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Epiphany Jones

Written by Michael Grothaus

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Epiphany Jones

Michael Grothaus



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For m.e.

And for the figments that live in our heads at three in the morning.

The Dream

Tonight I'm having sex with Audrey Hepburn. Audrey's breasts are different from the last time we fucked; they're bigger, not as firm. There's a hint of a stretch mark on the left one. The leading lady is bent over, gripping the bedpost. Her pink panties are slid down and pinched in place by the fold where her legs meet her ass, so my rod has the most access with the least possible effort. She's looking back at me, eyes sparkling and fixed, with a slim PR smile. I'm going like a jackhammer, sweating, shoulders cramping, but her face is as placid as a sleeping bunny.

And I've got to slow down; it's only been three minutes. But who am I kidding? So I let it all out as I gaze at Audrey's face. And for eight seconds I'm calm, relaxed.

There's a loud crack under my foot. It's Emma's picture. My little sister. My sweet, dead little sister. My thrusting must have knocked it off the desk. I always turn her around when I do this. No matter how old the photograph is you don't want the image of someone you used to know watching you while you squeeze one off. The cracked glass has scratched Emma's face. She's now got a little white-cotton scar over her right cheek.

For the next three minutes I straighten the items on the desk.

Seven minutes after that I'm hiding all traces of fake celebrity porn from my desktop. Just in case my mom comes over.

Then, when I notice it's four in the morning, I get that guilt. *Why did I do this? I have to get up in three hours, for God's sake!* I tell myself I won't do it again. I promise. I pinky swear, you know?

And look, maybe you pretend you'd Never Do Such Things; that you'd never stoop so low as to jerk off to actresses whose heads have been pasted onto a porn star's body. But this is better than seeing prostitutes or shooting heroin. It calms me down. It's harmless. Besides, it's temporary. It's just what guys do when they're on a break from their significant others. And anyway, the best part of these late-night jerk-off sessions isn't even what came before, it's what comes next: the clarity that comes after the guilt fades; the realisation of everything that's wrong in your life and the vow you make to change it.

I need to lose weight. I need to be more outgoing. I need to save money. I need to get a better job. I need to, I need to, I need to.

This clarity is like the previews for next week's episode – the promise of new, exciting adventures to come. It's the trailer of what you can do to improve your sorry life.

But tonight the clarity doesn't happen. Just like the last few weeks. No big ideas. No Nirvana. My life feels like a rerun.

I know how tonight will end. I won't fall asleep for too long. When I do it will come again: that same dream I've had for the last three nights.

And yes, it is odd to have exactly the same dream night after night.

And no, I don't know what the meaning is.

When it begins it's black and I can't see anything, but I can feel my mind floating through the nothingness. Then, slowly, a figure fades in. It's a young girl. Fourteen, maybe fifteen. Her frame is petite and doesn't fully fill the light-blue dress she is wearing. Her face is small and round. Her hair, pulled back tight around her head, is black like a raven's folded wing. Her skin, white as cream. And curiously, her left ear is mutilated. It looks like a piece of her lobe was torn right off.

And for some reason, I know she is The Deliverer.

But I don't know what that is.

We're in a silverware factory, of all places. The factory is abandoned. Teaspoon after teaspoon rusts in boxes on roller conveyors. Forks dangle from strings overhead. Three furnaces fill the far corner of the room. Their mouths gape, revealing long-extinguished insides. Behind

them, scorch marks on the brick walls. The floor planks are stained dark.

There's a hint of a cleft in the girl's chin and a slight tremble to her lip. The soles of her pale feet are black with dirt and dust and soot. She looks around frantically.

And I feel for this girl. She's terrified.

She's terrified because there are people coming. Bad people. I hear them outside, the people coming for her. Their silhouettes cast quick blue shadows as they dart past the windows, cracked and yellowed from chemicals and soot.

It's early evening. Outside, crickets scream in the tall grass. The strangers thunder at the tin sidings. They rip and howl and shout in bizarre tongues as they claw at boards nailed over a doorway.

And inside, this little girl, she just stands in place now.

And a voice is heard: 'An awakening is needed in the west.'

And the girl, she begins to cry.

Then they're in, the strangers. Faceless forms charge her. I know they'll kill her. I look away, there's nothing else I can do. But when I look back, the girl has grown. Now she is maybe twenty-something. And I would think her beautiful if she weren't so terrifying. Her smile is crooked and cold. Her eyes beget madness. She has a sickle in her hand. It's funny too, because it looks just like the Nike logo. And swinging this Nike Swoosh, she kills the first three men.

Swoosh!

There goes one head.

Swoosh!

Another.

Just Do It.

And as she's shortening people one by one, I start to focus on the dark hollow of the central furnace. I see something that leaves me feeling helpless and empty. I see myself hiding in the darkness of the furnace's belly. I'm curled up, naked and crying. I'm seventeen years old.

And I'm praying not to be seen.

Van Gogh

I wake feeling like I haven't slept.

The TV mutely plays an episode of *Mr Ed*. Wilbur and the talking horse are in astronaut suits. It's the one where Mr Ed tries to convince Wilbur that they can build a ship to the moon. And why not? If your horse can talk, it sure as hell can build a space shuttle.

I reach for a balled-up dirty sock on the floor and spy a lone yellow pill sunk into the carpet next to it. So I do have one left. I really should take it.

I really should do my laundry, too. Tomorrow. Both tomorrow.

I stumble into the kitchen and grab the box of cereal with a white cartoon rabbit on the front. The microwave clock shows just how little time I have. I spoon my breakfast into my mouth, but by the time I get to the museum I'm still twenty minutes late. The moment I step into the Grey Room my boss starts complaining.

'I need that Chagall done by eleven.'

'Sorry, Sir. I was jerking off till five in the morning,' would be the honest thing to say. But this guy, he probably hasn't got it up in twenty years. He wouldn't understand.

'Sorry, missed the bus.'

'Today is the last time you miss the bus. Understand? By eleven,' he orders and walks back into his office.

I turn on the Mac. It's got a grey desktop that perfectly matches the grey walls and grey everything else in this room. No wonder I'm depressed.

I'm a Colour Imaging 'Specialist' for the Art Institute of Chicago.

It's my job to make sure all the paintings you see in those art appreciation textbooks nobody could give a damn less about have accurate colour representation – so the periwinkle blues actually look periwinkle blue and the Venetian reds, Venetian red.

And let's get something straight about my title. There's nothing 'special' about me. Nowadays companies will throw 'specialist' or 'consultant' onto any job title. It's their way of tricking you into thinking you're important.

But a 'specialist' is one step above a peon and a thousand levels below anyone who matters.

Same thing goes for all you 'consultants'. Let's be real, you don't advise your company about anything. You're a salesman. You're Willy Loman and you've already got one foot in the grave.

'Hey, buddy,' Roland calls out before he's even in the room. 'Here're more negatives for that Chagall. Donald wants them by eleven, I think.'

No joke.

'Thanks,' I say, powering on the scanner. Roland looks like a failed male porn star: a little too old, a little too thin, a little too boney. Most disturbing though is that he shaves his arms every day. He does this so everyone can clearly see his stupid sleeve tattoo, which runs from his wrist to his elbow. And I swear to God, I've never seen him without his shirt sleeves rolled up.

'Hey, you want to see it?' Roland asks with the excitement of a twelve-year-old who's just found his father's nudies.

'They've brought it to you?'

Roland grins.

'I can't. I've got to get this done.'

Roland shakes his head. 'Check it out with me. It'll take five minutes.'

My sleep-deprived mind doesn't have the power to argue, so I follow him down the hall to his photo studio. What would normally be a thirty-second walk takes minutes because of all the plastic sheeting and disassembled scaffolding in the hall. This whole wing is a mess because of the renovation of the museum. The whole time I'm glancing over my shoulder to see if Donald is going to storm out and bust me. The whole

time Roland keeps jabbering about 'It', his voice wriggling through the sludge in my head like a tapeworm.

And when we finally get to his studio there It is, on an easel, just like it probably was a hundred and twenty years ago. It's small: eleven inches by eight inches.

'Careful!' Roland shouts. He's caught a tripod I bumped into. 'That's ten million dollars right there.'

That's all I need. Donald would end me if I damaged a painting. The tripod, it's this old thing from the seventies. The MiniDV camera makes it top heavy. Its plastic legs are fractured in places. Anything heavier than the camcorder would snap it.

The way Roland is looking at me, he's wondering how I get through each day.

'Why don't you get the museum to get you a decent one?' I say.

'I've tried,' Roland answers like I shouldn't have even needed to ask. 'The renovation is cutting budgets from every department.'

The thing with Roland, he's friends with my mom, and that's where he gets it. Everything he says to me has a '*you should know this*' inflection to it.

Roland's desk is cluttered with fading flash screens, digital-camera card-readers, a week-old *Sun-Times* and books on outdated versions of Photoshop. But at least he's got a fairly new Mac. The one they make me work on barely gets by. Sticking out from under a pile of old prints is a *Hollywood Reporter* with a picture of Penelope Cruz on the cover. And out of the corner of my eye Roland is giving me a pompous smirk. He pretends to himself that he knows what I'm thinking.

Above his mess of a desk is a framed article that's clipped from the *Chicago Tribune*. In the article there's a photo. In it Roland stands next to Donald and the director of the museum. All three wear stupid Masters of the Universe grins. In the right-hand corner there's a picture-in-picture of the Van Gogh right next to Roland's ridiculous face. And, OK, maybe I am a little bitter. He helped the museum obtain the Van Gogh. It's on loan from the private collection of his old boss. It's why he got the raise over me.

Behind me, I can feel Roland staring. He thinks I'm envying him. But you know what? I have nothing to envy. I'm in that picture too. Go ahead, if you look closely enough, in the opposite corner behind the director's elbow, right there in the background, right where the caption starts you can see me behind the ' - IZED', hunched over my computer. The caption reads: 'PRIZED WORK COMING TO THE ART INSTITUTE. (FROM LEFT) DIRECTOR DAVID LANG, DONALD GENTRY, AND ROLAND PEROSKI.'

'It's the first self-portrait he did after he lopped off his ear,' Roland says, all high and mighty.

You can't tell that from the painting. It's a profile from the right. Van Gogh looks so sad. But at the same time, for someone who was so depressed he put a lot of colour into it. Bright specks of yellows, greens, reds and blues fill the painting. His hair is orange and his eyes a kryptonite-green. You can see the manic in them.

And here, Roland goes into bragging mode. He starts stroking the top of the canvas like it's a cat. 'The boss thinks this painting alone will attract an extra forty-thousand visitors in the next few months,' he says. 'So many museums wanted to get this piece, but none of them had the right connections. The real interesting thing is that...'

And I quickly lose interest. Lack of sleep makes my head feel so hollow my thoughts bound around the room like leaping sheep, before my eyes come to rest on his desk and the *Hollywood Reporter* with Penelope Cruz on the cover.

Maybe what I need right now is a pick-me-up. Maybe I can borrow the magazine and take a quick trip to the bathroom.

'Hey, buddy? Jerry? Hello?' Roland is saying. My thoughts snap back to him. He's still standing by the painting, absentmindedly rubbing his finger over the top of the canvas. You can tell Roland's an ex-Hollywood guy. He needs all the attention on him and his 'accomplishments'. When he doesn't have that, he's one of those guys that fake concern that because you aren't paying attention to him there must be something wrong with you. 'Hey, buddy, you OK pal?'

And that's when I think, fuck it, and decide to tell him about the

dream. He's an artist after all. Maybe he knows what a silverware factory symbolises in dream-speak. But I might as well be talking to myself. Before I've hardly begun, Roland's solely focused on the painting again, a short stroking of just the same one-inch section of the top of the canvas, as if he's found an invisible pimple he's considering popping.

The painting isn't that big a deal, I yell in my head.

In my head I say, *No one cares about fine art anymore.*

In my head I say, *You're so full of yourself.*

So with Roland engrossed in his own glory, I edge over to his desk and take the *Hollywood Reporter* with Penelope Cruz and slowly roll it up and put it in my sleeve.

But with him stroking the canvas and me with my jerk material shoved up my sleeve, this is just getting awkward. So I say, 'Hey, what's with the camera crew outside?'

He says nothing.

I say, 'Roland?'

And he says, 'Oh, yeah – they're doing some story on how the museum's renovation is way over budget.' Then, as if starting to snap out of his trance, he says, 'Hey buddy, I should get started on this.'

And feeling the magazine rolled up in my shirtsleeve, I agree. I tell him I better get those Chagalls corrected, but he's already shut the door behind me.

Back in the Grey Room I'm all alone. Donald is at his weekly ten a.m. with the museum board. That gives me the privacy to lock the door.

And a little after eleven I give Donald the colour-corrected TIFFs. I tell him I'm going to lunch. I need to get out of this grey prison.

Figments

I grab my venti double latte and the *Sun-Times* and take a seat by the window. Today's headlines:

'Alleged Child Rapist Beaten to Death by Victim's Father'

'14 Die in Palestinian Suicide Blast'

'Archdiocese Settles in Sexual Abuse Charges'

'Kraft Lays Off Additional 6,000 Factory Workers'

And just as I begin to feel better about my own life, I catch something from the corner of my eye: the girl with the mutilated ear. The older, beautiful, terrifying version of her. She's standing on the sidewalk, just on the other side of the glass door.

But I blink and when I open my eyes again, she's gone.

And I guess this is as good a time as any to explain something to you. What I just saw, the girl from my dream, the one from the silverware factory, the one standing right outside the door just now? She wasn't real. She's just another figment of my imagination.

Look, to me this feels so long ago, and I still don't even remember half of it, but I'll tell you about it anyway. This was way back years ago when I was seventeen. This was the night my father and I were in the Explorer. But this was still five years after Emma died. Five years after I began to zone out on TV and movies. Five years of my mom and dad

seemingly forgetting how to say her name. Five years of referring to her death only as *'What Happened'*. I mean, why talk about my little sister when you could just pretend she never existed?

Back then my dad was one of the most powerful public relations people in Hollywood. And on this night Dad and I were driving to one of his Hollywood studio parties. A wrap party for some forgettable film called ... well, I forget. Dad said he wanted me to meet 'the gang'. I think he just wanted to impress me. He knew how many movies and television shows I watched and wanted to show me that he was part of that world. Or maybe he was just trying to make up for not being around much. He and Mom didn't talk much after *What Happened*.

Most of the people at the party were behind-the-scenes guys: producers, executives, distributors. His group, the PR people, was there too, including an underling who worked for my father for years and who I'd never met. I can't even remember his name. And, of course, Roland, shaved arms and all, was also there – but back then he called himself 'Rolin'. He was the PR photographer at the time and believed that all photographers had to have cool names if they wanted the celebrities to trust them. In Hollywood it's not what you create that matters, it's the image you portray, and 'Rolin' with tattoos conveyed *serious artistic talent* levels of magnitude greater than 'Roland' from the Midwest.

'Hey, come here,' Rolin called over to my father and I when we arrived. He rolled up his sleeve. 'Check this out. My latest. Cool, huh?' It was da Vinci's Vitruvian Man on his inner forearm. He looked like he was skinned alive. Rolin's blood dribbled through where the ink had been injected earlier in the day.

I don't remember much else about the party, but my shrink says that's normal. He says, given after what happened next, it's reasonable for my brain to try to block memories from that night. It's my mind trying to save me from more hurt.

But I do remember what I wish my mind would let me forget. After the party, driving home through our subdivision, the Orange County air was warm and smooth as it flowed in the car windows. My dad

seemed lost in thought, so I just listened to the crickets as they creaked and watched the curbs slide past, dipping and breaking every time there was a driveway. Suddenly there was a sharp swerve and a pop. I was jerked forward and the seatbelt snapped something in my chest as our vehicle stopped cold. I looked over at my father. The way the windshield was embedded in his skin, thousands and thousands of little shards of glass, his face sparkled like a mask of diamonds. I had never seen anything so magnificent. Then blackness crept in.

I woke to the horn. The windshield was gone. The steering wheel was in my father's chest. I remember trying to scream, but couldn't. Nothing was coming out. Someone was by the car. Blackness again.

'It doesn't look good,' a voice said when I woke at the hospital. I thought they were talking about me, but they meant my father.

Our car hit a large maple. The impact was so forceful part of the engine ended up in the back seat. I was the lucky one. Broken collarbone. Bruised arm. Three weeks of physical therapy. The next day, when I woke, my father was dead.

Maybe I looked like an asshole to all the doctors in the hospital because I wasn't all torn up and crying about things. But after Emma I had learned how to compartmentalise my hurt so well that I no longer remembered how I should feel when someone else close to me died. So I just lay in my hospital bed and held my mother's hand as she shuddered and cried.

The funeral came and went. I was given my father's gold watch to remember him by. It felt more like a retirement gift. *Thanks for your service, son.*

A few weeks later I met a girl. It was when, as usual, I went to a movie by myself. As fate would have it, Rachel chose to catch a flick on her own that day too. She was seventeen and had just moved to LA for a modelling contract with *Cosmo*. We hit it off right away, and though her work kept her busy, we were soon seeing each other. She was gorgeous: slim body, perky tits, anime-red hair and green eyes that would have matched the Van Gogh's eyes perfectly, now that I think about it.

One night Rachel stopped by while my mom was out grocery

shopping. I brought her up to my room and started to undress her. Truth be told, it was the first time I had ever seen a girl naked.

I can still feel how hard her nipples were, how soft her cheeks felt. Her hair smelled like Snuggles Fabric Softener.

I laid Rachel back on my bed and kissed her belly. She slowly arched her hips as I peeled off her mauve lace panties. I slipped a condom on and clumsily began thrusting.

She was so beautiful. Her little moans so comforting. Her breath on my neck so warm. She was perfect. Barely a minute had passed and I already wanted to cum. In her, on her – it didn't matter.

That's when Mom walked in.

'Mom!' I screamed.

'Jerry, what is this?' Mom yelled, her jaw long and her eyes wide in mortification.

And to Rachel, I yelled, 'Cover yourself up!' But she just lay there: legs spread wide, a perfect grin on her perfect face.

That's one thing about being a supermodel: you know you're so beautiful it just doesn't bother you if total strangers see you naked – even your boyfriend's mother.

'Oh, Jerry, oh Jerry,' Mom kept saying. 'What are you doing?'

To Mom I yelled, 'I didn't think you were home!'

And to the pillows on the bed I yelled, 'Rachel, get dressed!'

But that's one thing about being a bunch of pillows: they don't have to do what anyone tells them.

And just before I blacked out, Mom asked, 'Who's Rachel?'



Rachel, it turned out, was a figment of my imagination. That's the name my psychiatrist gave it: a 'figment'. A hallucination, a symptom of psychotic depression, maybe as a result of my father's unexpected death. Or maybe, my father's death, coming right after Emma's, was the thing that made me snap. Who knows?

Mom told the shrink how I had stacked the pillows like they were a person. Two duck-feather ones for the torso, decorative pillows from the couch for arms, a couple of body pillows for the legs. My mom feared the worst. But my shrink stressed that I wasn't schizophrenic. 'Psychotic depressives invent people to fill voids,' the shrink said.

What void? My mom didn't dare ask.

'Psychotic depression and schizophrenia are two different things,' the shrink told us. He said schizophrenia is a slow road into hell. It's not reversible. Psychotic depression is. 'With regular counselling from a mental-health professional and some Zyprexa we can rid Jerry of these figments,' he explained in his *Harvard Medical Journal* voice from behind a large oak desk. 'Your son will be good as new in no time.'

Mom looked like she really didn't believe it.

'Are you sure the medicine will make him OK?' she asked.

'If not, there's always electroshock therapy. That can help.'

'My poor baby,' my mom said, like the treatment was inevitable. Me, I was reading between the lines. I wasn't going to get laid by a super-model any longer.

'And what other things should we keep an eye out for? Besides the seeing people?'

'As long as he stays on his meds, nothing major,' my shrink told her, like I wasn't in the room. 'Maybe some disassociation. Some minor anti-social behaviour. Perhaps a small inclination – less than one percent of psychotic depressives get this – but perhaps a small inclination to other rare disorders.'

'Such as?'

'Really rare stuff. An inclination towards things like Stockholm syndrome.'

My mom whimpered.

'Relax,' my shrink tried to reassure her. 'Just make sure he's never kidnapped and he'll be fine,' he winked. And to me he said, 'But seriously, be sure to stay on the medication or the figments could come back. And you don't want us to have to treat this with shock therapy.'

I took my meds religiously and saw the shrink once a month. I saw

Rachel less and less. Another difference between being a schizo and being psychotically depressed: you know your hallucinations aren't real once someone points the first one out. It makes them a lot easier to ignore. And though the medicine seemed to be working, my imaginary supermodel began to be replaced by very real stomach cramps.

'I want to try a new medication,' my shrink said the next time I saw him. 'It's off-label for this condition, but there's a lot of anecdotal evidence that it's helpful for treating it. It might even eliminate your hallucinations with little or no side-effects.'

Sounds great, Doc. What is it?

'Mifepristone.'

Aka RU-486.

Aka the abortion pill.

Don't ask me how the pharmaceutical companies figured that one out. Maybe some psychotic depressive was convinced she was pregnant, popped a 486, and suddenly realised not only was she never pregnant but that the father of her child never existed.

However they figured it out, they were right: the abortion pill not only kills babies, it kills imaginary friends as well. I never saw Rachel again.

A year after the accident my mom packed us up and moved to a teaching job at DePaul University. Her friends thought she was running from the memories of her husband, but Mom wasn't running away from anything. She hated Hollywood life. She was running towards the life she had always wanted. Sometimes we can only be free when the people we love are gone.

One day I came home to our new Chicago house to find Roland in our kitchen. His shirt was a hideous blue-and-orange Hawaiian theme and his goatee had started to sprout grey. Roland had left the studio and moved to Chicago to take a position at the Art Institute. Mom said he wanted to offer help in getting me a job at the museum.

'We have lots of computers,' he said to me, like I was some delicate flower.

Mom had told him everything.

‘It’ll be nice to get out of your bedroom, won’t it, honey? Maybe get your own place with all the money you’ll be earning?’

‘Trust me,’ Roland said, ‘you’re going to love the museum.’



I fucking hate the museum and I need to be back there in ten minutes – barely time to finish the paper. Like anyone else, the amount of love I possess for my lunch break is directly proportional to the amount of hate I possess for my job. I cherish this time. But just as I turn to the Celebrity & Lifestyle section he comes in.

The bum.

Besides his torn clothes and his dirt-marked face, he looks like an old version of Ernest Hemingway – or the Gorton’s Fisherman. Silver hair peeks from the bottom of his knit cap, grey whiskers give him a rugged look, but it’s his cool blue eyes that are the most striking.

Every once in a while he’ll burst through the doors screaming about religion or philosophy, before someone offers him coffee to calm him down. I guess the regulars have found it’s quicker than waiting for the Chicago PD to show up. Today he’s unusually frantic.

‘I seek God! I seek God,’ he cries. ‘Where is God?’

This sounds familiar.

‘I will tell you,’ he continues. ‘We have killed him – you and I.’

Ah, Nietzsche.

‘All of us are his murderers.’

Someone give this guy a coffee already.

‘What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives.’

Personally, I think he just pulls this crazy act because he knows you can get a lot more out of people a lot faster by scaring them, annoying them, or making them feel like they’re your saviour, than you can by sitting around asking them for a nickel.

Case in point: a kind-looking, balding man is bringing him a cup

of Kenyan Select right now. ‘It’s OK. Calm down. Why don’t you drink this and warm up?’ the coffee-bringer tells the doomsayer. The bum takes it and stands between a set of tables and the snack counter, his body blocking the path of an alternatteen barista with pigtails who carries a tray full of biscotti. Her shirt reads: ADMIT IT. YOU’D GO TO JAIL FOR THIS. As the barista awkwardly slips around him, carefully trying to balance all the biscotti on the tray, one falls off. The bum snatches it from the floor before the girl has a chance to see.

Now the bum’s settled into a seat in the middle, at a little round table with a chequerboard. The barista, counting biscotti, eyes him suspiciously. The bum holds his biscotti in both hands, twitching his head left then right, like a skittish squirrel nibbling an acorn.

Choke on it, you freak. My lunch break is almost over and I didn’t even get to finish my paper in peace. I put on my coat and leave the *Sun-Times* on the table. Someone else will get to finish it. As I walk towards the exit I pass the bum and intentionally check him with my body, knocking him back in his seat. *Fuck you*, I say in my head.

And just as I get to the door a lady screams.

I turn around and everyone is on their feet. Through their legs a mass of dirt-stained clothes wriggles on the floor. Then a break in the crowd reveals a black knit cap with silver hair sprouting from the back. The bum’s face is turning an ever-darkening shade of blue. He’s grasping at his throat. The motherfucker is choking on his biscotti.

There are eight people between me and the bum, but no one is doing anything. Admit It just rolls her eyes, wearing a face that says, *God, this is so inconvenient. I don’t get paid enough to worry about choking homeless people.* Some guy near the back has started recording everything with his phone. Look for it on YouTube soon, no doubt.

And maybe the rest of the people don’t know the Heimlich, but I’m betting no one else is helping him because they don’t want to touch a creepy, worthless fuck of a man – worthlessness that might rub off on to them.

I can relate. To the bum, I mean.

Clawing at his throat, he's a minute closer to death than he was when the lady screamed, and still the crowd is acting like they're watching a one-man improv show.

And look, I don't know the Heimlich either, but I did bump him. So I push my way though and kneel at the bum's side. Then I do the worst thing possible. I do the thing the first-aid refrigerator magnets tell you never to do: I stick my fingers down his throat.

And there's a reason they tell you that. All I've done is lodge the biscotti further down. Panicked, I grab his coffee and pour it into his mouth.

And somewhere in the crowd a woman screams again.

Someone shouts, 'He's going to die!'

Someone shouts, 'His face is so blue!'

Someone shouts, 'Leave room for cream!'

And, leaning over the nearly dead bum with his mouthful of steaming coffee, I take my middle finger and jam it down his throat.

I thrust up and down, finger-fucking his mouth until the coffee has saturated the biscotti enough to break it in two. As I roll him onto his side the combined coffee and biscotti sludge slowly dribbles out of his mouth and down his whiskered cheek like a mini mudslide. Going back in, I stick all my fingers in his gaping, coffee-scalded mouth, past his rough, rodent-like tongue, till I feel the sewer-slime slickness of his throat and scoop out a clumpy mush of biscotti. I go in one more time, fishing for leftovers.

Then comes the gag.

And his warm, chunky, lava-like vomit flows over my hand.

He gasps for air.

'I'm not going to go to hell for someone as worthless as you,' I whisper under my breath, as I watch his sad face lose its blue. His whiskered cheeks softly pump up and down.

'Oh!' a woman exclaims. 'Oh!'

'Awesome,' says YouTube guy.

Then I guess the crowd realises they should do something so when they tell this story to their friends they can say they played a part. They

help the bum up. They tell him he is so lucky. They tell him to view this as a new day, a new start.

I'm still on the floor, my hand covered with homeless vomit. No one wants to help me up.

My fingers are red and scalded. My heart is racing, beads of sweat dot my face, and it feels good when someone opens the door and the cold April wind blows in.

And when the door bangs shut, she's on the other side of it again – her raven hair hangs in wet strands before her eyes. Her pale skin is slightly pink from the cold. The place where her ear lobe should be drips with water from the shredded cartilage. And her green eyes stare at me. I mean, *right* at me. The words from my dream echo in my head: *An awakening is needed in the west*. Heat radiates from my skin. The little beads of sweat that dot my face evaporate. I'm dizzy and just want to close my eyes, but I can't look away from the girl. Those penetrating eyes. That mutilated ear.

Then a towel hits me in the face.

'Here you go, hero,' the alternatteen barista says, moving between me and the door.

I wipe my hand clean of vomit and when I look up again, my dream figment is gone. It rains in her place.