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Editor's Note

"Spring," as an insipid marquee announced to me this morning, "has sprung." Also, "Our Sk8ing Classes Are Wheelie Gr8," according to a different local sign composed by a more imaginative poet. Speaking of good imaginations, we're pleased to cram the cruelest month with random acts of creativity from four talented writers. Betsy Streeter—whom you may remember as the artist behind the March issue's scary-elegant cover illustration—kicks things off with a laugh-out-loud-then-wonder-if-you're-a-bad-person story, "Del, We're Sorry, Please Stop." After that, Charlie Fiset's "Natural Birth" will change the way you look at eggs forever. You may want to enjoy "Them Oranges," a heart-pounding tale of hunger by Nicole Wolverton, with a glass of fresh-squeezed juice. Last up is Ben Pullar's "The Strangler Fig Slide," a fanciful tale with as many twists as its eponymous attraction. (Notice I didn't say "titular," because that sounds like a word frat guys would use on Spring Break.) Read, ponder, share with friends.

— Laura Garrison

Del, We're Sorry, Please Stop

Betsy Streeter

Oh, Del, you know we're sorry, right? We're sorry. We couldn't be more sorry if we got in a circle with no shoes in the snow and wailed and whacked ourselves and each other with sticks. I'm serious.

We thought we were doing something beautiful. We would pay our respects by the river, and listen to the water going by, there would be birds, we would stand there and ponder the sky, and tell our stories about you. There on that flat dirt place, the wide spot in the trail where you always liked to pause and stand there, hands on hips, head tipped back. Your favorite nature walk, you always said that was.

We took you down in a wheelbarrow, head first. You stared up at us, or you would have if your lids hadn't been covered over with stones. I thought you might like having the sun on your face so we left it sticking out.

None of us are gardeners. We don't know how to maneuver a wheelbarrow. Gene, he thought he could get the thing a little farther along the path, you know, give you the best view. So he just, pushed on it a little. Nothing huge.

When you slipped out none of us moved, we all just stood there. I would characterize this as paralysis. To be honest we had already gone so far outside of the proverbial "comfort zone," bringing you down there, I think the idea you might fall out of the damn thing just short-circuited our minds into dumb rocks.

So we watched you thud and roll down the embankment and land face-down in the stream.

I saw the back of your cream-colored sweater, and one of your hands, as you bobbed there in that little bit of shallow water.

I'll be honest, I wasn't enthused about pulling you out of there. I'd been keeping my distance, about ten feet back, through this whole process. I could see your face and halo of fuzzy hair, and the rust-colored wool blanket over your body, but that was as close as I intended to get.

Having you contained in the wheelbarrow, that put you in a nice defined space so we could see you there and talk about you, and honor you, and sing, and all the things we had planned. Beth did a great job, by the way, putting together the program. You would've liked it. She used this marble-pattern blue paper that she found in her drawer.

And now, here we had to figure out how to pull your dead self out of shallow cold water. That was getting up close and personal, let me tell you. You there in that stream water, right smack in contact with the living world of rocks and grass and all of it, that threw me, I have to say. And you're not a small guy. As you know. The grass waving in the water around you, it threw the dead and the living into high relief like a brick wall suddenly hit with a floodlight.

This must be when you got mad. Because we retreated to talk over the situation, shuffling our feet in the dry leaves under the aspen trees and whispering even though there was no one around and you were dead, nobody was gonna hear. But the shame shushed us up I guess. And you got real mad. I would too, face down in the river, if my friends were blathering like idiots in the

woods instead of getting my body out of there. Trust me, I would have been furious.

So, we meant no disrespect when we scattered like that. When you came walking through the trees, dripping wet and with the stones still over your eyes, and I have to say your walk, it was all different. You walked like a giant robot or an NBA player, fierce and stiff, nothing like you used to be. No stoop or shuffle. Just straight-ahead walking. Boom boom boom.

We don't understand what the hell you are doing. I've spent every single second for the last twenty-four hours trying to figure it out, at least when I'm not straining to anticipate which direction you will walk next and get the hell out of your way.

All I know is, you've got to stop the walking. Beatrice, she just keeps throwing up. She can't get it together at all. And I feel a little bad for Beth, after all that work she did on the program, we didn't even sing one song. Not one.

We are sorry we dropped you. Okay? We were trying to do the right thing, and now we're all running around out here and throwing up and you just keep walking your NBA walk in the woods, crunching over the leaves, boom boom boom. And I don't think we can do another night of this. The flashlight batteries are gone, and I'm serious if I end up with a dead car battery stuck out here with you walking like that, I'm gonna start throwing up too.

Tell you what Del, if you'll just lie down somewhere, real quiet, or maybe just lean up against a tree, your choice, we'll get you back in the wheelbarrow and take you right on home. I promise. I'm over the keeping a distance thing, I'll get you in that wheelbarrow myself. But I have to be double, triple sure that you're done

walking, man. I can't handle that. I'm not coming within a mile of you when you're doing that.

You can just go on back to that favorite spot of yours, and lie down, and stop all this, and we'll come get you. Or, wherever you want. You decide. But please, do it soon, will you?

If you hold still and stay that way (I'm not kidding, you have to be a proper dead person, Del), I promise we'll come on over and sing you your favorite song. And then we'll get you home.

BETSY STREETER is a Science/Speculative Fiction/Comics Author/Artist. Her YA science fiction novel, *Silverwood*, has just been accepted for publication. She publishes the webcomic "Neptune Road" at her site and at Perihelion Science Fiction. She has a cartoon in the Smithsonian Astrophysics Observatory's traveling exhibit on black holes, she understands the Infield Fly Rule, and she once devised a way to score infinite points on Space Invaders for the Atari. She lives with her husband, two kids, two cats, a tarantula and two persistent deer in Northern California. See her work at betsystreeter.com.

Natural Birth

Charlie Fiset

Julie was shucking eggs. How many eggs did it take before one could use the word "shuck" with impunity? One dozen? Two dozen? Julie was shucking three dozen eggs. They had been waiting for her, wrapped up in a blanket-like towel, on the kitchen counter when she arrived home from the hospital.

Normally she didn't work in the kitchen, but she continued to shuck when she discovered how enjoyable it was—cracking, peeling. Sometimes a liminal layer of overcooked egg would stick to the wall of the shell; it made a noise like scotch tape pulling off drywall when she separated them. She enjoyed the thought that her fingers were touching spherical flesh. She could picture the hidden golden yolk suspended in ether like a miniature sun, halted in deadened animation, now so much latent, useless being. The egg flesh was more similar than dissimilar to the flesh wrapped around her own bones.

The back door slammed and suddenly Julie's mother appeared in the kitchen. She looked at Julie and screamed, dropping the bags she'd been carrying. They landed on the floor with a muffled crunching sound.

"Julie—" her mother began.

"What was in the bags?" Julie asked.

"More eggs," said her mother. "I thought I needed more."

Instead of fetching the tea towel that hung from the stove, Julie pulled out her phone and began to photograph the scrambled mess

as it expanded over the tiles. “You always think you need more,” she said. “Why would anybody need so many eggs? One egg is too many eggs.”

“Why did you do it?” her mother asked, a hand trembling over her heart, fluttering like the ruffled pink silk scarf wrapped tightly around her neck. She pushed past Julie and rummaged under the sink, retuning with paper towels and disinfectant spray.

“Do what?” Julie asked, without looking up.

As if trying to escape the savagery, a single intact yolk slid down the sloping floor towards the backdoor, dragging itself through the gory path of its own amniotic food. Julie videoed its progress. She got down on her hands and knees, transfixed. A long, ropy white cord slid after the yolk like a streamer—like it was wearing a raccoon-tail hat. She wondered if it would have been the spinal cord.

Her mother stooped down and started wiping up the mess, wincing at the pain of her chronically inflamed disc. “You can’t go looking like *that*,” she said. “You just can’t.”

“I’m going,” said Julie. “I said I would.”

“They’ll think you’re making a statement.”

Her mother was still upset about the prosthetic penis Julie was currently sculpting. She’d found it in Julie’s room and had thought it was a sex toy.

“Let them think whatever they want.”

“Why did you do it?” her mother asked her again. “Do you hate me, Jules? Do you want them to stare?”

“I didn’t need it to keep warm,” said Julie, running her hands over her freshly-shaven head. “It didn’t make me any prettier—not that I care, anyway. And it was dirty.”

That afternoon she'd been looking in on the operating theater, sketching a woman who was having a hysterectomy. She was a special case: pear-shaped vagina, one for the books. The woman had been strapped down on the table like a wriggling worm, pinned beneath the clean pure lights. Everything in the theater was rendered so perfectly white and sterile by the lights—even Julie's own skin. It had been so easy to follow the blue veins in the fluorescent glow; they were not stagnant, like the pictures she drew. They moved and pulsed, were always changing. Then surgeon nicked an artery and the blood shot in a long, thick stream upwards, spattering the plate glass right in front of Julie's face.

"Dirty?" Julie's mother asked.

"You know the smell of peoples' hair? It smells like 'them.' But that's just a nice way of saying it smells like their sweat, their oils and salts, squeezed out through their pores from their glands, produced from the dead plants and animals they consume. It takes seven years to cycle through every cell in the body. Every seven years you are a new person made from the things you eat. Shampooing your hair is like spraying perfume on a pile of compost and calling it clean."

Julie's mother stared at Julie, and then went back to wiping up the eggs. "This doesn't have anything to do with Parker, does it?"

"Who's Parker?" Julie asked.

"Don't be like that."

"Like what?"

"Please don't say anything rude or strange to Mary," her mother burst out suddenly, her face blotchy and red with distress. Her thyroidal eyes looked enormous in her plump, sagging face—wide and frightened, like the eyes of a child. "Or the other ladies.

They're all so happy, Jules, and sometimes . . . sometimes people don't need to be reminded of unhappy things."

Julie knew her mother was thinking of the prosthetic penis when she said "unhappy things."

When Julie and her mother arrived at the baby shower, the other women were already organized in a ring, sipping steaming mugs of coffee, their plates sprinkled with pastry crumbs. Julie's mother flitted off and became absorbed in a conversation with one of the Aunts, and Julie was left—as usual—to fend for herself.

Her mother was right. There had been a pause in the conversational flow of the circle when they entered. Mary, who sat at the "head" of the ring, surrounded by stacks of frilly-wrapped presents, had gaped and then looked away quickly, smiling. But after a few stares and stifled giggles the ladies turned inwards upon themselves, folding the circle tightly closed, as if wishing to exclude the sight of Julie altogether. The Aunts, slumping heavily, looked like a panorama of the Appalachians, softly rolling but impassable. They oooed and cooed when Mary described her back pains with a vividness that would make contemporary poets jealous.

Mary's hair was curled up in ringlets. She wore a maternity dress that was nearly a hoop skirt, looked both virginal and utterly knocked-up, like the bride in *The Arnolfini Wedding*.

"Julie, your hair," said one of the cousins, sniggering behind her palm. "Time for a change? Or was it politically motivated?"

Instead of explaining about the dirt, Julie shrugged. She could feel Mary's eyes on her.

"Oh!" Mary gasped suddenly. "He's kicking!"

The Aunts crowded inwards and Julie was trapped.

"Don't you want to feel?" one asked, her pink face stretched wide into a smile. She grabbed Julie's arm at the wrist before Julie could jerk away, and Julie's hand was buried beneath a pile of plump, round fingers. She felt a subcutaneous rippling beneath her palm. Like how the surface of the water stirs before the shark's dorsal fin emerges.

"We're having the birth right here in the house." Mary's voice emitted from the nexus of the crisscrossed web of hands. "We purchased a birthing pool. Of course you're all invited. The atmosphere is very important in natural births. The energy has to be sublime."

Julie jerked her hand out from the bottom of the pile. "Aren't you worried about hygiene?" she asked.

But before Mary could say anything, one of the Aunts cried: "I'd just love to see the baby's room!"

The baby's room had recently been renovated. It was painted blue with large decals of sailboats and pirate ships. The mobile hanging over the crib was pirate gold and pistols. There was a small, plush rapier tucked in among the teddies.

"The sonogram said it was a boy," said Mary. "I want to be able to acclimatize him to his room as soon as he's born, so he doesn't suffer any sudden shocks that might cripple his development. Every moment is crucial at the stage between in utero and the transition to the external environment."

"Aren't you worried about forcing the child into a normative gender role?"

"What do you mean?" Mary asked, her smile stiff.

"Julie's just joking," said Julie's mother, appearing suddenly from amidst the aunts.

"Isn't it a bit . . . much?" Julie asked.

"You mean the *toys*?" Mary asked, with a little laugh.

"I mean inherently violent toys. You might say that you're encouraging violent tendencies with all this pirate stuff. They're rapists and murderers, after all."

"I don't ever remember hearing about anybody being killed by a *baby*," said Mary.

"Women die in childbirth all the time," said Julie.

Silence fell over the group. Julie took a step backwards. She'd forgotten that she'd been holding her phone, filming the room. Now she looked at the women through the tiny, glowing screen; their eyes glinted in the fluorescent lights—the way animal eyes refract in photos. She'd read before that pregnant women had been banned from the theater in ancient Athens because when the drums and claxons sounded, heralding the appearance of the *Bacchae*, sometimes the women got so scared that they spontaneously aborted.

"Oh, shut up, Jules," said one of the Aunts. "Nobody wants to hear your nonsense. Mary, try to think what it must be like for her. You've got Paul and she hasn't got anybody. You've got a new house and the baby coming and she's holed up in her parents' basement . . . You're the prettiest girl in town and Julie doesn't even have hair."

At this there was a smattering of laughter.

"Obviously," said Mary, "it's just a desperate cry for attention. Pathetic."

Julie could still hear them talking while she fled down the hall, threw on her coat and boots. "Her mother says she's got the depression. You know they had to bring her back from the city—"

"That's right," Julie yelled, as she opened the door. "They found me in the bathtub, nearly bled out! Doesn't that make you feel sorry for me, Mary?"

Julie's basement room was filled with flowering plants. Her mother had an arboretum in the summer and liked to get a head start before the spring planting. The plants were strewn with Mary's prosthetics, making it appear as though the stalks were sprouting ears or noses instead of carrot greens or onion shoots.

Julie was watching a children's television show while she put the finishing touches on the prosthetic penis. She carefully shaved another centimeter from the glans. She'd created a three-dimensional mold from the exact specifications of the transsexual man who was to receive the prosthetic. A button could be pressed just beneath the scrotum and the hydraulic rods would stiffen; an internal mechanism was connected to the testes, so that the prosthetic could offer the complete range of sexual experience.

Once upon a time, she'd wanted to be a real artist. But during her stint in the city it became clear that she was too technically minded for abstraction; her drawings were too close to life. She could draft effortlessly, having a natural grasp of proportions. And she could measure millimeters with her eyes. But the nonconcrete escaped her.

The television program was repeating a familiar musical motif associated with the rising action of the plot. The trilling, over-excited sounds built up in Julie's ears like underwater pressure, like the force that pushed a bullet from a gun. Just when the music was rushing with her boiling blood the program paused for commercials.

An advertisement for a popular brand of vitamins flashed onto the screen. First it showed pictures of wheat fields and sunflowers and salmons leaping vigorously up a fast-flowing river. Then it showed a man's back. He was running from the camera, the perfect symbol of vitality and health. His shoulders slumped forward suddenly and the image became layered upon the brand's logo. A palimpsest of superimposed color tricked the eye, but Julie could see that the man was now leaning over the figure of a woman; they reclined into the horizontal, hips thrusting to the beat of the jingle. They humped away until they were reduced to a single streak of sunshine emanating from the cartoon sun that was the brand's logo.

Julie rose from the couch and approached her canvas; it was blank, though dozens of sketches littered the floor around it. Her hand dropped to her stomach. She thought she could feel a tiny, hardening lump in her core like a pearl accumulating layers of sand. The vitamin from the commercial had beamed directly into her core. She was suddenly very aware of the plants. It was as if she could hear them respiring. She looked at the beaded fog upon the window and could picture the molecules of water at the subatomic level; she could see the carbon monoxide floating in the room—she could feel the oxygen. She could feel herself, little by little,

exchanging her precious molecules with the gasping, strangling vegetation as she breathed in and out.

Julie fled the basement, knocking the prosthetic penis to the floor on her way out. Upstairs, the house was empty.

She wanted desperately to speak with her mother. She walked down the street blindly, looking into the houses through the windows, all of which were clouded with condensation. Finally, she arrived—as if on purpose—at a house she recognized. Her mother's car was parked outside. It was Mary's house.

Inside, all was silent save for the hint of murmuring voices. They rippled down the hall. Julie followed the sound until she reached the door of the downstairs bathroom. The eerie noise raised the hair on her arms and neck. She pulled out her phone.

"Hello?" Julie called. "Hello? Mom? Are you here? I need to talk to you . . . "

She pushed the door open.

A ring of women was standing around what appeared to be a portable wading pool. The pool and the women only just fit into the cramped bathroom. Mary was squatting in the water. Her breasts were covered by a black bikini top; her enormous belly seemed to bob upon the surface. Her hair was unbound, hanging around her face in sweaty sheaves. She was making mewling noises, and so were the other women. It took Julie a moment to realize that they were all chanting in time to some sort of a Lamaze meditation recording that was playing from a stereo on the sink. They breathed in with Mary, and then expelled the breath in a low, sustained moan . . .

Julie began to laugh.

She pressed her knuckles to her face, but she could not stop the sound from escaping into the room. Soon it was echoing off the walls.

The ladies peered round at her.

Mary's eyes focused on Julie. "GET OUT!" she screamed. "GET OUT!"

"Mary, calm down—"

"Oh GOD!" wailed the Aunts.

"GEEEEET OUUUUUUUUUUUT!"

There was a sudden burst of motion. Mary looked as if she were trying to rise from the water, perhaps to expel Julie from the room herself. But she only succeeded in upsetting the balance of one of the Aunts, who had been leaning against the wading pool. With a shriek the Aunt tumbled into the water; the pool buckled and then water began to gush forth. Losing her balance, Mary tipped over backwards, her legs sticking up into the air like a squashed cockroach.

A dark shadow emerged from between Mary's legs; the water clouded with blood and then the shadow rushed forth, sliding along with the water, a ropy cord streaming out behind it. It came to a sudden halt when it bounced against Julie's toes.

Julie had been following its progress with her camera. She zoomed.

Julie's mother hadn't been able to stop attrition baking since the birth of Mary's son. Cartons of eggs were sitting on the counter, waiting to be cracked and baked into pies, cakes, flakey pastries or quiches. She had decided to make Mary a month's worth of

suppers as an apology. “I know how hard it is to cook when you’ve got a new baby to look after. And it’s so important to get the proper nutrition. You don’t eat the right food, Jules,” her mother concluded, with a nervous titter. “I tell you that all the time.”

“How’s Mary, anyway?” Julie asked.

“Apparently Mary’s been a bit batty since it happened. Hasn’t been able to stop crying—she’s blaming the whole thing on you.”

“Of course,” said Julie.

“She says you ruined her baby/mother bonding, because you were the first person the baby saw. She says all anyone will be able to remember about the beautiful event is the baby bouncing off your shoes. She says she’s humiliated. I told Mary that she has a beautiful baby, and nothing to complain about. And that footage you took of the birth is lovely stuff. You can see him open his eyes for the very first time. Such a little angel. He didn’t make a peep. I think Mary needs to go on a post-natal vitamin regimen or something. Poor dear.”

When Julie descended into the basement to start working on her prosthetics again, she noticed that the door to her studio had been left ajar.

When she pushed inside the room she saw a woman standing in front of the easel that sat in the corner. A plethora of papers were tacked up onto the wall behind the easel; the floor below it was littered with sketches and paint-smeared canvases, torn or with broken frames. Upon the easel there sat a canvas covered in dark smudges that looked like glossy red tar, weaving in and out of themselves in crisscrossing patterns, circling inwards towards two points of light. You could only tell that the smudges congealed to form the shape of a face if you looked very closely, and then all

became clear. It was the *inside* of a face, as it would have appeared if someone had peeled back the skin in a hanging flap and painted the mess of nerves and veins and muscle that lay beneath. It was impossible to tell to whom the face belonged by looking at the painting alone. But the sketches on the floor showed a photographic replica of the same face over and over.

The woman standing in front of the easel turned around. It was Mary. She was holding a bag of groceries, her winter boots and coat still on, as if she had just come from the grocery store.

Julie could feel her head swimming; the overhead fluorescents were beginning to flash ominously in the corners of her eyes. "Mary," she said. "Where's your baby?"

"My baby?" said Mary. "This is a drawing of *my* baby! These are all drawings of him! You psychopathic *bitch*!"

Mary reached into the plastic bag and started hurling things at Julie: a box of crackers, a head of lettuce. One egg. Two eggs. Three eggs.

An egg smashed into Julie's forehead and trickled down her face. Before she could move away Mary cornered her against the wall and smashed more eggs into her hair and cheeks. Taking the only egg that was left in the carton, Mary mashed it against Julie's lips. The shell fractured and then broke. It dug into Julie's flesh and she gasped in pain—and then Mary forced both egg and shell into Julie's mouth.

Julie tried to spit it out, but Mary rammed her palm against Julie's jaw, holding her mouth closed. Julie's eyes were wide with fear as she struggled to swallow. Mary's eyes followed the progress of the egg as it bulged down Julie's throat.

Then, Mary leapt backwards with a gasp.

Julie looked down to see that the front of her shirt and pants were stained with blood. The stain was expanding frighteningly, dying the cloth red. She could feel the blood drain from her head, from her face.

"Thank you," said Julie, a bit of shell falling from her lip. "Thank you, Mary . . . it's all right. Everything's all right. I'll just hop in the car and drive myself to the hospital. Really," she said, looking up into Mary's eyes, "Thanks."

CHARLIE FISET is currently completing her MA thesis in Creative Writing at the University of New Brunswick. She looks forward to starting her PhD in English at UNB next year.

Them Oranges

Nicole Wolverton

What winds blow in the valley below the big town on the first day of June always smell of oranges. Sharp, sweet, with the bitter tang of pith. And with it came the undeniable hunger. Every year. Lettie always stood for a moment, waiting to throw open the shutters in her bright, airy kitchen to let in the rush of summer citrus and the unflinching desire to eat.

"You don't even like them oranges," her husband would say, and then she'd nod. You can't argue with the truth. Yet out Lettie would go, into the bright sunshine or the stinging rain, to seek the source.

This year was no different. She flung up the sash above the sink, and the fruit-drenched air invaded the house, soaked under her skin. She rested her palms on the edge of the counter and drank it in. Time was of the essence. It always was.

A few steps away in their pin-neat bedroom, Elmer still sprawled beneath the comforter. Strands of brown hair peeked out, blown wild with each push of his sleepy breath. Lettie fished for her shoes, just under the edge of the bed, and slipped them on, quiet as can be. Her husband flung out a hand to pet the round hardness of her belly, and the baby under his fingers kicked. Once, twice, and then the rumbling settled.

Elmer mumbled, "Don't even like them oranges."

"When you're right, you're right, dear," she said. Her hunger was louder than the wind. The aroma was everywhere. On

everything. Maybe it *was* more intense this year. Her mother—God rest her soul—had explained about pregnancy, the way she'd sniffed out the strangest things, the smells a thick-walled cloud fogging her brain until Lettie had been born. That year the oranges had been strangling in their depth of scent, her mother had said.

Getting outside, that's what was needed. Lettie'd clear her head, her nose, let the wind take her where it might. She slipped a knife into her back pocket. A lady never knew when she might need a good knife on the first day of June.

Outside the house, right there on the flagstone walk, she sniffed, deep and wide. She wet the tip of her finger and held it high into the air. The gusty wind caressing her skin made her more ravenous. The sun heated the crown of her head, magnifying the heavy aroma. Another gale led Lettie to the road, and some intuition—a prick of recognition—turned her to the west, to the oak-heavy forest and the barely discernible paths within. She walked, following her nose, the nudges from within her belly.

She would eat. She and the baby, they'd both eat.

With each step, she imagined how it would be. The year prior she'd come upon a juicy morsel in the dappled shade beneath a tree in the main square. The year before that, she'd found herself behind a dilapidated building on the outskirts of the city, snuffling warm skin. And oh! The taste. Hot and wet, sweet and succulent.

From the year of her own birth to the day she was married, it was her mother that raced her into the hills and forests to get to the source. She could still remember the feel of their clasped hands, the way she'd taken to the hunt without much of her mother's urging. Some vestigial memory must have hooked its heritage into her DNA because Lettie—like her mother, like her mother's mother,

and all the women in the family who came before—had the instinct. Mother gently offered up suggestions: how to make less of a mess with the eating, why burying the skins was such a necessary process. The glory of the family lineage and service to the big town above the valley.

The sacrifice.

The townspeople never talked much about the family gift. Perhaps behind closed doors there were whispers, a warning about the first day of June and those Hanahan women. That family could out-hunt a bloodhound, that was what her neighbors said within her hearing. Noses like sharks, people said.

She'd once hid in the bushes to eavesdrop on an old man from the big town, his stories about her family. Pretty as all get out, but there was something ungainly in that way the little one, Lettie, could sniff out a wounded animal from a mile away. Something off about the way old Edith Hanahan could pick out the spot to look for a lost child. It was in the blood, far back as anyone could remember. And the way the older ones just withered away when the daughters married—it wasn't right. Lettie had known already her mother would die, and she alone would carry on the traditions, but hearing it from a stranger . . . that had stung like a bee.

None of it ever mattered to Elmer. No, he'd never cared who she was . . . or for the whispers about her family history. He'd only shake his head every June and let her go about her business. "You don't even like them oranges." It was his only comment.

The wind changed direction, bringing a yawning whiff of orange from the north. She swiveled, set to sprint across the meadowed expanse. The forest just beyond shook its leaves, and the breeze altered course again. Seconds later, the scent of citrus

drifted from the south, and Lettie hadn't a strong notion about the direction to try. Such strangeness to the hunt this year; perhaps it was the strong winds at fault, or perhaps the baby made it harder to get a read on the source. So hard to pinpoint anything. She plopped down on a patch of clover and held her belly between two unsure hands.

For an hour the tempest whipped, mixing the smell of ripe oranges with raw earth, damp moss, rotting leaves, and rutting animals, and Lettie waited, whispering secrets to the baby. A girl, just like her. She could tell by the way her craving solidified into a solid punch of want. Her mother always said you could figure it out, if you just paid attention. Unlike the baby, Lettie was patient. She waited for the calm air to descend and the scents to settle. Meanwhile, her belly heaved and cried.

"This way," the wind whispered. "Come this way."

Well, *that* was different. Never had encouragement come from anyone but a Hanahan. She remembered her mother once hiding in the trees, guiding her, teaching her the secrets, to find the place from which the orange fragrance came. Passing along the legends. Pointing to the green, green valley and the bustling town, the family role in its fortune.

Lettie rose and let the voice take her. First back across the tall wild flowers and grasses, a half circle through the wood, where the oranges were muted. She emerged into blazing light and a fragrance so encompassing she thought she might never sense another. The baby kicked again.

"Across," the voice urged. "Beyond."

She followed, a hollow space growing inside her chest, even as the spice of orange in the air filled her with anticipation. The ground was firm beneath her feet, fever trapped under her skin.

Yes, it was just ahead of those trees. She could feel it. Her incisors ached with the need to tear into flesh, swallow the juice. See the ritual clear for another year.

She didn't enjoy it, not really, not knowing what she must do. Well, not *after*, anyway. When she had time to think about it. But the valley below the big town on the first day of June demanded her service. And it demanded sacrifice. Her mother told her once of what would happen if she ignored her calling. She wouldn't even think of shirking her duty.

When through a thick brush Lettie tunneled, it was her own backyard in which she stood.

"Inside." It was a hiss in her head, a cyclone in her skull. Maybe not the wind, as she'd thought, but a voice speaking around the thing she didn't want to admit.

Her feet walked the path by memory, so intent was she on following the perfume, so sure she had made an error. Now she caught the smell, the thick of it in her throat. How she'd mistaken it, Lettie couldn't tell. She stumbled once at the backdoor, fumbled with the key. Deep down she knew service and sacrifice would twine together this year, more than ever, and it filled her with a sensation she'd never known before: dread. Something drew her up the stairs, down the hall, and through the doorway into her bedroom. Her husband still slept, face mashed into the pillow.

She crept closer, then closer still, held back only by the bloom of oranges permeating the room. The wind brought her the scent of fruit, took her to the source.

She would eat. She and the baby, they'd both eat.

Elmer stirred, his skin suggestive of an entire grove of tangerines . . . and maybe clementines. She leaned closer and ran her nose along the nude, aromatic spine, the firm and fragrant shoulders. Even his fan of hair smelled sweet. Her mouth filled, and her jaw went slack, fingers crooking with the urge to feast. The baby kicked.

Lettie slipped the knife from her back pocket, so crazed with appetite she didn't even bother to wake him to say goodbye. Elmer would understand. The baby would understand. It was for the town.

She didn't even like them oranges.

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The Strangler Fig Slide

Ben Pullar

The slug on my left wrist made me want to vomit. The trouble was there was no bucket, so I opened up the glove box of my car and vomited all over a 1955 street directory. A pity, a bit of a relic, but sometimes you have to open up your mouth and empty your stomach all over some sort of antique, it's a refreshing way to live life.

It was that sort of afternoon, getting headaches, having to deal with slugs all over my body. I was driving my big green Ford along a wet road, feeling very glum, and was just about to give up hope of anything good ever happening again when I saw the strangler fig slide. It appeared in the rainy windshield like a frozen broccoli. Five hundred metres of steaming waterfalls and carpet snakes hissing at wasps, it shimmered with magical life. It kept disappearing behind smears of rainwater, then the rusty wipers would clean the big broad window lens I was looking through and it would pop up again.

It flickered ahead of me, and for a few moments I forgot about my troubles. Then the wipers broke down, the tree got foggy again, and they came back to me at top speed.

I was having a bad run. Not just slugs. My parents were making me miserable and my career options were a bit grim. I hated my job with the Danish shipping company, and I didn't think things could get much worse. I decided to treat myself to a bit of fun, so I pulled into the vast empty strangler fig slide car

park and got out.

The tops of the tree were hidden in a bank of black cloud. I lit a cigarette and noticed the slug still perched on my wrist.

"You're ruining my life," I said to it. It barely flinched.

I wound up the windows of my car and walked through pelting rain to a small entry booth.

An ancient woman of about eighty-five was operating the till.

"What's up?" I asked.

"I'm working. You?"

"I'm hoping to have some fun on the waterslide up there," I said. "I've just had an altercation with a slug."

The woman sneered at me.

"Shoot it."

"No, I won't do that," I said, a bit shocked at her attitude.

"Why not?"

"Doesn't seem very humane," I said.

"Slugs aren't humane," said the woman. "They eat crickets."

"I doubt that," I said.

"Fifteen dollars," said the woman.

I was staggered at the price. I turned and looked at the tree again.

"Pretty steep," I said, looking around at the mossy lawns and pavements below the gigantic rotting fig.

"Gee, sorry about that," said the woman, sniffing very loudly with both nostrils.

I paid the money, got a ticket, and waved at her as I walked through the turnstile.

"Have a great day," I said.

"Don't forget," she said to me, her beady eyes flickering in the dark afternoon light, "crickets."

I bought some togs from the souvenir shop attendant, a squat man named Kenneth who wanted to talk about boat hull problems. I couldn't get out of there fast enough.

I stood below the great fig and felt awed by it again. The thing had its own rivers, lakes and groves, it seemed to me. It had its own microclimate. Tiny cyclones were festooned under its larger branches. Its trunks fell to the ground like melting wax spirals.

I caught a chairlift and followed its wires up the enormous fig's part wooden, part fiberglass trunk. Thick syrupy water fell from the distant canopy, while bad-tempered frogs peered from caves in the tree's wet hide. The chairlift rocked back and forward in the rain and I held on tightly. There were a few bad moments, like when the darker gusts of four o'clock rain came washing in and drenched me in wet flowers. There were a few moments when I thought the old wires might break, and I'd be dropped through the air, dashed against the root systems hundreds of metres below.

But after about fifteen minutes I finally made it to a rotting green-stained pine platform deck near the tree's top.

The deck led to the opening of the single water slide's mouth. It was being tended by an old man. He was sitting in an iron chair under a big umbrella, growling at the weather and, I guess, me. He wasn't doing all that much tending, admittedly. He was doing more "moldering" than "tending', I thought, and his eyes were closed.

I approached the water slide mouth, trying to be as quiet as I

could, but I stepped on a waterlogged flower bud and I knew I'd spoiled all of my sneaky traipsing actions.

The old man's eyes flashed open.

"Halt," he said.

"There a problem?" I asked.

"Yeah," said the old man, "have you checked your height credentials?"

He pointed to a sign of a four-foot tall koala bear holding his right arm out at about the three and a half foot mark.

"If you fit neatly under that koala's paw you're too small for this slide," the old man declared.

"I think I'll do fine," I said, a bit testy by now.

"I'm serious," said the old man. He got to his feet. He was wobbly, obviously a bit weak. The water had seeped into his flesh and swollen his skin up quite a bit.

"You go and stand beside that koala, and if you're too small for this slide, you don't get to go on it," he coughed.

I sighed.

"All right, all right," I said. I went and stood beside the koala. I put my hands on my hips. I felt stupid standing there in my togs, my bandy legs looking like cassia stems next to what was a very short koala. Its paw nudged my upper thigh area.

"Well?" I asked after half a minute.

"Hold your horse, boy," said the old man, "I'm trying to just make sure."

"Oh for god's sake," I said, "this is ridiculous!"

I had had enough. I'd had years of having to put up with all sorts of elderly relatives, including my grandfather the colonel, and I was not about to start taking orders from this bozo. I

immediately walked over to the waterslide mouth and leapt in head first. I've no idea what the old man did. But I have a feeling he made arrangements. Got in touch with his insiders in the fig itself. I have that feeling because I had a really bad time in that fig that afternoon.

I slid down that dark water tube, over mossy timbers and through green lights and occasional grim afternoon glimpses, and things got faster and faster.

I quickly got worried about the speed. Then I started to fear the dreadful sounds.

Strange howling unnerved me. Then there were the weird chuckles.

Giant red eyes appeared and I started to really get bothered.

It was the hairy monkey hands reaching for me that finally made me scream with terror.

They appeared out of vents in the slide walls and grabbed at my arms and legs. Their claws tore great wedges of fat from my back and shoulders. Only my terrific speed saved me.

Then the snails struck. They snapped at my fingers and toes, spat venomous sputum at me from behind leaves, generally snarled and joked and haunted me.

They were aided by bats. And spiders. And of course the snakes, who really scared me. I dodged and ducked and hoped for the best, and I think I did a pretty good job avoiding those wretched creatures.

Then, when I thought I had averted the worst things in that deep dark well of damp timber, I was suddenly wrenched from the slide by a net. I was thrown onto a green-carpeted floor in a cozy fire-lit living room.

A number of heavyset men stood around me. A whispery voice coughed and said "that's all right men, leave him be."

The men walked off, and I looked up and saw a small man in a velvet dressing gown sipping tea and combing his black beard.

"Hi," said the man, "I'm Nesbit. Nesbit the poet. How are you doing, enjoying your afternoon?"

"No," I said.

"Oh, dear. Oh, dear me, that's not good. Not good at all. Really? You're really not enjoying it?"

"It's been awful," I said. I got to my feet. The poet threw me a towel, and I dried off my hair a bit. "I don't know why I bothered to come here, really," I said. "Big mistake. I'm having dinner with my parents at six."

"Oh, no," said Nesbit, "that's never fun. A pity you've not had time to brace yourself for dinner with the parents. Instead you're all damp and scratched. Well, I tell you what you should do. You should get back in the slide and go and complain to management, you see. The fellow who runs this park, he's a reasonable man, but sometimes the direct approach is best. I'm always at him to clean up his act but he ignores me. I've had a poetry residency here now for about fifteen years and I'm afraid nobody listens to an ensconced poet much after a while. They might listen to you, though."

I quite enjoyed my time in Nesbit's living room that afternoon. I ate some chocolate biscuits, cooled down a bit, and had a look at some of Nesbit's poetry volumes.

"I'm due to put out a new selected poems edition shortly," he said, flipping through one of his earlier selections. "Quite

relaxing revising things in this atmosphere. Constant sound of running water. Every day's a rainy day. And on actual rainy days you double your money!"

I waved goodbye and thanked him for having me.

"Oh, don't mention that, pleasure to have you aboard, so to speak. Good luck, matey!"

I leapt back into the slide then, and although the rest of the trip wasn't exactly fun, I survived the monkey hands and the vicious nocturnal snails and the bats and got spat out of an enormous tap root into a snug pool of warm water roughly seven minutes later.

I clambered out of the pool, collected my clothes from the toilet block I had originally changed in, then stalked through the park, determined to have words with the slovenly park manager.

But as I walked deeper into the park things got darker and stranger, and I started to wonder whether I should just make a break for it and get back to the car.

Ferns grew over the paths, cobwebs tangled with phone wires.

Cedar trees fell down, blocking roads.

Finally I came to a moss-draped demountable building near a falling fence. Beyond there was thick scrub.

Rain fell hard now.

I crept into a water-spoiled room, a sort of mossy foyer covered in lizard droppings. A young woman sat behind a desk.

"Hi," I said, "I'm looking for the manager here."

"Manager?" she said. "You mean Rhodes, I suppose."

"I suppose I do," I said.

"Go through the door, the one covered in rat dung," she said.

I did as I was told. I walked into a giant burgundy room of flickering red and orange lamps. A fish tank covered one wall five meters to the high ceiling. An old Mozart 78 played on a gramophone next to a drinks cabinet.

A man in a white hat and a white suit sat behind a vast desk. He was on the telephone.

"Tell them I would do that, but I can't. I just can't. All right? That clear? Charmed. Bye now."

He hung up the phone and leapt up from his desk. He stormed over to me and held out his hand.

"Hi," he said, "my name's Horsham Rhodes, inventor of the strangler fig slide theme park and assorted other lesser creations. Like Dodgem World, the world's largest dodgem park. Long closed down. How can I help you?"

"I came to tell you this place needs a bit of renovating," I said. "It's dangerous."

Rhodes laughed.

"This is a joke, obviously," he said, smiling.

"No," I said. "Somebody will get killed soon. It's a death trap."

"That poet put you up to this I bet," groaned Rhodes, frowning suddenly. "You know his favorite meter? Quatrain. I mean, come on."

Rhodes stalked over to the drinks cabinet, poured us a brandy each, stalked back.

"Absolute bloody berk. Still, nice enough. For an artist."

"He advised me to talk to you," I said, "but I had already

formed the opinion that this place is a death trap. You need to clean up your act or else."

Rhodes sighed and sat down at his desk.

"Yes, yes, I suppose I do. I suppose you're right. I guess it is high time things changed here."

He lit a small cigarette, offered me one. I took it with all the gusto I could manage.

"You know," said Rhodes, sounding very sad and defeated, "this place came to me in a sort of vision? I was young, hungry, desperate. A bit dyspeptic. One night after a lot of beer, I saw a great green tree filling up the world. Next morning I went and bought an old fig in Perth, started to renovate it. Bought an old secondhand water slide set from Hong Kong, and presto! Easy as that. Still," he added sadly, "the years have not been kind."

I smoked that cigarette and I commiserated. I could understand Rhodes' pain only too well.

"I have my own problems, you know," I said. "This slug on my left hand. Drove me up the wall this afternoon."

I wriggled my wrist in front of Rhodes' face.

"Yes," said Rhodes, "I noticed that, a bit on the hideously ugly side I thought."

"Like a sea cucumber," I said. "And it didn't just happen, you know. It took years to get this slug on my left wrist this afternoon. I looked down an hour ago and there it was. Awful."

There was silence for half a minute. Then Rhodes seemed to perk up.

"All right then, since we're both so down in the dumps, let's help each other. Here's my advice to you. Put on a glove, hide the slug."

"I don't actually own a glove. I'll have to buy one."

"There you go, sorted. Now," he said, his eyes beaming like ocean liners, "give me some ideas, what do you have for me, eh?"

He opened up a notepad, got out a biro, waited for me to come up with something. Anything. I gave it some thought. Was there any way back for a place as moldy and sludgy and old fashioned as the strangler fig slide theme park? How could it ever return to its 1978 glory peak? Then I had some sort of green light flicker up in my head.

"I think I know," I said at last.

"Well then, dish it out, what is it?" Rhodes' pen hovered over his notepad like a flying saucer.

"I can't tell you. I can only show you," I said. "Come on, follow me."

I led Rhodes to the telephone. "Call up every media representative you know," I told him. "Every family friend. Everybody. I'll do the same. Tell them to be here in two hours for a wonderful spectacle."

Rhodes was curious, and bothered, but he did it.

Two hours later we stood in our togs atop the platform next to the water slide tube entrance. Rhodes still wore his white hat of course.

Below us thousands of people filled the theme park. They clambered on rooftops, in trees, around the warm pool below the great fig. Some were even brave enough to climb the actual fig, though the snakes chased most of them off.

"Rules are simple," I said, "first into the pool below wins the inaugural Strangler Fig Slide Classic. But it doesn't much matter

who wins really. The main thing is we'll have put on a show. That's the way to do things, Rhodes. Everyone understands a good show."

Rhodes looked pale.

"What's wrong?" I asked, putting out my latest cigarette on a leaf.

"That thing about it not mattering who wins," he said. "That's the most beautiful thing I've ever heard a man say."

I winced slightly.

"Do you read books, Horsham?"

"Sometimes. More of a pamphlet man myself. Years running a theme park. You get to know the form."

"Well, great," I said, approaching the slide mouth. Then, feeling bad, I stopped, turned toward him. "By the way," I said. "I was lying."

We leapt into the slide seconds apart. The night was thick with torrential rain and electricity. The night was full of love and hate, and we had plenty of both.

The public got a real show that night. The tree lit up with the sights of flaming monkeys grabbing for Rhodes and me. At one point they just about got Rhodes, but he let off a firework, blowing one of the monkey's arms off, and he escaped.

But it was a near thing, and the stakes grew with every encounter.

I led early, but Rhodes caught me up quickly. He knew every stretch of that tree, every dip and straight and groove, and he let the water carry him past me in the seventh minute.

I hung in there, paced himself, and started fighting back, got within spitting distance a few times, then fell back again.

Then things got deadly.

It was the old man from the top of the tree. He started firing his air rifle at us from a hollow deep inside the fig.

"You're too short!" he yelled at me, his voice cracking out of pure rage. He went on shooting. He got Rhodes in the neck twice, me in the right nipple. Blood gushed out but we kept up the pace.

At that point the old woman from the entry booth bought into the contest. She threw Molotov cocktails at us from one of the fig's wet caverns. Both of us dodged them, but they broke against a fig root and introduced glass into the waters. Plus she hurled insults at us.

"You call yourselves men!" she screamed. "And you," she yelled at me, "you had better watch out for that slug! Might mistake you for a cricket!"

It was that chance insult that saved the night for me. The slug! Of course! I had forgotten it in all the tumult. I looked down at it on my left wrist, vomited, which made things a bit trickier, but the really fantastic thing was the slug was glowing. It had gone all phosphorescent, from stress possibly, and it lit up the wooden slide tube like a storeroom. Suddenly I could see. The dark caverns were dark no more. It meant I could take incredible risks, unthinkable in the dark, but possible now I had a panicky slug to light my way.

The crowd roared as the action got channeled into the closed-circuit TV screens all around the park. They watched me gain on Rhodes, and they roared at the fun of it all.

Finally the two of us were very close to the end of the slide. Rhodes was slightly ahead, but two bends from the end he went

wide, slid a bit on a snail, and I snuck down the inside into a late lead, one I took with me to the warm pool beneath the great fig.

The crowd screamed and shouted, took photographs, chanted our names.

We clambered out of the pool. Rhodes shook my hand, initially very disappointed, but he was surrounded by adoring people telling him how marvelous his theme park was, hugging him and kissing him, and he cheered up quite quickly.

One of them was Nesbit the poet.

"You were right," said Rhodes to Nesbit, "sorry about all the insults over the last five years, sport."

"It's okay," said the poet, "I made them into quatrains anyway."

It was a grand night, and it changed both our lives in the long run.

The strangler fig slide became the biggest theme park in the southern hemisphere after a long time in the darkness, and every night Rhodes would hold water slide competitions, attracting some incredible talent from all around the world.

As for me, I became one of the world's finest water slide racers, an acknowledged genius of the downhill swash. I started winning international titles only eighteen months after that night, and my own personal life improved a great deal to the point where I gave up cigarettes in mid-1997.

And I come back to the strangler fig on a regular basis, usually whenever I am in town and due to have dinner with my parents, who still doubt my life choices. I always like to let off a bit of steam pre-meal, so I drive through the rain and look

forward to seeing that great fig, full of people, Rhodes up the top of it directing events. He waves at me now, and I grin back at him. Then I look down at Leroy, my trusty slug, perched on my wrist like a waterproof watch, ready for a night of top-speed slide action.

I no longer vomit when I see Leroy. You get used to slugs, no matter how repulsive. Now I just feel a bit funny in my stomach, but I generally hold back the vomit.

I have tried to persuade him to cover himself up, though. It turned out that Rhodes' idea about a glove worked for me, but only got Leroy off side. He stopped glowing for a few months after I tried that, causing me to miss out on the Geneva five-hour endurance slide. I've since talked to him about wearing a cape, but he won't do it. Wriggles about terribly when I try to put one on. He doesn't like hoods, either. Or gowns. It doesn't matter how successful you get in life, sometimes your slug just won't listen to you on the subject of apparel.

I haven't mentioned robes to him yet, mind you. Maybe in the Spring . . .

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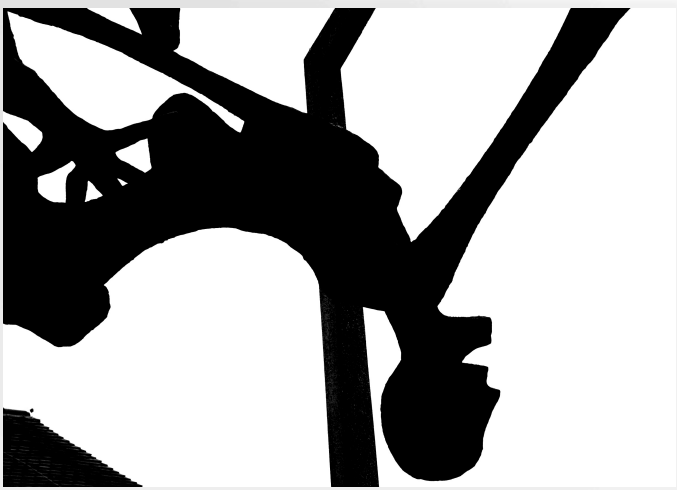
On the cover:

"ANGUISH"
Isabella Petty



ISABELLA PETTY is an aspiring writer and photographer, much of her work consisting of nature as well as the darker, twisted depths of the human mind. In 2011, she hosted a silent art auction for charity, where some of her own photography was displayed. With the help of the Colorado Springs art community she raised $1,000 for a family in Haiti. Isabella is currently living in Colorado Springs, preparing for college and spending time with her family. However, after college she plans to travel the world, finding inspiration for her writing and photography wherever it turns up.