
HOOCHIE
COOCHIE
• A COLLECTION OF HUMOROUS MICRO FICTION •
ez

Ellipsis Zine #13

Hoochie Coochie

Ellipsis Zine #13 Hoochie Coochie

© 2023 Steve Campbell
Cover photography by Keenan Constance via unsplash.com

All rights reserved
No part of this publication may be copied or reproduced, stored in retrieval systems or transmitted in any form or by any means - electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the publishers. All the stories included within this publication have been reproduced with the knowledge and prior consent of the authors concerned, and no responsibility is accepted by the publisher for infringement of copyright or otherwise arising from the contents of this publication. Whilst every attempt has been made to ensure accuracy in compiling this publication, the publisher cannot accept responsibility for any inaccuracies, omissions or otherwise since compilation.

Contents

08 **Mama Says Swipe** Left by Elizabeth Collis

10 **In the Dark** by Fiona McKay

11 **The Last Act** by Christine H. Chen

12 **Writers as Lovers** by Kay Rae Chomic

13 **Christmas Eve** by Diane Simmons

15 **How it Tastes** by Rebecca Douglas

16 **Kintsugi** by Emma Philips

18 **Atomic Instructions** by Zary Fekete

19 **Nocturnal Animals** by John Holmes

21 **Love is Blind** by Samuel Edwards

22 **Interview to a Plastic Bottle** by Eleonora Balsano

24 **Once Upon a Lamina Propria** by T. L. Ransome

26 **Hoochie Coochie** by Sarah Royston

28 **A Nice Piece of Cherry Cake** by Bronwen Griffiths

30 **The Spiralling Cost of Visualisations** by Slawka G. Scarso

32 **Mr. Baxter's Post-Probation Resolutions** by Maggie Iribarne

35 **The Séance** by Debra Williams

37 **Navigating Certainty** by Kim Murdock

39 **CONSIDERING AN APPLICATION TO THE CIVIL SERVICE: Job 55390 - Head of Agile Delivery** by Emily Macdonald

41 **Missing in Action** by Allan Miller

43 **Dad's Rules for the Urinal** by Hannan

45 **The Headline Writer's Last Day** by Karen Jones

47 **Body Parts** by Catherine O'Brien

50 **Creation** by John Holland

52 **The Good Boy** by Michael Conley

54 **Missive from the Department** by Sarah Lewis

56 **The End of My Crime Fighting Partnership with John Popper of Blues Traveler** by Keith J. Powell

57 **Boudicca Has a Spot of Bother** by Jane Broughton

59 **Saturday Job** by Rebecca Field

"That's what you do? Go right when you like him?"

"Yeah. Left when you're not interested."

Mama says swipe left. "He looks mopey, like he lost his cat. Is this the way to find a husband?"

"Boyfriend. Yeah, everyone does it this way now. It's normal."

Mama brings two fingers to her lips like she's really considering it, then says swipe left. "This one ran over his cat by mistake. Car too fancy. You choose a boyfriend from a photo?"

"And the info they give you. You go on a date, several dates, see if you like each other."

Mama says swipe left, pokes my arm with her fingers. "That one strangled his cat. Honey, he looks dangerous, makes me nervous. This is no way to find a husband, girl."

"Boyfriend, date. It's no different from the matchmaker putting you and Papa together. It's just online now, and faster and I do the choosing, not my family."

"Nothing wrong with matchmaking. Family knows best. Think of the beautiful marriage your father and I have, twenty-eight years. We grew to love each other."

“Humph.”

“Let’s see.” Mama wrinkles her nose, says swipe left. “He’s allergic to cats. Look at his red nose and small eyes and what’s with the orange beanie?”

“He’s outdoors in the snow, he’s just cold. But you’re right, doesn’t look very healthy. Look, here’s one with a cat!”

Mama says swipe left, narrows her eyes like she knows. She knows. “This one would love his cat more than you. An Abyssinian cat, eh? It would suck all the attention out of him. Here, give me the phone.”

“Wait, he’s good-looking—hey, give it back!”

Mama swipes left, and left and left, the screen light sparking in her eyes, her gaze flicking. That focus—a kitten watching a swinging toy, one paw raised to swat, ready to pounce.

In the Dark

by Fiona McKay

He couldn't find his trousers. Knowing they were there somewhere, he stretched out a hand in the all-encompassing dark. There was fabric under his hand. Not surprising, but silky. Utterly the wrong type. He inched his fingers away from his naked body, rustling and rummaging as silently as possible. Hoping the quiet jangle of his car keys would lead him to salvation.

His hand met a viscous blob and he flinched away, jostling something that clinked, then rattled, then flowed. Cooling coffee poured down his bare leg, which kicked out, opening the door, spilling clothes, croissant crumbs and apricot jam onto the bedroom carpet.

Downstairs, the voices paused.

If only the back of this wardrobe led to Narnia, he thought, pushing past the faux-fur jacket she'd been wearing when they met. Nothing but plasterboard, echoing under his fists.

He made one last frantic search but her silky robe slid off their tangled clothes, making a sled of the breakfast tray; it careered out the wardrobe door and landed against the leg of the bed, smashing the coffee pot into glassy pieces.

Her husband would definitely have heard it now.

The Last Act

by Christine H. Chen

The third show was Han and Yang Djembe Drums & Proots by a father and son duo. Both appeared barefoot, wearing white bathrobes. Hands flapping on djembe drums, they circled each other, bopping their heads, strings of shells clinking like keys in a pocket. The beats accelerated, then stopped. Han let out a fart, Yang followed suit with a bigger one. Father and son trumpeted gas one after the other, their symphony popping and thumping to the explosive laughter of the audience. Father and son bowed, fist-bumped each other. Han winked at his future ex-wife, crimson-faced and pinched-lipped on the first row.

Writers as Lovers

by Kay Rae Chomic

Two ex-lovers, also writers, bumped into each other (literally) on 42nd Street.

"It's you," she said.

"No, it snot," he said.

"Still not funny."

"Your hair looks like a tumbleweed."

"Have you quit working out?"

"My guess is you had eggs sunny side up for breakfast."

She buttoned the cardigan over her shelf of breasts. "Check the New Yorker this fall for my short story."

"My novel's being published by Doubleday," he said.

"Miss you," she said as the sun poked his eyes.

"Miss you, too."

All lies.

Christmas Eve

by Diane Simmons

'We used to be a normal family until Donna introduced us to garlic bread,' Dad says.

I laugh along, act like I think it's funny. But it's not. This is 1991, for God's sake. Food's moved on.

My parents and brother hover round my dining room table clutching their plates, looking lost. Mum's the first to select something – she chooses a mushroom vol-au-vent, prods it, gives it a sniff. Obviously reassured, she puts it on her plate. After a tense few minutes, a slice of Brie is eventually risked along with a few salad bits. Dad and Gary watch her carefully, then follow her example – they're obviously treating her like some kind of royal food taster.

I begin to relax and then I hear Gary chuckling. Grinning, he picks up a samosa and mimics throwing it across the room like a boomerang.

I glare at him. 'My carpet…'

He laughs but puts the samosa back. 'What the hell is it, anyway?' he asks.

'It's an Indian pastry,' I say. 'It's spicy. Like curry.' I've no idea why I'm bothering to explain – the only curry he's ever eaten is a Vesta.

He shrugs, bites on a piece of Iceberg lettuce, shivers as if it's actually made of ice and goes off to switch on the telly. I pile my plate with the neglected foods: crunchy falafels I spent ages perfecting, a chunk of tortilla that looks almost as good as the one I ate in Madrid, a hunk of garlic bread.

Dad stares at me as I eat. 'Did you make a pudding, love?'

I look at his abandoned plate and go through to the kitchen to get the sponge cake I made yesterday. When they see it, they ooh and aah like it's a three-tiered gateau. As they shove it in their faces, comment on how moist it is, I smile, think about telling them that the cake is made with grated carrot and courgette, that the topping's main ingredient is cream cheese. But decide against it.

At least for now.

How it Tastes

by Rebecca Douglas

'In this drink...' the bartender says in his husky Spanish accent, setting down the brandy glass with a flourish.

You gaze around the hip Little Collins Street bar, low-lit and brimming with huddles of people. No one gives a hoot what you're drinking and that you're alone while doing it.

'In this drink,' he repeats. '... is our Brazilian brandy, distilled from Amazonian camu camu berry and maracuya fruit and the warm tears of the San Pedro waterfall; mixed into orange juice of the purest disposition before the inevitable savage pang of betrayal; the bitters of a solitary life endured surrounded by sycophants and false friends; agave syrup of a high hunger that begins in sweet ecstasy and then shreds your guts in the swiftest reversal; a gin of corporate rigidity and glacial efficiency; a cask whisky reminiscent of Scottish dock worker oppression and violent, radical street protests; all swirling around a champagne depicting an effervescent utopia of succulent-covered skyscrapers and altruistic and enigmatic inhabitants morphing into a puce wasteland of carcinogenic smoke, disfigured foliage, smouldering corpses and infinite nihilism. And a twist of lemon.'

'That's nice,' you say. 'But I ordered a Coke.'

Kintsugi

by Emma Philips

When grandad fell backwards through the living room door, taking out nan's prized Yucca and crashing into the sideboard, knocking the wings off her beloved Hummel, I told him about the ancient Japanese art of Kintsugi. Grandad said a plant was one thing; he could probably get off the hook with a bunch of flowers and a quick trip to B&Q for a replacement but the Hummel was another thing entirely, nan loved that angel with the part of her heart she reserved for Phil Collins and the dog, so unless I could cast another from the liquid gold I was banging on about, he might as well commit hara-kiri. Then he pulled himself up and started swearing as he searched the drawers for glue.

Meanwhile, I looked for the missing wing tips and decided that if we used grandad's model paint and a tube of Bostik, we could do this, especially if we likened the angel to Uncle Bertie, who was nan's favourite brother although he was always in bother. I would use my winning smile and tell her it had flown too close to the sun, but luckily grandad's repairs had left the figurine with a permanent shimmer of daylight in its feathers. "She'll never buy it", grandad said as he scanned eBay for a copy, "it'd have to be identical; listen for nan's key in

the lock and brace yourself for the atom bomb."

That's what stands us apart from the Japanese, I thought. We're forever smashing stuff and moving on, but if we just picked up the pieces and put them back together, we might learn to view things differently. With Kintsugi, maybe nan would come home and see that grandad has the Midas touch, instead of always claiming he has butterfingers.

Atomic Instructions

by Zary Fekete

David knew he didn't have a lot of time. The nuclear explosion had just lit up the lake on the opposite side from where he was sitting. He sighed. His stocking cap and scarf would need to come off before they burst into flames.

He hopped to his feet and immediately ran, leaving the lake shore, stripping off his fall clothing until only his tracksuit was left. He left his teddy bear behind... he wouldn't need it. His training reminded him to keep the heat from behind centered on his head and shoulders. That way he could be assured he wouldn't go blind from the blast light which was already gathering in his peripheral vision.

There were several other children who were also already running, but he doubted they make it to the blast doors. The personalities of the survivors might help to describe how the upcoming years of underground life would be if they made it past the fail-safe line. Susie was trying to bring her schoolbag with her. *Directive #33: Bring only what you need*. Mortimer was holding his cat. *Directive #12: No pets*. Tonya was the only one who he thought might have a chance. She was still holding *her* cat but he knew that she had studied the fallout instructions and she had always been hungrier than the other children. *Directive #10: You are allowed one snack*.

Nocturnal Animals

by John Holmes

A cold wind blows pounding rain against the window. Metal hits metal, rhythmically, like an alarm clock ticking.

The first sheep suddenly crashes straight into the hedge. Using power, associated with larger animals, it quickly smashes its way through into the neighbouring wild meadow. Fearfully, it looks back to check if the wolf is still on its tail.

A smaller sheep runs desperately up to the gap, jumps, but catches its forelegs on the sharp branches. Trapped and bleeding, its incessant bleating disturbs the flock behind.

Now all the sheep are pushing and barging. Some of them rush towards the narrow gap in the hedge, smacking into the little one's newly coloured red fleece.

The farmer's dog sails over its pen wall and races towards the four legged frenzy. The barking adds to the chaos and desperation.

A siren starts blaring in one of the farmhouse bedrooms. The hallway lights up and a searchlight stretches aggressively across the muddy yard. The farmer throws opens the front door, loudly whistles his dog and reaches for the keys to his gun cabinet.

The sky darkens and a rumble of thunder approaches

from the distance. For a brief moment all the animals freeze, as if waiting for the flash. Lightning or gun shot?

I lift my head off the pillow, look over at the damp patch on the bedroom wall, check my racing pulse and decide that counting sheep doesn't help with my insomnia.

Love is Blind

by Samuel Edwards

They call her a Siren. A mythical creature with cruel intentions, dangerous and enchanting and a killer of men. They call her a monster. They warn their children about her. They flee from her voice lest they be pulled into a watery grave.

They call her a Siren. I call her Michelle, and we've been dating for six months now.

We met at a karaoke bar. She was on stage, her hips moving to the rhythms of the music like a luminescent lava lamp, and when her eyes locked with mine I drifted towards her as if floating on a gentle wave. Standing side by side, we were suddenly alone in the whole world, not another soul mattered, and we were singing songs like *Another One Bites The Dust, Knockin' on Heaven's Door* and *Only the Good Die Young*.

My friends think I'm crazy. I think they're jealous. They call her a Siren, but I call her sweetheart. Sure, there's obstacles, like in any relationship. She keeps arranging trips to the beach. She wants me to buy a boat. And when she sings in the shower, I get weak at the knees.

They say love is blind; hopefully it's deaf too.

Interview to a Plastic Bottle

by Eleonora Balsano

Please introduce yourself. I'm a plastic bottle in a WeWork.

What are you doing here? They forgot to put me in the fridge and now everyone wants a cold drink. They blame it on me, not living up to their expectations.

Aren't you embarrassed about being plastic? Not until you mentioned it, frankly. Aren't you embarrassed being flesh? Spilling blood from every little scratch? I'm clean, light, reusable.

You release toxic chemicals when you stay too long in the sun, though. Reusable is a loose concept for you. I wonder what you release, because of the heat. Better not to know. I won't ask, I'm empathetic like that.

And a smart alec. I've been around, in one form or another, for way longer than you. Call it experience.

What will you do once you're done? People like to picture me in a waste sorting centre, melted and repurposed alongside millions of other plastic bottles. I might come back as a fancy swimsuit.

Or? A kid might find me, write his heart out, push it inside, toss me into the sea. I'd like to wash up on an African beach. Somewhere warmer, friendlier. A place where people could

still see the pluses of things like me, without obsessing over the minuses.

So selfish. What about microplastic and dying whales, and the ocean becoming *unfriendly* because of you? Don't you ever think about the consequences of your actions? Look who's talking. Consequences. As if you people ever worried about them. What about another kid finding me, miles away, and feeling less lonely? There's a whole literature built around messages in bottles, don't you know that?

I'm sure there's a whole literature defending spray cans. From the 80s, probably. You must be a passionate person. You sound like one. I'm not a spray can. I'm a clean, reusable item.

Right. They all say so. Then it's up to us to figure what to do with your lot. Wish me luck with that. Wish *me* luck. I guess my time is counted, but remember, so is yours. Goodbye.

Once Upon a Lamina Propria

by T. L. Ransome

The pageant is incomplete without the sentinels. They line the parade route, watching the many-spangled, gorgeous, foreign display. Their translucent proboscides telescope in and out, full of suction. Here a herald disappears, there a jester, their unfamiliar, many-patterned tunics demanding analysis, breakdown. They will not be returned.

The splendid parade is steadily thinned out. The sentinels peddle their finds to the browsing pattern-keepers, pale, changeable and ruthless. These sinister shoppers move around the crowded, dark-lit bazaar next to the parade ground, looking for their ideal, their perfect match among the captured. When they find it, an unspeakable slaughter begins.

Many-hooked fingers, arms, tongues, teeth find purchase on the bodies of the jesters, the heralds. The captured bend and writhe as the pattern-keepers' hooks and teeth become part of them, flay them, assimilate them. A final abomination of acid rain ends their consciousness, turns the red and green and gold of their tunics to an unwholesome, viscous brown, melting the shards and shreds of things that lived in color.

The steaming, tart, syrupy mess will be absorbed,

processed, divided. It will give the pattern-keepers life. It will give the sentinels reason to continue their slave-taking.

There will be another pageant in four hours. If it hails from the land of Burgher King, the jesters will be char-broiled. If they're from Queen Wendy, they'll be fresh, and never frozen.

Hoochie Coochie

by Sarah Royston

When they see me, the men will forget their cardboard soles, their fields of dust. The women will tut at my daring. They might blush or whisper, but they sure as hell won't leave. They need this too.

The piano starts; something exotic in a minor key. They all sit up. This is what they've come for, why they've saved their hard-scratched dimes. I won't let them down.

Giving my spangled corset a final wiggle, I fluff the tiny frill of skirt. Hours of training have left blue kisses on my calves. The music rises: now. I shimmy-slink across the sand, trailing each foot so my ankle-bells shiver.

With high-twined arms and snaking hips, I sway towards the pole. Not the centre-mast — that one's too thick. This guy-pole is perfect. I grasp it strong and sure. The gypsy tune swirls faster as I make my first spin, legs poised in a sundial. Then an under-arm twirl, a sultry drop, a rippling roll. The crowd gawps. I'm just getting started. Three carousel spins, flying fast, making my long hair whirl.

I grip the wood between my shins and start to climb. They gasp as I grapple higher, close to the wind-snapped canvas. I press my thighs tight to the pole, raise my legs and point my

toes. Then release my hands, lying back onto thin air.

Upside down, I see wonder-struck faces. A little girl gazes, open-mouthed –

"MUM! You are SO embarrassing!"

My daughter glares, hands on hips. Behind her, a queue of kids are waiting for a turn on the fireman's pole.

"There's a big hole in your leggings and EVERYONE can see your knickers."

I slide down to earth with a bump.

A Nice Piece of Cherry Cake

by Bronwen Griffiths

That red coat, you always wear it even though I've said you're too old for red. It doesn't suit your skin tone. To be honest, it looks rather cheap. I know you paid a great deal for that coat. You always pay a lot for stuff. Less wasteful, you say. Expensive things *last*. There is some a truth in that but there's also another truth - most of us can't afford to pay *your* prices. You've had your hair dyed by the chi-chi hairdresser on the High Street. The colour clashes with the red of your coat but I don't suppose you realise it. Ash blonde with hints of strawberry and aubergine, is that what they call it? You'll have to go back to Giorgio in a few weeks if you don't want your grey roots to show through. Goodness, that lipstick is rather loud. I feel I should warn you about it because if you think any man in the street will give you the merest hint of a glance, let me tell you, you're wrong, not just wrong - delusional.

Now you're ordering cherry cake with your latte. I have no idea how you manage to stay so slim at your age. I only have to glance at a chocolate to put on the pounds, or is it kilos these days. You need to be careful. You're looking a little – how shall I put it – gaunt. This is what happens when you diet in your sixties and seventies. The weight comes off the face but

never the belly.

You claim you're sixty-seven but I checked your birthdate and I see you've knocked five years off your age. Five whole years. How do you dare? Never mind. I'll order myself a piece of cherry cake. It does look nice and the glace cherries won't clash with my colour scheme. My own coat is M & S navy. It may not be as expensive as yours but I don't come cheap. Even you should know that.

The Spiralling Cost of Visualisations

by Slawka G. Scarso

For 120 euros per hour, my life coach tells me to imagine I'm wearing a yellow raincoat whenever I meet my ex. And when he starts to drown me with his sour accusations only minutes after he's begged me to get back together, I just need to visualise myself with the yellow raincoat. And let the words slip on me like they were raindrops.

When I tell her that it's hard to imagine all this rain in Rome in July, for 120 euros an hour my life coach tells me to imagine a calming colour – I pick light blue – and to imagine this colour slowly flooding me, flooding my mouth, my ears, my skin, my hands, my legs, my heart.

When I tell her that calming may not be enough, not when his voice booms, for 120 euros an hour my life coach tells me to visualise my ex. She tells me to visualise him and then shrink that image. Shrink him till he's half the size, then half that, then again and again until he fits in the palm of my hand or in my pocket. Shrink him till his voice squeaks.

And after spending 360 euros, when my ex invites me for a drink I say Why not? I pick a place he always said we could not afford while we were married, and just as I thought within minutes he starts biting with words, flooding me with all his

rancour. That's how I end up at the police station, wearing a yellow raincoat when it's 40°C in the middle of July in Rome, my skin all blue, my eyes and tongue too. And when they ask me for the fifth time where is my ex, I squeeze my pocket so they cannot hear him squeak. I say I want a lawyer.

For 280 euros an hour, my lawyer says he'll claim insanity. He says I can imagine myself out of prison already.

Mr. Baxter's Post-Probation Resolutions

by Maggie Iribarne

1. **I will not drink on Sunday night.**

I pile the empty cans in the recycling bin. Melissa hated cans beside the door. Melissa's gone. Tomorrow's my first day back. I need the booze to sleep, take the edge off.

2. **I'll quit smoking.**

John from custodial services is smoking on the loading dock when I arrive.

"Hey, Baxter, where *you* been?" he says.

I fist bump him.

"A conference," I say, shivering in February air.

"Wow, some long ass conference."

I apply my boot to the butt in dirty snow, head in

3. **I will learn my students' names.**

"Yo! Baxter's back!" A tall, vaguely familiar kid suggests a high five in the crowded hallway. My weak hand meets his. A vomitorious wave rises, recedes.

4. **I will not overshare with students.**

"The sub made us memorize poetry," Susie says.

Susie, what's her last name? Chapsworth? Chapstick?

"When I was in seventh grade," I say, "I memorized Poe's 'Raven.' It still haunts me. I've been to therapy about it. "Nevermore! Nevermore!" I squawk.

Susie flaps her wings, takes flight.

5. **I will control my emotions**.

During the introduction to Hamlet, Fifth period Gabe has an elongated bit of tissue hanging from his nose. I pace to tamp down the rising storm. The walls close in.

6. **I will get off double secret probation**

In eighth and final period, paper airplanes fly above a sea of necks bent in texting pose. I'm an actor on the stage, awaiting an unwilling audience.

"To die, to sleep, No more," I say.

The room grows quiet, really quiet. I realize I am shouting.

7. **I will achieve tenure.**

I am told to clean out my desk. I sit alone in my classroom and free that unstoppable giggle, the one that got me here in the first place.

8. **I will show them I am competent, intelligent, well-versed in my subject area.**

"The rest is silence," I quote *Hamlet* one last time to Steve the guidance counselor as he returns me to my car.

"Okay, man. Sounds good," he says, slamming the door, leaving me shivering, alone, laughing.

The Séance

by Debra Williams

So, here I am, sitting at Madam Sosostris's, listening to the fraudulent bitch drone on. 'Channelling' Ma, so she says. Will tell me things no one could possibly know unless mother dearest really was whispering them into her ear or beaming them straight into her head. How exactly is this nonsense supposed to work, anyway?!

Ma visited her at least once a week after Dad died, so there's nothing the old fraud won't know about her. Why am I even here? Bloody mother, making it a condition of the will and my inheritance that I attend!

Right, here she goes. Must try to look interested.

"I have your mother here now, Malcolm. She's saying… it's a bit faint. What is it, Maureen? Ah, yes! She's saying, 'There's a new will with my solicitor, Malcolm. One you didn't know about. Written, witnessed and stowed safely away in their safe the day before you pushed me down the stairs. Good job Madam S warned me about that – and just a pity that I wasn't able to prevent it. You can't dodge fate, so Madam S always says. So, I've left everything to her. She won't go to the police as long as you don't kick up a fuss. Bye, Son.'"

The ruthless old devil fixes me with her dark eyes. “Bet you didn’t see that one coming, did you, Malcolm? Luckily for me, I did…”

Navigating Certainty

by Kim Murdock

We're rehearsing for dinner at my parents' place. *Kelly*, I say, *Kell, what do we say when gramma offers you a gingerbread man?* Her face lights up, then she remembers, knits her pale brows into something serious. She says, *No, no thank you gramma, the doctors say I can only eat certain things now.*

I press on. In my mother's larynx-blown voice I say, *But they're your favourite, hun bun, with pink smarties for buttons?* Her pause lands like a tiny fist in my gut. Her tears anoint me as Grinch and Satan rolled in one. Gratan. Srinch.

I don't pretend to be good at this, navigating the latest *this* in our world. But after long nights spent in Emergency cradling an origami-folded pre-schooler, waiting in uncertain space on cracked plastic chairs, I'll take it. A diagnosis. A treatment. Protocols to follow, a mission to carry out.

We take a break and make popcorn. A favourite, thankfully untouched by the rigours of our new foodscape. *Bird food*, my mother calls it, *sanctioned by them quacks and loons.* Kelly covers her ears as the first kernels hit the potlid, then giggle-dares me to lift it off. She hops from one peel-and-stick floor tile to the next, singing along to Bowie's *Life on Mars?* while we wait for the popping to stop.

That night, I dream we're astronauts, eating from sealed silver packets designed especially for us. I imagine her untethered, floating freely around me, not collapsed on the floor, unable to get up. I dream her body does not betray her. She wears the same white snowsuit as in waking times, with panda bears dancing along the side seams. The same white, felt-insulated boots.

We say *No, no thank you!* when gramma asteroids past our orbit. Mitten-linked, we space-skip onwards, towing our dream logic like a lassoed moon.

We find travelling through space is easier than by rust-pocked car.

No one questions the science of the science. Alien life forms welcome us, then wave us on our way.

CONSIDERING AN APPLICATION TO THE CIVIL SERVICE: Job 55390 - Head of Agile Delivery

by Emily Macdonald

The Role	
~~The Head of Agile Delivery Management is responsible for setting strategic direction for product delivery management, defining and implementing standards and processes, managing the team across a broad portfolio of products and services, and successfully implementing recovery for project crisis situations.~~	
With a strong background as a Scrum Master or Agile Coach...	*I coached the third fifteen at high school. I know how to master a scrum. I know all about the agility required to avoid being tackled with the ball.*
What will you be doing?	
• ~~Accountable for the Matrix management of up to~~ 50 ~~development~~ squad members...	*50 in the squad? Woah, way more than usual.*
• Tracking and reporting of KPIs such as cycle time, throughput, bug arrival/departure rates...	*I average 19.45km per hour. In London. Not bad eh? With a new bike I reckon I could go faster. Bugging doesn't seem sporting but it's winning that counts.*
• Managing escalations to senior leadership.	*Tick. 'Pass the buck upwards.'*

• ~~Coordinating the teams' project plans,~~ roadmaps, risk assessments, sprint boards...	*Maybe it's athletics and orienteering too? I can read a map.*
• Optimising the teams' backlog, ensuring it has enough buffer, ~~correct priorities, stories are well understood, have adequate acceptance criteria in alignment with definition of ready~~	*Tick again. The Devil finds work for idle hands. Give people plenty of useless work to do.*
• ~~Developing, guiding and~~ improving ~~process related~~ ceremonies	*Yep. Ceremony creates a sense of occasion. Like an anthem before a match, or that haka those All Blacks use to intimidate their opponents.*
What are we looking for?	
• ~~Has a deep knowledge of and~~ leads on a range of ~~Agile and~~ Lean tools and techniques...	*I'm stumped. Possibly rude?*
• ~~Able to establish the feedback loop for teams and has responsibility for the translation and measurement of value~~ (what you put in and what you will get out)	*Dance the hokey pokey.*
• ~~Able to~~ ensure the team has a situational awareness ~~of what each other is working on.~~	*I usually know where I am*
• Focuses on the outcome.	*What's the bleedin' point otherwise?*

Missing in Action

by Allan Miller

Despite writing his name on everything, my son often comes home from the nursery missing various items. Hats, gloves, socks, wellingtons, jumpers, coats, water-bottles, lunch boxes, and bags have all vanished. Occasionally we'll get something back after asking, on the nursery parent's WhatsApp group, if anyone has found our son's things mixed up with their child's things.

One afternoon, I went to collect my boy from the nursery and the teachers said he wasn't there. I asked them what they meant, and they asked me if I was sure I'd brought him in. When I told them I was certain they just shrugged their shoulders. They were somewhat blasé about his disappearance, unlike my wife who was fuming (with me for some reason??!!) when I returned home minus our child.

A couple of days later I checked back with the nursery, to see if he'd turned up, but I could tell they were getting fed up with my "accusatory tone". After a week I was resigned to not getting my boy back when I spotted him in the street with one of the mums from nursery.

'That's my son,' I said, pointing at my son.

The woman looked at me as if I was mad.

‘This is my son,’ she responded indignantly. ‘Come on Flynn, let’s go.’

‘You’ve got my son,’ I insisted. ‘I’d know him anywhere.’

‘You are mistaken,’ she replied, as she pulled my son away.

‘His name’s written on him!’ I called after her. ‘Look on his back.’

She harrumphed then peaked down the back of his jumper. Her face sank. At the top of his back, tattooed in large black letters, was the name...

Duncan

‘I’m sorry,’ said the woman sheepishly. ‘I was certain he was mine.’

I smiled. ‘No worries. They all look pretty similar at that age.’

My son waved goodbye to the woman, I took his hand and we walked home together.

That night a message pinged up on the nursery WhatsApp group. It was from a parent asking if anyone had taken her son Flynn home by mistake.

Dad's Rules for the Urinal

by Hannan

I'm not going to be here forever mate and the urinal is a strange and scary place so I made this pocket-size rule book for you.

The urinal isn't like the toilet at home and mum can't go into the men's lavatory with you to help. You'll need to commit these rules to memory.

Hold your chin up. I know you'll be alright.

One: All conversation must cease once you have entered. It doesn't matter if you're slating Southgate's tactics, or moaning about homework, the men's lavatory is a place for quick loans not long-term negotiation.

Two: Don't ever take the middle urinal. This is incredibly rude. You work your way into the middle, from the furthest left or furthest right. It doesn't matter which one. What you don't want to be is trapped with a man's willy either side of you. This is a massive no no. If there's only one urinal left, with two blokes either side, you hold it in and wait for one of them to leave.

Three: Make sure you unzip your zipper all the way. An attempt at peeing with it half down is a recipe for disaster. We

want to avoid disasters.

Four: Never, I repeat, never make eye contact with anyone. If you do, run. Even if you're in there with a mate, you look down with your mind on the job. In and out as soon as possible. That's the aim of the game.

Five: No pooping in the urinal.

Six: Breath through your mouth.

Seven: Most importantly, you have to shake for at least half the time you spend peeing. You don't want any dribble. Trust me, it's very annoying.

Eight: If you're wearing grey, make sure you take even more care. Nothing shows up more than pee on grey trousers.

Nine: If you're wearing suede shoes, don't even bother going in.

Ten: You've heard it before, but I'll say it again. Always wash your hands.

I'm sorry I can't be there for you mate, but stupider people than you have mastered it. Give your mum a kiss for me.

The Headline Writer's Last Day

by Karen Jones

Stephen, the editor, looked over the rim of his glasses at John. "Take a seat. You've just joined us as a headline writer, yes?"

John sat up straight, grinning. "Yes, I love it already!"

Stephen smiled. "Uh-huh. Okay, let's look at the story behind your first headline. This lawyer…"

John interrupted. "Bald guy called Brian."

Stephen raised his eyebrows. "Brian? Bald? Really? Okay, can you think of another word for a lawyer who works at the higher levels of jurisdiction?"

John shrugged. "Barrister?"

Stephen gave him a thumbs up. "Yep. And how about another word for a fight?"

John looked at the ceiling, clicked his fingers. "Brawl?"

"Yeah, that sounds good, eh? And where did the brawl take place, John?" Stephen asked.

"In a pub."

Stephen tapped his pen on the desk. "Another word for pub?"

John scratched his chin. "Bar? It was called the Bull and Bush, by the way."

Stephen gritted his teeth. "The Bull and… Jesus. And this

barmaid involved in the bar brawl…"

"Barbara," John said.

Stephen clenched and unclenched his fists. "Barbara? Are you kidding me? Okay. I saw Barbara's photo. Anything particularly noticeable about her?"

John thought for a moment. "She had a very curvaceous figure, sir."

"That she did," Stephen agreed. "One could almost call her busty, or buxom, eh?"

John nodded. "I suppose."

Stephen smiled. "So, we have a bar brawl at the" – he checked his notes in disbelief – "Bull and Bush featuring a busty barmaid called Barbara and a bald barrister called Barry who ended up with a barstool up his bum?"

John shook his head. "No, no, it was just the one leg of the stool…"

Stephen held his hands up to stop John talking. "Mere details. Remind me, what was your headline?"

John squirmed in his chair. "Local Lawyer Hurt in Fight."

Body Parts

by Catherine O'Brien

The following is a nonpareil ~~story~~ guide to the human body. One is advised to familiarise oneself with the detail contained herein. Please read carefully and retain for future reference.

Mouth = Brain's Censorship Window/Fuel Funnel Entrance.
Pros = can celebrate and censure.
Cons = known to beg old loves to reappear.

Hair = Keratin Threads.
Pros = looks good when flipped.
Cons = few verifiable Rapunzel tales and expected to stand on end if scared.

Hands = Five Digit Flesh Slice.
Pros = they can speak their own language.
Cons = one size fits all gloves never fit.

Nose = Mobile Smelling Antenna.
Pros = can hoover large swathes of olfactory richness with ease.
Cons = yearns to find itself in another's business.

Feet = Flattened Bounce Baubles.
Pros = largely unacquainted with anything other than a ground dwelling existence.
Cons = prone to odour.

Arms = Jointed Squeezing Tools.
Pros = can encircle others to convey affection.
Cons = cannot facilitate flight.

Eyes = Experience Sieves.
Pros = only three receptors are needed to sense all colours.
Cons = promiscuous - known to wander.

Neck = Rotating Head Pedestal.
Pros = low maintenance (unless it sticks itself out)
Cons = ineffectual when called upon to crane despite what you may have heard.

Heart = Juice Bar.
Pros = pragmatic, adheres to a clear philosophy of 'in', 'out' and 'shake it all about'.
Cons = self-important, like an actress that doesn't audition to get the part.

Fingers = Bone Rakes.

Pros = dogged advisor whose signature move is 'the point'.
Cons = when engaged in courtship, can use a 'come hither' motion that is extremely cringey not to mention wholly uncreative.

Ears = Sound Wave Portals.

Pros = Contains a bone called the 'anvil'.
Cons = Bad reputation (see dog-eared book pages).

Brain = Neural Switchboard.

Pros = cinematic mode is but a daydream away.
Cons = fragile, a bedrock which shouldn't be blasted.

Disclaimer: Information provided in this guide was correct at the time of going to print.

Creation

by John Holland

- Next one. Reference 11099871.
- Check.
- Head – one.
- Check.
- Arms – two.
- Check.
- Fingers – eight.
- Check.
- Thumbs – two.
- Check.
- Testicles – two.
- Check.
- Penis – one.
- Check.
- Do you fancy a cup of tea?
- Wouldn't say no.
- Milk and two lumps?
- Check.
- You don't have to say check when we're having tea.
- Of course. Sorry. Second nature.
- That tea's really hit the spot. Well, back to it.

- Check, er, yes I mean.
- Penis – one.
- Check.
- Hang on. Haven't we already had one penis?
- Er, no, no, I don't think so.
- Are you sure?
- Oh yes, pretty much so.
- Ok then. If you're certain. Legs – two.
- Check.
- Feet – two.
- Check.
- Toes – ten.
- Check.
- Next one. Reference 11099872. Head – one.
- Check. Er, would it be possible for me to reserve that last one?

The Good Boy

by Michael Conley

The concept has been explained over and over: no matter what you've done, however bad it is, you go into the little room, you tell the priest, the priest decides how many prayers it's worth, and that's that.

"Does the priest recognise you and remember your name and tell anyone what you've said?"

No.

"Even if you've done a murder?"

Even if you've done a murder.

It seems wild to him, but he likes it.

He hasn't done a murder; he can't think of anything he's done, really.

He's been consistently mean to his little sister, but that doesn't feel enough somehow, more like the natural order of things. It's going to be awkward if he goes in there later this morning and only confesses to that.

It's 8 a.m. and he's in the sitting room eating toast with lemon curd, which he's old enough now to make for himself. He needs to do something immediately, something big enough.

He could wake his parents up by setting their bed on fire?

Too big.

Taking the Lord's name in vain, that's one. He closes the living room door and whispers "fucking Jesus stinking Christ."

Too small.

On TV, the two zany presenters are joking, zanily, about which one always stands on the left and which always stands on the right. He looks at their cold, dead eyes. They've probably done some horrible things. He envies them that.

"Shut up and get on with the cartoons," he mutters.

He gets up and smears their stupid faces with the lemon curd side of his toast. He steps back and turns the television off. There are thick smears of lemon curd all over the screen. He throws the piece of toast at the wall and it sticks, below the framed photograph of his grandparents' wedding.

He watches the toast slide slowly down the wall.

Too weird.

He goes to the kitchen to get a cloth.

Missive from the Department

by Sarah Lewis

Those who are drowning will be thrown a rope. We will endeavour to save you.

Before we deploy the rope, we need to assess how drowning you are. This allows us to determine what level of assistance you require, and guarantees we do not waste rope on people who do not need it.

The assessment is simple and should not take long to complete. Please answer in black pen and write in capital letters inside the boxes. If you get the form wet, we will not be able to accept it. Each question requires third-party evidence to support your claims and we cannot accept original documentation. We cannot accept seaweed. We hope you understand. We accept evidence from all professionals working with you, except anyone you have had contact with in the preceding 25 years.

You will be required to attend an in-person interview. The interview is an opportunity to describe to our caring team how your drowning affects you on a day to day basis, such as whether you are able to tread water for at least 50% of the time you are drowning, how much salt water you can consume before vomiting your entire stomach out of your

body, and if you can attend important appointments while your head is going under for the third time.

Please note that attending your in-person interview will immediately invalidate your claim for rope.

If your claim is approved, there is a six week wait before we can release the rope. If you need help sooner, please contact your case worker and we may be able to provide some interim assistance. If you find yourself fully drowned between your claim being accepted and the rope being deployed, please contact the department to cancel your claim. Failure to do so will result in a fine.

If your claim is not accepted, you can appeal within 12 weeks of you formally drowning. Grievances can be raised through the official channel.

If you have any further queries about your life rope claim, please call the number below. Braille and audio guidance is available.

The End of My Crime Fighting Partnership with John Popper of Blues Traveler

by Keith J. Powell

On nights when he wasn't touring, John Popper and I kept the streets safe.

"Don't give us *the run-around*," I'd say, "Drop the switchblade or face *the hook*."

On cue, John Popper would mime a torrent of furious haymakers.

We were righteous, unstoppable. Then I blew it.

We'd cornered this slick safe cracker uninterested in going quietly. *Pow*. John Popper dropped him with a single punch. "And that's why he's called the one-hit wonder," I said.

John Popper slumped, turned, and slipped into the shadows. Soon, rising police sirens filled the night, and beneath them, pangs of exquisite, doleful harmonica.

Boudicca Has a Spot of Bother

by Jane Broughton

"What do you mean; I can't leave my chariot there? How dare you, you whey faced whelp!"

"I'm sorry madam, but you're blocking the entrance to the playground."

Boudicca glared down at the janitor. She was over six feet tall and all that weapons training had honed her into a muscular fighting machine. Not that there was any need for combat any more. She sighed. Things weren't what they used to be.

The janitor appeared to be waiting for her to obey him. Unbelievable!

"*You* move it if you need it moving. I'm waiting for my daughters and do not bow to the whim of any man. Are you Roman? You have the weasel countenance of one!" She banged her long wooden stick on the tarmac.

"Hey," the janitor squeaked, "that's a spear! You can't bring a weapon onto school property. I'm calling the police!" "And," he added, "I'm not Roman, I'm from Bolton."

"I am not leaving without my daughters," Boudicca shouted.

The janitor pulled out his phone but before he could

summon reinforcements the bell sounded and a battalion of shrieking children charged out of the school doors.

"Heamu, Lannosea, to me" yelled Boudicca. Two small girls pelted into their mother. "Have you brought sweets, mum?" "Can Sophie sleep over, mum?" "Oh mum, you've brought that old chariot again." Boudicca shrugged and produced two packets of gummy bears.

"Come away, girls. It's rabbit stew tonight. No, Sophie can't stay for a sleepover. You remember what happened last time. It took me hours to scrub that woad off her face."

"Aw, we want pizza. Everybody in our class has pizza except us."

"I've told you before; no Roman food in my house!" Boudicca herded her complaining daughters towards the chariot. As she passed the janitor, she wrenched the phone from him and dropped it to the floor. She crushed it with one large foot.

"Prove it," she said, allowing him a glimpse of the battleaxe under her cloak. The janitor stood, mouth open, as she vaulted into the chariot.

"Up the Romans!" he shouted bravely to her retreating back.

Saturday Job

by Rebecca Field

Harmony doesn't believe in love at first sight but if she did she'd probably fall in love with the man who comes into the shop each Saturday to buy a Fanta and a Toffee Crisp on his way to football training. Sometimes he varies it a little and buys a Crunchie or a Boost, but the way his blue eyes twinkle as he grins at Harmony always makes her stomach flip.

Harmony doesn't believe in getting up early on weekends but since she got the job at the newsagent she's learned to haul herself into the shower by 7:30am otherwise she'll be late and she doesn't want to get fired from her first job. If it wasn't for Toffee Crisp Man she'd have jacked it in by now because she'd get paid more washing glasses at the Dizzy Duck but the hours are better here and she can eat cola fizzy laces when nobody's looking.

Harmony doesn't believe in eating five fruit and veg each day but if she did she'd eat five apples followed by a Toffee Crisp just to balance things out. Once, in January, Toffee Crisp Man bought a Granny Smith apple, said he was on a healthy eating kick as he winked at Harmony. She's developed a taste for them since then, but he never seems to come in while she's eating one.

Harmony doesn't believe that good things come to those who wait but if she did she'd never have had the balls to ask Toffee Crisp Man if he had any plans later and she'd never have known he 'might be in the Dizzy Duck later' with some lads from football. She heads there with her mate Leanne and learns he also has a love of lager and Scampi Fries and he scored the winning goal today and Harmony stores up these nuggets of information like a hamster for the next time he comes in for his Toffee Crisp until she sees him kissing Tiffany Walsh by the fruit machine and now Harmony believes that all men are pigs and Toffee Crisps are shit.



Visit ellipsezine.com to purchase other publications
or browse our archive of flash fiction.