



Cassingle: Five Stories
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Published: 2009

Categorie(s): Fiction, Short Stories

Tag(s): "creative commons" "short stories" "short fiction" "flash fiction"
"literary fiction" "twelve stories" "literary journals" mcsweeneys fence

Cassingle—a follow-up to 2006's *Single*—is a collection of previously published short stories. "The Guest" first appeared in *Fence* (Winter/Spring 2007); "July 4: Easter" appeared in the debut issue of *Twelve Stories* (readtwelvestories.com); "Nose" first appeared in *Bridge: Stories and Ideas* (Spring/Summer 2001); "The Adventures of Bad Badger"—my first published story—appeared in *McSweeney's* #3 (1999); and "The Arab Bank" was serialized in May 2009 during the Cannes Film Festival (jimhanas.com/thearabbank).

Shortly after this collection appeared in late 2009, it was reviewed in (of all places) Toronto's *Eye Weekly*, a paper-based publication. The reviewer, Brian Joseph Davis, wrote: "As for the future of publishing, it won't entirely look like Hanas' experiment in free, but it will look more like it than not. At five stories and 33 pages, *Cassingle* is aptly titled and rather witty. A combination of original works and stories that have appeared in the likes of *Fence* and *McSweeney's*, it is a good introduction to Hanas's perfectly designed, well-tuned and aerodynamic tales... . No matter the cut, this is writing that speaks American, in all its complexity. Help yourself to the free sample."

Months later, when Davis and his partner, Emily Schultz, were on the verge of launching an e-book imprint based on their Toronto-based literary site Joyland (backed by Canadian indie stalwart ECW Press), I was thrilled they asked me to submit something. I'm even more excited to announce that my full-length e-book story collection, *Why They Cried*, was released in October 2010 as this imprint's debut release. To purchase a copy, visit whytheycried.com. In the meantime, as Brian wrote last November, help yourself to the free sample. Thanks for reading.

Best,
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November 14, 2010
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THE GUEST

Kent arrived home from work to find his wife beating a boiling head of cabbage like it was the body of subdued mugger. She stood at the stove like a flamingo, the sole of one foot wedged against the opposite knee, one hand clamped tightly to her hip. In the other, she brandished a slotted spoon and slapped at the cabbage as it roiled in the rapids of a saucepan. She was vigilant but in no hurry. The danger—whatever it was—had passed.

Kiki wiggled in her car seat by the refrigerator, burbling in a language that appeared to have parts of speech but nevertheless failed to mean. It seemed diagrammable, this nonsense, although neither Kent nor Deana, his wife, knew where to begin. Sometimes they halted everything—as Kent did after sliding a hand around Deana's waist and kissing her on the ear—and ventured interpretations.

"Mommy make dinner, yum?" he said as he set his briefcase on the floor and crouched down to tickle the baby's cheeks and forehead. Deana, unimpressed, kept working the cabbage as Kent knelt on the linoleum and played a quick round of Agree with the Baby.

"Yees," he agreed. "That's right. That's right."

"Have you seen him today?" Kent asked, looking over his shoulder at his wife.

"No," she said, clubbing away. "But the Yellow Pages are missing."

Kent stood and looked down the hallway in the direction of the spare room.

"I think he's making a statement," Deana said.

"What kind of statement?"

"A negative statement," she said. "About me."

"Honey," Kent said, rising and hugging her from behind, poking her neck with his chin. "He's your friend, too, you know."

"That's what I thought," she said, her chest seizing beneath his arms. "But he hasn't come out at all. Not even to see the baby."

She pointed the spoon at the burbling, car-seated thing as if she were no longer sure it even was a baby.

"You need to talk to him," she said, her voice suddenly composed.

"I will," Kent said, although they both knew the moment had passed.

Todd had arrived on Sunday. His plane was late, and he and Kent had exchanged a series of messages over the airport intercom before discovering each other at Carousel 9. They had hugged and slapped one

another on the back, then dragged Todd's bags to short-term parking, where Kent asked how the trip had been.

"Fine," Todd said.

Todd did not look fine. He looked tired. He had not worked in months and had been staying with his parents in the Midwest, where all three of them—Todd, Kent, and Deana—had grown up.

Todd and Kent stopped at a café in the neighborhood and sat outside. They ordered drinks and talked about their lives. About how Kent was a new father, and Todd was thinking about looking for a new job, maybe, or a completely new career. He wasn't sure what he wanted to do, but this wasn't unusual.

"You'll figure it out," Kent said.

"I don't know," Todd sighed.

Kent suspected that Todd didn't want to figure it out, that he enjoyed letting indecision weigh on him like damp clothing.

Closing time approached and the restaurant's terrace evaporated around them. The Mexican bus boys hauled away the potted plants and the tables, and they retracted the oilcloth awning with a crank.

"But how *are* you?" Todd asked, as though he had been feigning interest before and it was now time to be serious. "What's it like having a family?"

"Great," Kent said, laughing "What's it like not having one?"

"I don't know," Todd said. "It's not like anything."

They swallowed the last of their drinks in silence at a lone table in the middle of the sidewalk, then returned to the apartment and lugged Todd's bags up the back steps and into the spare room.

And then he was gone. It was now Tuesday, and neither Kent nor Deana had seen any more evidence of their guest.

Like his wife, Kent was not sure what to make of this, although he didn't admit this to Deana as she finished preparing dinner and set out plates for them on the porch. He decided, instead, to act as though it made perfect sense. He would be the go-between, the peacemaker, even if he did think it was strange and, as Deana suspected, a statement.

Kent walked down the hall to the spare room. He raised his hand to knock but could not. The moment had passed. It was like failing to introduce yourself around early enough at a party. To do so now would be awkward.

He walked back through the kitchen to the porch. He gulped some wine.

"We're going to a baseball game," he said.

"Really?" Deana said.

"Tomorrow afternoon."

"Great," she said, forcing a smile as they both eased into their knives into plates of cabbage and curried chicken. "You're taking the day off?"

"I'm all caught up," Kent said. "How was your day?"

"Okay," Deana said, staring out past the corner store and the gas station to the fog rolling over the hills. "I think Kiki picked something up at the playground."

"Something like what?"

"She's been sneezing."

"Have you been sneezing?" Kent asked the baby, who sat in her car seat on the table between them.

Kiki babbled.

"How was work?" Kent asked.

"Alright," Deana said. "It was hard going back, but they got along."

"I had a hell of a day," Kent began.

"Kent," Deana said.

"But it's funny to watch everyone scramble. With the new guy, I mean."

"Kent."

"Especially Rich. Follows the guy around like a damned duck."

"Sweetie."

"What?"

"Do you think he's alright?"

"Rich?"

Deana rolled her eyes. "Todd," she said.

"I told you. We're going to the game."

"But you think he's alright?"

"I think so," Kent said, chasing a scrap of cabbage across his plate with a fork.

After dinner, Kent gave Kiki a bath. She burred on and on, insisting—telegraphically, as always—that her father join her in the tub. He complied, and the two sat babbling to each other in a tiny sea of suds and plastic fishes. Deana stood on the back porch and smoked cigarettes from the pack she kept hidden in one of her flower boxes, an indulgence she never allowed herself while in charge of the baby.

When Kent and Kiki dried off, the three reconvened in the bedroom to put the baby to bed. Deana slowly rocked Kiki in her arms while Kent

read out loud. It was the easiest way. It didn't matter what he read. He read from trade magazines and junk mail and books he randomly pulled from the shelf above the bed. Tonight he read from a copy of *Of Grammaratology* that Deana had acquired in college.

"You can't read that to the baby," Deana whispered as she rocked from foot to foot and patted Kiki's bald head.

"What?" Kent said. "She can't understand it. *I* can't understand it."

After her first day back at work—a day spent contemplating what statements were or were not being made against her—Deana didn't have the energy to fight. Kiki was asleep before Kent was through the footnotes on the first page.

Deana lay down on the bed and put the baby on her back beside her.

"Are you coming?" she asked.

"In a minute," Kent said, kissing both of them on their cheeks. "I've got a little work to do."

Kent went back through the kitchen to the porch. He retrieved the cigarettes from where Deana had hidden them and lit one off a candle that still burned on the table. He stood by the rail, looking out over the lights that dotted the hills. When he'd finished smoking, he ran water over the dishes in the sink and made sure the stove was off. On his way to bed, he saw that the light in the spare room was on. He pressed his ear to the door. He felt it with his hands, the way you're supposed to in a fire. He got on his knees and stared at the sliver of light that appeared under the door. He whispered Todd's name and the sliver went dark. Kent got up, crawled into bed beside his wife and his daughter, and immediately fell asleep.

Kent slept late. He watched as Deana got herself ready and went to pass Kiki off to Ginn, who arrived every morning at 8. Ginn was a bubbly student from the art school and too sweet to be believed. He didn't know where Deana had found her. There were ways women met women that he didn't know anything about.

After Deana left, he listened as Ginn prepared to take the baby for a walk. It was a big production. Ginn, who projected a childishness that Kent found painful, knew many more games than Agree with the Baby. She knew Sing to the Baby, Dance with the Baby, Dance for the Baby, Try to Explain Drum and Bass to the Baby, and the popular Confide in the Baby About Your Love Life, a round of which he happened to overhear this morning.

"You're lucky," Ginn was telling Kiki. "You're a lucky baby because babies don't deal with boys."

Kent felt a little guilty about not liking Ginn, in part because he knew that he didn't really dislike her. There was not a piece of furniture in the house that he had not imagined screwing her on top of or against. Her body, covered by shapeless sweaters and paint-stained peasant skirts, was made all the more lust-inspiring by this concealment. He constantly imagined how her heavy breasts might dangle like enormous raindrops as he took her from behind. As a precaution, he waited for Ginn and the baby to leave before getting out of bed.

After taking a shower, Kent got dressed in fan gear—jeans, a baseball cap, and a golf pullover—and approached the door of the guest room. He stood and listened, straining to detect signs of Todd. He heard the wind blowing through the drapes in the window on the other side of the door. He raised his hand and knocked lightly. He thought he heard the sound of someone rolling over in the room's large feather bed—the only piece of furniture in the room, which was otherwise used for storing abandoned projects and broken appliances—but he could not be sure. He knocked louder, which made the room seem quieter still.

"Todd," he said. "Todd. You want to go to a game?"

The game was a massacre. A waste of an afternoon.

Kent bought a single ticket in the lower deck. He sat amid a bachelor party being held in honor of a pimply-faced transit worker whose elders spat volumes of tobacco juice that flowed down the park's concrete risers, slowly and gruesomely, like a catastrophic mudslide. The sharp wind was made worse by the half gallon of beer that a melon-shaped toll booth attendant spilled across the entirety of Kent's row. The man bought everyone a round, by way of apology, but the cold beer only deepened the chill.

He returned home in a foul mood. He stalked through the living room, past Ginn and the baby, without even bothering to mentally contort the nanny into the usual series of positions. He went into the bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed. Deana would not be home for an hour. He pulled his beer-soaked sweater over his head and stretched out.

"How was the game?"

Kent woke up to find Deana standing over him.

"Is that beer? Wow, you really smell like beer."

"It was a spill," Kent said.

"Well, how was it? How was the game?"

"Good," Kent said. "Fun. We lost, but fun."

"Where's Todd?" she asked. She expected everything to be fixed.

"I don't know. In his room?"

Deana waited.

"Did he say anything about me?"

"About you?"

"Yeah."

"Like what?"

"Like, you know, about why he's avoiding me and the baby."

"He didn't mention it."

"Is he at least coming out for dinner?"

"I don't know."

Kent rose and paid Ginn for the day while Deana started on dinner. She was brutal with the preparations. Chipped fiestaware clinked in the sink and the wok she had bought at a Chinatown bazaar sang like a gong as she bounced it off the stove top.

"Honey," Kent said after Ginn had left. "Honey, listen."

"What!" Deana looked up from the cutting board where she was dissecting carrots with the concentration of a thrill killer.

"Todd didn't come out today," he said. "He didn't come to the game."

"What?"

"I went by myself. I haven't seen him or talked to him all day. If he's making a statement against you, it's a statement against me, too."

Deana fell into an exasperated pose and almost cut her thigh with the knife. A wave of tension broke across her brow, then crested again.

"Is he fucking crazy?"

"I would say he is distressed."

Deana took a whack at the carrots.

"He's leaving tomorrow," Kent said. "I'll drive him to the airport. You don't have to worry. He'll be gone."

Kent and Deana began their dinner silently, except for Kiki's incessant burbling.

Finally, Deana spoke.

"He must be depressed," she said. She had been thinking about it all this time. This was her considered opinion.

"He has had a hard time," Kent agreed. "With the job and with Elaine—how that turned out. It's been tough."

"Maybe it's been tough because he's depressed," Deana suggested, sticking to her diagnosis.

"We used to have fun."

"We did, didn't we?" Deana brightened at the thought.

"Sure we did," Kent said.

"When we first started dating and you two were in law school and he was staying on your couch? We used to drink coffee all night and laugh."

"He was funny."

"He *was* funny," Deana squealed. This realization made her happier than he'd seen her in days. "He was *so* funny."

"He's not dead," Kent said. "He might still be funny."

"Are we sure? He could be dead. We don't know."

Kent laughed.

"I saw the light go off last night," he said.

"Could be a short. Maybe he's not in there at all. Maybe he's been abducted."

"By aliens?"

"No, by gangbangers. Gangbangers have abducted our friend!"

"I'll call the police."

Deana laughed and gestured flamboyantly.

"Well, we can't pay the ransom," she said. "We've got an extra mouth to feed." She tickled the baby's nose. "At least Kiki would tell someone if we were abducted by gangbangers, wouldn't you?" she said.

"They wouldn't understand her, but she'd try. Wouldn't you?" Kent said, grabbing one of the child's tiny toes.

Kent and Deana had so much fun, they stayed on the porch past bath time. They laughed about their memories of Todd and finished the bottle of wine. They put the baby to bed and Deana retrieved the cigarettes from the flower box and blew smoke toward the hills. Kent pretended to be surprised but smoked a few himself before they stumbled into the living room and had sex between the couch and the coffee table.

They had forgotten all about Todd, wherever he was. As they lay beneath an afghan on the floor, Deana reminded Kent that he had to get up early to drive to the airport.

"I'm sure the gangbangers will drop him off," he laughed.

Suddenly, the baby monitor in the kitchen crackled.

"Yees," it said. "Yees."

Kent jumped from the floor, wrapped the afghan around his waist, and stumbled awkwardly down the hall. He entered the bedroom to find Todd standing over Kiki's crib.

His beard was overgrown and he was wearing the same clothes he'd worn at the airport. "Yees," he was saying "Yees." Deana appeared behind Kent in a towel.

"She's beautiful, you guys," Todd said, looking up at them glassy-eyed. "She looks just like you both. I see you both in there."

Deana entered the room and took Kiki in her arms. She rocked from foot to foot and turned so Todd could see the baby's face. They smiled at one another, Todd and the baby.

"Mind if I take a shower?" Todd asked.

"Go right ahead," Kent said.

Todd disappeared down the hallway and Kent fumbled with the alarm clock. Deana and Kiki lay down in the bed. Kent lay down beside them, and the entire family was asleep by the time Todd returned to the spare room and lay his damp body down on the cool sheets.

JULY 4: EASTER

Two years ago today our relationship was reborn, which is why we call it Easter. Or that's why Karen calls it Easter. I call it Easter because Karen does. It's not really Easter of course. It's the Fourth of July. It's Easter for me and Karen only.

Karen calls it Easter because it's the anniversary of our first acceptable date. Our first actual date occurred two days earlier, on July 2nd, but it didn't go well. I tried too hard, according to Karen. I relied heavily on long, well-rehearsed stories and she felt I wasn't listening. So after that first date—on what Karen (and therefore I) call Good Friday—our relationship died before it even began.

I crucified it, basically, by not listening.

The next day Karen slept with Doug, a guy from her work who was not particularly nice to her, but who was always just sort of there. That was two years ago yesterday. Holy Saturday. The day Karen slept with Doug.

The day after that, she gave me another chance.

This is our second Holy Week together and it has been difficult. But then it should be difficult, Karen reminds me, since it is how we honor the blessing of our relationship, which was given to us despite great odds—and my not listening—to deliver us from our solitary suffering.

Our observance began 47 days ago on May 18th. Our Mardi Gras. I cooked gumbo and did the dishes. Then I gave Karen a long back rub to prepare us for Lent, during which we vowed to deny ourselves the comforts of our relationship. I denied myself by sleeping on the couch, while Karen denied herself by going out almost every night with her friends Monica and Jessica—just like she was forced to do before our relationship brought us together. Sometimes she didn't come home at all, to give you some idea of her devotion.

The day after Mardi Gras, Ash Wednesday, Karen overslept—because of the Hurricanes I made, I think, and because Ash Wednesday fell on a Monday this year. When she finally woke up, she made a little cross on my forehead with ashes from one of the ashtrays she keeps hidden in the bathroom. She told me (like last year) that I should keep them there all day. I asked (like last year) if she would like me to make a cross of ashes on her forehead, but she said no, because it would make her eyes cross and everyone at her office would laugh at her. (This was prophetic—as Karen often is—since everyone at my office did laugh at me.)

And so our sacrifices continued, with me sleeping on the couch and Karen piously going to bars and movies and dance parties—with a brief reprieve on June 4th, the Feast of St. Peter's Chair, when Karen allowed me to cook, clean the dishes, mix more Hurricanes, give her another back rub, and sleep next to her, provided I remained on top of the comforter.

The problems didn't begin until Palm Sunday, which fell on a Friday this year. Palm fronds are hard to find this far north, and although I ordered two dozen from a florist in Honduras in what I thought would be plenty of time, the day came and I didn't have anything to put down in the foyer of our condo to honor Karen when she arrived home from work. I panicked a little, I admit, and plucked a few broad leaves off Karen's rubber plant, just so I would have something. I knew Karen would be disappointed because the leaves didn't extend down the hall, past the bathroom, and into the living room, like last year, and also because the fronds weren't technically fronds, but leaves I had plucked off her rubber plant. She was extremely disappointed. She questioned my faith. She prayed for me, and for our relationship, and then spent a long time out at a Bhangra party, atoning. I pledged to make the rest of Holy Week go smoothly.

As Maundy Thursday approached, I became anxious. I hadn't seen much of Karen since the rubber plant incident. She stayed out late on Holy Monday (a Saturday) and Holy Tuesday (last Sunday), and we only spoke for a moment on Holy Wednesday (Monday), when she explained to me that this year she would observe Holy Saturday by sleeping with a guy named Ron she had met at the Bhangra party, because Doug—who was always just sort of there—had in fact left town. Fortunately, I was too involved in the preparations for our last supper for all this to bother me much. I would need bread and wine, of course, and this peppermint balm Karen likes me to wash her feet with.

There was lots to do.

I ordered Middle Eastern food and bought a bottle of Argentinean wine that the clerk at the store recommended. I had everything set up for Karen's arrival when she called and said she was going to be late. Monica (or maybe Jessica) was having some sort of freak-out over Ryan, and although I barely knew these people, Karen said she would be home as soon as she could. She didn't come home until after nine, and she didn't seem as interested in the last supper as she was last year. She was quick with the pita (her body) and wine (her blood), and she wasn't impressed by the foot washing or the peppermint balm. She didn't even insist that I reenact Judas' betrayal by posting a naked picture of myself on my high

school reunion's webpage, like last year. Instead, she said I could betray her by cleaning up and leaving her alone while she went into the bedroom and talked to Ron for a long time.

Good Friday is a solemn day, of course, even when it falls two days before the Fourth of July. As is our newly established custom, we went camping on Karen's uncle's farm. I carried the equipment, to signify Karen's suffering, and all the way into the woods I was supposed to talk non-stop—talk about anything that came into my head—like I had two years ago. Sometimes I got out of breath, from the walking and the talking and the weight, but Karen prompted me to keep talking. Talking had been important enough to sacrifice our relationship, she reminded me, so there was no reason I shouldn't be able to keep it up all the way to the campsite. After the tent was set up, we built a fire and Karen declared silence—a whole night of silence—to commemorate our relationship, which I had just figuratively killed with my blather.

Karen forgive me, for I know not what I do.

In the morning, I packed up the tent, and Karen led us out of the woods. At home, she took a shower, then went to Ron's house to endure her final terrible temptation.

Now everything is set. I have hidden colored eggs and chocolate bunnies everywhere—chocolate bunnies that I have kept hidden in the back of the freezer since actual Easter, because it really is impossible to get them at any other time of the year. I saved some Peeps and some plastic grass too, to avoid last year's fiasco, when I thought it would be cute to observe the resurrection of our relationship with bottle rockets and sparklers. Karen did not think this was cute, so this year I have followed her instructions to the letter, which she has set out in detail in a spiral notebook.

This notebook contains all sorts of things: pictures of us together and smiling, and pictures of me, alone, sleeping. It contains the liturgical calendar for the next four years and instructions for observing the obligatory holidays. These run for pages in Karen's tiny, precise handwriting. I don't know where she finds the time.

I thumb through the notebook, forward into the future and backward into the past. The notebook has a picture of Boy George on the cover. It is older than our relationship. Much older.

It gets dark and then late. Karen does not call, but she will be here very soon—when it is time. She is later than she was three nights ago, and much, much later than last year. But she will be here. I know it. I have faith.

She will not forsake me.

NOSE

The sommelier's hand stalled in mid-air and hung there, frozen and limp, above the midpoint of the table, above the salt and the pepper, and above the single pink rose in the flat black vase. He looked at his hand as though it were a recently discovered artifact before slowly folding his forefinger back into his palm and returning his attention to the bottle of wine he had yet to open. A man of obvious composure and reserve, he seemed surprised by the action and by its discontinuation, as if he had only suddenly become aware of both.

He pulled the cork, presented it, and poured two glasses, all without looking up. He was understandably ashamed although the man, her date, understood.

It was striking.

The man (her date) reassured the spooked attendant with much friendly talk and extra thank-yous. If she excused herself, the man decided, he would make a point of formally pardoning the lapse.

He had been looking at it himself all night, at its perfectly formed, severish curve. At how it was not all diminished by the silver rectangular frames resting across it. It suggested royalty, although in an entirely non-specific way, lacking reference to any particular kingdom or people.

It was her outstanding quality.

She was not beautiful. Apart from this, her outstanding quality, she was plain. Her thick black hair was, maybe, a little too thick. Her pale skin was too pale, although she had made none of the typical compensations. Her clothes were not revealing. Her voice was not loud. Her gestures were in no way theatrical. She showed no signs of a struggle. She knew that people stared, the man—her date—could tell, although she didn't seem to know why. Maybe it was her hair.

Her only affectation was a complicated hair flip that involved thrusting her shoulders back and gathering her thick hair into a bundle, like a bath towel, and draping it—presenting it really—over her left shoulder. She performed this every two minutes or so. It had once been based, perhaps, on an actual experience; on seeing a photograph maybe in which she seemed particularly appealing to herself. The man considered the evolutionary value of such a procedure and did not doubt there was one, although he could not imagine what it might be.

They hadn't said twenty words all night. She had smiled and he had smiled. He had talked to the waiters and she had smiled. There wasn't anything to say. Her outstanding quality tolerated no space, no reasons

to talk. There was nothing to say that couldn't be said with shrugs and smiles and this sublimely articulated hair flip.

Her date stared over his glass. She smiled. He leaned forward on an elbow, and she continued smiling.

He set the glass on the table and leaned forward further still.

The smiling continued, but he could tell by the thrust of her shoulders that she was headed into another hair flip.

"Would you mind?" he asked.

She gathered her hair and placed it over her shoulder.

"Would you mind?" he managed again, helplessly watching as an exotic, trembling hand reached out across the table.

THE ADVENTURES OF BAD BADGER

They had no idea what he was talking about. No one ever did.

"C'mon. You know. He's a badger with a hat," he said, certain he was offering a decisive clue. "Wears dark glasses?"

His face was red and his eyes beat back and forth. His voice cracked with frustration. The two women at the bar looked at each other, shook their heads, and wordlessly made plans to move to a table.

Jones had always wanted a tattoo. It was only a matter of figuring out what he wanted a tattoo of. It was not to be taken lightly, he often explained to tattooed friends and acquaintances, after making clear his absolute willingness to get a tattoo, just as soon as he'd figured out of what. It had to be perfect, symbolically speaking. It had to cut to the core of his morally variegated belief system and drag to the surface some part of him he knew would never change, or at least meaningfully represent the structural impossibility of any such thing. They, the tattooed friends and acquaintances, had no idea what he was talking about. Even then.

He consulted a variety of reference works: Graves' *Greek Myths*, *Lives of the Saints* (in several competing editions), *The Complete Tarot*, *6 Weeks to Reading Japanese*, *Untying the Celtic Knot*, an illustrated history of Marvel Comics, and a seemingly exhaustive omnibus of real and proposed traffic signs issued by the Illinois DMV. Nothing. Every possibility he hit on was too specific to last or too general to be unique. More than once, he'd made an appointment to sit for the needle only to find that the Korean characters for "decay" or Dionysius emerging from the thigh of Zeus or even the old school Teutonic *Seyn* (under erasure, *naturellement*) were way old news in the tattoo world.

Then came Bad Badger.

The Adventures of Bad Badger appeared one day on the comics page, in between *The Wizard of Id* and *Beetle Bailey*. The strip's protagonist looked like you'd expect a cartoon badger to look. Imagine a mouse; then imagine Mickey Mouse. Note the mental processes in between, perform them on a badger (the crude etching in the deluxe color second edition of *Webster's New Twentieth Century Unabridged Dictionary*, or any comparable work, will serve), and you have the basic idea.

Bad Badger was otherwise unremarkable. His dark glasses were reminiscent of Steve Dallas and his dangling cigarette was pure Andy Capp. His adventures consisted mainly of his being tired and grouchy and nasty to other woodland creatures, whose difficult dialects suggested they might be characters from *Pogo*.

Jones wanted to be Bad Badger. He developed an entire cosmology around the character, as if he were some sort of tragic hero, like Oedipus or the Silver Surfer.

Slow-moving yet quick-witted.

Esoteric yet accessible on many levels.

Apodictic yet robustly *a posteriori*.

These were the beatitudes of Jones' peculiar religion.

Convinced that the badger perfectly summarized the human condition, Jones had his likeness injected into his left bicep in four glorious colors. It was perfect. At the tattoo parlor, every last one of patrons confessed, after extensive interrogation, that they'd never seen or even heard of Bad Badger.

A week later, Bad Badger was gone. *The Wizard of Id* and *Beetle Bailey* again shared a border, making room for an extra Cryptoquip at the bottom of the page. Jones tore up the paper that morning, and many mornings after, in frantic pursuit of his missing hero.

After a week with no relief, he called the paper. The explanation he got depended on who he talked to. The strip had been cancelled, the cartoonist—Bill something-or-other—had died or disappeared or quit drawing. Jones went to the library and looked through papers from other cities, but nothing.

"See?" he said, peeling back his sleeve so they could and squinting through the smoke that rose from the cigarette twisted into his lips.

The women stared blankly at the figure on his arm, shaking their heads. As they hustled their napkin-wrapped toddies to a far away four-top, his voice cracked into a crescendo.

Solipsistic yet radically transpersonal.

Unified yet totally torn asunder.

Cruel yet fair.

She had an interesting face, with smooth, pale skin and eyes that were disarmingly bright for being so brown. Her hair was short, artificially auburn, and wrapped in a formless scarf the color of eggplant.

She talked about her immigrant parents—they were Czech, which explained the face—and about how her father, a psychiatrist, had rejected Freud and her mother, in that order.

She talked about how her husband's cousin had taken people hostage in a trailer park in middle Indiana a few years back, and how it had not ended well. About how she had met her husband at art school in Milwaukee when they were both eighteen and how they had been married

after graduation at twenty-two and about the country and western band that played at their wedding. She didn't mention where he was now, while she was talking to strange men in a Chicago loft apartment lived in by another art school friend, who had in fact been her maid-of-honor. He could be anywhere.

She said she had drunk much too much the night before and had become depressed. Apocalyptically so. She wondered if he thought she had a problem.

He said he couldn't say.

"I have this fear," she whispered past the 120mm cigarette she held never far from her lips, "that just before we die it's not our whole lives that flash before our eyes, but only the parts we've tried to forget."

"It's so horrible," Jones said. "It must be true."

He had no idea what she was talking about. No one ever did.

THE ARAB BANK

It had been a beautiful spring in Cannes—the most beautiful Marco could remember. It had rolled in slowly and remained mild, even in the afternoons. At night the air embraced the bodies on the Croisette without conflict, gently blowing everyone's defenses away. Marco cruised the beaches in a pearl white Land Rover, punishing the speakers with music from Marseilles and Compton. It had been particularly easy this spring, and it had always been very, very easy.

Marco wasn't even seventeen when he discovered that if he tilted his shoulders just right, he could squeeze his body into the alcove between the Arab Bank and the Gucci store, just as he had learned to do in a dozen similar places along the Croisette. Thus arranged—mangled, really, in a contorted contrapposto—he could observe the users of the bank's ATM without himself being seen. Then, after a certain hour—when Campari and brazed goose had lulled most foreigners into a carefree stupor—he could emerge, as if from nowhere, and scare the foie gras out of them.

They never asked what he wanted. They were too terrified by the sudden appearance of a young, brown tough to even wonder as they handed over their withdrawals without a word. The authorities were no use. The Algerian paid well and the police considered the Arab Bank Surprise to be one of a thousand harmless operations aimed at levying an informal tax on tourism.

Marco had scared the foie gras out of Scandinavian newlyweds, snotty English businessmen, Persian playboys, and Americans of all kinds—including many among the army of publicists, critics, producers, directors, agents, stars, and hangers-on that invaded Cannes one week each spring. One year alone he had scared the foie gras out of Messrs. C____, T____, D____, P____, and a foppish companion of Mlle. O____, all of whom (save the companion) he had once idolized in the multiplexes outside Nice.

It came easily. Marco's Moroccan mother had conceived him during a fling (a professional encounter, he'd always suspected) with a man she insisted was a member of the Danish royal family, and his early appearance seemed to confirm this. His hair was white as milk, and his mother let it grow long and tangled—like a girl's. During festival season she dressed him in a soiled christening gown and together they trolled the outdoor cafes in the old part of town. She heaved a wheeled calliope up and down the uneven flagstones of the Rue Saint-Antoine, while

Marco—at her constant urging—presented his smudged face and filthy palm at table after table, accompanied by a weakly coughed "s'il vous plait."

Women, especially, smiled intensely at this display, as if they wanted even the busboys to notice how deeply they adored children of all classes. The waiters, meanwhile, abetted this kabuki, secure that Marco's mother would compensate them for the fact that the popular guidebooks warned against tipping as though it were a serious crime. Marco's neediness was in great demand, and his small, shell-like hands could barely handle the volume.

As puberty approached, however, Marco began to resemble his mother. His hair became dark. His skin ripened to a deep olive. There was an awkward stage—which he endured stoically, keeping to himself in the housing projects between Nice and Cannes—before he emerged a formidable young man. He was short, but he was strong—an attribute helped along by long days spent hoisting terra cotta tiles up the sides of hotel construction sites, which is where he came to the attention of the Algerian.

Marco already knew of the Algerian, of course. Everyone did. The man had been his mother's protector during their panhandling days and perhaps, Marco knew, at the moment of his conception. The villa where the Algerian lived had once belonged to the English author Somerset Maugham, according to local lore, while in person he resembled the squat, silver-haired philosopher Jacques Derrida, at least according to a picture of the latter that had once appeared in *Le Monde*. (The Algerian, by contrast, never allowed himself to be photographed.)

Accompanied by an enormous Belgian, the Algerian approached Marco while he was working at the Hotel Carlton. It was lunchtime, and Marco was crouched down with his crew by the service entrance, smoking cigarettes and cursing. The Algerian walked up to him like he'd known him his entire life, as he may in fact have, and demanded his name.

Marco stood and answered.

"Come," the Algerian said.

Marco followed the man and his bodyguard through the narrow streets to an alley behind the Hotel Martinez. They passed through an unmarked door and into the kitchen of the hotel. The chef, an anxious Parisian whose cheeks turned purple in the presence of steam, greeted them enthusiastically and waved them to a table arranged between the service bar and the utility sink.

"How would you like to eat lunch here every day?" the Algerian asked as Marco sat in one of the two chairs the bodyguard plucked away from the table. Marco liked it. He and the Algerian enjoyed a lunch of strong coffee and mussels, all attended to by the chef himself.

The hotel needed a helper, the Algerian explained, but first Marco would need new clothes. Marco braced for the news that he would have to stuff himself into a stiff, burgundy vest—like those worn by the bellhops who manned the circular driveways along the Croisette. The Algerian explained that he would not be an official employee, however, and therefore wouldn't have to dress like one.

The bodyguard stepped forward and produced a roll of bills. He peeled off four 500-franc notes and tucked them under Marco's saucer. Then he fished inside his coat and produced a slender plastic brick half the size of a cigar box. Recognizing it as some sort of phone, Marco slid his hand under the nylon strap that ran its length and held it to his ear.

"Go shopping," the Algerian said. "The concierge will give you a room and a car. Enjoy yourself. Order room service. We'll call."

Marco nodded.

"Be ready," the Algerian said.

After that first meeting, Marco returned to the Martinez a new man. He bought two pairs of crisp, dark blue jeans, both several sizes too big, and a belt to cinch them around his narrow hips. He bought an undershirt with the Gucci logo splashed across the front and a white dress shirt with no collar. Inside the Gucci dressing room—for all the nights he had spent lying in wait outside, he'd never been inside—he slipped into the undershirt and one of the pairs of jeans, letting the legs bunch around the tops of his paint-splattered work boots.

At the hotel, he was greeted by the concierge, who ordered an eager bellboy to show him to his room. He relaxed by the pool and haunted the bars until morning. He lounged at the Plage du Martinez, ate steak frites in his room past midnight, and was never presented with a bill. Finally, one evening—while Marco was letting an Italian widow tweak one of his ropey triceps at the piano bar—the giant brick buzzed and wiggled, slaloming between their drinks like a wind-up toy.

It was a woman.

"Where are you?"

"What?" Marco responded.

"Where are you? I'm waiting."

"Who is this?"

"It's Sylvie," the woman said. "You are supposed to be here."

"Where?"

The woman spat into the phone.

"Alright, alright," Marco said. "Where are you?"

"Antibes."

"I'll come," he said.

When he arrived at the Hotel du Cap, Sylvie was out front, waiting in the darkness alongside the Boulevard JFK. She was smoking a cigarette, which she carelessly let slip from her fingers as he unlocked the passenger-side door.

"You are the latest?" she asked.

Marco shrugged.

"No better than the last," she sniffed. "Where were you?"

"No one told me," he said.

"Stupid," she said, although she didn't mean only him. Sylvie seemed to think everything was stupid, a fact she punctuated with a derisive laugh released in tortured bursts, like the squawk of a macaw.

"What is this ridiculous car?" she demanded as her laugh rattled through its interior.

"A Land Rover," Marco said.

"What is this music?"

"Gangsta rap."

"It's terrible," she said, switching off the stereo.

Sylvie was the most beautiful prostitute Marco had ever seen. The American models on the beach, with their cornsilk hair and distorted breasts, looked more like prostitutes than she ever could. Beneath her dark brows, she had the cheekbones of a fashion model, and in profile (as Marco saw her from the driver's seat) she looked like Nefertiti herself.

But despite her beauty, she oozed unpleasantness. She told Marco she was from Ankara, that "Sylvie" was her professional name, and that she would never ever tell him her real one—a promise she made good on even after hundreds of spare mornings spent relaxing her long, salty limbs in Marco's bed at the Martinez. Customers sent for her and returned her, but sometimes Marco would have to retrieve her, she explained, although she didn't explain why he'd had to retrieve her tonight.

When they arrived at the Martinez, he asked if he should walk her in.

"Of course," she smirked, stinging him with her laugh. "You have nothing to fear. The Algerian is king here, and you are his prince."

Marco quickly familiarized himself with the operations orchestrated by the Algerian's organization. He shuttled Sylvie and her colleagues to appointments and couriered hashish, cocaine, and Ecstasy to the after-hour parties that flourished all summer long from Monaco to St.-Tropez. He collected tribute from the concierges, each of whom served as the ringleader of operations inside his own hotel. He oversaw an army of North African urchins who could slip, undetected, into luxury suites and rented villas and pick them clean as efficiently as schools of piranha.

Marco shaved his head and pierced his ears. He grew a goatee and fussed over it. He had a bust of Queen Nefertiti tattooed on his chest as clumsy tribute to Sylvie's ill temper. He bought a Rolex, a platinum chain, and a ring shaped like a crown. He became a fixture at the Martinez and the Majestic and the Carlton, where he mixed with the clientele, providing them with harmless international flavor—at least until they stayed too late at the lounge or he encountered them at the Arab Bank, a ruse in which he still indulged out of nostalgia.

Americans made particularly satisfying targets for such idle scams, which—like the Arab Bank Surprise—often required little more than the suggestion of violence or scandal. Not only were Americans easily snared in their own traps, they were ignorant and proud of their ignorance. They spoke loudly and only ever in English. They lacked the basic manners of a houseguest and were easily put on the defensive. Their patriotism, to which they frequently resorted, was absurd.

Marco rarely saw the Algerian. Instead he dealt with Ludolf, the bodyguard who had been present at that first meeting at the Hotel Martinez. He turned out to be pleasant; not nearly as intimidating as his silence and size had first suggested. He had a weakness for sweets, in fact, and he and Marco met each Thursday afternoon at the ice cream shop on the promenade, before it had even opened for business.

The procedure was to buy tickets before ordering—one per scoop—but Ludolf always had an unlimited supply hidden in the pockets of his gigantic suits. He sampled the latest flavors and quizzed the girls behind the counter about the ingredients. Then he and Marco would retire to the concrete barrier that separated the Croisette from the beach and talk business while Ludolf perspired through the shoulders of yet another linen jacket. They got along, in a brotherly sort of way, and Ludolf was the first to comment on Marco's transformation.

"Who dresses like this?" he said at one of their early meetings. "You look ridiculous."

Marco was wearing a yellow bandana like a crown, the two spare ends flopping around his eyebrows like limp rabbit's ears. He also wore a blue flannel shirt, buttoned straight to the top, that looked stifling for the time of the year.

"They dress like this in Los Angeles."

"In Los Angeles? In Marseilles maybe. When have you been to Los Angeles?" Ludolf asked.

"Never."

"I have. I didn't see anyone dress like this."

"They dress like this in South Central Los Angeles," Marco said. "S_____ dresses like this."

"You look like French Vanilla Ice." Ludolf laughed so hard he almost dropped his cone. "And isn't S_____ dead?" he asked.

"Maybe," Marco admitted.

It was at these weekly meetings that Ludolf and Marco exchanged instructions and cash, and it was at this meeting—ten years after their first encounter behind the Hotel Carlton—that Ludolf told Marco to stay out of sight. Something had gone wrong. It would be better if Marco didn't know, he insisted. He gave Marco the key to a room at the Majestic and told him to go there and wait.

The tub fit Marco's body snugly, like the cool granite between the Arab Bank and the Gucci store. The familiarity washed over him as hot water spilled from the faucet and crashed between his feet. The phone by the sink rang. He hauled himself upright and answered. It was the concierge. Men had come asking about him, he was told. He would be safe if he stayed off the Croisette. Marco hung up, raked a hand across his scalp and considered shaving. He pulled the vanity mirror to the length of its expandable helix and inspected the dark hairs that crept from his nostrils like spiders legs. He wrapped himself in one of two complimentary robes that hung from the bathroom door and walked into the other room.

He flipped a switch by the nightstand and the blinds rolled skyward, accompanied by a motorized hum. The lights from the pool and the neon sign high above it—"MAJESTIC," it said—threw blue shadows across the bedspread and turned the salmon carpet a rancid orange. He retrieved a bottle of Jack Daniels and a half-empty can of Coke Light from the honor bar, twisted the cap off the bottle, poured the whiskey into the can, then sat by the window and lit a cigarette.

It had been four days since Ludolf told him to stay out of sight, and past the pool, across the Croisette, Marco could make out the lights outside the Palais des Festivals. Searchlights swept the horizon. Flashbulbs winked like fireflies. It was the night of the Grand Prix. *The B_____ of L_____* was favored to win the Palm D'Or and the papers reported that Mlle. B_____ would attend, accompanied by Messr. L_____ and his adopted aboriginal children. Mlle. S_____, meanwhile had been seen squiring a mysterious lady, whom she had allegedly met in rehab, in the vicinity of the Noga Hilton. It would be a chaotic scrum with everyone—the players, the press, and the locals—jockeying for position. There would be unprotected vanity everywhere. Maybe he could venture out for awhile, Marco thought. For an hour. Like Sylvie had said years earlier: the Algerian was king and he was his prince.

Marco pulled on the jeans and the Laker's jersey he'd been wearing since his last meeting with Ludolf. As a nod to caution, he put on a baseball cap promoting *The B_____ of L_____* he had found in the closet, instead of his trademark yellow bandana. He considered himself in the mirror, then headed downstairs.

The bar at the Majestic was in full swing. The doors bordering the patio were open wide and crowds streamed in from the Palais. The cave-like lounge was separated from the lobby by a few tiers of carpeted steps. Inside, it was a black and red maze of tightly-spaced two-tops and conversation pits created from the juxtaposition of love seats, ebony side tables, and severe but comfortable wingback chairs. Marco made his way to the bar and took a stool near the far end. To his right, three women huddled in a triangular formation. They were here too early. To his left sat a man, an American, stranded on a lone corner stool—cut off from the mainland.

Marco winked at the bartender and sized the man up. He was past forty yet uncommonly good-looking. His hair was a perfect silver that seemed to both verify and complement the strength bonded into his jaw. It took Marco several seconds to realize that this was in fact Monsieur F_____, an American actor well-known for playing conflicted anti-heroes and charming bachelors, frequently in the same person. Marco could't believe his luck. Celebrities, like children and Americans, were defenseless against almost any scheme. They were out of place in a strange land, Fame, in which they were expected to appear entirely at home—an effect they accomplished by ignoring their instincts altogether. Having once studied them in the multiplexes outside Nice, Marco

had spent years studying them in settings like this and had familiarized himself with their defects.

The actor kept his eyes glued to the mirror behind the bar. Marco had often dreamed of encountering Monsieur F_____—either at the Arab Bank or the Hotel Martinez. In his movies, he projected a carefree worldliness that Marco knew to be a facade. The actor avoided looking at Marco, even out of the corner of his eye, as though the two were separated—not by inches—but by a thin, opaque wall.

He was dying to talk.

There was an art to setting the stakes. Americans were rarely capable of the French required to order a second glass of rosé, let alone to persuade irritable gendarmes to pursue a complaint they were not interested in pursuing. If the stakes were set just right, however, they wouldn't even try. They would be happy to escape at all.

"You from L.A.?" Marco asked abruptly.

"Yes," the man said, shooting Marco the sidelong glance for which he had once been named "Sexiest Man Alive."

Marco was patient. He swapped drinks and rhapsodized about France and the French. He panted about the sans souci lifestyle in a way that flattered them both—two rogues resting between conquests.

"How do you find Cannes?" Marco asked.

"Fine," his man coughed. "Different from Italy."

"Different from everywhere," Marco said, lighting a cigarette with a flourish.

"I suppose that's true," the man laughed. "The beaches are nice. And the view."

"But of course it's true," Marco said. "Look at all the people from L.A. and tell me this is not the center of the universe."

The actor said he was tired of Cannes, because of these people. The phonies. He said he wouldn't be back, but they always said that. The actor excused himself, Marco followed, and soon they were snorting lines of cocaine off the bidet in the men's room while the attendant turned his eyes politely to the ceiling.

Back at the bar, the actor became loud. The bartender winked, knowing how pliable Marco's targets became once they had conspired with him. Marco surveyed the room and saw that it had become cramped. At the end of the bar he spotted Sylvie. She caught his eye but didn't wave. Marco nudged the actor and leaned close to his ear. He pointed to Sylvie, who knew full well she was being pointed at.

"You want to fuck her?" Marco asked. "You want to sniff cocaine off her ass?" Marco knew the actor would be shocked, at least by the suddenness—if not by the frankness—of this question. It was his way of snapping away the refuge from L.A. and the phonies that he had so briefly provided.

"You want to put it between her tits?"

After years of experience, Marco knew, within a few degrees of certainty, what would happen next. The actor might not be shocked at all by Marco's suggestion. He might, instead, ask how much such a thing would cost. If so, Marco named a price, collected, and vanished. If the man decided it was up to him to complete the transaction and approached Sylvie directly, he would earn a slap and a rough escort from the knowing bartender.

Or he might get caught up in the moment and take Marco's question as hypothetical—as mere locker room talk—and advance his own descriptions of what he would like to do and where he would like to put it. Such a man had no intention of paying for anything. He was keeping up appearances and would be shocked when Marco took offense at *his* depravity and unleashed a stream of insults that attracted the attention of the entire room. The man's face would turn pale as he felt the entire bar—and, it seemed, an entire country—turn against him. Observed in his perversity, self-consciousness would press on him like a stone. Marco would let it weigh there for the right number of moments before suggesting a one-time payment that would set everything straight. A man in such a situation, presented with an escape from an inescapable situation, would turn his wallet inside out with gladness. Later, he would relate the whole thing to friends back home—at a wrap party or maybe even on a late night talk show—and laugh nervously about how he had stumbled upon one of those awkward cultural differences.

Finally, there was the possibility that the man would say no, he did not want to put it between Sylvie's tits or sniff cocaine off her ass. That is what the actor said, and Marco knew he was lying. "You do not think she is beautiful?" Marco asked, his voice cracking into a shrill arc. "You deny that the women of France are the most beautiful, most desirable women in the world. *Tout le monde?!?*"

The actor did not turn pale immediately, but panic glowed inside him. One out of ten men in this situation got up and left. Marco let them go, a reward for having resisted—on this single occasion—their depravity. The rest, like Marco's actor, tried to reason. He attempted to explain that of course French women were beautiful and, yes, France was

unquestionably beautiful; he just wasn't interested in what Marco proposed. But Marco would not be consoled. He pounded on the bar and knocked over his stool. The women to their right turned and looked at the actor and suddenly realized who he was, while the actor put his finger to his lips and tried to quiet Marco as he imagined that the paparazzi would arrive at such a spectacle in an instant. Behind them the crowd parted and the music died. But while Marco expected to see cameras, coming to claim his mark, instead he saw Ludolf, who grabbed Marco with his giant paws—sticky with fudge and rainbow sprinkles—and hustled him through the crowd, onto the patio, and out to the hotel's manicured driveway.

"I told you to wait," Ludolf mumbled as they broke into the night air, flashbulbs popping like firecrackers behind them. Ludolf's beefy arm hung over Marco's shoulder, pushing the bill of the baseball cap down over his eyes. Marco stumbled along until he found himself tripping on cobblestones and, at last, being pressed into the passenger seat of his own Land Rover. The bodyguard circled to the driver's side and tossed his linen jacket past the steering wheel and told Marco to cover his face.

"You couldn't wait."

Marco turned to see the Algerian in the backseat, shaking his head like a disappointed father.

"Wait for what?" Marco asked.

Ludolf plucked a tabloid off the dashboard and slapped it on Marco's lap. Marco read the story, in which a woman described being mugged by someone who sounded very much like Marco. Ludolf put the car in reverse and poked a finger at the page, drawing his attention to the crude sketch that captured Marco perfectly—bandana, bunny ears, and all.

"I didn't know she was anyone," Marco said as Ludolf steered the Land Rover onto the Croisette. He recognized the picture of the woman in the paper from earlier in the week, from between the Arab Bank and the Gucci store. It had been easy, like always. She dropped her purse and ran.

"She's Mlle. S_____ 's girlfriend, from rehab," Ludolf said. "Now they want a picture of you."

"People ask me why I never allow myself to be photographed," the Algerian said as Marco slumped down in his seat and pulled Ludolf's jacket over his eyes, breathing through his mouth to avoid the scent of sea air and sweat. "It isn't to avoid detection. The police know where I am. They come by and I give them lunch. I serve champagne."

Ludolf navigated the car east on the Croisette, headed toward the Martinez amid the dense festival week traffic of Citroens, mopeds, and limousines.

"I stay out of sight because it's part of the unspoken rules," the Algerian said. "Some people see and some are seen. Which is better? Both are good. But one can't be both. None of us can."

Ludolf turned off the Croisette onto the Rue Latour Maubourg and veered down the alley behind the Martinez where the Algerian had first treated Marco to lunch. Marco pulled Ludolf's coat away from his face in time to see a flashbulb explode in his eyes, as bright as a thousand neon signs. The hair-dryer purr of a moped engine raced and Marco staggered out of the car and tried to give chase, but it was no use. He heard Sylvie's laugh and made out the knots in her long spine as she sped away, her arms laced around the chest of an unseen paparazzo.

Marco cursed and walked back toward the Land Rover. As he approached, it rolled away. He walked faster, but Ludolf accelerated. He ran, and the car went faster still until it turned the corner and disappeared. Out of breath, Marco put his hands on his knees and gulped at the damp evening air.

From the same author on Feedbacks

Single: Two Stories (2006)

"Single" contains two previously published short stories: "Miss Tennessee" and "The Cryerer," which first appeared in *The Land-Grant College Review* and *One Story*, respectively. Both appear in "Why They Cried," my full-length story collection, now available as a Joyland eBook from ECW Press. Enjoy the sample and visit whytheycried.com for more information about the collection.



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