellow as the moon seems to be replaced instantly by the sun. We both have the reggae band playing in our heads. Mine is tossing around over and over a reggae version of "Leaving on a Jet Plane." Huck's is "No Woman No Cry." We joke that we will have the Sama Sama reggae band playing in our heads for weeks. As we say good night, he tells me he will be getting an enormous tattoo tomorrow and asks me if I would stop by the tattoo shack with the huge orange hammock on the porch.

\*

Lying in bed, I had been feeling sorry for myself. I have just spent five days at a gay villa, and I am longing to be around my gay brothers. I feel resentful of the homophobia I know is coming at me from many of the straight men. The last person I ever thought would rescue me from that state of mind is a straight Canadian soldier.

I stay up trying to write a short story about the encounter of Huck and Jon. In the morning I finally go to bed at 9:00 a.m. because my encounter with Huck has my mind reeling.

\*

I race over to the tattoo shack around noon. My feet can't get me there fast enough. I want to be with Huck and yet am baffled by the intense urgency I feel. It has been gray and cloudy morning, but as I pick up my pace, the sun bursts through the sky shouting and waving hello, and I can't wait to let the water feel me again.

At the tattoo shack there is a guy with the longest dreads I have ever seen dangling through a hammock, as if long, black snakes were sweeping the old wooden floor as the hammock sways back and forth. The tattoo artist is older and seems as

relaxed as a human can get. Some obscure Tracy Chapman song is playing on a radio. Huck must have told the guy in the hammock that a friend was stopping by because he just points his finger to the back room. Huck is lying on the bed in just his swim trunks. He tells me he is getting really scared because this is going to take about four hours and it's going to hurt. He is clearly freaked. The design is huge and will be on his left side, a place where people rarely get them. The tattoo artist tells him to be patient and to expect a lot of pain. In twenty-three years, he has never given anyone a tattoo of that size in that area. "It is all bone," he keeps muttering and shaking his head. "It is all bone."

I grab Huck's leg and say, "Okay, Huck, here's the deal. Do you really want this tattoo? If you do, I will hang out and keep you company. I am a really good nurse."

He nods yes, then mutters, "Stay, please." I become the tattoo nurse. I run back to my bungalow and get him some pills that will help him sleep. I make sure he drinks a lot of water, buy him Pringles (they are everywhere). I buy a fifth of scotch, tell him funny stories, put cold towels on his forehead, and basically make sure he is okay, documenting the ordeal with my camera.

The tattoo is of a devil-looking serpent coming out of the ocean. This image gives me chills. As the serpent with its sword rises, a huge splash of water hits the air. The other half is some sort of angel figure carrying a torch of glowing light. He told me it was his personal reckoning of the good and evil inside himself. The never-ending reminder to himself...that he chose to kill. He is utterly motionless. The tattoo artist is amazed, as I am, at Huck's perfect stillness during four hours of intense pain. I think to myself, this is a soldier's story. He understands all too well what a false move can mean. He knows how to be a statue or risk being killed.

\*

Later, over lunch, I interview him for a short story I plan to write about him. I ask him for examples from combat when he had to be that still or it could cost him his life. He tells me not long ago he was searching a burned-out basement for weapons. He heard footsteps above and hit the basement floor. As he was lying there, he knew that if anyone heard him, he would be dead. It was a soldier's strength. The determination I witnessed during those four hours while he was getting his tattoo was staggering. I learned once again that the will of the human spirit is indomitable.

The tattoo shack has a back room behind the tattooing room with a mattress on the floor. The room rents out for ten dollars a night. Huck is turned on his side, eyes closed; the drugs are working. The tattoo artist was taking a break to eat his lunch. The door opens and a beautiful, young, blonde woman who reminds me of Scarlett Johansson walks in, says her name is Daliana, and she wants to rent the back room. Then she looks at Huck, looks at me, and whispers, "He is so hot." I laugh and agree. She tells me she is from Canada, and I tell her, "Don't rent that room, you can do better." Huck turns and says, "Canada, where?" Canadians love meeting other Canadians. I tell Daliana to meet us later at Sama Sama to party.

The moment she leaves I can see Huck is having a really hard time keeping it together. The tattoo artist says, "Get ready for round two," with this ominous tone in his voice. Huck's body isn't moving, but his face tells me he is in severe pain. He turns to me and says, "You are a lifesaver. Do you realize you are saving my life? Do you get that, little buddy?"

I say, "Huck, saving lives, come on. That is what we talked about last night. Isn't that what this new friendship is all about? You went into the war to kill and had your epiphany that you are here to save lives. Now you have to stop calling me little buddy; it is way too Gilligan on this island." He

shakes his head no. He flashes me that look that says don't make me laugh; it hurts. I tell him about John *Irving's A Prayer for Owen Meany*. It's one of my favorite books, and I have reread it on this journey. I explain that it is a book about the Vietnam War, God, the act of killing, and destiny. I think it's an important book for him to read. I know it will speak to him.

He told me the night before that he thinks one of the reasons we've met is so I can help him read novels again. I will send him off with this book and hope it has a deep effect on him.

\*

I am at a café on the dock with Huck and Daliana, who has become another amazing friend from good old Canada. She has also spent time with Huck. I've played matchmaker and set them up for the night. They share their own moments of exchanging their lives. We can hear the boat coming into the dock, dropping off new guests. About fifty people are walking down to the main sandy road. I hear someone yell my name. It's Mags wearing the brightest orange dress. It looks like the sun is walking towards us, giving new meaning to the word sundress. To her right side is her beautiful daughter Morag. People always tell you their kids are beautiful, but Morag had a casual effortless beauty. Everyone introduces themselves and they join us for a cold drink. Huck only has about ten minutes until he has to get on that boat, the boat that would begin his journey back to war. Daliana and I are both heartbroken to see our soldier off. As he gets up to leave, I hug him, kiss him on the cheek, and tell him how special he is and that he is the best, most unexpected surprise on my journey.

I am crying. Hard. My dad is a Korean War vet and had to live through the horrors of that war. Several bullets pierced various parts of his body while parachuting into combat. The first five years of my life were spent in and out of VA hospitals in Brooklyn, New York. My ex-lover, James, was in

Vietnam and has had to deal with the horrors of exposure to Agent Orange. I have a lifetime of connections to vets. It suddenly occurs to me that I have never met anyone serving in this current war.

I start to worry about Huck's safety and think, Okay, gods, you have played with me enough, and it has been great fun, but now PLEASE turn your eyes to my friend. Play with him and keep him safe. If he comes out of this, he could do so much good.

Even thinking the word "if" scares me. Yet his bags are packed and he's ready to go...and I can't control what I can't control. I can only say to my friends on this island: Don't say a prayer for Owen Meany; say a prayer for my new friend Huck. I tell Huck I want to write about him on my travel blog, but I need to make sure he is cool with what I write. I show him the first entry, and he blushes and said, "It's all good; just change my name." It's the weed. He asks me not to use his name and I tell him I will respect that. I say I am going to call him Huck because I just read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* for the first time. He looks puzzled and asks why. I tell him that Huck was a character who initially can't see his compassion for Jim, the runaway slave, as a man, as a human being. But on that raft, he sees him as a man with a full life, finds out he has a wife and kids, and instead of getting him killed, he saves his life. The epiphanies seemed to coincide.

\*

I'm back in Los Angeles, and after three months away I could be walking on the moon. The cold weather hurts, the wet rain has no heat in it, and I am a stranger in a strange land—my own.

I can't sleep so I roam and putter around my home like a visitor getting acquainted with his new surroundings—a sixth country. Lorraine, my oldest and dearest friend since I was

fourteen, has come to see me. She is a tough, smart, gorgeous Italian woman. She has the biggest eyes, brown, almond shaped, and everyone even strangers remark about them. I regale her with stories about the magic that happened. I go on and on about Huck and tell her she will die when she meets him. We are watching the Super Bowl and screaming about one of the most magnificent touchdowns in football history.

My cell phone rings. When I check the message, it is Daliana, there are five messages. She tells me that she needs to talk to me and not to mind her voice, as she has a cold. I tell Lorraine that it was not a "cold" voice but a crying voice. I mutter, "Lo, I'm scared; Lo, I'm scared." I frantically check my email. She has sent a message saying to call her anytime, and she needs to talk to me.

We shared our love for Huck like two schoolgirls; this must be about him. Lorraine tells me to go into the living room and call Daliana.

When she picks up the phone, I yell "tell me he is okay. Tell me he has no legs. I don't care if he can't see, just tell me his brain is intact, tell me he is alive!"

She cries hard. The death cry, the hard, searing cry of sudden loss.

I say, "You got the information wrong somehow. It's a lie!"

Through her deep sobs she keeps saying, "He is gone, our friend is gone."

I fall to the floor and feel grief and political rage collide head on. Like two boxers smashing each other's brains out, each blow numbing the other.

My friend was killed by a roadside bomb. The term almost sounds friendly, "roadside" seems so harmless. I am thinking about what a friend had said: *I was hoping it was a lie.*

I have heard those lyrics my whole adult life, but now it means something entirely different. It means Huck, it means Sean.

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## **New Fiction from Moe Hashemi: “Javid”**

We buried Javid on a gloomy Friday morning in late December, shortly before Ali was gassed on the battlefield. All the guys from the eleventh grade attended the funeral, most of the teachers too.

Later that day at the mosque, Javid’s dad, a well-groomed, bearded, middle-aged man who sold rosaries and prayer stones to pilgrims, stood at the podium with an Abrahamic disposition and gave a speech about how proud he felt as a father to offer a martyr to God and to the Supreme Leader of the Revolution and how much Javid cared about both.

\*

I had known Javid ever since the second grade. I still remember our first conversation when he approached me timidly and asked why my old eraser was so unusually white and clean.

*“My baby sister grabs it whenever I’m not looking and she licks it clean.”*

*“Wow!”* he said and walked off pensively looking at his dirty eraser.

The next day he came to class with his eraser all nice and clean:

*"Look what my baby sister did to my eraser!"*

He didn't have a baby sister. I could picture him licking his eraser for hours.

\*

No matter how hard Javid tried to blend in, he stood out like a bad stitch in a Persian rug. He was too scrawny for his age and always wore a buzz cut and clothes that were either too small for him or too large. One year, he became the butt of jokes when he showed up to school in early September in ugly blue winter rubber boots with conspicuous large white dots. The boots were a bit too big for him and made loud farting noises with every step he took. He pulled his pant legs as far down as he could to cover the boots and walked like a geisha to diminish the noise, but this just made him look even more awkward.

\*

Javid was an easy target for bullies. They called him Oliver Twist, played pranks on him, locked him in the school bathroom, hounded him on his way home and pummelled him hard. But, the bruises he received from the bullies were nothing compared to the ones he brought from home; he never complained or talked about his bruises. He seemed to be able to take all insults and injuries with a rueful smile and move on.

\*

His undoing though was his unfeigned innocence. Mr. Nezami, aka "Mr. Psycho," was our disgruntled science teacher. He was a vicious, paranoid man in his early forties who thought the world was after him, so he went after his students.

*"Javid! Read out the passage! Page 45, Plants."*

Javid opened his book and started reading.

*"Although plants can respond to certain stimuli such as light by turning towards it or by opening their petals and leaves, they do not have nerves or any equivalent system to feel or respond to stimuli such as pain."*

At this point Javid fell silent and looked kind of lost.

*"Why did you stop? Go on,"* snapped Mr. Psycho.

*"Sir! Does this mean that if people kick trees and break off their branches, the trees don't cry inside?"*



The whole class burst into laughter at this; Mr. Psycho strode menacingly toward Javid.

*"Are you mocking me, kid?"*

He twisted Javid's arm and pulled him off the bench, then slapped him hard a couple of times on the back of his shaved head, and kicked him out of the classroom.

\*

Once we got into comic books, Javid found a passion. He didn't own any comics, but he managed to borrow some from the few friends that he had. At first, he became infatuated with Captain America and drew the superhero's pictures on all his notebook covers, but Captain America lost some of his glory once Javid became acquainted with Rambo.

\*

In those days, the Iran-Iraq war was at a stalemate. The two sides had lost lots of manpower and they were desperate for recruits. Iran's Revolutionary Guards would visit high schools and show action movies like *First Blood*, tell tales of valour and glory on the battlefield, and then try to sign up as many kids as they could. As long as you were fifteen or older, all

you needed to join was a consent letter from your father or your legal guardian.

\*

Ali, who was the oldest kid in our class, as he had failed and repeated a grade, was the first to sign up. His older brother had joined the Basij paramilitary militia before him and had been dispatched to the battlefield, so Ali's father was reluctant to let his second child join. Ali forged his dad's signature, and then taught Javid how to do it as well. Ali was hoping to go to seminary school after graduation and he was a true believer in martyrdom and going to paradise. Javid, on the other hand, signed up for the love of guns. He wanted to get a big machine gun and kick ass like John Rambo. Perhaps, he fantasized about taking all that pent up rage inside him and blasting it at enemy soldiers.

\*

I visited Ali at the hospital a few months after Javid's funeral. He had been poisoned with mustard gas during the Battle of Faw Peninsula. He had hideous blisters all over his body, was blinded in both eyes and had irreversible lung damage. There was a breathing tube taped to his nose. He asked about school. I told him about our classmates and the pranks we played on teachers. I also told him how Mr. Psycho had ended up dislocating a kid's elbow, and had been fired; he had eventually locked himself in a hotel room, swallowed all his meds and died.

*"Lucky bastard! I wish I could go that easy,"* He wheezed.

*"You'll be fine,"* I lied and tried to change the subject, *"Tell me about Javid."*

*"We took our intensive training course together. Javid had a real talent for marksmanship. He finished at the top of our class. The night before we were sent to the front, he was so*

*excited that he couldn't sleep." Ali burst into a fit of coughing. He continued talking after a long pause, "We were taken to the front in a military truck. Javid was among the first to get off. An Iraqi sniper was waiting in ambush and started shooting at us right away. Javid took a bullet in the chest and was gone, just like that! He took the blow and moved on to paradise. That's the way I'd imagined I'd go."*

He paused again, breathless, his sightless eyes staring up at invisible entities beyond the ceiling.

*"In a way, I also feel sorry for him," Ali murmured, "after all, he didn't get to fire a single bullet at the enemy."*

\*

Ali died the next June after a hard battle with cancer right around the time we were graduating from high school. He was buried in the same plot of the cemetery as Javid, among the throngs of other fallen soldiers.

I visited both their graves one last time before I was drafted. I placed a small picture of Rambo on Javid's grave and one of a blind angel on Ali's. I left the cemetery wondering what others would put on my grave.

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## **A Review of Ruffi Thorpe's New Novel 'The Knockout Queen,' by Andria Williams**

"Who deserves anything?" asks Lorrie Ann, one of the protagonists of Ruffi Thorpe's first novel, [The Girls from Corona del Mar](#) (Knopf, 2014). She's putting the question to

her stunned-into-silence friend, Mia, who has so far known Lorrie Ann only as something of a saint, a martyr of circumstance, the golden child from a perfect family ruined by terrible twists of fate—until the two women meet up suddenly after years apart. Lorrie Ann pops a baklava into her mouth—she’s a junkie now, to Mia’s shock; she only wants to eat sugar, she’s raving a little—and she demands, “Do we deserve the spring? Does the sun come out each day because we were tidy and good? What the fuck are you thinking?”

Even when the line is delivered by a young heroin addict whose husband has been killed in Iraq and whose father was a Christian rock musician, it’s an important one to Rupi Kaur’s writing. The question—“who deserves anything?”—permeates all three of her books, which also include [\*Dear Fang, With Love\*](#) (2016) and [\*The Knockout Queen\*](#) (April 2020). Her characters, sometimes taken far astray by life, puzzle over what they have done, or what has happened to them—has it made them good or bad, or is that a spectrum like anything else?— or maybe their worst fears really are true, and good and bad are terrifyingly, irrevocably definitive.

Lorrie Ann, former evangelical, junkie, cuts through all that with her blunt, manic aphorisms and her baklava-smearred fingers. She knows how the historical intersects with the personal. She’s seen it herself. Still she wonders, Do we deserve the spring? What are we all thinking?

\*

In Kaur’s most recent novel, *The Knockout Queen*, our narrator’s name is Michael. He is (at first, briefly, before we inhabit his teenage self) eleven years old, and his mother has been sentenced to three years in prison. Michael is looking around at a world that makes no sense:

*When I was eleven years old, I went to live with my aunt when my mother was sent to prison.*

*That was 2004, which was incidentally the same year the pictures of Abu Ghraib were published, the same year we reached the conclusion there were no weapons of mass destruction after all. What a whoopsie. Mistakes were made, clearly, but the blame for these mistakes was impossible to allocate as no one person could be deemed responsible. What was responsibility even? Guilt was a transcendental riddle that baffled our sweet Pollyannaish president. How had it happened? Certainly he had not wanted it to happen. In a way, President Bush was a victim in all this too.*

*Perplexingly, the jury had no difficulty in assigning guilt to my own mother as she sat silently, looking down, tears running and running down her face at what seemed to me at the time an impossible rate. Slow down, Mom, you'll get dehydrated! If you have never been in a criminal courtroom, it is disgusting.*

This is the lively, engaging, youthful, and astute voice we will hear from Michael throughout the rest of the novel. As a young teenager he is already aware that perceptible deviance will assign you blame. Women fare horribly in domestic violence cases, he knows, because no one expects a woman to be the aggressor. No mind if she has put up with years of abuse, prior—there's just something that's not right about it. (But are we *sure* that we can place any blame on President Bush?) With his mother gone, he has been taken in by his exhausted Aunt Deedee and is sharing a room with his cousin, Jason, “an effortlessly masculine and unreflective sort...who often farted in answer to questions addressed to him.” Jason's also got a mean homophobic streak that only makes life harder for the closeted Michael. Finding it hard to make friends, Michael turns to a dangerous habit: meeting much older men online.

This is Orange County, California, circa 2010. Michael has the internet and a false sense of confidence, or maybe hope. He has seen how history intersects with the personal. Still, with the sun glaring outside his window, he aims for privacy in the darkness of his room. He reaches out. Maybe there's someone on

the other side. His tension and longing are a tender thing, snappable. What will he find, or who will find him?

\*

Across her three novels, Ruffi Thorpe's characters share a common childhood in the sun-drenched, high-wash landscape of Southern California, often pre-or-mid-dot-com, when some normal people still lived in normally-priced houses. Michael, for one, does, now that he has moved in with his Aunt Deedee. But she's working two jobs—at a Starbucks and at the animal shelter—just to pay her mortgage and to provide some kind of future for that aforementioned, flatulent meathead son. Michael observes that she has a personality “almost completely eclipsed by exhaustion.”

Still. Still. It's California. A reader can almost feel that legendary warm air coming off the page, the smell of hot asphalt, car grease, stucco, sea salt, chlorine, oleander on the highway medians, bougainvillea; the too-prickly, broiled grass in small front yards. I've read that Thorpe's novels have the quality of a Hockney painting-turned-prose; they do, the brightness, the color, the concrete, the sky—the scope and scale—but there's also a nostalgia, a tenderness, and a cellular-level familiarity in her writing that's capable of delving even deeper into that locale, and which can probably only come from having had a California childhood. I could almost feel my eyes burnt by the bright white sidewalks, the way, as a kid walking home from 7-11 or Rite Aid, you'd have to look at something else for a moment, glance at the grass for relief but still see the sidewalk rectangles bouncing vertically behind your eyelids.

✘

Our teenage narrator, Michael, muses that he can't believe anyone could live in a place with such terrific weather and not simply smile all the time. However, at this point California is already changing. “On either side, my aunt's

house was flanked by mansions," Michael describes.

*Poor house, mansion, poor house, mansion, made a chessboard pattern along the street. And the longer I came to live there, the more clearly I understood that the chessboard was not native but invasive, a symptom of massive flux. The poor houses would, one by one, be mounted by gleaming for sale signs, the realtor's face smiling toothily as the sign swayed in the wind, and then the for sale sign would go away, and the house would be torn down and a mansion would be built in its place.*

\*

Though she lives in one of the hulking new-construction mansions next door, things are not much easier for Michael's neighbor, Bunny. Bunny is the tallest kid in their class. Soon she grows taller, to her own horror, than all of the teachers and parents as well. This is not something that she can help. When she meets Michael stealing a smoke in her side yard—not knowing he's also been swimming in their pool whenever she and her father go on vacation, though she'd hardly care—the two strike up an easy and natural friendship.

Bunny lives with her father, Ray, one of those realtors "smiling toothily" from billboards, and perhaps the most ubiquitous of them all, having risen to the highest ranks of his toothy, hustling kind – his face plastered on bus stops all over town, attached to every holiday and parade, to the point that he seems to Michael a sort of local, B-grade royalty. Off the billboards, the real Ray is a somewhat fatter, puffier iteration of his entrepreneurial visage, and he has a bit of a drinking problem as well as a fixation on his daughter's future in sports. (This last bit will become important.) He will also be, under Thorpe's skill, an intermittently hilarious, bizarre, very deeply flawed delight to read.

Complicating factors, there's cruel gossip circulating around the death of Bunny's mother in a car accident some years before.

So life is hard for Bunny, too, and her friendship with Michael becomes a once-in-a-lifetime sort of friendship, which will be forged even stronger when Bunny does something irrevocable, sending both of their lives spiralling. This is an often sad, and not an easy book, but I can say with confidence that their rapport, due to Thorpe's seemingly-effortless skill and sparkling dialogue, is a joy to read.

\*

Thorpe's novels grapple, frequently, with what it means to be "good" – for women, men, kids, parents. What happens to girls and women who aren't seen as "good," boys who are not tough enough? (What happens to the boy who cannot, in fact, fart on cue?) What happens when there are deviations from the strict masculine and feminine markers our species depends upon to send immediate signals to our poor, primitive basal ganglia? Some people – the unreflective sorts, maybe, the Tarzan wannabes like Jason, the ones who take solace in the bedrock of their own infallible outward markers—could get upset.

In Michael's case, his cerebral nature and his kindness may be nearly as dangerous, at least in high school, as his sexuality. "The people I had the most sympathy for," he thinks, "were almost never the ones everyone else had sympathy for."

Still, both Bunny and Michael want, the way most teenage kids want, to be good—to be liked, to be happy, to have positive relationships with their friends and parents; to be, in the ways that count, *pleasant*. Here's Michael:

*[It] was a popular take when I was growing up, among the post-Will & Grace generation: Fine, do what you want in bed, but do you have to talk in an annoying voice? I did not want*

*to be annoying, I did not want to be wrong, I wanted to be right. And yet I knew that something about the way my hands moved betrayed me, the way I walked, my vocabulary, my voice. I did not consciously choose my eyeliner and septum piercing and long hair as a disguise, but in retrospect that is exactly what they were.*

“As often as I was failing to pass as a straight boy during those years,” he later thinks, “Bunny was failing to pass as a girl. She was built like a bull, and she was confident and happy, and people found this combination of qualities displeasing in a young woman.”

Through the figure of Bunny we see, then, what qualities might instead be pleasing in a young woman. Contrast Bunny with her volleyball teammate Ann Marie, as seen through Michael’s eyes:

*Ann Marie was a special kind of being, small, cute, mean, glossy, what might in more literary terms be called a “nymphet,” but only by a heterosexual male author, for no one who did not want to fuck Ann Marie would be charmed by her. She was extra, ultra, cringe-inducingly saccharine, a creature white-hot with lack of irony. She was not pretty, but somehow she had no inkling of this fact, and she performed prettiness so well that boys felt sure she was.*

Thorpe stays impressively in Michael’s voice: only a young man of his very-recent generation would speak so easily about lack of irony and “performing prettiness” in the same breath as “extra, ultra, cringe-inducingly saccharine” and “fuck.” Her mention of that “heterosexual male author” with a nymphet preoccupation is also a smart nod to a later scene in which Bunny’s dad, Ray, somewhat drunk (as usual) and sentimental (less usual), sits Michael down and strong-arms him into looking at an old family photo album, a socially awkward and therefore very funny situation several narrators across multiple Nabokov novels have also faced. It’s equally funny in *The Knockout Queen*. But Thorpe gives the monumental authority

of the male gaze a clever twist, for Michael, unlike one of Nabokov's middle-aged narrators, is not at all titillated by these photos of Bunny but instead empathetic, fascinated by his friend's life before he knew her, before her mother died, before her whole world changed.

*I wished I could go back and really look at the divide in her life: before her mother's death, and then after. When she ceased to be part of a scene that her father was documenting and began to be posed artificially, always on her own. Was I imagining the sadness I saw in her smile? Or was it an effect of the camera flash, the glossy way the photos had been printed, that made her seem trapped in those images, sealed in and suffocating behind the plastic sheeting of the photo album?*

*"Thank you for showing these to me," I said.*

Michael marvels at the loving photos he sees of Bunny's mother, decried as a slut by the gossips in town, her death whispered "suicide." Do these images tell the truth, or do they lie as much as any other, prone to the bias of the photographer, prone to distortion? Michael feels that the tenderness he sees in them is genuine, even though he knows how easy it is for a certain angle to tell it wrong. Where he feels the distortion has occurred is on the outside of this album, this family, in the crucible of group thought. (There's a joke both in Nabokov as well as here about the distorting power of the visual: in *The Knockout Queen*, a Facebook photo of the high school volleyball team goes viral because, due to perspective, Bunny erroneously looks fully twice the size of any other member of the team. In Nabokov's *Transparent Things*, the slim and attractive Armande in an early photo is given, "in false perspective, the lovely legs of a giantess"). As with Hugh Person, in *Transparent Things*, or Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*, the camera and the idea of a photographic memory eventually lose some of their stability, some of their complete control—and so, through Thorpe, does the male gaze

and the historical power of the speaker, or of the loudest one in the room. There are hints of knowledge, Thorpe suggests, that evade group accusation, that dodge the iron maiden of a harsh mainstream and even the seeming authority of daguerreotypic capture: like motion, or like memory.

It would be hard to write three California novels without the specter of Joan Didion hovering overhead, so Thorpe leans into this, as well, with the addition of a grisly, community-shocking murder that seems to come right out of the *White Album*—the sort of local tragedy Didion might have learned of while floating in her Hollywood rental home's pool. With this event, too, Thorpe challenges what we think we know from the outside.

There are real problems in this paradisaical California town. Racial inequality, homophobia, the fact that fewer and fewer people can afford their own homes. A salacious news story is a most excellent distraction. But Michael, young as he is, feels the sick appeal of the outside verdict and tries to resist it. Yes, everyone's talking about the murder with concerned gravity—so grave, so concerned— at every Starbucks you wait in line at, everyone whispering, *Can you believe it? It happened to someone from here? How could she have let that happen to her?* But he senses the *tsk* of judgment in their analyses. Why would anyone let violence happen to them?

*We needed to pretend violence was something we could control. That if you were good and did the right things, it wouldn't happen to you. In any event, it was easier for me then to demand that Donna [the victim] become psychic and know how to prevent her own murder than it was for me to wonder how Luke could have controlled himself. It was easier for all of us that way.*

Luke, here, the killer in question, is a sort of (pardon the comparison) George W. Bush, perplexed by his own power, almost a victim of society's forgiveness for what is already

understood and comfortingly masculine and clear. (It seems intentional that the victim's name, literally, means "woman.")

Isn't it easier to cast your lot with someone who seems to have control – even if they can barely understand it – rather than the weaker person, the one still striving?

\*

Bunny and Michael decide to play at "realness." It's a term they've gleaned from the drag queen documentaries and the reality TV they love to watch—RuPaul, and *Paris is Burning*—where Michael can practice at performing and Bunny, riveted, can "deconstruct" femininity, which still eludes her even as she longs to attain it. They crack each other up to the point of tears with their impressions of people they know, at which Michael is very good and Bunny just abysmally horrible.

*One of the terms we stole from RuPaul's Drag Race was the concept of "realness." They would say, "Carmen is serving some working girl realness right now," and a lot of the time it just meant passing, that you were passing for the real thing, or that's maybe what the word began as. But there were all different kinds of realness. In Paris Is Burning, which we must have watched a hundred times, a documentary about New York City drag ball culture, there were drag competitions with categories like Businessman or Soldier. Realness wasn't just about passing as a woman, it was about passing as a man, passing as a suburban mom, passing as a queen, passing as a whore. It was about being able to put your finger on all the tiny details that added up to an accurate impression, but it was also about finding within yourself the essence of that thing. It was about finding your inner woman and letting her vibrate through you. It was about finding a deeper authenticity through artifice, and in that sense it was paradoxical and therefore intoxicating to me. To tell the truth by lying. That was at the heart of realness, at least to*

me.

I loved this, as a fiction writer. The fun of pretending, how it can be an empathy, or a skewering. The wildness of that ranging, creative, odd and hilarious act—trying on voices, affects, personalities, lives. Trying your hand at fiction.

*To tell the truth by lying.* What is “realness,” then, but a mission statement on writing fiction? On invention, on possibility?

And it feels so very Californian, in a way, adding gravitas to Thorpe’s chosen locale, to “[find] a deeper authenticity through artifice.” Ray laughs to Michael, “No one was born in North Shore!” There are plenty of people who were born in California and live there now, but also a huge number who were not. Isn’t that, in a sense, passing? What separates one kind of passing from another, makes it more or less acceptable? How could some transplanted midwesterner who adopted whole-hog the California lifestyle judge a gay kid for wearing eyeliner?

What is the line between authenticity and fiction? What do we do with what is given to us?

\*

At the end of the day, Michael and Bunny are two kids whose parents have royally screwed up, probably because someone also screwed up when *they* were kids. So it goes, on and on. *Amor fati*, reads the tattoo on Lorrie Ann’s slim shoulder, which, as Thorpe points out, is just another way of saying “embrace the suck,” and which Nietzsche re-purposed from the Stoics.

Why tell these stories, I wondered, if nothing is ever going to change? After all, *amor fati* seems a last resort. Lorrie Ann’s husband dies in Iraq. George W. Bush and Michael’s dad both get off scot-free. The outsider kids will always be bullied. In Thorpe’s second novel, *Dear Fang, With Love*, the narrator, a young-middle-aged college English professor named

Lucas, who has been exploring both his family's Holocaust-razed past and his daughter's newly-diagnosed schizophrenia (and who sounds, here, influenced by T.S. Eliot) thinks:

*Our family had been jumbled by history, by war, by falling and rising regimes, by escapes across the world, by drives through orange groves and trips to Disneyland and the slow poison of sugar flowers on supermarket cakes.*

*America was not safe. We would never be safe. The danger was within us and we would take it wherever we went. There was no such line between the real and the unreal. The only line was the present moment. There was nothing but this, holding my daughter's hand on an airplane in the middle of the night, not knowing what to say.*

Thorpe understands the way trauma makes its way through society and through an individual life. Trauma is not always the blunt instrument; or, even if it started that way, it may not be, forever. It can be sly and nuanced. It can be both traceable and unknowable, brutal and delicate. Do we try to pass, within it, above it, until we are all okay? What if we know that not everyone will be okay, even though they try, even though they deserve to be?

There is a Bunny who exists outside the gossip against her, separate from her jarring appearance and possibly, Thorpe suggests, even separate from some of her own actions. "You don't have to be good," Michael tells Bunny. He means she doesn't have to be socially acceptable, she doesn't have to be fake-good, girly good. She already is good. They both are.

Thorpe, Rufi. [The Knockout Queen](#). A.A. Knopf, 2020.

The Knockout Queen is [now available](#) anywhere books are sold.

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# New Poetry from Michael Chang



Friedrich Wilhelm Karl Kuhnert (1865-1926), "Bowhead whale."

## *the secret life of simon & the whale*

the boy inches close to the water  
barefoot backpack slung over one  
shoulder  
he plays with the sand dips his toes in  
his name is simon  
simon is my human  
i quote mean girls: "get in loser, we're going shopping"  
he giggles  
he likes ranch dressing but sometimes the buttermilk is too  
much for his stomach  
he enjoys wong kar-wai's movies but would rather talk  
about steven universe  
when we play hide-and-seek he wants to be found because he  
loves me  
i take him to school he hums along to my songs but prefers  
katy perry  
we watch tv  
i tell him how unrealistic the show shark tank is  
he looks at me quizzically  
we change channels then go to dairy queen  
he doesn't say things like white whale because that is  
derogatory  
just like how we don't talk about sushi or climate change  
he shoos screaming babies and barking dogs away from me  
when we go to coney island we speak in russian accents and

fall over laughing  
i ask if he has been following the news  
he says someone is being mean to him at  
school wants to know what to do  
i quote kate moss: "looking good is the best revenge"  
he shows up the next day looking spiffy  
he has a slick yellow raincoat  
so i won't get wet when we hang out! he says  
i smile  
he offers me half of his sandwich and i am happy  
i tell him about my creative writing class  
he teaches me how to tell a joke he is a  
master of comedic timing i am no slouch  
i tell a joke about hiding the minibar keys from lindsay lohan  
he laughs but mostly because i act it out it is an  
oscar-worthy performance  
he wants to offer me some goldfish crackers but thinks twice  
he hands me a hot dog with mustard and relish instead  
we watch the sunset see  
the dolphins showing off again  
he asks what i'm dressing up as for halloween i say  
zorro he makes a face  
he says he couldn't decide between a zombie or an astronaut so  
he is going as a zombie astronaut  
we test our knowledge of state capitals but he falls asleep at  
lansing  
i say i got called for jury duty and explain what  
that is  
simon says you have the right to remain  
silent he bursts out laughing  
i reveal that lobsters are the kings of secrets they have  
dirt on everyone  
the hoovers of the ocean  
he thinks i mean the vacuum i guess that makes sense too  
for my birthday simon brings me a red velvet cupcake  
my favorite kind  
he asks how old i am turning



you will put your phone on  
vibrate then turn it off

you will stay over we will get drunk things  
will happen

then you will leave  
still thinking about me

swallowing you like an  
eclair

\*

in the movie of my life i would like to be played

by emmy-winning actor james spader

although i am not white

as they remind me

at every turn

### ***statement of evil corp***

for immediate release  
press contact :: lucifer morningstar  
(666) 666-6666

new york, ny :: we do not comment on personnel matters : but  
we will train our gaydar on you : hands steady like a  
surgeon's : locked and loaded : prickly pear margaritas : we  
are certified analytical geniuses : with an absolute pitch for  
fine poetry : objects in the mirror are closer than they  
appear : due to a lack of evil representation in the media :  
we have no equivalent : who the hell is from chambersburg, pa  
: we guess someone must be : thank god it's not us : haha god  
: we will make you famous like rodney king : a splash of the  
coffee : grey flannel by geoffrey beene for men : when we

think of our life together : we imagine you in a suburban parking lot : loading seltzer into the trunk : looking fresh to death : you have to buy our product to know what's in it : we won't get into specifics : we don't want to set a timeline on this : who gave you that information : we'll have to refer you back to them : it's early days : this is going to be a process that takes place over time : we were for it before we were against it : there have been discussions : we will not entertain hypotheticals : we are not going into tactics techniques or procedures : this may be an iterative process : that is above our pay grade : we want to stress that this is pre-decisional : there is a plan but plans have to be flexible enough to survive first contact : it may be OBE (overcome by events) : we have not been given release authority : it is not yet approved for action : we are on a conditions-based schedule : all options are on the table : we will continue to engage with alliance partners on a range of activities that will ensure maximum lethality : please only quote us as senior evil corp officials or persons close to senior evil corp leadership : 9 out of 10 dentists choose evil corp : we are your anger managers : very legal and very good : our revenge makes us wise : let us look at you through our designer shades : our product has been endorsed by kate bush : no, she is a freshman at kennesaw state university : a real georgia peach : we find your () faith disturbing : your lack of taste does violence to our senses : your very being is inimical to our existence : go somewhere else for that washer and dryer set : bitch : we will take you to the cleaners : what do you love : what do you hate : if you could live inside a tv show which one and why is it lucifer on fox : who are you : what do you want : we are on pace to find cadence : the quiet you hear is progress : thank you for shopping at evil corp

***october 6, 2019, remarks as prepared for delivery***

i informed mister river barkley last night that his services

are no longer needed in my life. i disagreed strongly with many of his suggestions, as did others in the administration, and therefore i asked mister river barkley for his resignation, which was given to me this morning.

although i appreciated his jfk jr vibes and his assertion that his dick is his biggest muscle, he never did my laundry. he failed to deliver to me macaroons in every imaginable color or call me his pocahontas and he my settler.

he cast serious doubt on his intelligence by detailing the depth of his feelings in support of the vietnam war and the draft. the public was regularly informed of this.

his choice of veal over fish was totally inexcusable. i was equally appalled when i encountered tickets to mariah carey in his diary stained with sperm and electric blue ink.

he never recovered from the unusually loud guttural noises he made during sex. he was unconvincing when he said he loved me, often in a voice that suggested he was far away or underwater. his declaration that tulsi gabbard should win the democratic nomination was similarly off-putting.

he was unable to tell me how many planes are in the sky or if it is true there are more people alive now than have ever lived. he declined to feed me more jello shots despite our school motto *possunt quia posse videntur* (they can because they think they can).

he embarrassed me by getting into that fight with his truck and losing. subsequently he had his arm in a cast which stank to high heaven.

admittedly i will miss the firm underside of his thighs and the steady scaffolding of his sex. i am however comforted by the truth that nothing is better than breadsticks with the menendez brothers.

i thank mister river barkley very much for his service to our country and my happiness. i will be naming a new mister river barkley next week.

thank you!

(don't pretend you're sorry□□)

### ***acid taste like***

He started seeing Sam everywhere.

Sam, who called him 'beautiful,' eyes like liquid smoke.

Sam, who stood perilously close as they poured the wine.

Strong yet gentle, blond-dusted hands.

Sam, who wore the plaid shirt, frayed khaki shorts, and beat-up loafers on their bodega run.

Chestnut-brown bedhead, cheeks rosy on their porcelain face.

The one he wanted to hold him, the one he hoped to make less lonely, the one he followed home.



Life was hard enough without a Greek chorus of Sams second-guessing his every move.

Haunted by his exes, he wanted significance.

He cried into his champagne, tired of questioning, tired of pushing back.

Acceptance sounded so good, like a drug.

Boy was with Girl.

Kind, inquisitive eyes the color of concrete.

Brown hair (of course) slicked back, shoulders firm, torso wide.

Girl freaking out, some low-rate drama.

Boy's body, a boar ready to charge.

Girl in the bathroom, Boy's expression softened—

Freed,

Granted a reprieve,

From performing masculinity.

Boy looked over, smiling as if he understood.

So tantalizingly close,

All he had to do was reach over,

Before Boy slipped back into character.

He imagined bringing Boy dinner, roast chicken and potatoes.

They would eat in silence, as if any stray sound might tip her off.

Bellies full, side-by-side on the bed—

Striped pajamas,

Sheets that smelled like her,

Growing braver in the dark, bodies ablaze with feeling.

Skin, lips, tongue, there for the taking.

He raised a finger to Boy's lips and gently pried his mouth open, inserting his finger.

Play it safe or swing for the fences?

Snatching Boy's receipt off the table, he felt a sickening swirl of desire—

Like standing in the eye of a hurricane.

This little victory made him happier than he'd felt in a long time.

Throwing up in that Waffle House, acid stinging his throat.

Outside for a smoke, his socks mismatched and his hair wild.

GO BACK TO CHINA, someone yelled, speeding past.

Possessed by cultural restlessness,

Always searching for a way in, a way out.

He decided that his favorite word was 'possibility.'

Even hope doesn't seem as surefire a thing.

Possibility is hope plus.

Nothing out of reach.

Maybe.

He unfolded the receipt, admired it.

CUSTOMER: SAM \_\_\_\_\_, it read.

He noticed the digits, the urgent scrawl.

Penmanship tight, compact, economical.  
CALL ME, it said.

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## New Poetry by Antonio Addessi

You'd caught  
the big one they said, you'd hooked a willow and  
sank thigh deep into the muck. They hung up  
when I asked if they'd bring you home.  
It was late and I had my rollers in.

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## New Poetry by Aidan Gowland



René Magritte, Not  
to Be Reproduced,  
1937

### Breathless

If you say "I am not a monster"  
Into the mirror and turn around three times  
A better version of yourself will start to take root in your  
heart.

If some nights you cannot make your mouth say the words,  
If you cannot make your lips make the sound,

It is okay to say "I am not *always* a monster".

If your friend tells you that you need to forgive yourself  
Before you are consumed by the weight of your own actions  
It is okay to drink until you believe them.

If you have pushed all your friends away and are standing on  
the edge  
of a bridge and a voice in your head says 'Don't jump'  
That voice is your friend  
and it is okay to listen.

### To the Woman Who Finds My Ex

You will find him shaking on the couch  
With his hair plastered to his forehead  
And his body covered in sweat.

He will say

*Help me*

But he won't want your help.

You will think of the words

*Addiction*

*Overdose*

*User*

But you will stop short of death.

He will glow in the dark.

He will take pleasure in his pain,  
Smear it over his life with a spatula  
And call it impasto,  
Call it progress,  
Call it hope.

He'll say the drug is the only love that he believes in,  
The only love that hasn't let him down.

You will think of the words

*Betrayal*

*Ungrateful*

*Sacrifice*

But you will stop short of leaving.