

Crow Toes Quarterly

More Tales From
A Playfully Dark World



Christopher Millin

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A Playfully Dark World**

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Millin, Christopher, 1976 -
Crow Toes Quarterly: More Tales From
A Playfully Dark World / Christopher Millin

ISBN 978-0-9880909-6-5

Cover Artwork by Kristian Adam
“Big Al and the Boyz”

Staff Interpretations and Back Cover Illustration
by Sarah Campbell

Published by Crow Toes Press
Printed in Canada



Also by Christopher Millin

The King of Arugula

Fowl, Swine and Things That
Send Shivers Down Your Spine

The Healing Sand

Crow Toes Quarterly
Tales From A Playfully Dark World

Mr. Pockets:
and other unsettling and unbelievable stories

If you are a dreamer, come in
If you are a dreamer, a wisher, a liar,
A hope-er, a pray-er, a magic bean buyer...
If you're a pretender, come sit by the fire
For we have some flax-golden tales to spin.
Come in!
Come in!

– Shel Silverstein (Invitation)

Four Nerds Who Love Words And A New CTQ Dream

November 20, 2020

Staff Villain v.
Crow Toes Quarterly Magazine
and The Narrator

Exhibit 32-A

Phone Transcripts
Tuesday, October 13, 2020

Conversation between Crow Toes Quarterly's Narrator and
the Staff Villain

11:31 am

SV – (inaudible groans and grumbling)

N – Hello. Hello, Staff Villain, is that you?

SV – (inaudible groans and grumbling)

N – Sounds like you. Sounds like your grumbling. It's been so long my dear friend.

SV – (more inaudible grumbling) Who is this?

N – It is you! Your voice... is unmistakeable.

SV – Why have you not answered my question? Who are you? And while I'm at it, why isn't the Easter Bunny an Easter Chicken? He leaves eggs right? Bunnies have nothing to do with eggs. Makes me so... angry.

N – It's me, SV. It's the Narrator.

SV – The Narrator, eh? Then tell me a story. Make sure there's a spy, a porcupine with poisonous quills and a ninja that throws starfish in it.

N – No no no. The Crow Toes Quarterly Narrator. Remember? It's been almost ten years since we last spoke.

SV – Crow Toes Quarterly. Those words make no sense. It should be Crow's Toes Quarterly. But... but that sounds terrible. Why do those three words sound so familiar?

N - SV, we published a magazine together for four years. You, me, Ogilvy and Poinsettia... and those terrible bears for that brief period. Don't you remember?

SV – I remember exactly three things, buddy: The star of the 1953 Film Noir classic The Limping Man was Lloyd Bridges;

a group of parrots is known as a pandemonium; and waking up someone before noon should be a punishable crime. And have you noticed the time?

N – Ahhh, I've missed your cantankerous personality.

SV – Buddy, I gave up trying to comprehend big words almost a decade ago. In fact, I gave up most everything to do with words.

N – That's why I'm calling. That's why I spent almost a year tracking you down.

SV – Why does your deep, engaging voice sound so familiar?

N – Because you know me. Or you knew me. We experienced some of the scariest, most dangerous, most exciting things ever together. Remember when the whale swallowed us?

SV – No.

N – Remember when you went to that Santa Claus festival in Finland?

SV – No.

N – Remember the Budgen?

17 seconds of silence.

N – Hello. Are you still there?

SV – I’ve been successfully hiding from the world since that horrible experience with the Budgen. I’ve spent almost ten years now trying to forget them. Trying to forget that silly magazine you dragged me into. I told you I’d make your life miserable if you ever tried to contact me. How did you find me? And why... why did you do exactly what I asked you not to?

N – I saw you in the background of a news broadcast about a bank robbery. Once I had your location, I hired a private investigator to get me more information about your whereabouts. Yesterday, he emailed me a phone number. I took a chance calling you, SV. I’m... I’m trying to get the gang back together again. The world has changed so much in the past ten years. The world needs great stories and great art now more than ever. The world needs us, SV. It needs people who live and breath and love the words they share. The words they read.

SV – Bah!

N – There’s a whole new generation of people out there who have never experienced the magic of Crow Toes Quarterly.

SV – Magic! Bah! I remember being hung over the edge of a cliff more than once because of that magic.

N – Listen, I’ve scoured the Internet and the magazine racks of the world. There is still nothing out there like Crow Toes Quarterly. Playfully dark, intelligent literature for children remains a thing of the past. Kids need to be challenged again. They need to laugh again and be scared again. They need to be comforted and whisked away by a story or a piece of art.

And adults... don't get me started about what adults need.

SV – Uggggg, I like neither children nor adults. I only like fainting goats and I know for a fact they can't read. I want nothing to do with this sell-out reunion tour you're planning.

N – I'm meeting up with Poinsettia tomorrow. And she knows where Ogilvy is... She knows, SV. She's excited by this idea and she's sure Ogilvy will be excited, too. We can all be together again publishing the best ever literature and art magazine for children. We can all be together again...

SV – I don't like any of you. I never did. I want nothing to do with this.

N – Crow Toes Quarterly can't exist without you, SV.

SV – And society cannot exist without the rule of law... and right now you are breaking that rule of law. You are harassing me. You are trying to coerce me into doing something I do not want to do. And you have woken me up before noon. You will hear from my lawyers about this.

N – SV, my intention was never to rile you up. I just thought... I just thought that after all this time of trying to take things from the world, you might want to help put something good back into the world.

SV – Buddy, you thought wrong.

CLICK!

End of call: 11:39 am

I've just been served papers by our Staff Villain's lawyers. The above text was pulled from the 1200-page package of papers. I'll read the rest of the pages after I finish this post. Yes, it's hard to believe he's still going through with his lawsuit even after rejoining the CTQ staff, but if you know our Staff Villain, then you know he never gives up on anything. And you can't fault a person for never giving up.

Right now, our Staff Villain is leaning back in his chair with his legs propped up on his desk. He's throwing pencils up at the ceiling trying to make them stick. He doesn't realize he needs to sharpen the pencils before there's even a chance of them sticking. Ogilvy is struggling to get the jug of water onto the dispenser and Poinsettia is on the phone talking to an informant for an article she's writing about Okanagan Lake's elusive Ogopogo.

It has been ten years since I last wrote about the goings-on at Crow Toes Quarterly. TBH, I never thought I'd write about CTQ ever again. But here I am, clickity clacking away in what can only be called a miracle turn of events and it's making me a little emotional. I don't want to drone on about what we've been up to for the past ten years because I know those stories will eventually come out. What I want to drone on about is where we're at now. You know, the now now... and I'm not talking about the great Gorillaz album from a couple of years ago. I'm talking about the now now and the here here with the us us in the world of children's art and literature. It may be hard to believe, but we are back! Like a zombie with its

head still attached. Like a ghost evading a ghostbusting trap. We're back with ten years of experiences and education to draw upon to make Crow Toes Quarterly better than it has ever been.

I don't have to keep telling you... because you know as well as I do. The world was a far different place in early 2011 when we shut the doors on CTQ, for what we thought was forever. "Traditional magazines are dead," they said back then. "People don't want to read anymore," they said. "The Social Network will win best picture at the Academy Awards," they said. "Science and responsibility and logic will keep us safe from viruses and tree demons," they said. Seriously, how can one paragraph have so many wrong predictions in it?

I waited. I waited for the things in the above paragraph to happen and I waited for a successor to come along after we disappeared. And for a while, I thought that successor was UNDERNEATH THE JUNIPER TREE, a wonderful literary journal that ran until 2014. I was heartbroken by its disappearance and started to think there were nefarious forces out there trying to rid the world of ooky spooky kooky kids lit. I spent years after 2014 following up leads and conspiracies about groups whose sole purpose was to convince children to stop reading. These were the same groups who invented texting and removed cursive writing from school plans. But nothing ever panned out.

As I went down rabbit holes and fire station poles looking for answers, bookstores suddenly started to gain popularity again, and all those e-readers they said would revolutionize reading were recycled and turned into robot vacuum cleaners. Soon print magazines reappeared on racks around the world. And

all those fancy dancy digital magazines that were “the next big thing in reading” started to remove the animations and crossfades and embedded video they thought people wanted, and got back to the heart of what made reading a magazine so fantastic in the first place: the words.

And still, there was no true successor to Crow Toes Quarterly. It was becoming clearer and clearer that the true successor to Crow Toes Quarterly would and could only be Crow Toes Quarterly. A new generation of readers and writers and authors have come along looking for content and quality from a different era. The type of content and quality built with the strongest, longest lasting materials the imagination can muster. The type of content that isn’t afraid to scare the heck out of you or to challenge your imagination or to make you pee your pants laughing. It’s the type of content that will inspire you to pick up a pen (or a laptop) and write a story of your own, or to pick up a paintbrush and paint a masterpiece. Content that is in short supply these days!

Crow Toes Quarterly is an art and literature magazine for children aged 8 to 13 who don’t scare easily... But don’t let that sway you from reading our magazine. Realistically, CTQ is for everyone who likes classic storytelling, extraordinary art, and the ability to engage their imagination to its fullest. It is a 40-page publication released four times a year online in PDF format and in the real world as a limited run print edition. The first issue of CTQ Part 2 will be released in March 2021. Between now and then, you can help us out with this passion project of ours by buying a subscription... or two... or ten. By spreading the word about our magazine. And by never ever bringing up the pending lawsuit between our Staff Villain and the company he once again works for.

You can also follow along with our progress through this blog and through the CTQ website.

We are so excited to be sharing our story with you again and we're so excited for you to share your stories with us. Welcome back to Crow Toes Quarterly, my friends. Welcome back!

Time to dust off my old tag line and say it for the first time in a decade. Here we go...

Read always... and always enjoy reading.

The Unfortunate Byproduct Of Touching Barbecue Lighters To Glaciers

November 23, 2020

My intention was to move us back into the building in which we had first published CTQ. So many weird and wonderful things had happened in that building, and I thought the ghosts of the past would have a lot of input on the direction of our future. But when I went to talk to the owner of the building about leasing an office, both the owner and the building were nowhere to be found. Not only were they gone, but so too was the city they had been located in.

Now I don't want to bog this blog down with politics and divisive content (this would be content that causes disagreement or hostility, which we get enough of from our Staff Villain), but I am a believer in facts and truth. And one of the truths about why the landlord and the building and the city no longer exist has to do with the fact that the temperature of our planet is rising. Part of why I loved our original office so much was the view we had out the lunchroom window. It was an ocean view. You often saw submarines breaching the

ocean surface and seagulls dancing the tango in the sky when they thought no one was looking. And if you squinted hard enough, way off in the distance you could see the ice caps of Lindrossland.

A brief geology lesson here before I go on: an ice cap is a glacier, which is a thick layer of ice and snow that covers fewer than 50,000 square kilometres (or 19,000 square miles for all our American friends). And if you're wondering, glacial ice covering more than 50,000 square kilometre is called an ice sheet.

I had heard rumours ten years ago that if even a third of Lindrossland's ice caps melted, it would raise the ocean level around us by three feet. In the past ten years, Lindrossland's ice caps melted by two thirds and the results were catastrophic to the city the CTQ office was once located in. Now, I'm not going to completely blame Earth's rising temperature, because I know for a fact about five years ago Dr. Awful sent out fifty of his most indiscriminate henchman, armed with blowtorches and bbq lighters, to rid the planet of all its glaciers and icebergs. Allegedly, he found a fly frozen in one of the ice cubes in his Shirley Temple. He believed water was out to get him and went on a three-year long vendetta against ice. A third of Lindrossland's ice caps fell victim to Dr. Awful's misdirected rage.

So the old city, building, and I assume landlord (because the captain always goes down with his ship) are now under water. And the CTQ staff is not disappointed one bit by this fact. Our Staff Villain was sure there'd be certain people from our past scoping out the building, waiting for our return so they could "finish" their business with us. Ogilvy was afraid of a

pear he had left in the fridge in the old staff lunchroom. He was sure it had rotted and mutated into something that was waiting to eat us because we forgot about it, and as you well know, nothing likes to be forgotten. And Poinsettia... well she just felt the past was in the past. A new beginning should mean a new office, city and landlord.

Our Staff Villain suggested we write the name of the city we wanted the new office to be in on a piece of paper and we tack it to a tree. He'd then blindfold himself and fire arrows at the tree until he hit one of the names. That would be where we'd relocate. So we let him do it. We kind of had to, because he was pointing an arrow at us when he was suggesting the method, and he said if we didn't agree with him, one of us would "take the place of the tree."

I wrote down Honolulu, because I thought it would be fun to luau with lovely leviathans late at night. Poinsettia wrote down Lapland, because she loved the mysteriousness of the Northern Scandinavians. Ogilvy wrote down a ramekin filled with mayo, because Ogilvy was a little confused about what we were doing. And our Staff Villain wrote down Barkerville, because he loved dogs and assumed the town was run by them. I didn't have the heart to tell him the former mayor of Barkerville chased a bus out of town and was never seen again, and not a single dog was voted onto city council during the last election.

We tacked our locations onto the nearest tree and quickly found safety behind other trees in the area. I peeked out and watched as Our Staff Villain blindfolded himself, then fumbled around looking for the bow and arrow on the ground below him. When he located it, he pulled the

arrow back, spun around ten times, then let the arrow go. It whizzed past my ear and hit a metal sign that said “Don’t Feed Bears Raisins. Not Even A Bear Should Be Treated That Cruelly.”

“Missed!” I yelled

“Not by much, though,” our Staff Villain said.

“Wait, what?” I replied.

He laughed and fumbled around looking for another arrow on the ground below him. This time, with precision and speed, he pulled back the arrow and fired it at the tree with our locations tacked onto it.

“Hit!” I yelled.

Poinsettia reached the tree first. She pulled the arrow out and untacked the paper it had hit. “The location of our new office is... Well that’s funny,” she said. “I don’t remember any of us writing down this place.”

There were still four pieces of paper tacked to the tree, which meant someone had tacked a fifth place up without us noticing. “What does it say?” I asked.

“It’s what happens when Tarzan lifts weights,” she said.

“Well that’s not a location at all,” our Staff Villain said. “Let me shoot another arrow.”

“Wait,” I said. “I think it’s a sign.”

“It *is* a sign,” our Staff Villain said. “Literally. And it’s also a trap.”

“Look at the bottom corner of the paper it’s on,” Poinsettia said.

She held the paper out so we could all see it. In tiny writing, in what looked like an even more annoying version of the comic sans font, it read “Treacherous Tim’s Treasure Hunts: Search Everywhere to Win Everything.”

“It’s a treasure hunt clue,” I said. “There is nothing nefarious about it. I think we should find the answer and reopen the CTQ office there. Let’s vote on it.”

“I still think it’s a trap,” our Staff Villain said. “If this vote ends 3 to 1, I insist we create a room in our new office where we keep weapons and booby traps for when whoever is planning to attack us, makes their move.”

The vote was 3 to 1 and we all agreed to appease our Staff Villain’s restless imagination.

So here we are, in the little town with a name like what happens when Tarzan lifts weights, with a new office and a lovely new landlord named Robert Percival Ledoux III. The office is comprised of four separate rooms: a lunchroom, a weapons/booby trap room, a main room with three “work” desks, and my office. There are two large windows on the south side of the office that look out over a vast forest named Walkenton Woods. There is a wonderful story about Linus Walkenton, the man the forest is named after, that I will share in later posts.

The only downfall to the new CTQ office is the fluorescent pink mold growing in one corner of the lunchroom. Obviously, this mold had a profound effect on Ogilvy. He was sure it was mold from the pear he had forgotten. He was sure it had come looking for him. When Robert assured us the mold would be cleaned the Friday after next, and that it was caused not by a rotting pear, but by a brief downpour of acid rain mingling with lead-based paint they had failed to remove and repaint during recent building upgrades, Ogilvy relaxed a little. He's also really taken to the masks we have to wear in the office until the mold is gone.

I had always said in the past, change is a great kickstarter for creativity. When I used to get writer's block, I'd hop in the Winnebago and go on a road trip. The new sights and smells and sounds would open up my creative mind and let new ideas flow through.

There is just so much potential for inspiration and creativity here in this brand-new place and time. I can't wait to see what unfolds.

An Office Full Of HACKs And One Big First

November 27, 2020

The first applicant was asleep against the CTQ door when I arrived this morning. His grey and purple hair looked like a lilac bush in serious need of pruning. His white shirt cuffs had dirt and ketchup stains on them. There was a funny crease in the shape of a dingo's ear stamped into his cheek. And he was snoring heavily... his snores sounding like the rattles of a ghost ferry coming into port. I nudged him with the toe of my boot and said, "Excuse me, sir. Is there a reason you are sleeping against my office door?"

He startled awake and wiped away drool that had dried and crusted to his lips and chin. When he noticed me standing above him, he flopped around on the floor like a fish out of water for a good ten seconds gathering his few possessions and his sense of awareness. He then jumped up and stood perfectly straight in front of me. Still blocking the door. "Good morning, Sir," he said in a too loud for 7am army-like voice. "My name is D.L. Inkwent and I'm here for the

interview. You said if I was even one second late, you wouldn't acknowledge my existence. I couldn't risk being a second late or the existential conundrum that would ensue because of that lateness. So I got here four hours early."

Now, you may have noticed, in my very first sentence above, I said this man was an applicant. You'd think at the office of an art and literature magazine, he'd be applying for an internship, or to be a grammar cop, or for a position in the IT department (which, if you didn't know was the department of Intermittent Terror). And you'd be completely wrong for thinking that. This poor man was actually the first in a parade of folks (dozens more poor men and woman and one sentient Titan Arum named Gary) that came through the CTQ office throughout the day to apply for the position of 'Staff Villain's Servant', or as these folks now prefer to call it, "H.A.C.K." H.A.C.K. is an acronym for Help, Accountability, Crisis and Knowledge Supporter. I kid you not.

It didn't take me long to figure out this was put together by our Staff Villain. When he arrived at the office three hours late, twenty-nine more very confused applicants had arrived, each one claiming that if they were even one second late to the interview, they would no longer exist in our Staff Villain's eyes. They were backed into corners, sitting on and under desks and laying across windowsills. There were so many people (and one sentient plant) in the office, I lost track of Ogilvy's whereabouts. I later found out he had hidden himself in the cupboard under the sink in the lunchroom, disgusted by the smell coming off the Titan Arem named Gary. Poinsettia was on assignment, staked-out on a beach between Penticton and Summerland in British Columbia, Canada, trying to catch an interview with Ogopogo, so she

didn't have to experience the sights and the smells and the shenanigans going on in the CTQ office. Lucky her!

Our Staff Villain eventually found a small spot on his desk to put down the full tray of specialty coffees he was holding. He threw up his hands in exasperation and hollered, "What the heck is going on here? My office is filled with people who look like poor excuses for servants! My office is filled with hacks!"

I squeezed between a man that looked like a Neapolitan Mastiff in a tuxedo made for a Labrador Retriever and another man that looked like a salamander in mechanic coveralls and I said, "These are HACKs! And they're here for you. According to them, you've lined up interviews for a new servant... I mean, a new HACK."

"I did?" he asked.

"You did!" everyone in the office said in response.

"Hmmm, I guess I forgot about that," our Staff Villain said. "I guess that's why I really need a servant right now."

"Ahem," one of the HACKs voiced up.

"You should get that looked at," our Staff Villain said. "This is no time to be ill."

"No," I said. "They now prefer to be called HACKs."

"Well, that's the silliest thing I've ever heard," he replied. "Hacks are sounds sick people make, or what you do when

you use computers to gain unauthorized access to data in a system, or a term to describe rough cuts, blows or strokes... like a few good hacks with my karate-chop hand and I might get through these HACKs to get to my specialty coffee. A HACK is not a name for a servant.”

“It’s an acronym, SV,” I said. “It means...”

“I know what an acronym is,” he said and rolled his eyes.

“No... H-A-C-K. It means Help, Accountability, Crisis and Knowledge Supporter.”

Our Staff Villain chuckled and said, “Sounds like a bunch of random words put together to make another random word.”

“Whatever the case,” I said, “they’re all here for you and they have become quite the distraction. I don’t even know where Ogilvy is. Please hire your new HACK and get the rest of them out of here so we can get some actual work done today. We have no time for this. This return to the world of publishing magazines is still all so new. There’s just too much to do...”

“Ghosts with no creativity like to say BOO,” our Staff Villain said and laughed. “See, I can rhyme, too.”

For many years after we originally closed the CTQ doors, we were unable to trust anyone. We were unable to show our faces in public for fear of being kidnapped by shadowy organizations or given evil glares by dismayed writers who no longer had a place to submit their short stories. During that time, I did all my non-CTQ editing work online from a room

built into a rockface behind a waterfall in Central America. Ogilvy returned to the clouds and Poinsettia lived aboard her family's hot-air balloon. It remains a mystery as to where our Staff Villain hid, but what I do know is during that time he was without any sort of life helper.

There is a story in our SHORT STORY VAULT about our Staff Villain's original servant, who up and left him after years of service. And ever since the mole-like man left, our Staff Villain had a most terrible time finding a replacement, eventually giving up the pursuit altogether. How he survived without someone to help him with his daily activities, without someone to make him accountable for his actions, without someone to clean up crises and without someone to answer random questions about what makes blue cheese blue, is beyond me. Our Staff Villain can barely unbox a new fandangled techno gizmo, let alone make that gizmo work. So I was all for him hiring someone to lift the burden of everyday life off his shoulders. But I was also a little perturbed he hadn't informed us about the interviews.

When the last applicant left, the sun had long set and the only thing I had accomplished all day was ridding the office of the Titan Arem's awful smell (using a mixture of essential oils and mint leaves, which I rubbed onto every surface). I had come into the office that morning hoping to do so very much, but it turned into a day wasted. And in the early days of restarting a magazine, of rebuilding a world, every minute of productivity counts.

I've been reflecting a lot lately on some of the more technical reasons why we weren't able to keep the magazine going the first time around, and I think today was a good metaphor

for what happened to us back then. We got distracted. Not by a bunch of HACKs looking for a job, but by lofty goals, by difficulties in our lives outside of the office, by trying to make someone who had the financial power to keep us going forever, believe we were something we were not. Distractions (and horrible ghouls and shadowy organizations) took our focus off what was most important... the reader and the words they were reading. And because of that, we didn't see the magazine folding up beneath us.

Before locking up and heading home for the night... after Ogilvy had come out from under the sink and Poinsettia had returned from another unlucky day trying to score an interview with Ogopogo and our Staff Villain had settled on the very first applicant, D.L. Inkwent, for his new Help, Accountability, Crises and Knowledge Supporter, I had everyone sit down at their desk. I passed them a sheet of paper on which, in bold Helvetica font I had typed, "From here on forth all that matters are the words. We will never let the distractions of everyday life steal the importance from those words and if, for one minute, we do, we will resign from Crow Toes Quarterly immediately." Underneath the statement were four lines where I asked each staff member to sign their name. Yes, it was a serious note to end the day on, but it was essential for our survival as an art and literature magazine.

And this time I want to survive so badly...

And so too, it seemed, did the rest of the staff. One by one they read the statement and without folly or fight, they signed their name in the appropriate spot. I had never been prouder of my staff... of my friends. I know it was more symbolic

than anything, but it was a symbol of our growth as people on this planet... as gatekeepers to worlds beyond our own and to upholding literary standards, which seem to be slipping more and more with each passing year.

When the sheet of paper was handed back, I filed it in my desk drawer under MISSION STATEMENTS. I was upset by losing the day, but I also knew by the end of the day I had gained so much more than I had lost. I knew this time in the world of children's literature was going to be different for us. And I think the staff knew it, too.

If that wasn't a sure sign of our growth, as we were all stumbling down the stairs on our way home for the night, the sound of a hand loudly slapping against a forehead stopped us in the stairwell. "The coffees!" our Staff Villain exclaimed. "With all that ruckus in the office, I totally forgot about the coffees. I bought them for you guys. I got Ogilvy a hot chocolate with root-beer flavoured whip cream. I got Poinsettia a breve Americano misto with one pump of vanilla flavouring and I got you, Mr. Narrator, a light roast coffee with just a splash of cream. Your favourites, right? Sorry I forgot to give them to you."

Never, in all the time we had been together during our first four years publishing a magazine, had our Staff Villain bought us anything.

This time truly is going to be different.

A Coffee-Filled End To Mr. N's Brief Character Arc

December 14, 2020

Have you heard the old children's adage*, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never harm me"? It's intended as a defence against bullying and verbal abuse. It's a lovely little ditty that has lived on throughout modern history in elementary school playgrounds, spelling bee competitions and arena stands filled with riled up parents "watching" their children play hockey. Well today, that little ditty repeated over and over in my head, not because it's a joy to sing or because at one point in the day flamingos surrounded me and laughed at me because I couldn't stand on one leg longer than a few seconds, but because of just how wrong the writer got it.

Sticks and stones didn't break my bones... they didn't even leave a scratch on me. But someone thought my name was Chad and that almost got me killed. So, you see, out of all the strange events that occurred today, it was the name that actually harmed me.

I thought the magazine publishing life would be a little less eventful this time around. I guess I thought wrong. And we're still months out from our first new issue seeing the light of day. What's going to happen once the magazines start rolling off the press? I need to think more positively. Ogilvy has reminded me over and over, I must not allow myself fall into Staff Villain territory. That territory is barren and cold and hostile, and I am anything but...!

I publish a magazine for children and I tell stories for children and I like to think I have the heart and the creative wonder of a child, but by all appearances I am an adult. I, like many other adults, must start my day with a cup of coffee or else another Narrator eventually shows up. This Narrator is fidgety and edgy and not a delight to be around. The reason for this, is coffee has a little thing in it called caffeine, which is addictive. Like 80s hairstyles and the colour wenge. When you are addicted to something, your life cannot function normally until that thing is in you. Addiction is not a good thing. Like 80s hairstyles and the colour wenge. But alas, I, like so many other adults, am addicted to that morning coffee.

A friend of mine who shall remain nameless... his father used to say, "Drinking coffee will put hair on your chest." It's a good deterrent for children picking up the habit, because hairy children end up working at the circus, or even worse, as the practice body at a dog-grooming school. Drinking coffee didn't just put hair on my chest, coffee also made mornings very difficult if it wasn't consumed in a quick and constant manner. And this morning I woke to an empty tin of ground coffee.

My first thought was, I wonder how many legs a Peruvian

Giant Yellowleg Centipede has? And my second thought was, how can this tin be empty? It was full when I went to bed last night. After Googling the answer to the first question (there is always an odd number of leg pairs ranging from 21 to 23), I began pulling out everything in my kitchen cupboards looking for ground coffee I could brew. Looking for answers to the mystery of the empty coffee tin.

The answer, my friends, wasn't blowing in the wind. It was caught in video format by the surveillance system I had set up shortly after moving into my new home. We've kept the whereabouts of our new CTQ office a secret, but secrets are a hard thing to keep in this era of tracking and location. As much as I've assured the CTQ staff we are safe to be in the world again, I know some of those who wanted to destroy us and make us disappear forever, are still out there. I am keeping a close eye on them, using the same tracking and location software that I am sure one of you out there is using to track and locate us right now. These dangerous factions have shifted their priorities since we originally went into hiding ten years ago. But once they see the first new issue of CTQ hit the newsstands, I know their priorities will shift back to us. And when that happens, I will be prepared. The surveillance is part of the preparation. Of course, I can't tell you what else I've done, except that it includes an invisible Zeppelin, three genetically modified wolves and a one-hundred-year-old jar of kimchi.

Anyways, as I was saying, viewing the video surveillance from the night quickly solved the mystery of the empty coffee tin. At 2:34 AM, the kitchen window slid open and the strange silhouette of a being with a thin body and an overly large teardrop-shaped head slunk through the window. The being

went straight to my coffee cupboard and my tin of ground coffee. The footage was grainy because of the dark of the night, but I could clearly see this shadowy being tip back the tin of coffee grounds. I could see the grounds funnel out of the tin and into its mouth. When the grounds were gone, the being threw the tin back into the cupboard, did three backflips, ran across the ceiling and along the walls a dozen times, then leaped out the kitchen window it had so silkily entered through only a few minutes earlier.

I had to face the facts. The coffee was gone and if I didn't get a cup or two in me fast, the other Narrator was going to appear. As I said above, my Mr. Hyde (who I will call Mr. N) is not a society-friendly person. And I could already feel him clawing his way out of my subconscious. I had to lasso Mr. N quickly and drag him back to the bog in my mind where he lives most of the time, or the world would suffer. And don't you think the world has suffered enough lately?

I looked under couch pillows and combed through the shag carpet for loose change. In only a few minutes I had collected two dollars and thirty-five cents. Hopefully, it would be enough money to get me a coffee at Lucille's Diner & Vacuum Shop, where you always find "The Best Brew & The Cleanest Crew" in town.

The tire on my Penny Farthing was flat, so I made my way to Lucille's by foot. I got about a hundred and thirty of those feet from my home when a flamboyance of flamingos surrounded me. I've already told you that they weren't the friendliest flamingos. As they taunted me while I stood on one foot trying to prove a point, a gentleman driving by in an oversized pick-up truck covered in dirt and animal fur yelled,

“Hey Chad! I told you if I ever saw you again, I’d add you to my collection of taxidermied heads on my man-cave wall.”

As you well know, my name is not Chad. It never was Chad. So I put my foot on the ground and started to run. The last thing I wanted was to have my head hanging on a wall next to jackalopes, hefelumps and jabberwockies. My head belonged on my body. Where, if I’m not wrong, all heads belong.

I ran and I ran, then I tripped on an empty coffee tin lying on the road. I hit the pavement face first and was infected with the worst road rash you’ve ever seen. I couldn’t believe how much it hurt being named Chad. But I fought through the pain and ran into Walkenton Woods. The trails in Walkenton Woods were way too small for an oversized pick-up truck, so I knew I’d be safe in there. The woods were cluttered with sticks and stones, but somehow, none of these hazards hurt me.

I was ten minutes into the woods when I spotted another coffee tin. It was lying in some ferns just off the trail. A few meters up from that I spotted another tin. And then another. It looked like the aftermath of a war between coffee and tea, and the tea had obviously left the forest victorious.

Behind me I thought I heard footsteps, but the chill this sound sent through my body made me realize it was just Mr. N. And he was close. Too close. And he was so much more terrifying than a hunter in a pick-up truck with a vendetta** against a man named Chad.

But then I heard the footsteps again. This time, I couldn’t pass them off to a side of my personality that appears when I

don't drink coffee. This time, I had to accept that I was being followed, and that the gentleman who mistook me for Chad was most likely the person following me. I was done running! For ten years I had run from so many terrible things, running now from mistaken identity seemed almost laughable. I didn't carry a rifle or a Bowie knife or a crossbow, but my mouth was filled with ammunition just as powerful as bullets and arrows and stabby stabs. My words had gotten me out of so much trouble in the past. They would surely get me out of what was bearing down on me now. I spun around... to an empty trail.

"I know someone's there," I said.

A Folgers Coffee can half-lit by an errant ray of morning sun was at my feet. At the base of a large tree only a few meters away was a Tasty Cup Coffee tin. That's when I registered the age of the tins. They were ooooooold!

Another large tree stood parallel to the one with the Tasty Coffee tin beside it. There wasn't a tin at the base of this tree, but there was a silvery-grey bare foot sticking out from behind it. The lack of mud boot, or camouflage sock covering the foot made me realize whoever or whatever the foot was attached to wasn't the hunter who hated Chads... it wasn't even human.

"I know you're behind the tree," I said. "I see your foot."

The foot darted back behind the tree.

"Most days I love games, but today is not the day to play with me," I said. "I am suffering from severe road rash, an extreme

case of mistaken identity and horrible caffeine withdrawal. All I want is a cup of coffee and my day back!”

A high-pitched squeal ripped through the forest. I covered my ears to dull the annoying sound. The squeal morphed into a more human-like yell, then into a string of English words. “Bake signal pie rhyme bones Eric mochi languish rugby popcorn whistle gelato WhatsApp astute.”

The random words took shape and became fully formed sentences. “Dingle berry lactose friend you harm mean not I just want a puppy where is the bathroom can you direct me to the nearest payphone coffee is my favourite I have a cup right here if you want it in fact I have several cups right here.”

Whatever was behind the tree really liked coffee, just like me. Math isn’t my strongest suit, but that’s when I put two and two together and got 2:34.

“Were you in my kitchen last night?” I asked.

“Kitchen Jerry that’s the ticket why do birds stand on one leg you have good coffee I want to give you a cup to say thank you for the cup you give me,” said the being behind the tree.

After it spoke, it quickly peeked out at me. Now you think I’d be more surprised, or even terrified, by the sight of a real-life alien, but if you’ve followed our story, then you’d know aliens have crossed our path many times in the past. Heck, we even hired one once to star in a commercial for our magazine. The alien I was looking at now looked a lot like the one we picked up hitchhiking in Northern England in 2008 when we were heading to Scotland to celebrate Hogmanay***.

I snapped a picture to show Ogilvy, because he just loves aliens. But my quick movement startled the alien and made him run off into the forest. If I get a chance, I'll share the photo with you, too. But please don't tell anyone about the aliens. I know I can trust you to keep their existence a secret. Right?

My first instinct was to chase after the alien, but my instincts were dulled when the rich, smell of hot coffee funnelled through my nostrils. It was the most heavenly smell ever. And it was coming from behind the tree where the alien had been hiding. I walked to the tree and peeked around it. There, standing upright on the ground was a take-out cup of coffee from Lucille's Diner & Vacuum Shop. It still had the coffee lid plug in it. Two knocked over, mostly empty coffee cups were lying next to it.

I picked up the full coffee and pulled out the plug, releasing a wisp of steam. The smell of the steam was even fuller and richer than the smell that had drawn me in. Without hesitation I tipped the cup back and emptied its contents into my mouth and down my throat. The coffee wasn't lava hot, which was a definite no no for the coffee I usually chose to consume. But this situation was anything but usual. Today, a warm cup of coffee meant yes yes.

And with each gulp of coffee I drank down, Mr. N's distance grew from me. When the coffee was gone, so too was Mr. N. I felt myself again. The pangs**** of hostility and despair were gone. The macabre skin had peeled away from the world I inhabited. I walked out of Walkenton Woods humming the Sticks and Stones adage, laughing at just how wrong the writer got it. At least in my life, on this one strange day.

I didn't go into the CTQ office. Instead, I went to the grocery store and bought the whole row of coffee bags and tins. It took three taxis to get the haul back to my home. I spent the remainder of the day hiding the coffee all over my house, ensuring there would always be enough coffee for me and for any coffee-addicted alien who might need some. But most importantly, ensuring the end of Mr. N's character arc in the CTQ story.

* a proverb or short statement expressing a general truth. (noun)

** a prolonged bitter quarrel with or campaign against someone. (noun)

*** a New Year's festival in Scotland and parts of northern England. The name is also used for the dole of bread, cake, or sweets then given to the children who go from house to house soliciting it with traditional rhymes, one of which concludes with "Rise up and gie's our Hogmanay."

**** a sudden sharp pain or painful emotion. (noun)

A Visit . . . From The Punctuation Police!

December 19, 2020

Four loud bangs woke me out of a dead sleep. It sounded like twelve large people holding one large tree trunk, ramming it against my front door with all of their might. Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

The digital alarm clock was flashing zeros, so the power had gone out at some point. I was disoriented and groggy. It felt super late. Or even worse, super early. I quietly slid out of bed and grabbed my butterfly net (because it was the only thing around me I thought I could use to protect myself) and I crept up to the door. “Who... who’s there?” I asked as big and scary like as I could. I probably sounded more like a leaf shaking, but I did the best I could.

“Is this the home of a Mr. Narrator?” A booming voice asked from the other side of the door.

“Who... who’s asking?”

“We are the police and we’ve had a complaint against a Mr. Narrator from the Crow’s Toes Quarterly Magazine. We’re following up on it. Please open the door or we’ll be forced to break it down.”

“A complaint!” I gasped. “And you you’re following up on it now!”

“This is a serious matter, Sir. Time is irrelevant. Please open the door.”

Now you can’t just open up your door to any Tom, Dick, or Nancy that bangs on it in the middle of the night. Even if they claim to be the police. It’s the oldest ploy in the book. “We’re the police. Let us in!” Then you open the door and three large FiddlyGumps push their way in and your home becomes their new playpen. Nosiree, you don’t want that! I’ve heard it takes almost a year to get rid of the smell of a FiddlyGump. So I slid on my extra-strength, middle-of-the-night-visitor chainlink lock and I opened the door just wide enough to see who was really on my front porch.

It was the police! Sort of. The glow of my porch light lit up two people. They wore police-like uniforms, but their hats were stretched two times higher than most, and they were boxier than most hats. The men stood up straight as planks and kind of resembled exclamation marks. “We need to talk to you about a very serious matter,” one of the officers said. His eyebrows looked like sideways apostrophes. His moustache looked like an upside-down parenthesis.

“You mentioned that,” I said. “May I enquire what that matter is?”

He removed a set of handcuffs from a holster on his belt and held them out in front of him. As they dangled there, they resembled a colon. “If you don’t let us in, we’ll have to force our way in and put you in these.”

“Geesh, that is serious,” I said. I had never seen police officers that looked like them, but I could tell they were legit. And serious.

I slid the lock off and slowly opened the door. The two large men, made even larger by their large, boxy hats, entered my my home, ducking as they stepped through the doorway. Once inside, they both pointed a flashlight in my eyes. “Are you Mr. Narrator from the Crow’s Toes Quarterly Magazine?” asked the one who had been doing all the talking.

“I am the Narrator, yes. And it’s just Crow Toes Quarterly Magazine.”

“Hmmm. No apostrophe s there, eh? Interesting. We may have to discuss that in more detail in the future. Right now we are following up on three separate complaints about your use of ellipses and exclamation marks. We could also throw in a comma misdemeanour, but the rules on commas are quite subjective and we’ll let that one go for now.”

“I’m sorry, what!?” I shrieked.

“Well, see right there,” the officer said. “You’ve added an exclamation mark to your question. And that’s just wrong.”

“Who has filed these complaints?”

“That’s classified information. The fear of reprisal was mentioned in one of the complaints.”

“Reprisal! Did our Staff Villain call one of these in?”

“Sir, this is serious,” the officer said for the umpteenth time. “You can not use ellipses and exclamation marks so willy nilly. So haphazardly. So unnecessarily. Especially in the case of ellipses. It’s a sign of laziness. It’s a gateway to literary deceit.”

“Well that’s just ridiculous. I use ellipses a lot, I will admit that. But I use them to help define my literary voice. An ellipses is a way to put the reader deeper into my head. My thoughts are often incomplete, so the three dots are a way to convey my drifting off into another thought. Or to show that time has passed and things have slipped away into the ether. Or to omit something I am not ready to share quite yet. You know in Greek, the word ellipses means ‘omission’.”

“Well, of course we do,” the officer said. “We’re the punctuation police.”

“It’s those omissions within the three dots that allows my readers to use their imaginations even more. It gives them a little creative license to add to our story.”

“That doesn’t sound so deceitful.”

“Of course it doesn’t,” I said, still a little snippy from having to have the conversation so late at night.

“You should have added an exclamation mark to that last quote,” the officer said. “I heard a rise in your voice.”

“Ahhhhh!!!!” I screamed.

“Great use of exclamation marks!” said the officer who hadn’t spoken yet.

“At Crow Toes Quarterly, we are all about hyperbole* and, in the case of our Staff Villain, bombast**,” I said and took ten deep breaths to calm me down. “An exclamation mark adds life and colour to a sentence. I want our words to be full of life and colour. And that shouldn’t be a crime?”

“Listen, buddy,” the punctuation police officer said. “I hear where you’re coming from and I applaud your conviction to doing things your way. But there’s the rule of literary law that must be followed. We’re here to uphold that law.”

“Who makes this law? Literature is just another form of art and art, my friend, is subjective. I paint with words and sometimes that paint goes outside the lines. Sometimes it sprinkles off the canvas and colours something it wasn’t meant to colour. We have to have a little leeway in our art, or all of this is meaningless. My words will be no different than his words or her words or your words. If we can’t go outside of norms, we become robots. And that last thing we want is for robots to be writing our stories.”

The quiet officer chuckled.

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

“Cup your hand to your ear,” he said quietly. “And really listen.”

“Hey, Mark, keep your yapper shut!” the talkative officer snapped. He turned his focus back onto me. “Have you heard of The Chicago Manual of Style***?”

I nodded.

“It’s the book of rules we like to follow, especially when folks are writing fiction. I understand and commend you for the way you choose to punctuate. And I can let your excessive use of exclamation marks go. A little more volume isn’t always the worst thing. But I am going to have to ask you to reel in the ellipses. I am also going to have to ask you to use them properly hence forth.”

“Properly? Wait, did you say this is fiction?”

“From this blog post forward I am going to need you to put a space between each dot in the ellipses. Is that something you can do, Mr. Narrator?”

I pinched my arm to make sure I was awake. The whole scenario had taken on a dreamlike turn. I had heard of the Grammar Police before, but the Punctuation Police was something totally new and out of the blue. The requests were so odd. Are people really so serious about punctuation that they’d alert authorities when they were distressed by it?

“Is that something you can do?” the officer repeated with a little more firmness in his voice.

“I can . . . try.”

“Good,” he said. “That’s a very good start.”

The officer wrote me up a warning and said any more complaints would land me in literary jail for thirty days. When he and his partner left, I had to read the warning a hundred times over just to reassure myself it was all real.

Sleep was out of the question for the rest of the night. That's for sure! My heart was a timpani and the beat it was playing was a chaotic soundtrack to a horror movie. So I took to my kitchen table with pen and pad of paper in hand and I began the process of learning to write my ellipses according to the "law."

It didn't go well.

Literary jail can't be that bad. Can it?

* Hyperbole (n) – exaggerated statements or claims not meant to be taken literally.

** Bombast (n) – high-sounding language with little meaning, used to impress people.

*** The Chicago Manual of Style - is a style guide for American English published since 1906 by the University of Chicago Press. Its 18 editions have prescribed writing and citation styles widely used in publishing. And some people are very very very serious about its rules.

A Penny Between Lenny's Toes

December 29, 2020

Around midnight last night, as I was making the last edit to a short story going into the March issue of Crow Toes Quarterly, I heard the distinct sound of an envelope being slid under the office door. This happened a lot in the old days, when good people tried to warn us about all the bad people who were out to get us. But these are the new days and so few people know where we are, so I found the sound quite startling. I jumped from my swivel chair and ran to the door, hoping my ears had been playing a trick on me. Alas, they had not ...

Scrawled in childlike letters on the front of the envelope were the words, A PENNY FOR YOUR THOUGHTS. I carefully slid a folded piece of paper out of the envelope and read it under the desk lamp in my office.

Dear Mr. Narrator and the rest of the CTQ Staff, the note read. Twenty years ago I was four years old. I vaguely recall

having a brother named Leonard during that time. I say vaguely, because it is quite hard to recall memories from that young of an age. But I see flashes of another little boy in our kitchen and sitting with me in front of the TV. I hear his name in my head. When I ask my mom about these vague memories, she gets weird and says it's all in my imagination. I have spent the last two years investigating the existence of this brother I know I had. And what I have uncovered in that investigation is shocking, and probably to most people, quite unbelievable. But I have read past issues of CTQ. I know what the four of you, and Christopher, too, have been through in the past. I know that you will believe me, and that you will help me get the story out so this nefarious practice will finally come to an end . . . so big brothers and big sisters everywhere will stop disappearing. Please, Mr. Narrator, meet me at Lucille's Diner & Vacuum Shop at 9am tomorrow so I can share the story of my brother Lenny and the pennies he found between his toes. Sincerely,

The name of the letter's author had been erased and left blank. I could see the indent of the letter z and the letter q under the tiny bits of eraser clinging to the paper. At least, I think it was the letter z and the letter q. It didn't matter. I was intrigued by the story behind Leonard's mysterious disappearance, so I rushed home and went to bed. I wanted to be rested and ready for the mysterious meeting.

When I arrived at Lucille's Diner & Vacuum Shop at 9am sharp, it wasn't hard to spot the man I was looking for. He was tucked into the corner of a booth made for six people. In a café full of the cleanest, happiest looking people around, he looked disheveled and morose*. I stepped up to the booth and he welcomed me to sit with the subtle nod of his head. I

slid into the booth and motioned for a cup of coffee. When Lucille dropped it off at the table, the man across from me turned his face so she couldn't get a good look at him. Lucille gave me that "Everything all right?" look and when I gave her the "All's good" look back, she returned to disassembling the motor of a vacuum that appeared to be sixty or seventy years old.

"Do you drink coffee?" I asked. "Would you like a cup? Lucille's personal roast is one of the best I've ever had. She calls it her Classic Pot Roast. How funny is that? Because pot roast is typically a beef dish made by slow-cooking a usually tough cut of beef in moist heat, sometimes with vegetables."

The man wasn't interested in chitchat, or coffee. "Just listen," he said, and then began his story. "One night ... "

Now, I need to preface this before I go into the man's story ... the only changes I have made to the story have been the removal of his name and to the perspective, from a first-person point of view** story to a third-person point of view*** story.

And now, the story of the pennies between Lenny's toes:

One night Lenny woke to the sound of spare change dropping on his bedroom floor.

Usually, Lenny woke up to his mother yelling at him, "Get up! You've slept in! We're going to be late for school!" Or to

his younger brother jumping up on his chest and dangling a spit string precariously over his face. So the sound of spare change dropping on the floor was odd. Especially, since it was still dark out. And especially since Lenny was an eight-year old kid who was broke. According to his mother, eight-year olds had no need for money when all the money they needed “was already in their mothers’ wallets.” Whatever that meant.

Lenny probably should have been more frightened by the sound of spare change dropping on his floor in the middle of the night, but sometimes fear can be crumpled up and tossed in the waste bin when curiosity takes over. And Lenny was curious. He loved the idea of not being broke. Of having a little spare change to buy a pack of gum that tasted like soap or a frozen pop shaped like a ghost with a gumball in its mouth. So he reached out for his bedside lamp, and after a moment of fumbling around looking for the switch, flipped it on.

Lenny threw off his blanket and shuffled down to the end of the bed. It was the best vantage point to see his whole room. Nothing was out of place. The floor was still littered with puzzle pieces and building bricks and action figure accessories. But there wasn’t a coin anywhere to be seen. Not a nickel. Not a dime. Not a quarter. Not even one of those funny fifty-cent pieces he’d only seen a few times in his life.

“What a crime,” he whispered. “That sound was as clear as day. That was money hitting the floor. There should be coins everywhere. Maybe ... maybe it was just a dream.”

Disappointed that his imagination had tricked him into believing he would no longer be broke, just as it had tricked

him the night before into believing he was invisible (which was quickly proven false when he tried to sneak another salted-caramel praline macaroon and his mother slapped his hand away from the box), Lenny grabbed his blanket and shuffled himself back into a sleeping position. That's when he felt it. There between his big toe and his second toe on his left foot. Squished in with the toe jam and the bedding fluff. He looked down at his foot and saw a copper coloured half circle poking out from between his toes. He took a hold of it and pulled. It made a squishy, gushy mushy sound as it came out of the crack.

The closer Lenny brought the strange object to his face, the more he could smell the toe jam. And it wasn't near as pleasant as the strawberry jam his mom put on his toast in the mornings. He plugged his nose with his free fingers and he inspected the item that had been between his toes. It was a coin, but not like any coin he had ever seen before. It was a different colour than all the other coins he had ever seen and it said "1 cent" on it.

"I've seen five cents and I've seen ten cents and I've seen twenty-five cents, but I've never seen one of these before," Lenny whispered. "One is such a small number. It would sure take a lot of these to buy myself anything. If it's even real."

Lenny dropped the 1-cent coin into a Mason jar half-filled with marbles that was on his bedside table, and he went to sleep.

At breakfast, as his mother scraped burnt bits off the toast with a butter knife and his brother scraped the dried boogery bits off the sides of his nostrils with his pinky finger, Lenny

asked the question that was on his mind when he woke up. "Is there such thing as a 1-cent coin?"

"Of course there is," his mother said. "It's called a penny."

"Why have I never seen a penny before last night?" Lenny asked.

"Probably because they stopped making them in our country just before you were born," his mother answered.

"Well that would make cents," Lenny said and chuckled. "Get it? See what I did there?"

"Wait," his mother said and threw the burnt toast she had been trying to save into the garbage. "What do you mean before last night?"

"I found a penny between my toes in the middle of the night," Lenny said. "I didn't know what it was until now."

"That's a funny place to find a penny," his mother said and placed another piece of bread in the toaster. "As long as you don't wake up with pennies over your eyes, it'll be okay."

"What does that mean?" Lenny asked.

But before his mother could answer, the toast started to burn again. "Ahhh," she said ejecting it quickly. "Forget it. Today, it's a spoon full of peanut butter for the both of you. Eat up and get in the car."

Lenny didn't think about the penny the rest of the day. Instead,

he thought about pencil erasers shaped like UFOs and about how far he could see if he were on Bigfoot's shoulders. And when darkness fell and day became night and his mother's shouts of, "Bedtime!" echoed through the house, still, the strange happening from the night before did not enter his mind.

Lenny woke up the next morning, and there, lodged between his big toe and his second toe was another penny. This time, the strange discovery filled Lenny with fear. And a desire to get rid of the green, gushy gunk that was building up between his toes. He pulled out the penny and jumped out of bed. "Mom! Mom! Mom!" he yelled as he ran through the house. "I found another penny in my toes! And I think my toes are sick!"

"What are you going on about?" his mother said as she stepped out from her bedroom.

"Look! Look" Lenny said and held the penny up to her face.

"Oh, goodness," his mother said and plugged her nose. "What's that terrible smell?"

"It's the gunk between my toes," Lenny said. "But that's not the scariest part. Someone is putting pennies into the gunk while I'm sleeping."

"As long as it's just the two pennies," his mother said, "and as long as they're not on your eyes, it's just fine for now."

"Why do you say that?" Lenny asked. "Why wouldn't it be fine if they were on my eyes?"

“Maaaaaaaahhhhhhhmmmmmm!” the scream of Lenny’s brother echoed through the house.

“Your brother needs me,” his mother said and dashed away.

“But I need you, too,” Lenny said to himself.

That night before bed, Lenny drank two cans of soda and sprinted around his house for five minutes. His mom often told him soda was full of sugar and caffeine, two things that gave him “the wrong kind of energy.” His mother also told him, “Try exercising instead. That creates good energy.”

Lenny needed all the energy he could get if he was going to stay up all night and catch whoever was putting pennies between his toes.

With his heart racing and his eyes wide he crawled into bed and waited.

And waited and waited.

He woke to the sound of little claws scritch and scratching the hardwood floor under his bed. “I can’t believe I fell asleep,” he whispered.

The light was still on and morning sun was creeping into the room, so he quickly jumped out of bed and lifted the blanket so he could see what was underneath. “Aha,” he said. “I got you!”

But all he caught was one of his wind-up robots on its side, spinning round and round.

Lenny hung his head in disappointment. And that's when he saw it. Another penny was between his toes. He now had double the disappointment. And that was way too much disappointment for a kid to handle. He removed the penny and dropped it into the Mason jar with all the other pennies.

Night after night Lenny did everything he could to try and catch whomever, or whatever was putting pennies between his toes. One night he built a robot with his building blocks that had rubber bands and gears and a little motor that opened and closed the robot's hand. He placed the robot next to him on his pillow and placed his earlobe in the robot's hand, hoping that the constant pinching of his earlobe would keep him awake. One night he made his brother sleep on the floor next to his bed. His brother was a restless sleeper and when he was asleep he constantly shouted out about fireants and pickled artichokes. Surely, Lenny thought, all the commotion and creepiness would keep him awake. One night he even filled his pillow up with ice cubes, hoping the shock of the cold against his brain would keep him awake. But of course, none of these things ever worked. The battery in the robot's motor always died. The nights his brother was in his room, the boy slept through the night without a peep. And the ice always melted and the pillow always returned to room temperature. Lenny always fell asleep. And every morning a penny was always there between his toes.

A week passed. And then two. After the first couple of nights, Lenny stopped telling his mother about the pennies. She had nothing more to offer other than her relief the pennies were not on his eyes. As long as they weren't on his eyes, everything was fine. He tried asking his teacher Mrs. Fritz what pennies on the eyes meant and Mrs. Fritz said something like "only the

dead should worry about such things” and returned to scolding one of his classmates for eating chalk. The toes were so far from the eyes, eventually Lenny let go of this funny statement, too. And as the weeks passed, the Mason jar next to Lenny’s bed got heavier and heavier. Pennies weren’t worth much, but if you had a lot of them you could still buy stuff. Eventually, Lenny turned his focus to the jar and not to the source of the pennies. If he could fill the jar, he could definitely buy one of those foam airplane kits he’d wanted since his friend Jeremy got one. He’d climb up on the roof when it was windy and he’d fly that plane to the next town over ... the town that was named after a male duck. Maybe that’s what they wanted, he thought. Maybe they want me to buy a foam airplane.

It was a bad dream about furry creatures with long, sharp teeth nibbling on his earlobes that woke him in the middle of the night. Lenny opened his eyes wide and felt something cold fall onto his eyeballs. Two somethings actually. Two somethings that had been resting on each of his eyelids. He sat up quickly in bed and heard the sound of coins falling onto his bedroom floor. It had been months since he had heard that sound. He fumbled around in the dark searching for the light switch. Lenny hoped what he had heard bouncing on the floor wasn’t what was just in his eyes. He flipped the light switch and saw them instantly. Two shiny pennies.

“MOM!” he yelled.

His mother swung open his bedroom door and out of breath said, “Whhhhhhaaaaaatttt?”

“The pennies on the floor,” Lenny said. “When I woke up, they were on my eyes.”

“What? Oh no,” his mother said. “No no no no ...”

She spotted the jar of pennies next to Lenny’s bed. “You only told me about a couple of pennies between your toes,” she said as she picked up the jar. “I thought maybe you had just accidentally stepped on them and didn’t notice right away.”

“There’s been one every morning for more than three months now,” Lenny said.

“Oh dear, no,” his mother said and dumped the jar of pennies and marbles out onto Lenny’s desk. The marbles rolled off the desk onto the floor, and then headed off in several directions. She counted the pennies, two at a time, back into the jar. “... 96 ... 98,” she said as the last two pennies on the desk were dropped into the jar. She looked at Lenny tucked into his bed and said, “I can’t believe it’s already that time.”

“You can’t believe it’s already what time?” Lenny asked.

His mother picked up the pennies off the floor and deposited them in the jar. “One hundred pennies,” she said. “One dollar doesn’t buy you much these days. But for me, it bought me the world. And now, they’re buying it back.”

Still holding the jar of pennies, she leaned over and kissed Lenny on the forehead. A tear fell from her eye onto Lenny’s cheek. “Good night, son. You’ll find no more pennies between your toes when you wake. I promise.”

“Well how do you know that?” Lenny asked.

“Other than those smelly feet of yours, Leonard, you were

absolutely perfect. You were just what I needed to keep my spirits up when I thought I would never have a child of my own.”

“Mom, what are you talking about?” Lenny asked. “I am your child. I am ...”

Lenny’s mother gave her son one last sad smile, turned off his bedside lamp and left his bedroom, shutting the door behind her. She took the pennies with her.

The room had never felt so dark. It was too dark. Lenny reached out to turn on his bedside lamp, but there was nothing where the switch had been only seconds earlier. “What the heck is going on?” he whispered.

A car turned onto his street and the car’s headlights briefly shone into his bedroom. In that moment the room lit up, Lenny saw them. Thousands of them. They were squeezing up through the cracks in the floorboards. Out through old nail holes in the walls. In from under the closet door. It was only a second or two that Lenny saw them, but it was enough time to see that his mind was obviously playing tricks on him. They were adorable. Furry creatures with big eyes. Rabbit like. But not rabbits. Kitten like. But not kittens. Puppy like. But not puppies. They were meshing together and growing and rushing towards him like a furry wave from an ocean of fur.

And when their hot little bodies crashed down and enveloped him, he felt nothing but warmth and safety and joy. The wave picked him up and carried him out of bed. There was no fear. Just a strange sort of acceptance of what was happening. The

hot, furry bodies squeezed him and squashed him and then they sucked him down with them through one of the cracks in his bedroom floorboards. His arms felt furry and warm. His eyes grew and he could now see in the dark. Lenny no longer thought about mothers or brothers or school or candy or foam airplane kits. Lenny only thought about one thing: placing pennies between the toes of a little girl whose time it was to return home.

A town away from where Lenny once lived (a town named after a male duck), an eight-year old girl named Wendy woke when a morning sun ray reached across her face and tickled her nose. She stretched her arms, gave one last big yawn and jumped out of bed. When her feet touched the hardwood floor, there was a funny clicking sound. That's when Wendy saw it. There between her big toe and her second toe was the shiniest penny she had ever seen.

“Please, dig deeper,” he said upon finishing his tale. “I know how brilliant Poinsettia Park is at finding the truth. I know if anyone can prove the existence of these creatures and my brother, it is she. It is Crow Toes Quarterly.”

He quickly slid out of the booth and ran out of Lucille's Diner & Vacuum Shop. It was, indeed, quite the tale he had spun. But his demeanour indicated that he really believed he had discovered something he shouldn't have, and that he feared reprisal for sharing this discovery with the world.

I had a million questions running through my mind after he left Lucille's. Like how did he get such specific dialogue from

his brother and mother? How did he know what the creatures looked like? Did the girl named Wendy disappear, too? Why did he refuse to say Drakestown? And what about those pennies on Lenny's eyes? Did that mean Lenny had actually died and this was all just an elaborate distraction from the truth? So much was said, but so much is still unknown. After my fifth cup of coffee, I left Lucille's Diner & Vacuum Shop with the seed of a much bigger story nestled in my hand. All it needed was belief and hard work and time, and I'm sure we could make it grow. My only fear is that it'll grow into something we can't control ... into something that will set us down a similar path as we went down more than a decade ago.

Everything is still so exciting and new and full of potential.

Is this a seed I really want to plant right now?

* morose (adj.): sullen and ill-tempered.

** First person point of view is a point of view where the writer (or fictional narrator) relates information from their perspective, using pronouns like "I," "my," and "we."

*** In third-person point of view, the author is narrating a story about the characters, referring to them by name, or using the third-person pronouns "he," "she," and "they."

The Not-So-Obvious Danger Of Living On The Left Side Of A Volcano

January 8, 2021

My house is precariously built onto the side of a mountain, and that mountain is actually an active volcano. I know it's not the smartest place to build a house or to live, but according to my realtor (who did everything in his power to persuade me not to see the place), the land was initially dirt cheap, because most people in their right mind would never ever live on the side of an active volcano.

“So I guess the positives of living on the side of a volcano,” he had said after our viewing, “would be that there's not much chance of having neighbours constantly asking you to borrow some sugar, or your lawnmower, or your child to come back to their place and set up a new computer for them.” He had also said in that same breath, “I'm sure a place like this, in the middle of Nowheresville and Boringtown, is super attractive to some weirdo introvert out there.”

Well, I guess I'm that weirdo introvert. And you guessed right

... he was no longer my realtor after the viewing.

The BIG problem with living on the side of a mountain, which is an active volcano, is the constant threat of the volcano erupting. Have you ever played the “Floor is Lava” game? In it you pretend that lava is covering the floor of the living room or bedroom or jail cell you’re playing it in and you have to get from one part of the room to another without touching the floor, or else you burn. The only thing I want burned is my lasagna and my firewood in the winter. The game “Floor Is Lava” becomes a possible reality when living on the side of a volcano, and that can cause a layer of stress to everyday life that most people don’t have to live with. But when weighing pros and cons, the pros of living on the side of a mountain that is actually an active volcano, far outweigh the cons. At least for me.

Right now, you’re probably asking yourself, “Where the heck is he going with this?” and if that’s not what you’re asking yourself, then it’s probably, “I wonder if I have another can of escargot in the pantry?” Because that odd question is in my mind right now, and I never have a hankering for escargot. But if you are asking yourself, “Where is he going with this?” then I will tell you. Yesterday, before my morning wake-up alarm went off, another high-pitched scream wailed out of my phone’s tiny speaker. It sounded like a thousand unhappy three-year-old children having a tantrum at the same time. I grabbed the phone off my bedside table and muted it, then read the flashing text on the phone’s screen.

HIGH ALERT: MOUNT HAVARTI ON ERUPTION WATCH. IF YOU ARE WITHIN A 100 KILOMETRE RADIUS OF MOUNT HAVARTI, EVACUATE NOW!

Well, I'm not within a 100-kilometre radius of Mount Havarti ... I'm literally living on the side of it! Suffice it to say, I jumped out of bed, made a cup of coffee, ran around in circles for five minutes screaming, "Oh golly, no! Oh golly, no," then packed my essentials: 1 pair of clean underwear, 1 pair of clean socks, a toothbrush and deodorant, 1 pack of unopened O-Pee-Chee hockey cards from 1984, my signed copy of Lemony Snicket's book *THE COMPOSER IS DEAD*, a whittling knife, 4 unsharpened NO. 4 pencils, 1 pencil sharpener, 1 notepad, 1 music box that plays the theme song from *THE GOONIES*, 2 Mandarin oranges and 1 three-year old packet of white sugar.

Within minutes of the alert, I received calls from each CTQ Staff member asking about our V.E.Ps, or Volcanic Eruption Procedures. I had never considered this when writing up the office safety manual. I had considered being flooded out by an overflowing water cooler, and cans of root beer tumbling out of the fridge and knocking you in the head, and even being cut by our Staff Villain's sharp wit, but a volcanic explosion had never crossed my mind. Not once. Never.

I was freaking out on the inside, but in my calmest, coolest voice I told each staff member to meet at the office ASAP (as soon as possible and not as slow as possible as our Staff Villain likes to say). I also asked Poinsettia to bring her hot-air balloon. Really, it was the only thing I could think of on the spot ... and really, it was the only safe way to get out of town fast, as long as we didn't fly over the volcano just as it was exploding.

With my essentials packed and with a fresh cup of coffee in my travel mug, I took one last stroll around the house

and whispered, “I barely knew you, but I think ... I think I already love you. Take care, my new friend. Hopefully, the mountain just has indigestion and needs to let off a little steam. Hopefully, we’ll be together again soon.”

I left my home and looked high up the mountain rising behind it. A wisp of steam rose from the peak of the mountain. The steam curled and danced and meshed with passing clouds. It was a hypnotic sight I could have spent hours looking at, but just in the minute or two I was standing there, the wisp of steam became a thick stream of steam and then an even thicker funnel of steam, reminding me of my tea kettle when the water for my evening cup of spicy Chai tea has come to a rapid boil.

I Ubered a snowmobile to take me into the city. The gentleman driving the snowmobile was named Kent. Kent wore a puffy blue snowsuit and snow goggles with two different coloured lenses, one red and one blue. He had a moustache that had ice particles clinging to it. “You’re my last passenger, buddy,” he said when he pulled up in front of my house. “And this ride will have a thirty-percent danger charge added to it. Are we still a go, or is it a big fat no?”

“Well, I can’t get down the mountain road on my Penny Farthing, so you’re my only option,” I responded.

“Soooooooooooo?”

“We’re a go!” I said and climbed onto the back of the snowmobile. “Now go!”

The staff were gathered inside the lines of parking spot 237,

our designated meeting spot should a fire ever break out in the CTQ office building. Kent pulled the snowmobile up to the top of the spot and let the engine rev as I paid the fare plus thirty percent plus a tip. I watched him speed out of sight, then turned around to greet the staff. None of them had noticed my arrival. Ogilvy was walking in circles with his hands held behind his back. He was singing Bob Marley's "Everything's Gonna Be Alright" and looking at the ground, kicking pebbles and bottle caps as he walked. Poinsettia was looking up at the sky and tapping a pencil against the notepad she always carried on her. I assumed she was calculating wind speed and distance achieved within a certain time frame while traveling in a hot-air balloon (but I have been known to be wrong with my assumptions). And our Staff Villain ... he was sitting cross-legged at the end of the parking spot holding onto a stick. He was running the index finger of his right hand along the stick. When he saw me looking at him, he said, "Oh good, you're finally here. Do you happen to have your whittling knife on you? I just can't seem to get anywhere sharpening this stick with my finger."

"This is no time to whittle," I said. "Mount Havarti is going to blow its top and we need to be as far away from it as we possibly can. Have the magazine files been saved to the cloud?"

Our Staff Villain shrugged his shoulders.

"Yes," Poinsettia replied. "It was the first thing I did after the warning went out."

"I also put them on a USB key," Ogilvy said. "I'll leave it in one of the clouds we pass by when we're up in the balloon. Then the files will be double safe."

“Great!” I said. “Now let’s get in that balloon and get the heck out of here!”

We filed into the balloon, which Poinsettia had tied down to some bike racks on the other side of the parking lot.

“Okay, crew,” she said as she untied the knots and lit the balloon’s burner. “It’s been a while since you last flew with me. Remember, hot-air balloons float because warm air is lighter than cool air. To get the balloon flying, the air inside the balloon is heated to over 200 degrees. That means, don’t get your hands or your hair anywhere near the burner. The only things I like to smell burning are my lasagna and my firewood during a cold winter day.”

While the air inside the balloon heated, I wondered if some universal force was trying to tell us we should have never come out of hiding ... we should have never thought restarting Crow Toes Quarterly was a good idea. The world has changed so much in ten years. It has become so reliant on technology and apps and screens, why would anyone be interested in reading words on paper. And as my thoughts got darker and bleaker, so too did the sky, because of the smoke that was barrelling out of the top of Mount Havarti and blanketing the sun.

The balloon began to rise and rise and rise. We all placed our hands on the edge of the basket and looked down at the shrinking world below us. A snake of cars and RVs and golf carts was winding its way out of town. The giant inflatable gorilla on the top of **GARY’S GREAT SLEEPS N’ MORE** mattress store, that is the first thing people see when they come into town, was deflated and slumped down over the entrance

to the store, probably sad that he had been left to burn in the flow of lava that would soon be coursing through the streets.

“We barely knew you, city,” our Staff Villain muttered. “So, it’s not like I’ve made any emotional attachments to you ... I’ll be okay with this.” He turned away from us and quickly moved to the other side of the balloon basket. To show any sort of remorse would go against every villain creed there is. But I could tell by his tone of voice and his actions, he was just as upset as we were about the possibility of losing everything. Again.

As upset as I was about the situation at hand, I was happy to see the calm evacuation taking place below us. If Mount Havarti was going to explode, no lives would be lost. And I took great comfort in that. Things can always be replaced, a wise person once told me. Lives can not. Unless you’re playing a video game. And just when the thought of an 8-bit balloon trying to beat a final boss that was shaped like an angry mountain with steam coming out of its one ear crossed my mind, the loudest BANG I have ever heard tore across the sky. Invisible waves of energy pushed the balloon sideways causing us all to fall to the floor and grab hold of whatever we could to stay inside the basket. Poinsettia fought hard with the pressure and the levers and the pulleys to get the balloon straight again. And when she did, we all looked toward Mount Havarti, which was suddenly a third shorter than it had been only seconds before. A mushroom cloud of steam and smoke and debris grew from what was now the top of the mountain.

I didn’t want to watch the lava pour down the mountain and destroy everything in its path, but I couldn’t look away.

Ogilvy reached out and grabbed my hand. And I reached out and grabbed Poinsettia's hand. And she reached out for our Staff Villain's hand ... and to my surprise, he took a hold of it. No words passed between us. We chose to process what we were seeing and what we were about to see in our own way. It was going to be bad, but we knew we were going to get through whatever it was, because we were together. And because we were alive.

After a minute or so, the goopy, sloopy, gushy, mushy lava appeared. But something was not right about it. It still flowed down the sides of the mountain, slow and lazy like yogurt flows down the side of the bowl when you miscalculate how much you poured into it. But the lava wasn't glowing orange and red. And it was making my tummy rumble.

"I've been hung over molten lava several times in my life," our Staff Villain said. "I know what lava looks like and that is not it. That looks more like ... like ..."

"Well geez, you're right," Ogilvy said, cutting off our Staff Villain's train of thought, "that doesn't look like lava at all. No, that looks just like melted marshmallow!"

TO BE CONTINUED ...

Inside A Book With A Marshmallow Covered Cover

January 16, 2021

A CONTINUATION OF: The Not-So-Obvious Danger of Living On The Left Side Of A Volcano

A hot chocolate topped with marshmallows is one of life's great pleasures. So it wasn't a surprise in the least when our Staff Villain shouted, "Well, oh my geez! Turn this balloon around and turn up the heat on the stove. I'm suddenly craving hot chocolate topped with marshmallows!"

We've seen some strange things in our time with Crow Toes Quarterly, but a melted-marshmallow-like substance flowing out of a volcano was something completely new to us. If indeed it was marshmallow flowing out of Mount Havarti. And if it was marshmallow, my concern was no longer my house burning down, but now being chewed apart when the animals of the forest returned and began feasting on it. Squirrels are particularly nuts about marshmallow, you know.

“That can’t be marshmallow,” Poinsettia said. “It takes several ingredients to make marshmallow and none of those ingredients exist inside mountains, except maybe salt ... and water.”

“Maybe, just maybe,” said our Staff Villain, “somebody used the inside of the mountain like a big mixing bowl and they mixed all the other ingredients together in there and when the mountain heated up, the magic happened.”

“That’s not how marshmallows are made,” Poinsettia said. “And even if they were made that way, how could someone possibly do that? And why would they possibly do that?”

“Who knows,” said our Staff Villain. “Why do people do any of the things they do? To fight boredom? To find adventure? To take a journey north of Normal? To have a story to tell at Janine and David’s stuffy dinner party next Thursday night? To try something new and see if it works? Who really knows!”

A news helicopter flew by us, its propeller causing enough wind to push us from overtop the forest to overtop the freeway several miles away. I found Poinsettia’s faerie-spotting binoculars in a toolbox on the floor of the balloon’s basket and I focused the binoculars on Mount Havarti’s blown top and the substance flowing out of it. It flowed so slow. It wasn’t even a snail’s pace slow. No siree! it was more a sleeping sloth’s pace slow (say that ten times in a row). And it flowed at that pace over my house and into the forest below. But it did not flow any further than that. No, siree, no!

Our cellphones all pinged at the same time, alerting us to

the end of Mount Havarti's eruption alert and to the city's sidestep from destruction.

From our vantage point high up above we could see cars suddenly making u-turns and heading back into the city. We could see CLOSED signs being flipped to OPEN. And we could see the giant inflatable gorilla on top of the mattress store pumping itself up, welcoming everyone back to Normal with opening arms.

"How close to my house do you think you could land this?" I asked Poinsettia. "I need to know if it really is marshmallow that just flowed out of the volcano and I need to start the process of cleaning it up, whatever that white stuff is."

"I've been flying hot-air balloons since I was a little girl," she replied. "I can land Hemingway just about anywhere."

Ah yes, I forgot to mention that Poinsettia's balloon is named Hemingway. She once had a dog named Hemingway, too. And a sailboat named Hemingway. And a ventriloquist dummy. You'd think Hemingway was her favourite author, or something. But he's not. She's more a fan of Twain and Lewis and Shelley and Faulkner. As am I. Though, Hemingway did write one of my favourite passages on writing. In his essay, *OLD NEWSMAN WRITES: A LETTER FROM CUBA*, he writes, "All good books are alike in that they are truer than if they had really happened and after you are finished reading one you will feel that all that happened to you and afterwards it all belongs to you; the good and the bad, the ecstasy, the remorse, and sorrow, the people and the places and how the weather was. If you can get so that you can give that to people, then you are a writer." It's what I have tried to give my

readers my whole writing life. Whether I am successful at it is still to be determined. But once again, I digress.

Poinsettia pulled one of the levers dangling from inside the balloon and we began to descend. The closer we got to my house, the sweeter the air around us smelled. With hints of maraschino cherry and caramel, it was hard to deny the dessert-like nature of the white substance that had flowed after the volcano erupted. Our Staff Villain was rubbing his hands and licking his lips the whole way down. Little explosions of memories long forgotten suddenly popped off in my brain. And then, the realization came. It wasn't beyond our Staff Villain to concoct such an epic scheme for such a small payoff.

The balloon landed and bobbed up and down and swayed with the movement of the gelatinous substance we had landed on. Poinsettia dropped the balloons' weights, which were sucked into the gelatinous substance, but eventually hit a stable bottom and secured the balloon. When we found our "sea legs" and balanced ourselves, we exited the basket. Our Staff Villain dropped to his knees once we were all out and he scooped up a handful of the substance. In one big bite, he gobbled up everything in his hand. "Mmmm, mmm good," he said and scooped another handful.

It was all too shady.

It was all too convenient.

"Did you have anything to do with this SV?" I asked. "I know you have friends named Janine and David. Did you do this so you had a story to tell at their dinner party next week?"

He stood up, balanced himself, put his hand on his chest and stumbled backward in what only can be described as feigned exasperation. Feign is just a fancy way of saying pretend. His dramatic response to my question made Ogilvy and Poinsettia narrow their eyes and widen their sense of distrust in him, too. “Why are you all looking at me like that?” he asked. “Do you think I’d really go to all the trouble of making hundreds of thousands of gallons of marshmallow sauce and a volcano explode just so I could make a dull as dishwater dinner party a little more exciting?”

“Yes,” we all said at the same time.

“Well, I have never been so offended,” he said. “I really thought we turned a new leaf here. Ugh, I hate that saying. I really thought this was a fresh start with the new CTQ. Out with the bad. In with the good and all that. You were always so quick to blame me for a lot of the bad things that happened to us in the past. I’m not ashamed to tell you that that hurt my feelings. Even though I was to blame for a lot of that stuff. I may have a gruff exterior and a no-nonsense attitude, but I am all mushy and gushy on the inside. I still bleed when you cut me. And right now, this cut is going deep.”

His moustache was twitching, like he was holding back tears, or holding in a gut-busting laugh. I couldn’t tell which. I remember our Staff Villain telling me once about an acting class he took. “It takes more than just wanting to be a villain to be a villain,” he had told me. “Sometimes, you also have to learn to play the part.”

“This eruption was a huge inconvenience to folks,” I said. “Not to mention, quite terrifying. I want to believe that you

had nothing to do with this, but I also know how fond you are of the words ‘inconvenience’ and ‘terrifying.’”

“This is just silly,” he said. “Ogilvy’s the one who first said it looked like marshmallow. Remember? Remember? I couldn’t find the words to describe it. Maybe Ogilvy had something to do with it?”

“What are the ingredients of marshmallow?” asked Poinsettia.

Without hesitation, our Staff Villain said, “Gelatin, sugar, corn syrup, salt, water, vanilla, icing sugar and corn starch.”

“Aha,” Ogilvy said. “I thought marshmallows were made from refrigerated clouds and unicorn spittle. There’s no way I could have done this.”

“Listen, just because I love marshmallows and I hate boring dinner parties, doesn’t mean I’m suspect Numero Uno,” our Staff Villain said. “Maybe it was a natural occurrence. Maybe a transport plane accidentally dropped all those ingredients in the little hole that used to be at the very top of the mountain. Maybe a million things. The three of you need to step back and really make sure you want to go down this path of accusation. It could lead us all to a dangerous precipice. You know what happens when you fall over a precipice?”

He didn’t wait for our answers.

“You don’t ever come back,” he said. “And by you, I mean me. What I’m trying to say is we’re on a very dangerous precipice

right now and through all this unfounded accusation, I'm losing my balance. A slight breeze and I might just go over."

"Now just a second, SV," I said. "We've been together again for a little less than two months. A lot of what's being said right now is because of our past experiences with you. You can't deny some of the crummy things you did to us and to the world."

"I would never deny such things. In fact, I am very proud of those things."

"Exactly," I said. "So you can't blame us for thinking some of that old Staff Villain is still in there."

He twirled his moustache and took a nibble of the marshmallow glob in his hand. "I understand what you're saying, and I am now stepping away from the precipice," he said and took a dramatic step toward us. "And now that I have stepped away and danger is no longer imminent, you ... all of you must believe me when I say, I have nothing to do with this. Don't get me wrong, I wish I did come up with an elaborate plan to make a volcano spew out melted marshmallow and disrupt the day for thousands of people, but I've been too busy trying to figure out how to get the ink cartridges into the new printer in our office. I haven't had time to do anything villainous since coming back to CTQ."

Ogilvy walked over to our Staff Villain, wobbling the whole way. He tugged on our Staff Villain's pant leg and looked way up into his eyes. "I believe you Mr. V.," Ogilvy said. "And I'm sorry I doubted you."

“I believe you, too,” said Poinsettia. “And I am also sorry for doubting you. It’s not like me at all to lose my objectivity* so quickly.”

“I believe you, too, SV,” I said just as a scurry of squirrels appeared. They swarmed the area around my house, just like I feared they would. The smell of all the chocolate I keep in my cupboards next to my coffee, mixed with the smell of the marshmallow was too enticing for the squirrels to ignore. “Oh no, they’re going to gnaw thousands of little holes in my house and nothing is worse than wind blowing through a thousand little holes. The screaming and wailing will be terrible! I’ll never sleep again.”

“I have an idea,” our Staff Villain said and wandered in a wobbly way back to Hemingway’s basket. He went behind the basket and began rocking it back and forth until he could get enough momentum to tip it over.

“Hey!” Poinsettia shouted. “What are you doing to Hemingway?”

“If we’re going to save the Narrator’s house, we’re going to have to take drastic measures!” he shouted back. “Poinsettia, how do I fire up the burner?”

Suddenly, we all figured out what our Staff Villain was doing and ran over to help him with his plan. Poinsettia unclasped the balloon from the basket, letting it deflate and fall onto the marshmallow behind us. Then she lit the burner. If you’ve ever been out camping, roasting marshmallows over a fire pit late into the night, then you know just how susceptible marshmallow is to fire. There’s a true science to getting the

perfect roast on the skin of a marshmallow. If the marshmallow is in the flame for even a second too long, it catches on fire and burns down to nothing. Hemingway's flame instantly melted the marshmallow around us down to nothing. We pushed and pulled the basket and the burner all around my house, getting just close enough to melt the marshmallow, but not so close we'd burn the house down. And as much as squirrels love marshmallow, they hate extreme heat! As soon as they felt the uptick in temperature in the air around them, they scurried off to nibble on marshmallow elsewhere. After fifteen or so minutes, all the marshmallow around my house was gone. And all that remained was black, crumbly ash that would blow away in the next breeze.

"That was a great plan, SV!" I said.

"It was, wasn't it?" he said.

While our Staff Villain basked in his accomplishment, several large oblong shadows ominously crept across the mountain. We only noticed the shadows when one of them crept over Ogilvy's feet. Ominously! High up in the sky, where we had been only minutes earlier, three enormous zeppelins floated in place. The envelopes, or skins on these zeppelins weren't the traditional silver colour. They were all black. And the windows in the gondolas attached to the bottom of the zeppelins were tinted black. These were shady zeppelins for sure. And if anyone among us knew shady, it was our Staff Villain.

"Do you have any idea who those belong to?" I asked him.

"I'm flummoxed," he said. "I'd say I'm baffled, confused and bewildered, but right now it seems like flummoxed is

the perfect word to describe how I feel. I have no idea who those zeppelins belong to, and I thought I knew every shady organization out there.”

A tinted window in each gondola rolled down and dozens of ropes were tossed out of the open windows. A shovel hand was attached to the end of each rope and when it hit the ground it scooped up a clump of marshmallow, then retracted back to the gondola. This happened thousands of times over the next few minutes. And all we could do was watch in awe. While we watched in awe, the squirrels watched in anger, chattering among themselves and shaking their little fists up at the zeppelins in the sky. When only a thin layer of marshmallow remained on the ground, all the ropes were pulled back into the gondolas and the zeppelins floated away.

We stood there, looking up at the now blue and empty sky, for what seemed like an hour. Our mouths agape. No words to describe what we had just seen. The extended silence among the four of us was just as strange, if not stranger than the day that had lead us to that silence.

Which leads me to this...

There are two things I took away from our experience with Mount Havarti's eruption and subsequent flow of melted marshmallow. Firstly, as much as I'd like to believe the world has become more transparent and safer in the years since we first disappeared, there are still organizations out there trying to disrupt the norm and tear holes in the fabric of society. There are still individuals who put themselves and their gains ahead of the need of good, hardworking, law-abiding citizens

like you and me. What the intentions are of these true villains is still unknown. But the unknown always seems to reveal itself to us at some point. I just hope these unknowns don't send us on a similar path as the one we went down more than a decade ago. Secondly, there is an old proverb that states, "Don't judge a book by its cover." It's a funny proverb, because I read books all the time based on their cover art. And yes, sometimes those books are terrible, but often, if a book has a captivating cover, it is very representative of the content inside the book. Really, though, "Don't judge a book by its cover" is just a roundabout way of saying appearances can sometimes be misleading. Our Staff Villain is a shady looking character, with his long, twirly moustache, his beady eyes and his RSF (resting snarl face). But just because he looks villainous, we can no longer assume that he is villainous. His actions and his words over this experience have proven that his outward appearance runs opposite to what's going on inside of him.

At least, I hope.

* Objectivity - in an objective rather than subjective or biased way: with a basis in observable facts rather than feelings or opinions.

Emily Abstract's Super-Sized Origin Story

January 26, 2021

The word 'weird' was misspelled eighteen times in a short story I was editing about a clown that wasn't scary, but wanted so badly to be scary. It was a funny concept for a story, but the continued flipping of weird's 'e' and 'i' was truly terrifying to me. The one time weird was spelled correctly, I circled it and wrote a note on the side of the page that said, 'Isn't it weird that your misspelling of the word weird was actually the correct spelling of the word weird? Weird.' Next to it I drew a big smiley face. While I was drawing the mouth on my smiley face, there was a tiny knock on my office door, like a dust bunny had bumped into it.

"Come in," I said.

I knew before the door opened it was Ogilvy. He always knocked like he didn't want me to hear him. Like if I didn't respond, he could just keep on keeping on with his day. The door cracked open the width of a sheet of paper and Ogilvy's

little voice slipped through the crack. “Is this a good time to talk to you Mr. Narrator?” he said. “I really don’t want to inconvenience you?”

“Oh Ogilvy, any time is a good time to talk,” I said. “Don’t feel like you’re ever inconveniencing me. This far into our friendship, you should know that. Come in. Come in.”

The door opened just wide enough for him to slip through. He entered the office and approached my desk hesitantly, hands clasped behind his back.

“Sit sit,” I said, pointing at one of the chairs on the other side of my desk. “What is it you want to talk to me about?”

He jumped up into a chair, twiddled his thumbs and said, “I need to tell you a story. A true story. Would that be okay?”

“Well, you know I love a good story, Ogilvy. Especially when it’s true.”

“I never said it was a good story, sir,” he said.

“To my ears, a story is a story is a story,” I said. “If someone is taking the time to share it with me, then I am just so grateful for having been lucky enough to be told it. Now tell me about this story you want to share with me.”

“Oh, okay,” he said and smiled. “So, I was at the grocery store yesterday after work buying my weekly supply of root beer and graham crackers when the strangest thing ever happened.”

“Stranger than melted marshmallow flowing out of a volcano?”

“Even stranger than that.”

“Now I’m intrigued.”

“You know how they put the graham crackers way up on the top shelf in the middle of aisle 3 at the grocery store?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I’m reaching for a box of graham crackers ... I’m on my tippy toes reaching reaching reaching as high up as I can when up above me, I notice a rainbow. A real-life rainbow and it’s stretching the length of the store. One end of the rainbow is in a pot filled with chocolate coins wrapped in gold foil and the other end is in the produce section in a stack of navel oranges. Not the fuzzy ones ... the normal ones. It was the most amazing thing because rainbows don’t happen on the inside. Right? Yes, I am right. So I run up and down the aisles trying to find out what’s making the rainbow and out of the corner of my eye I see a young girl, maybe six or seven years old with a paint brush in her hand, and she’s got a little canvas in her other hand. The paintbrush has paint dripping off it onto the floor. A lady standing next to the little girl is looking up at the rainbow and has one hand over her mouth and the other tugging on the little girl’s sleeve. I can tell she’s just as astonished by what she’s seeing as I am. But I can also tell these two have something to do with the rainbow. The lady pulls the little girl out of the store and I run out after them, because I have to know how they did it. I just have to! In the parking lot I catch up to them and say, ‘hey hey hello. I’ve seen so many amazing things in my life, so many so many. But I’ve never seen something like that. Please pretty please, tell me how you did it.’ The lady says,

‘You must be mistaken. We didn’t do anything.’ And while she’s saying this, the little girl is painting on the canvas she’s holding onto. The lady looks down at the painting and says, ‘What are you painting?’ And then the lady screams, ‘What is that!?’ This is where I start getting nervous, because the lady has this look on her face like she just saw a park full of zombies setting up for a big community picnic. ‘What do you see in the painting?’ the little girl says and smiles. But her smile looks like there are two fishhooks pulling up each side of the smile much too high, giving it a real menacing look. The lady says, ‘That doesn’t have anything to do with what we were talking about earlier does it?’ And the girl makes that scary smile again. ‘Oh no,’ the lady says. ‘Oh no oh no oh no, not yet. Not here,’ she says as she looks around the parking lot. When she sees me again, she screams, ‘You have to run as fast as you possibly can. Run! Run away! Hurry!’ Now four things and four things only are going through my head at this point. One: these two are just fooling with me because they know they shouldn’t talk to strangers. Two: if they’re not fooling with me, then my life might be in serious danger. Three: is the heart of a shrimp really located in its head. And four: getting the story of what’s happening in the parking lot of the grocery store is for sure worth the risk of sticking around.”

“Whoa. Whoa. Whoa,” I said, cutting Ogilvy off. “I don’t mean to be rude, but I just need to catch my breath here and dampen my dry throat.”

Ogilvy’s story hooked me. It had a recognizable setting, captivating characters, conflict, intrigue, and most of all, it made me want to hear it through to the end. But Ogilvy’s mention of root beer early in the story made me start craving

it. Made me start obsessing over it. Root beer root beer root beer pinged back and forth in my skull. I had to stop the pinging so I could give Ogilvy's story the full attention it deserved.

I returned to my office with two glasses of root beer and handed Ogilvy one. I cheers-ed him as we do when we share good beverages and good stories, and after we both had a sip, I said, 'Please continue.'

"Oh yes," he said. "It does go a little off the rails here. It was good to have a few minutes to work it out in my head. So where was I ... oh yes, indeed. The lady, she notices something high up in the sky behind me. But way far away, because she puts her palm over her eyes like a visor and she stares hard at it trying to make out what it might be. With what we had just been through up on Mount Havarti, of course I was thinking it was shady black zeppelins heading our way. I turn and look in the direction the lady is looking and what do I see heading for me?"

"What? What do you see, Ogilvy?" I asked in excited anticipation.

"Pterodactyls," he said.

"No!"

"Flying dinosaurs, no word of a lie, because you know my people don't lie or else we get really bad stomach aches like when you eat too much fudge."

"That's why this keeps getting better and better," I said.

“I know and you know and the lady surely knew that dinosaurs went extinct millions of years ago. Even that baddie Douglas Daggerton Darkfellow, or Triple D as he likes to be called when the news anchors read out his ransom notes on TV, knows that dinosaurs don’t exist in today’s world. He even tried bringing dinosaurs back to life through cloning and doing the Carlton Dance* for over three hours, as that old dinosaur revival incantation said to do. Remember that? None of it worked. The only dinosaurs around are the fake ones in museum dioramas. Knowing this, the lady runs over to me and grabs my arm. ‘You’re too close to us. You’ll be targeted, too. You have to come with us,’ she says. ‘Or you’ll be a dinosaur’s dinner tonight.’ I run along with her without struggling to get away. Her seriousness makes me believe we’re now in some serious danger. That we really are on the menu at Chez Pterodactyl. She lets go of me next to a car that has a smashed in front end and she says, ‘Get in. I’ll take you wherever you need to go once we’re safe.’ Then she pulls the canvas out of the little girl’s hand and tosses it down onto the ground. I try to catch a glimpse as it’s falling, but all I see are strokes of green and dark yellow and black. No shapes. No lines. Just colour. The painting lands on the ground face first and the lady puts her foot down on it and begins rubbing it into the pavement. The girl laughs and claps, then opens the back door to the car and motions for me to get in. She follows close behind me and shuts the door behind her. While we’re waiting for the lady to get in and start the engine, she turns to me and says, ‘It really is you! Hi Mr. Ogilvy, my name is Emily. I heard a rumour from one of the kids in my class that your new office is in my town. I’m so excited to meet you. I can’t wait to tell my mom when I see her again. My mom was a big fan of Crow Toes

Quarterly when it first came out. She even has some of the artwork from those issues framed and up on our walls.’ The lady opens the driver side door and gets in. She looks back at us and says, ‘Emily, what are they coming here to do?’ Emily makes that creepy smile again and says, ‘You saw the painting, Rebekah. You know what they’re going to do.’ The lady turns back around and starts the engine. As she reverses out onto the road, she looks at me through the rearview mirror and says, ‘Sorry you were in the wrong place at the wrong time. I hope that if this goes bad and we don’t make it back from this, you’ll understand why I am about to do what I’m about to do.’ The doors lock and she puts her foot down on the gas and the car speeds forward, leaving a cloud of exhaust and burning rubber in its wake. Emily fastens her seatbelt and reaches over me to grab mine and secure me into the seat. I frantically tug on the door handle and cry, ‘What are you going to do? What are you going to do?’ I was so scared, sir. I wish I could accurately describe how scared I was, because I know you’re a big fan of description. All I can say is I was so scared, it was indescribable. And then the lady says, ‘the first thing I’m going to do is tell you a story.’”

“Oooh, a story within a story,” I said. “How delightful.”

“Oh no no, sir,” Ogilvy said. “The lady’s story is the only story I want to tell you. Everything up until now has been filler getting to that story. All those things that happened ... boring run of the mill stuff. Booooooring!”

He tipped his head back, closed his eyes, opened his mouth wide and made snoring sounds, pretending the boringness of his previous words had put him into a deep sleep. After a few seconds of this, he snapped his head forward and in a wide-

awake state said, “So the lady is speeding down the road away from what looks like three very large pterodactyls chasing us, and she says, ‘It all began a week ago when Emily arrived at school just as the morning bell was ringing ...’”

Emily ran to join the children funnelling through the classroom door. The kids looked like sand funnelling through an hourglass. And just like sand sparkles when it’s under the sun, the children’s eyes sparkled from the sight of their classroom.

The desks were pushed against the walls, and where the desks once were now stood tall wooden triangles with white squares leaning up against them. A black apron was hanging from each triangle. On top of a stool placed next to each triangle and square was a paper plate. On top of the paper plate were five big blobs of paint: red paint, blue paint, yellow paint, white paint, and black paint. And lying next to the plate of paint was a selection of brushes and something that looked like a teeny tiny pie knife.

“These are easels and canvases,” Emily’s teacher Mrs. Louvre said, pointing to the wooden triangles and white squares. “Today, we’re going to paint. We’ll be just like Leonardo Da Vinci and Margaret Keane and Jean Michelle Basquiat.”

Emily had never painted before with real paint. Because her house was so white and so clean, her mother only allowed her to use crayon and pencil crayon on white paper. And only at the kitchen table. And only between 4pm and 4:30pm. Emily knew all about paintings, though, because her parents

collected art. They had paintings of people she didn't recognize, paintings of beautiful beaches and lush forests, of old barns in the middle of golden fields and of big baskets of fruit. Emily spent hours each day looking at the paintings on the walls around her house, pretending she was on grand adventures inside the worlds the paintings gave her a glimpse of.

Emily and her classmates ran to their preferred painting station and with the help of Mrs. Louvre, tied up their aprons. "All right," Mrs. Louvre said after everyone was ready. "As you can see, there are three true colours on your plate and a black and a white. An artist would call this their palette. The magical thing about red, blue and yellow is you can make so many more colours just by mixing one with the other. Watch."

Mrs. Louvre took the tiny pie knife, which she called a palette knife, and she scraped away a small portion of blue paint into its own spot on the plate. She then mixed into it a small portion of yellow paint, and before the children's eyes, the paint turned green. "I'm so confused," said a boy named Henry. "Are we painting or are we learning magic?"

Everyone laughed and Mrs. Louvre continued mixing colours. She mixed blue with red and made violet. She mixed red with yellow and made orange. And with each new colour made, the children "Oooh'ed" and "Aahhhh'ed" in delight.

"Now that you know how to make different colours, I want you to paint your favourite thing in the whole wide world," Mrs. Louvre said.

Emily had so many favourite things, picking just one was going to be hard. She looked around the room and saw her classmates painting squiggly renditions of dogs and parents and superheroes. She liked all those things, too, but what she like the most wasn't something you could see or touch. What she liked most was the feeling she had when she watched rain hitting her bedroom window. It was a feeling of peace and calm. Because Emily mostly felt restless inside and like the blood flowing through her veins had fire mixed in with it, the feeling she had when watching rain hit her bedroom window was one of her favourite things in the world.

But how do you paint a feeling? Emily thought. She raised her hand to ask Mrs. Louvre, but then she quickly lowered it. Her classmates would definitely laugh at her for asking such a silly question. And being laughed at was one of her least favourite things in the world. She would never paint that!

Emily picked up her palette knife and dipped it into her blob of blue paint. Without thinking about it, she placed the palette knife against the canvas and scraped out a blue line. When she lifted the palette knife off the canvas, grey clouds rolled into the classroom and rain fell down on her classmates. But no one noticed the strange weather event occurring all around them. They continued to paint their cats and bicycles and grandparents and doll houses. A wind picked up and threw the rain against the classroom windows. It ping ping pinged like fingers tapping out a song on a tabletop. Emily thought she recognized the song and began to hum along.

She scooped up some more blue paint, but this time she mixed in a drop of white. The blue turned a lighter shade. She scraped a line along the canvas with the new blue. She

did this over and over again until the canvas was covered in lines, all different shades of blue. “That’s exactly what it feels like,” she said and placed the palette knife on the plate when she felt the painting was complete.

With that, the clouds disappeared, and the room dried up. The children stood proudly next to their masterpieces. “All right,” Mrs. Louvre said. “Let’s tell everyone what you painted and why it’s your favourite thing in the world. Let’s start with you Emily.”

“My favourite thing in the world is the feeling I get when rain hits my bedroom window,” Emily said.

“That’s not a thing,” a girl named Alice said. “Things have substance. You can see them and touch them and take pictures of them. You just made a bunch of silly blue lines.”

“Now Alice,” Mrs. Louvre said. “Feelings are things and what Emily has done is represented them in the abstract. Abstract art isn’t confined to feelings either. Emily could have just as well said her painting was of a sailboat fighting through rough ocean waves, or a blueberry pie. The wonderful thing about art is, there are no boundaries to it.”

A classmate named Derek, whose painting looked like a cross between a gorilla and a thumb tack raised his arm. “Mrs. Louvre,” he said. “You know what I see in Emily’s painting?”

“What do you see, Derek?”

“I see cotton candy. The blue kind. You know when you take

a big bite out of it and your spit makes it wet around where you bit. How it makes the colour of that part of the cotton candy darker?”

Emily looked at her painting and started to see it, too. And as the image of cotton candy formed in front of her, the windows of the classroom shattered inward spraying glass all over the linoleum floor. Everyone screamed and covered their heads. Someone somewhere in the room yelled, “What’s coming through the windows? What is that?”

Emily pulled her hands down from covering her head and looked at the windows. A blue, cottony material was squeezing through the holes where the windows once were. Someone else somewhere in the room yelled, “It’s cotton candy!”

Cotton candy was not something to be afraid of, so the children all got up off the floor and ran over to the sweet confectioner’s treat barrelling through the smashed-out windows. They stuffed their mouths with the sugary blue fluff. As fast as the cotton candy rolled into the room it disappeared, eaten and enjoyed as cotton candy was meant to be.

At first, Emily’s painting manifested clouds and rain that only she could see and feel. But when someone else saw something in it and she began to see it, too, that thing became real. There had to be a logical answer. It had to be a coincidence that while they were talking about cotton candy, cotton candy appeared. A cotton-candy delivery truck must have crashed and sent all its cargo through the classroom window. But there was no crashed truck visible through the bite holes the kids had made in the cotton candy.

Emily found a blank canvas leaning against Mrs. Louvre's desk and placed it on her easel, overtop the one she had already painted on. She dipped the tip of her palette knife into the blob of red paint that had been left untouched on her plate of colours, then mixed in a little yellow to make a dark orange colour. As she scraped the knife across the canvas leaving an arced stroke of paint, marigolds began to fall from the ceiling. Thousands and thousands of marigolds. They were Emily's favourite flower. She crossed her first stroke of colour with a stroke of pale yellow. With each stroke, the marigolds piled up higher and higher, in corners and on the tops of desks and along all the easel edges. But only Emily noticed them. And when she finished the painting, all the marigolds disappeared.

Emily picked up the painting and ran it over to a group of girls with blue tongues and blue teeth, moaning about how much their stomachs hurt, but continuing to gorge on the cotton candy, nonetheless. "What do you see in this painting?" she asked.

The girls stopped eating and all took a close look. "I see falling leaves," said a girl named Stephanie. "Like in the Autumn, when they're that real pretty orange colour."

"Yeah, I can see that," said another girl.

Emily looked at the painting she had just made through the eyes of the girls she was standing with. Yes, she could now see the leaves, too. Falling falling falling leaves. And as she watched the leaves fall in her painting, they began to fall from the ceiling just as the marigolds had earlier. But unlike the

marigolds, these leaves were real. Mrs. Louvre threw up her hands and said, “Now what’s going on? Could this day get any weirder?”

With the cotton candy almost completely consumed, the kids turned their attention to the leaves. They picked up handfuls and tossed them around the room.

“Awww,” Mrs. Louvre said, “The janitor is going to be so unhappy when he sees this mess. Kids, put those leaves down. Put them down. And watch out for the glass. Please ... watch out for the glass!”

While Mrs. Louvre frantically ran around the classroom sweeping up as much glass and as many leaves as she could, and while the kids delighted in the strange sight of cotton candy coming through the windows and leaves falling from the ceiling, a woman slipped into the classroom unnoticed. She was tall, almost 6 foot 3 and all her clothes were red, from the hat on her head to the boots on her feet. She even wore a pair of red sunglasses. Emily only noticed the woman when she took hold of Emily’s hand and pulled Emily away from her classmates and out of her classroom.

“My mom said never to go anywhere with strangers,” Emily screamed. “Somebody please help me!”

“Emily, please stop screaming,” the woman said. “I am here to take you to your mother.”

“How do you know my name?” Emily asked.

“I just told you,” the woman said. “I am here to take you to

your mother. She's the one who asked me to come and get you."

"Where's my mom and who are you?"

"Your mom is ... fine," the woman said. "My name is Rebekah and your mother hired me to help you with your talent."

"What talent?"

"You know, with the things you conjure when you paint."

"I don't know what conjure means and I only found out I could make things appear by painting them an hour ago. My mom wouldn't know anything about it. Who are you and where are you taking me?"

Rebekah shoved Emily into the backseat of a car that was running. She slid into the driver's seat and pushed the child-lock button so Emily couldn't get out. Emily screamed again, this time louder and at a higher pitch. "Please, Emily, stop screaming," Rebekah said. "I'm not going to hurt you. I promise. I just need your abilities for an afternoon. Once you've helped me with my little predicament, I will make sure you get home safely, and I'll make sure your mom and your dad get a big stack of money for letting me borrow you for a few hours. I'll even give you some money. Seven-year-old kids should never be broke, am I right? You can buy whatever you want. Do you like ice cream? You can buy one of those ice-cream ghosts with a gumball for a mouth. Kids like those. I know I did when I was a kid."

Rebekah put her foot on the gas and sped away from the

school, leaving Mrs. Louvre and her fellow classmates with a mess of leaves, sticky surfaces and confusion, especially when it was discovered that Emily was gone.

“Where are you taking me?” Emily asked again in a smaller, shakier voice.

“Let me ask you a question, instead,” Rebekah said. “How come it took you this long to discover your ability? I’ve been watching you for a year now. Ever since the incident at Potter’s Park Shopping Mall.”

“What incident?”

“They had a finger-painting section set up in the middle of the mall that day, do you remember?”

“I don’t remember much about the finger painting other than my finger really hurting while I was doing it,” Emily said and tapped her finger on her chin like she was pressing a memory button. “But I do remember something very strange and painful happening that day. Yes ... yes I do. We were there returning a goldfish that died exactly one day after we got it. His name was Goldie. Not very original, I know, but I was barely six years old. What do you want from me? Anyways, we were in the pet store and the lady was telling us about a man who had just left. He was in all sorts of panic, the lady said. Just like that. All sorts of panic. The man was holding a bag filled with water, tied off at the end. Just like the bag Goldie was in the day before. But there was nothing in the bag, the lady said. And he wanted to dump the water into one of the tanks so he could hide it and come back for it later. The lady said, come back for

what? The water? How would he possibly do that? But he wasn't talking about the water, no. He was talking about what was in the water. He said there was a rare fish called a MacGuffin Fish in the bag. I remember repeating the word MacGuffin. Such a funny word, isn't it? MacGuffin. He said people had been searching for the fish for hundreds of years. Stories had been written and movies had been made about those searches. He told the lady he had found the fish in a pool of water a mile below the ice at the southern tip of Antarctica. He said certain people had found out about his discovery and he was now being hunted. His life was in danger. The fish, he said, had magical abilities. But he said no more. He dumped the water in the tank and ran from the store as fast as he could, shouting, I'll be back in two days! The lady at the counter said it was the strangest thing she'd ever experienced. She said she was a little shaken up by it. Getting back to the routine of refunding dead goldfish seemed to get her mind back on track, though. While my mom and the lady were busy with the details of the refund, I wandered over to the tank the lady had pointed to. Nothing was swimming around in it. But it really felt like there was something in there. I can't explain that feeling. But that feeling made me squeeze my arm through the opening in the lid on top of the tank and dip my whole arm into the water. I don't know why. I just remember thinking I had to. And that's when something chomped down on my finger. I didn't scream, because I knew I'd get in all sorts of trouble for putting my hand in the tank. I just pulled my arm out as quickly as I could. I watched two little bubbles of blood form on my finger. Before any more blood could leave my body, I stuck my finger in my mouth and sucked it all back down into me. My mom, she saw me with my finger in my mouth and told me I wasn't a baby anymore. Only baby's

suck their fingers. And then she dragged me out of the pet store. That's what I really remember from that day."

"Hmmm," Rebekah said. "I've never heard of a MacGuffin Fish. That man must have just been playing a joke on the lady. And you must have just pricked yourself on a sharp rock or something. Six year olds do dumb things like that. No, I'm talking about the balloon-animal incident. I was at the mall buying plastic sheeting, duct tape and hedge clippers for a job I had to do later in the day. I was walking by all the kids finger painting and I saw you there making a mess on a piece of paper taped to a wall. As I walked by you, I heard you say to another child, 'It's a zoo full of balloon animals, can't you see it?' Your mom pulled you away after that. What happened next was unbelievable. I'm sure you saw pictures in the newspaper of the aftermath."

"I don't look at newspapers. They're boring. But I do remember my mom saying something about balloons coming to life. I thought she was telling my dad a joke."

"It was no joke," Rebekah said. "I was coming out of the hardware store with my bag of supplies when a life-sized balloon animal, twisted and turned into the shape of a rhinoceros, ran by me. I was so startled I dropped my bag onto a passel of balloon opossums running by my feet. I popped them all. And then I heard your words in my head ... it's a zoo full of balloon animals. I didn't even pick up my hardware-store purchases. I ran back to the finger-painting station where a bunch of children were pointing at your painting saying things like, 'yeah, I can see a giraffe' and 'they really are balloons.' I knew it was you, Emily. I knew you had some sort of magical ability, so I searched you out and began

watching ... waiting to see it again. I waited and watched and eventually I got really bored, because nothing was happening. So I donated a bunch of canvases, easels, paint, brushes and aprons to your sweet Mrs. Louvre. And voila! Cotton candy and falling leaves indoors. My hunch was right. And now with your help, I can finally clear an obstacle that has been holding me back from achieving true greatness in my field of employment.”

“What’s your job?” Emily asked.

“I take things from people to make myself richer and more powerful.”

“You’re a robber?”

“Kind of. But the people I’m taking things from deserve to have their things taken. They are people who themselves have stolen, lied and cheated to get to where they are.”

“My mom says stealing isn’t right?”

“Let me ask you this, Emily. If you needed to break through an unbreakable wall, how would you do it? A million bulldozers? An army of indestructible robots?”

“That’s a funny question. If it was unbreakable, then nothing would break through it.”

“You’re a smart girl, Emily. Let me rephrase the question. If you didn’t know the wall was unbreakable, what would you use to try and get through it?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Dinosaurs maybe. Yeah, dinosaurs. The flying ones.”

“Pterodactyls?”

“Gesundheit,” Emily said.

“No, a pterodactyl is a flying dinosaur. Don’t you think a t-rex would have a better chance at getting through the wall?”

“But they have those teeny tiny hands. The flying ones can drop things on the wall, like bombs. Or they’d use their big sharp teeth to eat everything in their path, including the rocks in the wall. Or maybe ... or maybe they could just fly over the wall.”

Rebekah slapped the steering wheel and said, “Of course ... just fly over the wall. I can’t believe I didn’t think of that. I’ve been so darn focused on you and on the initial problem of the wall, I didn’t take a second to actually sit back and think. Fly over the wall. Perfect. But we might not use pterodactyls.”

Rebekah pulled the car over at an art supply store and left the engine running. “I’ll just be a minute,” she said. “I’m getting you what you need to help me get over that wall. Don’t you dare think about running. Or driving away. Remember, I know where you live and I’m not nice when people cross me.”

Rebekah got out of the car, slammed the door shut and disappeared through the colourful entrance to the art supply store. For a moment Emily contemplated running away from Rebekah as fast as she could. Rebekah had just kidnapped her. Kidnappers were not particularly nice people. And not

nice people are often liars, too. Rebekah could have been lying about it all. Was Emily willing to take that chance? Not at all! In her seven years of life, adults had proven themselves to be pretty reliable, pretty truthful people. Much more so than people her own age. The kids in her class lied about everything, from what they had eaten for breakfast to all the places they had travelled on and off of earth. Emily stayed put, because with her newly discovered ability, she knew that with a few strokes of paint, she could change the whole dynamic of her situation with Rebekah. All she needed was a canvas, some paint, a tool to spread the paint and a can-do attitude.

The car door swung open and a plastic bag filled with art supplies dropped onto the seat next to Emily. "Paint something," Rebekah said.

Emily watched her slam the door, walk around to the driver side of the car and get in. Rebekah put on her seatbelt and positioned the rearview mirror so she could see Emily in it. "Let's keep it light this round, okay?" she said. "Kittens or smile emojis or something along those lines. I just want to confirm your ability before we go pro."

"Just remember, Miss Rebekah," Emily said with words dripping in gooey sweetness. "It seems to only work if you see what I see ... or I see what you see ... or if we see the same thing."

"Then let's agree on you painting some cute little kittens. Nothing can go wrong with cute little kittens. You paint them, I know what they are, they'll come to be. I'll drop them off at the shelter and they'll find nice loving families to take care of them. How's that?"

“Sure Miss Rebekah,” Emily said. “I’ll paint cute little kittens.”

Emily found a 4-by-6-inch canvas, a tube of charcoal black paint and a tube of titanium white paint, and a one-inch artist brush. She squeezed out a blueberry-sized drop of the black onto the canvas and ran the brush through it. Then she blotted the canvas with the brush, leaving fluffy splotches of fading black across the canvas. When she was happy with the black, she squeezed a pea-sized blob of white onto the canvas. This time she used the tip of her index finger to draw white circles overtop of the black blotches. She crisscrossed a big white X in one corner of the canvas. As she painted, a black and white kitten slipped out from the crack in the back seat. It jumped into her lap and kneaded her thigh. When Emily finished the painting, the kitten disappeared. Poof!

“Miss Rebekah, I finished my painting,” Emily said and held it up. “What do you see in it?”

Rebekah looked into the rearview mirror at the canvas full of blotches and finger streaks. “Adorable,” she said. “I see a litter of kittens. Adorable kittens.”

Whether or not Rebekah saw what she said she saw, it didn’t matter. She voiced it, and with that proclamation, a tiny black kitten slid out from under the passenger side seat. It jumped onto the seat, meowed, then jumped up onto the dashboard. “I have to admit, I don’t like a lot of things,” Rebekah said, “but I do love a kitten. I can watch Internet videos of kittens for hours.”

She reached out and gave the kitten a scratch under its chin. While she was scratching it, another kitten appeared from under the passenger side seat. “Oh, isn’t this delightful,” she said. “What’s better than one kitten? Two!”

And then another appeared.

And another.

And another.

They hopped up on the headrests and the dashboard and into the back where Emily clapped and laughed. Kitten after kitten appeared, filling the inside of the car far beyond its intended capacity. “Emily, you have to stop this!” Rebekah screamed, signifying the end of her delight. “They’re going to make us crash! They’re going to kill us! Get rid of them now!”

“Miss Rebekah,” Emily said while giggling from all the kittens pawing at her nose and tickling her under her chin, “I can make them appear, but I haven’t figured out how to make them disappear. I think they’re here for good. I think you’re going to have to pull over and let them out. Just make sure you drop them off next to the animal shelter, like you said you’d do.”

A few of the kittens jumped down into the space where the pedals were located. One of them squeezed behind the brake pedal and squealed when Rebekah pushed the pedal down when the traffic light ahead of them turn red. Startled, Rebekah lifted her foot and screamed. The thought of hurting a kitten was too much to bear. But the inability to brake the car sent

them crashing into the back end of an ice-cream truck stopped at the red light. Kittens and paint supplies and ponytails flew forward into the backs of seats, and into front windshields. With the car stopped, Rebekah unbuckled her seatbelt and opened the car door releasing a flow of curious kittens onto the street. “No no no!” she screamed. “Not onto the street!”

She pushed through the flow of kittens and exited the car. Once outside, she stood in the middle of the road directing traffic around the kittens. Shooing the kittens away from any kind of danger. Though she wasn’t able to get them to the shelter like she’d promised, she ensured every single one of them safely made it off the road and into the park that ran alongside the road.

“Are you okay, ma’am?” said the man from the ice-cream truck. “Should we exchange insurance information now that you’ve sent all those kittens packing?”

“I’d appreciate a Miss and not a Ma’am, sir,” Rebekah said with a snark. “Ma’am is what you say to my mother. To a woman much older than I. I am in a rush, so I will let this one go, but do be more careful in the future.”

“Let this one go?” said the exasperated ice-cream man. “You ran into me. Technically, you’re one-hundred percent at fault here.”

“And I one hundred percent disagree with you, sir. I have memorized your license plate and you’ll be hearing from my lawyer.”

He continued to talk at Rebekah, but she muted his voice

when she slammed shut her driver-side door. In the car, she turned around and glared at Emily for several long seconds before she spoke. "You could have killed us."

"Miss Rebekah, you're not such a bad person," Emily said, and smiled wide. "You sure did love those kittens."

"Next time you try something like that, you and I and everything you conjure up will be taken somewhere you don't want to go," Rebekah said very coldly. "And only I will return from that place. So don't you dare try that again."

"Miss Rebekah, I have no control over what these things do. Heck, I didn't even know I could make these things until this morning."

"Just don't try it again."

"Yes, Miss Rebekah."

Rebekah popped the car into drive and sped around the ice-cream truck. The ice-cream man smacked the car on the trunk as it drove by, which at any other time would have made Rebekah stop the car, get out and force the man to eat rotten asparagus. But there was no time for such things. What Rebekah hadn't told Emily was she wasn't the only one who wanted to get what was on the other side of the wall. In fact, there were three groups she knew of that wanted the same thing and they were all en route. As evil as these other groups were, the real enemy now was time.

"I will not go anywhere if I don't get something to eat first," Emily said.

“You’re really pushing your luck here, Missy.”

“But I’m hungry. And scared.”

“Okay. Okay. Okay. I’ll stop at the grocery store and get you a sandwich. But after that, I want you to sit back and be quiet until I ask you to start painting. Capeesh?”

“I don’t understand what capeesh means, Miss Rebekah. Is it a vegetable? Are you asking me if I want a vegetable to eat?”

Rebekah slapped her steering wheel in frustration. “Capeesh is just another way of saying, do you understand?”

“Well that’s silly. Why don’t you just say, do you understand? I’d understand that.”

“Awoooooo,” Rebekah howled. “Be quiet. Be quiet. Be quiet!”

Emily sat back and smiled as the car sped down the road away from all the kittens, ice cream and angry ice-cream men. They drove for fifteen minutes then pulled into a grocery-store parking lot. Rebekah parked the car. “Don’t move a muscle,” she said. “I’ll be two minutes.”

“But you don’t know what kind of sandwich I like. What if you get me the wrong kind? What if you get me something with sprouts in it? If you get me one with sprouts in it I’ll shrivel up and die.”

“Don’t be so dramatic, Emily. Sprouts are a perfect complement to any sandwich.”

“That’s such an adult thing to say. Sprouts are evil. Like asparagus. And kidnappers.”

“Touché,” Rebekah said.

“I only speak English, Miss Rebekah. Why do you keep saying things to me in other languages?”

“Oh my goodness,” Rebekah moaned. “Get out of the car and stay close to me and don’t say a word.”

“Okay, Miss Rebekah. I’ll point at the sandwich I want.”

Before Emily got out of the car, she slipped a canvas under her shirt, and three tubes of paint and a palette knife into her pockets. Staying close to Rebekah was a challenge, because Rebekah was angry speed walking into the grocery store and through the aisles toward the deli at the back of the store. But being stuck behind Rebekah gave Emily the opportunity to paint.

As she walked behind Rebekah, out of sight, and hopefully out of mind, she dabbed the canvas with all the colours in her pocket: Red, Yellow and Blue. She mixed bits of them together to make a palette of seven colours, each of which she scraped along the canvas. As she painted, a vibrant rainbow crept along the ceiling of the grocery store. Emily loved rainbows and had coloured hundreds of them in pencil crayon at her kitchen table. But pencil crayons didn’t have the vibrancy of acrylic paints. Pencil crayons didn’t have the

ability to give rainbows life. By the time they reached the deli, the painting was done, and the rainbow was gone.

“Alright Emily,” Rebekah said still not looking at her, “point to the sandwich you want.”

“Miss Rebekah,” Emily said, somewhat distracted from her hunger. “That little fellow over there on his tippy toes. Does he look familiar to you?”

“Emily, what are you going on about?” Rebekah said and finally looked down. When she saw what was in Emily’s hand, she grabbed Emily’s arm and screamed, “Why do you have that canvas? What have you been painting?”

“That funny little fellow over there, Miss Rebekah. I’ve seen his face before.”

“It’s ... it’s a rainbow, right? I see it. You’ve painted a rainbow? A harmless rainbow?”

The rainbow, which had previously been a vision, appeared in the real world, stretching from the produce section out of a pile of navel oranges, all the way across the store to the candy section into a display of chocolate coins covered in gold foil. The coins coincidentally, were gathered up in a big plastic pot. All it needed was a leprechaun peeking out from behind the pot to make the scene complete.

Rebekah noticed the rainbow and covered her mouth to muffle the scream she was about to let out. She knew the rainbow was coming, but the sight of it inside the grocery store still surprised her. Shoppers also noticed the rainbow,

some pointing at it and others searching out its end. A big cuffuffle ensued. Cuffuffles were nothing but trouble and the only trouble Rebekah liked was the trouble she caused. “We have to leave now!”

“But it’s only a rainbow,” Emily said. “A rainbow can’t hurt anyone.”

“Look at everyone in here, Emily? People don’t generally see rainbows indoors. The sight of the unexplained is a terrifying and confusing thing for many. Many spend their lives trying to explain the unexplainable so they’re no longer afraid or confused. That’s where the danger lies. If one of these shoppers is a seeker of truth and understanding, we’re done for. We have to leave now!”

Rebekah was done reasoning with a seven-year-old girl. She squeezed Emily’s sleeve tight and dragged her out of the grocery store. Emily saw that once again, Rebekah wasn’t paying any attention to her. Funny, she thought, how adults can be so focused on you one second and the very next, it’s like you don’t exist. She dabbed fresh paint onto her rainbow canvas and began her next masterpiece.

The End

“Great story, eh?” Ogilvy said and slid off the chair.

“Wait,” I said as he started walking away. “That can’t be the end. What happened to you? To the pterodactyls?”

“Sir, I told you that stuff wasn’t very exciting at all. The story was about the girl, Emily. I think ... I think she’s going to harness her power one day and become a superhero. Remember when I pretended to be the Orange Atom? When I pretended to be a superhero?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Well, this Emily is going to be the real thing. I just know it. We’ve experienced everything you can imagine since we started this magazine all those years ago. I could go on for hours talking about all the unbelievable and extraordinary things we’ve seen and done. But it’s all been either supernatural in nature, or it has all had a logical and disappointing explanation in the end. We’ve never seen human beings exhibit powers like these, never ever ever ... you know, unless they were illusions devised and carried out by large groups of shady people. This Emily, she’s the real deal, sir, and I just wanted to share her origin story with you.”

“It was a fantastic story Ogilvy and I appreciate you telling me it,” I said. “And though that was the story you intended to tell, to a listener like me, what happened to you is a story in itself. It needs resolution or else I am left hanging. Readers and listeners and people who are alive don’t generally like to be left hanging. It usually ends quite tragically. Just out of curiosity’s sake, what happened with the pterodactyls? Maybe you could tell me that, so I’m not left hanging.”

“The last thing I want is for you to be uncomfortable, sir,” Ogilvy said. “Well let’s see. Yes. Right. The lady, she’s speeding through traffic. So fast. The little line on the speedometer can’t go any higher she’s going so fast. In and out of lanes.

Mere inches from other cars. Emily is laughing and clapping next to me. I look out the back window and I can now see the number of exposed teeth the pterodactyls have. I see their scaly skin. They're close. So close. The lady honks the horn and swears at drivers in the way. It's a very stressful scene, sir. 'It's okay Mr. Ogilvy,' Emily says at some point. Her words bring me comfort, like a fuzzy blanket when the heater stops working. She reaches down onto the floor and pulls up a plastic bag. She roots around in the plastic bag for a second or two then pulls out three tubes of paint ... it looked like burnt umber, crimson red and purple ... an 8 x 8 canvas, and a palette knife. She squeezes out a bit of paint from each tube onto the canvas and starts moving the paint around with her index finger. When she's happy with her finger painting, she cleans her finger off by rubbing it all over the car seat. Then she takes the palette knife and she starts scraping lines and shapes and words into the paint, exposing the white of the canvas below it. There's a jolt as one of the pterodactyls runs its claws across the roof of the car. Emily tosses the palette knife and the tubes of paint onto the floor and holds the painting up so only I can see it. 'What do you see, Mr. Ogilvy?' she says. I can't really explain it, sir. It was clear as window glass. Yes, there were just a lot of squiggles and lines and strokes, but it was so obvious what it was. 'Is that ... is that?' I say. 'I knew you'd see it,' she says without letting me finish. And then, like that, I lift my head up and I'm at my desk here in the office."

"Oh wow!" I exclaimed. "She painted our office? How wonderful is that?"

"No, she didn't?" Ogilvy said. "There was a word scratched into the canvas. It was barely legible, but it was there. It was

the word ‘safe.’ She painted the place I feel the safest in the whole wide world. She didn’t know it was here, with you and Poinsettia and our Staff Villain. She just knew that I would see what she wanted me to see and I would be whisked away from whatever danger they were heading towards. And I was. I do hope Emily is okay and that she becomes the superhero she’s destined to be. And I hope one day I can thank her for getting to be, in some small way, a part of her superhero origin story.”

With that, Ogilvy turned and walked out of my office. I spun my swivel chair around and looked out the window. I swore I briefly saw three large flying beasts in the distance, but they were gone as quickly as I registered them. That word ‘safe’ was repeating in my mind the same way the words root beer and weird had been earlier. But this time, the word was being spoken in the form of a question.

Safe?

Challenge Accepted: Producing A Magazine While Battling Unruly Bees

February 1, 2021

The office is buzzing today, not because it's full of bees and beekeepers trying to corral those bees (a story for another time), but because it's now February and we are less than six weeks away from (fingers crossed) releasing our first issue of Crow Toes Quarterly in more than a decade. Today, the staff is hard at work doing the things they do best, while not trying to get stung.

Poinsettia is busy busy busy putting the finishing touches on her feature story about a haunted delicatessen down the road called THE MEAT CREEPS. Our Staff Villain is busy busy busy twirling his moustache incessantly while moving graphics and pictures and stories around on the computer screen in front of him. Yes, I know you probably find it hard to believe, but it's true. The majority of the design and layout work for each issue of CTQ is done by SV. All those years of producing manifestos and fake news and propaganda for his various causes and criminal pursuits have made his skills in

publishing paramount to our success. Plus, this work keeps him out of trouble while he's at the office. Ogilvy is busy busy busy putting ointment on all his bee stings, because he was the unlucky one who removed the smiley-face sticker hiding the hole in the wall ... the smiley-face sticker that was keeping all those busy bees at bay. And I, your humble narrator, am busy busy busy writing emails to authors and artists telling them either, "Yay! You're in!" or, "Nay! Keep up your chin!"

This is the time of the publishing cycle where you can hear our hearts beating faster. You can see the sweat pouring off our brows. And the perma-smiles on our faces. You can feel the energy spinning around the office from the fantastically frantic action of each day, and from the shared delight of something new and exciting being put out into your world by the four of us and by our many contributors.

Consuming media like art and literature is a true pleasure in life. It is what allows our imaginations to flourish and stay healthy amid realities that are sometimes quite bleak and difficult. But for the CTQ staff and for our contributors, creating media like art and literature, and sharing those creations with you is pleasure and passion on a whole other level.

We are such fans of creation, no matter how big or small. Creation is what gives us life. Yes, that can sound hyperbolic (that's just a fancy way of saying exaggerated), but look at our world! No, not "ours" as in "your" world. "Ours" as in "my" world. The one where the CTQ office is located. The one where I live. I live in a world where marshmallow flows out of volcanoes, where aliens are addicted to coffee, where cute creatures in the walls steal our children, where little girls paint things that come to life and so on and so on. Exaggeration

is everything here. Creation is everything. Imagination is ... everything!

We make CTQ for people to use their imaginations to the fullest ... the folks writing the stories and making the art that go into the magazine, and the folks reading those stories and looking at that art on their computer screens, tablets, and phones in front of them. People like you!

We can't travel to far-off lands in the real right now, but in six weeks time, Crow Toes Quarterly will take you to far-off lands in your mind. It's going to be quite the trip, let me tell ya'! So pack your bags and make sure you have an extra pair of shoes and a few extra pairs of socks. Just in case you get caught in some quicksand or a mud puddle with no bottom (wink wink).

The Delicate Art Of Selecting CTQ Cover Art

February 25, 2021

When selecting cover artwork for an issue of Crow Toes Quarterly Magazine, a lot of meticulous effort goes into the process. By me and by every member of the CTQ staff. Effort, which in the past has consistently paid off. A CTQ cover needs to make a statement. It needs to stand out from all the other children's literature magazines. It needs to surprise, inspire, delight, and sometimes ... just sometimes ... cause fright.

A week ago, when we began combing through all the cover submissions, our Staff Villain was quick to say, "We're not going to do this like we used to, are we? I mean, I'm cool if you just want to close your eyes, spin around a few times, then point at one. Really, I'm cool with that."

"Now SV," I said, "You know that wouldn't garner a grand result. Yes, I'm sure the artwork chosen would be fine, but

fine is only fine when it comes to China dishware and dining. We're not in the food business here. We're in the word business and those words deserve stpendous ... they deserve extraordinary ... they deserve spectacular ... they deserve ...

"Okay okay, I get what you're saying. Let's just do this thing already so I can get back to my late-night filming," our Staff Villain said, cutting me off from saying, ' ... breathtaking companion artwork.'

"What are you filming, Mr. Villain?" asked Ogilvy, momentarily shifting the focus of the discussion.

"Did I say that out loud?" he said, more to himself than to Ogilvy. "Ugh, this rusty brain is going to give me Tetanus*? I wonder if a shot will help me?"

"Mr. Villain?"

"Oh, sorry. I didn't say filming. I said ... swimming. I've really gotten into late-night swimming lately."

"Really?" asked Poinsettia. "In the middle of winter, when everything is frozen solid?"

"Yeah. Yeah. It's good for the immune system. Circulation. All that stuff. You should try it sometime. Can we just move on?"

I only share the above conversation with you because I'm sure you'd agree with me that our Staff Villain is up to no good. And after he assured me his up-to-no-good days were over. I put the conversation in writing, so I don't forget it.

So, when we broach the subject at some point in the future while I'm picking a lock trying to free him from a cell, or injecting him with some sort of antidote, or handing over a wad of cash so he doesn't get his legs broken, he can't deny his troubles were completely unexpected.

But I've gone way off track now, haven't I?

Where was I?

Oh yes, the delicate art of selecting cover art.

We receive submissions from artists all over the world. They arrive at the CTQ office via email, snail mail and singing telegrams. Sometimes carrier pigeons fly through our open windows and drop packages off for us. Sometimes delivery Yetis toss them from the street below through closed windows. These times can get messy and dangerous. One time, an artist from Spain with the twirliest moustache and the wildest eyes was floating outside our window. He was wearing a jetpack and hollering at us through a megaphone, "The time is now! The time is now!" Ogilvy opened the window and asked, "The time for what?" The man from Spain tossed Ogilvy a clock and said, "To realize that time is fleeting**." Over the course of three weeks the clock slowly melted, drip drip dripping off the edge of my desk. A note supplied with the clock said not to clean the mess it made. The mess was the art.

We prefer our cover art to initially be on paper or canvas.

We also like to select our cover art about a month before the magazine is released. This gives the staff a visual representation of what they're working toward. A sort of eye on the prize,

if you will. Each issue of CTQ has a general theme packed in with it. Take the first issue of the new CTQ. The theme for this issue is HIDDEN. Hidden is the past participle of hide. In this case, it is a verb. But it can also be an adjective that means kept out of sight or concealed. When you think of hidden, I'm sure your mind wanders to all sorts of places. Some of you might be thinking about that emotion you hide to keep from hurting someone, or the skeletons hiding in your closet, or the monsters hiding under your bed. Some of you might be thinking about the deepest parts of the ocean and what's lurking down there, hiding in the dark. Hidden can mean a million different things. That's why we like to tell our artists that our themes are open to interpretation. This means the themes can be interpreted, understood or perceived in different ways.

I take all the submissions that tie in with the issue's given theme and I lie them out on all the surfaces in the office: desks, windowsills, solar panels, three-week old pancakes, tipped over televisions, whatever ... then I walk around the submissions for several hours. I usually have my chin clasped between my thumb and the side of my index finger as I'm doing this. Ogilvy will tell you I also do a lot of sighing and 'hmmm'ing during this time. What I'm looking for is a submission that jumps out at me. I'm not saying the artwork is alive like we are, but, believe you me, there is so much life in artwork. And if you give it enough time, that life will make itself known. Okay, I'm pulling your leg a little here. Yes, I am waiting for the artwork to literally jump out at me, but this usually happens when a fan kicks on, or a gust of wind blows through the office window, or our Staff Villain bangs his hands down on his desk and shouts, "I can't take it anymore!"

I take the first four that move, and continue on to the next part of the process. Once the four finalists are selected, each Staff Member is assigned a piece. It is then their job to take it home and dream about it. To go into the world of their given piece and wander around in it. And when they wake, take detailed notes about their dream experience. We do this for each piece over the course of four nights. And when all the data is collected, we order in pizza and extra-frothy root beer, and we have an extended staff meeting where we share our pros and cons. And then we collectively vote on the perfect cover.

The process is long winded, and some would say, “A big fat waste of time.” But it has never failed us. During CTQ’s initial run, we had sixteen brilliant covers that represented the material inside the magazine perfectly.

And I am so excited to tell you that the process was a success once again. We now have the perfect cover for Crow Toes Quarterly Magazine’s first issue, which will be released in early April ... unless, of course, a meteor hits the planet, or zombies attack. Again. Or our Staff Villain misplaces the computer files for the magazine. The neatest fact about our “reboot” cover is that it is made by an artist from Penticton, British Columbia, the city Poinsettia wrote about in her Ogopogo story.

I hope to tease the cover in the next couple of weeks. So as they say in the television biz, STAY TUNED!

* Tetanus is a serious disease caused by a bacterial toxin that affects your nervous system, leading to painful muscle contractions, particularly of your jaw and neck muscles. Stepping on a rusty nail has long been associated with causing Tetanus.

** Fleeting - (adj.) Lasting for a very short time.

Deciphering The Deceptive Dolores Flinty Autumnbottom

April 29, 2021

I am flabbergasted by the amount of time that has passed since my last blog post. Where does time go? Does it hide under rocks with crabs and cockroaches? Does it lounge on a beach in the Bahamas with too little suntan lotion applied to it? Does time simply slip on a costume and disappear into the masses, only to reappear when we realize how long it's been since we last thought about it? So much has happened since the end of February and now, not the least of which is the release of our first new issue of Crow Toes Quarterly Magazine in more than a decade. But I'll get to that after I talk about the disappearance of our beloved Ogilvy.

Like time, Ogilvy simply disappeared one day, and we hadn't realized it until, I guess you'd say, it was too late. Please don't mistake us for horrible people because we didn't realize Ogilvy had disappeared. I need to slap a little context onto the situation. In March, we were head deep in sand ... I mean, mind deep in words. Magazine production was going full tilt

with our deadline of April 1st pushing closer and closer. All any of us could think about was the magazine the magazine the magazine.

Somehow, with our eyes glued to computer screens and title placements and contributor emails and magazine proofs, we missed all the little things that weren't getting done around the office. Things like our water-cooler jug not being replaced and the root beer in our office fridge not being restocked and the dust on our collection of ancient Rubik's Cubes not being wiped off. These were the little things that Ogilvy took care of on a regular basis.

It was late-March when our Staff Villain called out for Ogilvy to touch up the shine on his penny loafers. When Ogilvy didn't come, our Staff Villain filed a complaint with Poinsettia, who is also our Human Resources representative in the office. Poinsettia was right to tell our Staff Villain his complaint wasn't valid. The list of tasks Ogilvy was responsible for was tacked up on our office corkboard and Poinsettia had to point out that shining shoes wasn't on the list. Our Staff Villain began to tantrum and insist that we add staff shoe shiner to the list immediately.

"Only if Ogilvy agrees to it," Poinsettia said, trying to calm him down.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" said our Staff Villain. "Let's ask him and get this sorted out. These scuffs in my shoes aren't going to come out on their own. Though that would be a great invention, am I right? Self-shining shoes! Seriously, the person who invents that would definitely become a millionaire. Just like the guy who invented the pet rock. I have

four of those things. They're great, because you don't have to feed them, take them for walks or pick up their poop. What were we talking about?"

Poinsettia paged Ogilvy over the office intercom, but he did not respond. Our Staff Villain began shouting his name. "Ogilvy! Ogilvy, where are you? We need to amend your task list ASAP! Where are you?" But Ogilvy did not respond.

I heard the intercom page and then the yelling, and broke away from editing Poinsettia's MEAT CREEPS story to investigate. "What's all the ruckus about?" I said as I walked up to a frazzled Staff Villain and a concerned Poinsettia.

"Ogilvy seems to be missing," Poinsettia said.

"I'm sure he's just in the bathroom, or playing jacks in the hallway. He was here this morning," I said.

"But was he?" Poinsettia asked. "Now that I've stopped thinking about the magazine for two seconds, I'm starting to realize, I haven't noticed Ogilvy for days now."

My heart dropped.

I suddenly thought of Ogilvy's story about the girl who painted things into existence, and the word she painted to get him out of the predicament she had inadvertently placed him in. SAFE. This office was his safe place and we had become so consumed with production of the magazine, we had removed the SAFE from the space, and let him slip away to golly gosh knows where.

“Ogilvy, are you here?” I shouted.

Our deadline was getting ever so close, but with Ogilvy missing, we simply couldn’t move forward with production until we found him. I made the timeout sign with my hands, essentially pushing the pause button on production and I called an emergency staff meeting. Our Staff Villain insisted we have finger sandwiches and cookie fingers and a selection of soda pop at the meeting as we did at all of our staff meetings, but I nixed the idea. The pressing issue of Ogilvy’s whereabouts was too important, and putting together a spread of food and drink would take away valuable time we needed to find Ogilvy and get back on schedule.

“If Crow Toes Quarterly Magazine was a literal person,” I said, “losing Ogilvy would be like losing a knee or an elbow. We’d still be able to function and excel and succeed, but we’d always feel just a little incomplete. We need our elbow back. Let’s get on the phones, hit the streets, surf the Net looking for any clues we can. Until Ogilvy is back, this is our only priority.”

“Should we call the police?” Poinsettia asked.

“Ummm ... let’s leave the police out of it for now,” said our Staff Villain. “I’m not in their good books these days. I can’t really go into details. But perhaps we can spend a few days on the case before we call them. Is that cool?”

“What have you done now, SV?” I said.

“Nothing, I promise,” he said. “It’s what they think I’m about to do.”

“And what would that be?”

“Hey, what can I say,” he said with a sarcastic shrug. “I have a reputation to uphold, and sometimes I have to make a few implications here and there to do that. But I’m reformed. You both know that. I’d never do anything to compromise this operation.”

“One week,” I said. “And then we get the police involved.”

We spent the remainder of the day turning the CTQ office upside down looking for clues. And I’m not exaggerating when I say we turned the office upside down. We flipped desks and chairs and drawers and garbage cans and then we sifted through everything looking for anything coming up with next to nothing. Nothing, that is, except for four ominous words scribbled onto the bottom of an illustration we had put in the garbage at the request of the artist a couple of days back. It was an illustration of a very fat crow holding a fork. And the words were, “There will be consequences.”

There will be consequences. It’s such a funny thing to write underneath an illustration, unless it’s the title of the illustration. But this wasn’t the title. No siree! This was a threat we just didn’t notice when it was being made. Made in jest, with a JK (just kidding) laugh thrown in with it.

One of the things we like to do at CTQ is invite artists down to the office for what we call, “Inspiration Creation Delineation Workshops,” or “ICDWs.” Essentially, we host two-hour-long workshops where we read stories we’re considering for the magazine or have selected for the magazine, and we invite

artists to create while we read. It's kind of like life-drawing sessions, but with raw words instead of naked bodies. It's a great way for us to find new voices for the magazine and to open up artists to a new form of creativity. We hold these workshops once a month. And they're super successful! There's a three-month waiting list just to get in.

Two days earlier we had held one of these workshops, reading stories by Jonah Finley (*The Dolphin Alliance Adventures Amazing — Episode 1: High Fives For Starfish*) and William Wandless (*The Goblin Box*) and a poem by Artemis Mead (*I Bet An Owl I Could Catch A Hare*). The room was filled with artists from all over the world. There was a young lady from Madrid, Spain and a gentleman from Chişinău, Moldova. There was another fellow from Biloxi, Mississippi in the United States who taught us all how to spell Mississippi backwards without even thinking about it: I-PP-I-SS-I-SS-IM. And lastly, there was a woman from Penticton, British Columbia, Canada, a mere hot-air balloon ride away from the CTQ office and a city that had become evermore prevalent in the CTQ world (read Poinsettia's interview with "Ogopogo" to see what I mean).

There was a lot of laughing and slinging paint and smudging lead in this particular workshop. The participants, including our reader (an initially quite reluctant Staff Villain) were having a grand old time. Until the end of the workshop. You see, at the end of the workshop we ask the participants if they'd like to contribute their work to the magazine. It's a no pressure situation and most artists politely refuse, because the work they created on-the-fly in two hours isn't always up to their standards. But most artists also ask to join our roster of artists we reach out to when looking for someone to illustrate

a story. This gives them more time to pick the perfect part of the story to illustrate and to perfect the illustration they create. At the end of this particular workshop all the artists, except for one, joined our roster. The woman from Penticton crumpled up her drawing, tossed it at our Staff Villain and said, “I want nothing to do with this place ever again. Please throw that in the garbage and never ever ever think about my art or me again for your silly little magazine. And you, sir ... you and your beady little eyes and your wiry moustache really grind my gears. Let’s just pretend I was never here. OhhhhKaaaaaayyyy?”

It was a strange thing to hear, because the woman had appeared to be having a great time throughout the class. And our Staff Villain was on his best behaviour that day. I know this, because I rarely saw him on his best behaviour, and chose to sit in on the majority of the workshop ... because who knew when I’d see him this way again.

The woman from Penticton laughed and said, “JK, SV. JK.” And with that, marched out of the office and out of our lives. So we thought for good. Our Staff Villain shrugged his shoulders, and then cracked a bad dad joke to lighten the tension in the room. “My friend wants to become an archaeologist,” he said. “But I’m trying to put him off of it. I’m convinced his life will be in ruins.” There was more groaning than laughing, but the tension had been cut.

We had put the woman out of our minds as she had requested, but this odd incident with her and the ominous words scribbled onto the bottom of her drawing were the only things we had to go on. The woman had gone by the name Sarah during the workshop, but she was registered

under the name Dolores Flinty Autumnbottom. I should have pegged that as a fake name from the getgo. I mean, how many Doloreses do you know?

A quick map search on the Internet proved that the address she had given us in Penticton was also a fake. Unless of course, she lived in a hair salon. I called the hair salon and asked if Dolores was there and they said they didn't know any Dolores. Then they asked me if I had ever known a Dolores and hung up on me.

"Be honest with me," I said to our Staff Villian. "What did you do to this Dolores/Sarah to make her so upset with you?"

He looked incensed by the question. "Huh," he said. "I'm quite incensed by that question. Before that workshop I had never met her in my life."

"But she seemed really upset with you. Almost like she was harbouring feelings from something that had happened in the past."

"Listen, Bub," said our Staff Villain. "I've cheesed off a lot of folks in my life. Most of these folks I've never seen before. That's the beauty of computer crime. You don't have to look them in the eyes when you're stealing from them. Maybe I did wrong that woman at some point, but like I said, I am completely reformed and all that bad stuff I did is water under the bridge*."

"Yes, but maybe there's no bridge for that woman. Maybe she never got over the water. Maybe she's spent a decade wading

in it trying to find you, and now that she has, she's going to make you pay."

"For what?" said our Staff Villain with great exasperation in his voice.

"This isn't getting us anywhere," stated Poinsettia. "We need to draw this woman out of hiding and confront her about this. Look at her drawing again. Look under the ledge the crow is sitting on."

Our Staff Villain and I leaned in to inspect the drawing. What, from a distance, looked like nothing more than fingerprints and errant pencil marks, were actually three teeny tiny drawings of tents, a plus sign and the drawing of a teeny tiny bell.

"Well that's a head scratcher," said our Staff Villain.

"I think it's ... " said Poinsettia, stopping momentarily to double check her thoughts. "I think it's her signature. I think that's her name."

"Tentplusbell," said our Staff Villain. "That's an even more unbelievable name than Dolores."

"No, I think the tents are a camp and the plus sign is adding the camp to the bell," explained Poinsettia.

"Mmmm, like the soup or the Scottish clan*," I said. "Historically one of the largest and most powerful of the Highland clans. What do you suggest we do, Poinsettia?"

“Well, I think we should do the opposite of what she so elegantly requested.”

“I like where you’re going here, P,” said our Staff Villain. “Going against people’s wishes or expectations is right up my alley.”

“But what if she has nothing to do with Ogilvy’s disappearance?” I asked. “Then we’re just a bunch of horrible people.”

“Thank you,” said our Staff Villain.

“I didn’t mean that as a compliment.”

“What does your gut tell you, Mr. Narrator?” Poinsettia asked.

“Well ... ”

I didn’t want to say it, but my gut was screaming at me that this Sarah Campbell, or Dolores Flinty Autumnbottom or whatever her name was, had Ogilvy and it was just a matter of time before she reached out to us to tell us what she wanted in return for him. I didn’t want to say it, and I didn’t have to because just as I was about to open my mouth, a brick broke through our office window and shattered it into a million tiny pieces. We ran to the window to catch the culprit, but the street that was several floors below us was empty of people.

“That’s a long way up,” Poinsettia said. “You’d have to be an Olympic shot-putter to chuck a brick that high. Even then, I doubt it could be done.”

Our Staff Villain picked up the brick and turned it over in his hand. The number 1 was drawn onto it with a black felt marker. “One what?” he said. “This is getting weirder and weirder by the minute. But that’s cool. I like weird.”

“It’s quite the coincidence a brick would break through our window just as we’re discussing what to do about this Miss Autumnbottom, don’t you think?” I asked.

“You don’t think she’s somehow ... ”

I put my index finger to my lips and stopped Poinsettia’s sentence. I pulled out the notepad from my breast pocket and a pen from the pen cup on our Staff Villain’s desk. I wrote, ‘Yes, I think she’s listening to us.’ And turned the pad so the staff could see it. I then wrote, ‘We need to find the listening device. But we need to act normal. Can you do that, SV?’ I showed the staff and as I should have known, our Staff Villain let out a sigh of exasperation.

“Of course I can!” he said. And, then upon realizing what he had done, added, “Make finger sandwiches for tomorrow’s meeting.”

I motioned for the staff to fan out and start searching. We had just turned the office upside down, but when you’re not specifically looking for a listening device, or bug as they call it in the biz, your eyes will probably slide right by it. We had all been bugged one way or another in our lives, so we knew the places to check first: fire alarms, table lamps, USB keys, spider webs. But none of these spots turned up anything. After we exhausted ourselves looking, I wrote on

my notepad, Let's come back in the morning and act like nothing out of the ordinary has happened. We'll then set in motion our plan to ...

Just as I was about to write, 'draw the woman out', the pen ran out of ink. I shook the pen hoping to loosen up any ink that was clinging to the sides of the ink reservoir. The pen rattled unnaturally as I shook it. I unscrewed the tip of the pen and tipped the barrel of the pen on an angle. The empty reservoir slid out, followed by a bead-sized metallic device. A small red light pulsed from the top of the device. I didn't hesitate. I tossed it out of the broken window and said, "What now?"

"We need to draw her out of hiding," Poinsettia said again. "I think we should use her crow drawing for that Artemis Mead poem. Start promoting her as one of the contributing artists in THE HIDDEN ISSUE. It's all so apropos**, don't you think?"

"Won't that just make her madder and more unpredictable?" said our Staff Villain. "It'd sure make me blow a gasket."

"Exactly," Poinsettia said. "Look how close she came to being discovered when she heard us talking about her. We now anticipate that she's going to do something, so we can prepare ourselves. She's the mouse and now we can be the ones to set the trap."

"Delightful," our Staff Villain said while rubbing his hands together. "I really do like this new, vindictive side of you, P."

"This isn't vindictiveness, SV," she said. "Vindictiveness is a strong desire to get back at someone. People who hold

grudges and seek revenge are full of vindictiveness. This isn't about revenge. I don't want to hurt her or make her suffer. There might be a valid reason for what she's doing. I just want to get my sweet little friend back."

We all did. And we all knew we should have called the police, but out of respect for our Staff Villain, we decided unanimously to try our method first. If it didn't work, the police would be our last resort.

Over the next week we continued working on the magazine, getting it ready for its April 1st release date. We also began to promote the magazine and its many talented contributors on all of our social media platforms. This included promoting Dolores Campbell (because we didn't know her real name at that point). When we sent out our first promotional tweet, we stationed our Staff Villain's H.A.C.K., D.L. Inkwent on lookout behind a dumpster across the street from our building. He was excited to get out of the lair for a few days and see the sun again.

The very second the Tweet went live, my office phone rang. "What exactly do you think you're trying to accomplish here?" asked the heavily modulated, robotic voice on the other end.

"Is this you, Dolores ... or Sarah ... or whatever you call yourself?" I asked.

"My name is not Dolores!" she barked, causing her voice modulator to buzz. "Uhhh, just a second ... "

There was a clicking sound and then the sound of a closed fist banging on something metallic and then she was back on the

line. "Don't ever buy refurbished voice modulators. They're the worst," she said, her voice now normal and familiar. "I told you I wanted nothing to do with your magazine. Why are you disrespecting my wishes?"

"You have our Ogilvy and we want him back."

"Who says I do?"

"Well at this point, it's pretty obvious: the words on the drawing, the brick through the window, the listening device in the pen. It's quite an irrational length to go to keep your art out of our magazine. We can be irrational, too."

"Well that's not very mature," she said.

"Why are you doing this?" I asked. "Had you just left Ogilvy here, we would have never thought about you or your art again."

She sighed. "This irrational action, as you have so eloquently put it, is actually a response to years worth of irrational actions."

"What are you talking about? By whom?"

"Don't push me any further," she said. "Ogilvy will be returned in due time. What is it they say about patience? It's a virtue, right? An admiral quality. You seem like an admiral fellow. Perhaps the only admiral fellow there. Be patient, sir. The brick was your first warning. This phone call is your second warning. You get a total of three warnings before things get really bad."

“Please don’t hurt Ogilvy,” I pleaded.

“Oh he’s not hurting,” she said. “I can assure you of that. In fact, it’s quite the opposite.”

And then she hung up. A second later the number 2 appeared in the comment section of our tweet about THE HIDDEN ISSUE.

“Do you think she’s serious?” Poinsettia asked during the hastily called staff meeting I held a few minutes later.

“Mrahh marahhh marah marah,” our Staff Villain said as he munched down on a finger egg-salad sandwich.

“What was that?” I asked.

He swallowed down the mushy, chewed-up egg and bread in his mouth and said, “She sounds as serious as an ingrown toenail. I had one of those things once and it got infected and the doctors almost had to cut my toe off. I’d say that’s pretty serious.”

“If she’s honest about Ogilvy not hurting, maybe we should pull back and just be patient,” Poinsettia said.

“My gut is screaming at me again ...,” I said.

And it was screaming so very loud. I knew the effect Ogilvy had on people. I knew how calming his presence was and how being around him gave you the “everything is going to be alright” feeling. Ogilvy is pureness personified and with

so little pureness out there, I know his true value to someone like Sarah Dolores Flinty Autumnbottom Campbell.

“ ... And it’s telling me the longer Ogilvy stays with her, the more she’s going to want to keep him. We have to publish the illustration with the poem. We have to get her back to this office, and I feel that’s the only way we’re going to do it.”

And so, on April 1st, 2021, the first new issue of Crow Toes Quarterly Magazine was released in more than a decade. It was spectacular! But the celebration was somewhat muted because it was missing a quarter of the team that had helped bring the magazine back to life. We sent *THE HIDDEN ISSUE* into the world with nary a mention of Ogilvy’s disappearance. And as plain as day we mentioned Sarah Campbell’s name in our list of contributors.

Within an hour of the magazine’s launch, a helium balloon shaped like a heart floated up past our office window. Our Staff Villain happened to be spitting sunflower-seed shells out the window when the balloon appeared. He was able to reach out and grab it and pull it inside. The balloon had the number 3 drawn on it in black felt marker.

“Hey, look at this!” he said, before letting the balloon float up to ceiling and get batted around by the ceiling fan. He then returned his attention to the outside world. “And hey, look at that!”

We rushed to the window and looked down at the parking lot where two people were in a tug-o-war, with a handbag playing the part of the rope. I said, “Isn’t that ... ”

“Yup, that’s D.L.,” said our Staff Villain, cutting me off.

Our Staff Villain’s H.A.C.K. was in an epic ‘pull and be pulled’ battle with Sarah. The commotion on the street had stopped cars and pedestrians. They watched on as the battle went back and forth. Back and forth. Just when it looked like D.L. had the upper hand, Sarah would get a good tug in and knock D.L. off balance.

The tug-o-war was called a draw five minutes into it when the police arrived. Yes, a tug-o-war between two adults in the middle of the day in the middle of a busy street was not a normal thing to see, so it was only a matter of time before one of the onlookers made the call. The sight of the police caused the two combatants to drop the handbag and put up their hands. We could see the police giving D.L. and Sarah a stern lecture. There was a lot of finger waving and head shaking and interpretive dancing. D.L.’s and Sarah’s head dropped at the same time, and like punished children they marched toward the CTQ building with the police following closely behind them.

A few minutes later the CTQ office door swung open. “These belong to you?” a burly voice asked as D.L. and Sarah stumbled into the office.

“Well, I don’t think they belong to anyone,” I said. “But the gentleman is employed by our Staff Villain and the woman ... ”

Through her gold-rimmed glasses, her eyes spoke volumes. They said, please don’t tell them what I’ve done. Or maybe they said, the only true thing to dip French fries in is

mayonnaise. I've never been that good at translating looks. It didn't really matter, though, because just as I was about to tell the officer the truth, Ogilvy walked into the office. He was twiddling his thumbs and whistling "The Cat Came Back." "Hey Poinsettia," he said, then turned his attention to the rest of us. "Hey Mr. Villain. Hello Mr. Narrator. Good day, D.L.! Jeez, I haven't seen you forever. How is everyone? Do you know Sarah?"

"Ogilvy!" Sarah said. "I told you to stay in the car."

"Ogilvy!" we all said all at once.

"And the woman?" the officer repeated.

"She's a ... she's a friend," I said. It wasn't my proudest moment. I couldn't believe I had just told a lie, but Ogilvy looked so healthy and happy. And maybe ... just maybe there was more to this strange, twisty story that would clear everything up. "Did they not tell you they're practicing for the world Tug-O-War World Championship next spring in Trondheim, Norway?"

The officer who remained hidden behind them said, "No, they did not tell me that. In fact, they told me something much more disconcerting***. So what's happening right here right now is I am being told three conflicting stories, one more outlandish than the next. What in the pastrami sandwich is going on here?"

"Oh my gosh," said Ogilvy. "You two are going to the Tug-O-War World Championships? I can't believe it. Neither of you ever mentioned being competitive athletes in this sport."

Wait. Wait just a second. Oh no. Oh no. It's magazine launch day, isn't it? I can't believe I forgot. I feel so horrible."

"Oh, don't feel horrible, little man," Sarah said. "I distracted you. It was my fault. I didn't mean to. I just wanted to make you feel ... make you feel important."

"But Sarah, this is where I feel most important," Ogilvy said.

"Enough!" the policeman shouted. "There is something shifty going on here and I have no doubts whatsoever you, Mr. Staff Villain are at the root of it. We will be watching you extra hard from now on. As for the here and now, if no one is going to implicate someone in a crime, I haven't got the time for this. My time is devoted to solving crimes, not helping people communicate better with one another. No more tug-o-war in the middle of the street in the middle of the day, okay?"

With that, the officer departed from the CTQ office, leaving Sarah alone with a now complete CTQ Staff. Awkward silence hung heavy in the air for a very long minute. "What, in goodness gracious sakes is going on right now?" I finally asked. "This was supposed to be a joyous day for the four of us. We've worked so very hard to achieve this again. And you ... you ruined it."

"I told you to be patient," Sarah said. "And I told you to leave my art out of this."

"Why did you take Ogilvy from us?"

“I didn’t take him,” Sarah said. “I just invited him over for tea and he stayed for a little longer than I had planned.”

“But we didn’t know where he was. We were worried sick,” I said.

“But it took you days to realize he was gone,” Sarah pointed out, that point piercing my skin and stinging. “I based my irrational action on a certain staff villain’s treatment of sweet little Ogilvy. I saw it first hand. ‘Get me this ...’ ‘Do that ...’ ‘Jump ... jump ... jump ...’ No one should have to put up with that kind of treatment.”

“But Ogilvy has a voice here, miss. He is just as important as any of us. His opinions and his concerns are valued as much, if not more, than mine or Poinsettia’s or even our Staff Villain’s. He does what he does here out of his own will. When he doesn’t want to do something he says no and we all respect his decision.”

“It’s true, I do have a voice,” said Ogilvy. “It’s not the loudest voice, but it’s always heard. I was just having so much fun with Sarah, I lost track of the time. We played UNO and Chess and we dressed up like our favourite movie characters and re-enacted scenes from their movies and we ate pickles and peanut butter and jam-covered popcorn. Please don’t be upset with one another. This is a glorious day. We’re all here now and we can celebrate together. Can’t we?”

I didn’t have the heart to tell Ogilvy about the lengths Sarah went to keep him away from us. And I know the rest of the staff held their tongues tighter than they had ever held them before. Our Staff Villain literally had his tongue clasped

between his thumb and index finger so he wouldn't say a foul word.

We spent the rest of the day celebrating the release of THE HIDDEN ISSUE and celebrating Ogilvy for the magical, wonderful person he is. We ate finger sandwiches and drank root beer floats (because celebrations always require ice-cream) and we played polka music two notches louder than we usually do. Sarah stayed with us and appeared to be having a most wonderful time, letting bygones be bygones****. And when darkness fell, she excused herself from the party. But not before giving Ogilvy one last big hug and telling him she'd see him again very soon.

A half hour later, after cleaning up the office, we slipped our jackets on and headed out for the night. As I was locking up, our Staff Villain tapped me on the shoulder and said, "That's not good."

I was focused on the keylock on the office door, so I had no idea what he was talking about.

"Look," he said.

I stepped back and felt a sneaky deaky shiver crawl down my spine as I read the words that had been drawn onto the door with a black felt marker.

THAT WAS THREE
NOW THERE
REALLY WILL BE
CONSEQUENCES

* Clan (noun) - a group of close-knit and interrelated families (especially associated with families in the Scottish Highlands).

** Apropos (adj.) - very appropriate to a particular situation.

*** Disconcerting (adj.) - causing one to feel unsettled.

**** Let bygones be bygones - to forgive someone for something done or for a disagreement and to forget about it.

The Land Of Lost Words

September 3, 2021

The time that has passed between my last post and now is not lost on me. It's kind of fitting the theme of our second issue of the new CTQ is LOST. LOST kind of became a theme of my life after the experience of putting this issue together, getting it printed and setting it free into the world. You see, I ended up losing something more valuable than gold ... more valuable than more time doing the things we love ... maybe more valuable than love itself. I lost my words.

It wasn't like I accidentally left my words on the table with my dirty plates and napkins after dinner at Lucille's Diner & Vacuum Shop. It wasn't like I could just retrace my steps back and find them. It was more complicated than that. I could still have conversations with people about general things like the weather and the benefits of eating oranges while lost at sea. And I could still order anchovies and bacon topped pizza from Jimborino's Pizzeria over the phone. Words still came

out of my mouth. But when I sat down to write anything with substance or creative thought or humour or horror, my words were lost.

For days I sat in front of my computer staring at the blinking cursor waiting waiting waiting for the words to make their way down from my brain into my fingers. Where the heck were they? I wondered. And then fretted. And then freaked out. On the fifth day of waiting for the words to return, I let everyone in the CTQ office know the words were missing and it was time to move to the next step(s): plaster the city with MISSING/REWARD posters, call the police, go to the media ... do whatever it took to get my words back.

Poinsettia calmed me down with a cup of hot chocolate topped with hazelnut-flavoured whipped cream. "It might just be writer's block," she said. "We all suffer from a little writer's block now and then. One time I couldn't write for a month. It was awful. But I was being chased by hunters I had foiled when I rescued the golden fox they wanted to kill. I was also embroiled in a lawsuit with a company that stole my credit card information to fund their next business venture: candy-flavoured potato chips. Not that I was against such an amazing idea ... I was just against them using my money to bring it to life. What I'm trying to say is, I had a lot on my mind and that took up a lot of space in here." She tapped her temple a few times and continued speaking. "There wasn't any room for anything else. Our return to the publishing world has been a lot of work. Maybe your mind is full of all the finicky details of that work and there isn't any more room left in there for anything else."

At that point our Staff Villain pulled an Otoscope out of

his chest pocket and stuck the pointy end in my right ear. He clicked on the little light attached to the Otoscope and Hmm'ed and H'ahhed for several seconds.

"Why do you have an ear doctor's device so readily available?" I asked.

"You never know when you might have to inspect a tight spot," he said. "Sometimes you need to inspect a tight spot before you attempt to get out of it."

"Well I guess in your case that makes sense," I said. "If anyone's going to get themselves into a tight spot, it's you."

"Shhh. Shhh," he said. "I need to focus if I'm going make a diagnosis."

"But I'm not sick. What is there to diagnose?"

"Mmmm ... " he said. "I see an excessive amount of earwax in there and I see a few potatoes beginning to sprout, but I'm afraid I don't see any words."

"Silly Mr. Villain," Ogilvy said. "Words aren't visible. They're like ghosts. There, but not there."

"Ahhh, my little pugnacious lackey coworker," he replied. "Words are just as visible as you or I. Or Poinsettia or our humble Narrator here. And like the people I just pointed out, words can be big and beautiful and ugly and minuscule and deadly and dreadful. And those are all things that can be seen, am I right? Words, they are everywhere you look, except, it seems, between our Narrator's two ears."

“Words are a narrator’s lifeblood,” I cried.

“But a narrator can read other people’s words,” Poinsettia said. “Not all is lost.”

“But ... but ... but the story of Crow Toes Quarterly is written ... and then told by me. Without those words I write, you and I and Ogilvy and our Staff Villain do not exist. And if we don’t exist, then Crow Toes Quarterly Magazine doesn’t exist. So you see the quandary we’re in if I don’t find those words.”

“Oh no oh no oh no!” Ogilvy cried. “Look at at Mr. Villain’s dirty boot! Look! Look!”

As if on cue, our Staff Villain’s boot, and his leg up to his knee, faded away.

“Well what on gobsmacked green earth is this all about?” our Staff Villain hollered, throwing his arms up in exasperation. “Do you know how long it took me to find a pair of boots that would fit my gargantuan feet and look stylish at the same time?”

Pens disappeared from desks. Pictures disappeared from walls. The water disappeared out of the water cooler.

“It’s happening,” I whispered. “Our world is slowly starting to disappear.”

“This is ludicrous,” our Staff Villain said. “I’m real. Ogilvy’s real. Poinsettia is real. We are not figments of someone’s

imagination. I refuse to believe that. Plus, I can still feel my foot and my leg. It's firmly planted on the real floor of this very real office. There is some sort of magic going on here right now and I don't like it."

"You're right SV. You are very real," I said reassuringly and ran from the office without saying goodbye or see ya later! Watching the world I had created fade away was the most painful thing I had ever experienced. Withholding the truth of Crow Toes Quarterly Magazine's origin — a truth I'm still not ready to share with even you — from my dear staff was a close second to the most painful thing I had ever experienced.

I had to run.

But first I had to hide.

Technically, though, I did run a bit at first, but these are all just words I'm writing here and a lot of times we get bogged down in unnecessary gobbledygoop when we start writing too many words.

So yes, I ran home and powered off my phone and my brain. Then I jumped into bed and pulled the covers over my head. I didn't want to see one more thing disappear. I didn't want to see the world I had created tumble around me. I hid under my covers for weeks ignoring knocks at the door and carrier-pigeon messages on my window sill. Soon the knocks stopped and the pigeons stopped landing. Weeks turned into months. And then one morning I woke to the sound of nothing. No wind blowing. No birds chirping. No mowers mowing. No faucets dripping. I flung the sheets off

me expecting to see nothing. But most of my room was still there. A small porcelain gargoyle given to me by our Staff Villain, of which he insisted I leave on my bedside table to ward off soul-stealing cats, was gone. But I was okay with that. The void-like silence caused my brain to click back on, and my first thought was, how long was I gone? And shortly thereafter I thought, how unbearably selfish of me to act this way. I have to stop the fade. I have to find my words.

Poinsettia had mentioned writer's block. It seemed the most logical explanation. A lot was going on before I lost my words. Not only was there the publication of *THE LOST ISSUE*, but I was also dealing with the voices in the walls, which were driving us all a little batty. Especially that one voice that sounded like Frankenstein's Monster after sucking from a helium balloon. Ugh! The office toilet was backed up, because a certain lackey I shall not name wasn't aware of the limitations of what one could flush down an office toilet. Toilet paper, yes. A bag of dry cement, no. I had just received a legal notice from Sarah to refrain from using any more of her art in our magazine. A virus had infected all of the office computers and someone wanted a hefty ransom to cure the virus. And if that wasn't enough to deal with, just before I lost my words, someone named Chuck P placed a curse on the building the CTQ office is in because he was allegedly upset with the tarot-card reading he received from Madame Zorboff, a psychic/medium/pastry chef who has a little office/bakery two floors down from ours. Yes, I was dealing with a lot. My head was filled to the proverbial gills with stress and strife and silliness. Maybe there really wasn't any room left for creativity and creation.

One of the things writer's are taught to help cure writer's

block is to change up their environment. Go somewhere new. Experience things they might not have experienced before. I've done it many times when I needed a kickstart to my creativity. I'd hop on a plane and head over to the African Sahara or charter a submarine and spend a day or two in Atlantis. The new sights and sounds and smells would loosen up the blocks holding my words back. The difference in the past, though, was I knew I was suffering from writer's block. It's a completely different feeling than actually losing your words. Writer's block is like a bout of insomnia. It's exhausting and uncomfortable and you feel like it's never going to end ... but it always does. And that realization stays with you. "I know this is going to end at some point." But when I ran out of the CTQ office building after seeing our Staff Villain start to fade away, I didn't feel like it was going to end. I felt like my words were lost for good. Like that dream I wished I had written down or the password to my email from 2006.

But I had to try something, and if changing up my environment had worked in the past, then it wouldn't hurt to try it again. As long as I didn't disappear before I got to wherever I was going.

In ancient Greece, in the times of Aristotle and Plato and Socrates, it was said that many of their great philosophies and revolutionary thoughts came as they walked. Walking and thinking go hand in hand, don't they? So I got out of bed and I walked and I walked and I walked. Out of my house and out of our town and into the next. It was a town called Fig's Grove. It was a town I did not even know existed until I walked into it. My thoughts swayed from the vastly different architecture in the town to the light drizzle that was falling

on my head despite there being no clouds in the sky to the two cockroaches sharing a piece of Hawaiian pizza next to a storm drain.

And as I walked amid this world of new experiences, new sights and new sounds, something funny happened. On the grass under a thorny rosebush in front of Fig's Grove's City Hall I saw the words, "The time that has passed between my last post and now is not lost on me." I picked up the words and put them in my pocket and continued to walk. Up an alleyway, on the back of a store that sold items for 99 cents, was a mural of a peacock wearing a motorcycle helmet and goggles. Above the peacock it said, "The open road is a beckoning, a strangeness, a place where a man can lose himself ... -William Least Heat-Moon" and curled up on the gravel beneath the mural were the words, "It's kind of fitting the theme of our second issue of the new CTQ is LOST."

With each new experience, the words I had lost were returning to me. I walked out of Fig's Grove and into a town called Persephone. If you know Greek mythology, then the name of this town should have elicited chills. Persephone was the queen of the underworld after she was abducted by Hades. But Persephone (the town) was anything but dark and fiery. Every street was lined with massive Oak trees and kids played hide and seek and kick the can at every turn. Laughter and the faint hum of a choir singing filled the air. Every hundred feet or so I found another few words: underneath a rogue newspaper page, inside a derelict phone booth, on the backs of ants heading to their hill. I carefully picked up each word and tucked it into my pocket. By the time I returned to the CTQ office I had this blog post in its

entirety. The big question was, would it find its way out of my head and onto this screen?

It's silly to think I've left you hanging, because you're reading this post now. Obviously, it found its way out of my head. But there were a few tense seconds before I started typing where I thought maybe ... just maybe I was too late. My index finger landed on the letter t and like a Mentos candy dropped in cola, the words erupted from me. I wrote so fast and furious I didn't notice my staff arrive. I didn't notice them standing around me watching pens reappear on desks and pictures reappear on walls and boots reappear on legs, which were reappearing on relieved Staff Villains. Only when I finished the post did I notice them. I looked up with visible relief in my eyes and one by one they squeezed my shoulder before leaving my office. As Ogilvy was about to walk through my door he turned back and said, "I'm so happy you found your words, Mr. Narrator. I lost this world once. I don't think I could lose it again. Sometimes we need to get out of our head for a bit to get back in there. Try not to forget that."

The time that has passed between my last post and now is not lost on me. But that time was needed to get my world back in order ... to get me and my crew back on track. THE LOST ISSUE is available now through our SUBSCRIBE page and we're now busy busy busy on THE BROKEN ISSUE, tentatively planned for an October release. These are trying, dark times we're living in right now. Find the beauty that still exists in the world. Because it really is everywhere. And maybe go that extra step and find the words to describe that beauty.

Clarity will return ...

ThE NeW CTq STAff PORtraiT CallOUT

October 5, 2021

One of the unfortunate bi-products of time passing is that we, as human beings, get older. Throughout history, we have tried to find a magic elixir or spell to reverse aging, but as of yet, we have failed in this endeavour. Our Staff Villain thought he had it one time when he haphazardly wandered into an ice cave in Northern Dagsnia and tripped over the skeletal remains of someone who had previously wandered into the same cave. A fanny pack around the skeleton's waist contained a small vial with the words "Button Serum: One Drop = One Year" written on it. The vial was filled with an icy-blue liquid. SV knew it could go either way, but he was willing to risk it. All the little grey hairs sneaking into the hair on his head and in his moustache were making him very self-conscious. He squeezed five drops onto his tongue and waited. And waited. And waited. A few hours later a trio of well-prepared hikers wandered into the cave, and through hours of inconsequential banter, slowly revealed that five years had passed since our Staff Villain had entered the cave.

Yes, with each drop he ingested another year had passed. His hair was now full grey, and the thought of how much it was going to cost to dye that grey out on a regular basis horrified him. He dropped the vial and stomped on it, burying it in the snow. No one was ever going to suffer like him.

But I digress.

In 2009, during the first run of Crow Toes Quarterly Magazine, we commissioned Kristian Adam, an artist whose work had appeared on the cover and in the pages of the magazine many times, to paint our staff portrait. It was a perfect representation of who we were at the time. But 2009 was twelve years ago and we are no longer the folks in that beautiful portrait. We are, unfortunately, quite a bit older, but I'd like to think we are also wiser. The past twelve years threw a lifetime of experiences and tragedies and discoveries at us. The past twelve years changed us. Kristian Adam's portrait of us will always hang in our office. It will always remind us of the naiveté and inexperience and excitement and heartbreak of those early days. But we all agree it's time for an update. Yesiree! The new magazine is now three issues in and gaining more and more readers with each new release. It's time to let the past go and focus on the here and now.

So it was, during our last board meeting we decided an open callout would be the most enjoyable way to get this new staff portrait. And maybe we'd make it a little contest, because we know how much folks like contests. So here are the details my dear friends:

There will be two age categories for the contest: 8-18 year olds & 19-Infinity. We're looking for a portrait that represents

the CTQ staff now (The Narrator, Poinsettia Park, The Staff Villain and Ogilvy the Lackey). It can be any medium and any size you like, but must be submitted as a high-resolution jpeg to ctqstaff@_____.com by Monday, December 6, 2021. Please write in the subject line “CTQ STAFF PORTRAIT CONTEST” and include with your submission a one-sentence bio about yourself (and if you’re under the age of 19, include your age).

We will select one winner from each group, and the winning selections will be published in THE COLD ISSUE (Issue 4), tentatively released on January 1, 2022. The winning selections will also receive lifetime subscriptions to our digital magazine and a fat cheque for \$50 (CDN). How cool is that? Submissions that aren’t selected will hang in our online CTQ Staff Portrait Gallery and be showcased through our various social media accounts.

So let’s see what you make of us!!!

Costumes Piled Ceiling High Part I

November 3, 2021

One of the saddest days for us here at Crow Toes Quarterly Magazine is the day after Halloween. All of those pumpkins and skeletons and cobwebs still out there, having served their temporary purpose, now considered eyesores. It's a hard thing to reconcile with. There's so much love, and love of horror, put into Halloween ... into Halloween night. It's just so doggone sad to see how quickly Halloween and that little bit of willingness to step outside of our normal comfort zone is forced out of us for another eleven months.

That's why on November 1st, Ogilvy likes to walk around town and thank the pumpkins and the decorations for all of their hard work. Thank them for giving us a good-natured scare. He places his pudgy little hand on the pumpkin's lid, just under the stem, and he says, "Your service has been recognized and will live on in the memories of everyone who crossed your path. And if, by chance, they do happen to forget you, I can assure you that I will not. Not ever. Never ever ever."

He's such a considerate lackey.

This Halloween was our first Halloween since returning to the world of publishing literature magazines. It had been ten long years since we last celebrated together. So we went all out for it. So far out, in fact, our Staff Villain left a voicemail the next morning explaining that he woke up in a small Icelandic fishing village dressed up as a sugarcube, and that he might not be back for a few days. A strange turn of events, considering he was at the CTQ Staff Halloween party the night before, whooping it up with the rest of us. Strange, but when it comes to our Staff Villain, strange is an everyday adjective. You must always expect the unexpected with that guy.

What I didn't expect to see at the office the morning of November 1st was a pile of costumes and masks and accessories piled up to the fluorescent lights in the ceiling. The biggest reason I didn't expect to see this was because The Inaugural CTQ Part II Halloween Hullabaloo only had five attendees. This pile would make one think attendance was in the dozens.

Yes, the usual suspects were at the party, that being Poinsettia, our Staff Villain, Ogilvy and me, your humble Narrator. But we also had a special guest. Our landlord's daughter joined us. Her name is Dorianna and she was dressed up as Coraline.

Five of us.

No more.

No less.

So where did the costumes come from? It was a grade-A mystery. And you know, that's kind of what we live for around here. Well that and root beer. And scary stories. And those funny little pill bugs that roll up into little balls when you poke them. Aren't they just the best?

The pile of costumes contained superhero garb, monster getup, fairy wings, goblin ears, wizard hats, boy bands from the 90s wigs and so much more. But the eeriest of the costumes in the pile were the four CTQ Staff costumes, which included lifelike rubber masks of each of our faces. I stared at these costumes for several minutes trying to process what I was feeling. It was like I was looking at versions of us that had been popped and deflated. A balloon CTQ staff waiting for a steady heavy breath to bring us back to life.

As I stared deep into the cut-out eyes of the Poinsettia mask, she snuck up behind me. "It's beautiful and it's terrifying," she said, causing me to jump and scream.

"Oooh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you," Poinsettia said.

I kick started my heart with a few deep breaths and asked, "Do you know anything about this?"

"Seems like a Staff Villain kind of prank. Didn't he crash here after the party? It's what he usually does."

"He's in Iceland."

“Pardon me?”

“A story yet to be told, I’m sure.”

“That’s funny,” Poinsettia said.

“Well his life is a comedy ... of errors.”

“No, not that,” she said and pointed at our Staff Villain’s desk. “That.”

Lying on top of the desk, among the potato-chip crumbs and cracked marbles and half-eaten jelly worms, was a perfectly square piece of our office wall. It was about the size of a soup cracker.

We quickly located the hole from which the square fit, behind the water cooler. I moved the cooler over and looked into the hole in the wall, but all I saw was darkness.

“The costumes are human sized,” Poinsettia said. “Kids and adults and everything in-between. How on earth would they squeeze through a hole that size? Not even the rubberiest person employed by the circus could fit through that.”

“I can’t believe it,” I said and smacked my forehead. “I can just check the surveillance camera footage from last night. That’ll give us some answers.”

“That’s a great idea! I can’t believe I didn’t think of that.”

We went to my office bookshelf. I pulled *The Cay* by

Theodore Taylor out an inch from the other books. We stepped back and a second later the bookshelf whirled and hummed. It then spun around into the wall and revealed the surveillance system on the other side of it. The monitor for the system was split into quadrants, with each square showing a different part of the office: the lunchroom, the main office with the staff's desks and my office, and just outside the front door to the office (for those of you asking, What about the weapons/booby trap room? We have a separate, hidden surveillance system monitoring this room ... that's how important the safety of the weapons/boobytrap room is).

I reversed the video to the time I remembered leaving Halloween night. Just before midnight. Poinsettia and I watched our landlord arrive to pick up his daughter. We watched us all tidy up before Poinsettia, Ogilvy and I left the office. We watched me set the night lights, wave one last time to our Staff Villain, who was spinning in his office chair. Then we watched as I locked up and left. I fast-forwarded the video until the timestamp said 1:06am. At this time the images in the quadrants flickered and fizzed out and were replaced by four different pieces of lined paper covered in a child's drawings. They kind of looked like Aurin Sasi's drawings in *THE BROKEN ISSUE*. These drawings filled the quadrants till 3:13am. At that time, the quadrants flickered and returned to showing our office.

"Well that just sent a shiver down my spine," Poinsettia said.

"Yes," I said. "It feels like the temperature has dropped thirty degrees in here. That was ... "

“Wowwwwwww!” someone in the staff office said in a long, drawn out way, causing Poinsettia and I to both jump up and scream.

“This scary stuff should’ve happened last night,” I said when I landed. “It all feels so out of place this morning.”

We ran out of the office and saw Ogilvy looking up up up at the pile of costumes.

“Ogilvy!” we said at the same time.

Ogilvy’s awe at the pile of costumes was struck down by our acknowledgement of his arrival. “Hey gang,” he said. “This town is so much bigger than the one where we used to publish the magazine. So many more people celebrate Halloween here! It took me a looooooong time to thank all the pumpkins and spooky decorations for their service. But don’t get me wrong. I enjoyed every second of it.”

“Ogilvy,” I said. “Do you remember anything strange from last night?”

“Oh my golly gosh,” he said catching a glimpse of something in the pile. “That’s me in there. Hey, we’re all in there. It’s like we’re snakes and we shed our skins. That’s really really spooky, because I’m not a snake. Am I?”

I can assure you, Ogilvy,” Poinsettia said. “You are definitely not a snake. Our Staff Villain on the other hand ...”

“Ogilvy,” I said again. “Do you remember anything out of the ordinary last night?”

He squeezed his chin with his thumb and index finger and said, “HMMMMMM, let me think. Thinking. Thinking. Thinking. I remember Mr. Villain rambling on about how tired he was of people complaining about everything and anything. About how he wanted to build an army of Staff Villains so he could face them all head on and turn their frowns upside down. ... with force. Wishing he had a cloning machine in his underground lair so he could do such a thing. But that’s pretty standard fare. Wait. I do remember something being a little off. The dip! The dip for the potato chips had a sour taste to it.”

“Okay then,” I said. “I guess we have nothing.”

“Wait!” Ogilvy shouted. “Dorianna was off.”

“What do you mean?” Poinsettia said. “Dorianna had a great time.”

“Yes yes yes, she did,” Ogilvy said. “But she kept telling me she didn’t want to go home because she was afraid.”

“Of what?” I asked.

“She said ... she said she had told a fib to her father and now she was sure the scary creatures from a scary story a friend had told her earlier in the day were going to take her away when she got home. She said she wished we could just keep the party going all night. I thought she was making a reference to the source material for her Halloween costume.”

Suddenly, the phone rang, causing Poinsettia, Ogilvy and me to jump up and scream.

When we landed back on our feet, Ogilvy said, “Why is November 1st turning out to be so much scarier than October 31st? We might want to consider changing Halloween to November 1st in years to come.”

I picked up the handset and said what I always say when I answer the phone at the office, “Crow Toes Quarterly Magazine. Be wary, we can be scary. How can I scare you today?”

It might not have been the best thing to say. It was Dorianna’s father ... our landlord Robert Percival Ledoux III on the other end. He shrieked, “Have you seen Dorianna?”

“The last time I saw her was after the party when you picked her up. What’s going on?” I asked, already knowing the answer, but still fearing it being spoken out loud.

“She wasn’t in her room this morning!” She isn’t anywhere!”

Dread clawed its way into my body. “She has to be somewhere,” I said.

“I’ve called every person, every place in town. No one has seen her. It’s like she just disappeared in her sleep.”

“I’m sure she’s safe,” I said as reassuringly as I could. “I’ve got three quarters of my staff here with me today, Mr. Ledoux. We’ll make it our priority to search every nook and cranny in this town, every up and down, every here there and everywhere.”

“Thank you,” he said. “You really are wonderful tenants.”

I hung up the phone and said to Ogilvy and Poinsettia, “Just as I feared. She’s gone. But I think I know where she might be ... or better put, I know who might have her. And you’re not going to like what we have to do to get her back. Especially you, Ogilvy. You’re not going to like it one little bit ... ”

TO BE CONTINUED ...

Costumes Piled Ceiling High Part II: The Truth About Fiction

November 13, 2021

There is a trope* in folklore, fairy tales, myths, urban legends and even your Grandpa Jack's fireside stories about all the scary things that happen to children when they lie. Or when they are bad or mean. Or when they go places they shouldn't go. If you've followed any of our story in the Crow Toes Quarterly world, then you'd know this trope is prevalent here, too. Think back to the Budgen, of which I can barely speak of, more than just their name. And recently, there were the Pimms. Oh, and those fluffy monsters that leave pennies between the toes of the children they're going to take. Many of these monsters, spirits and mysterious creatures live under beds or in the walls of bedrooms. Many of them wait patiently, sometimes for years, for the child they are watching to slip up ... to give them the authority to make their move.

When I first appeared in 2006 and began honing my skills of narration, one of the first stories I ever told was about the ANKLEBITERS. When I told this story, it was completely

fabricated by my imagination. I had very little experience in the living world up to that point, so I did not have a good foundation of what was real and what wasn't. I wanted to tell a scary story, so I mashed up a bunch of these tropes and created toothy little creatures that live in the walls and wait for children to lie so they have an excuse to gobble the children up in the middle of the night. It was a very creepy story. You see, first the Anklebiters would scratch on the walls to get the child out of bed to investigate. Creepy, right? Then the Anklebiters would rush out and chomp into the child's ankle so the child would fall to the ground, which then brought out the rest of the Anklebiters to finish off the feast. Super extra creepy, right? This story set a precedent for future content in both the magazine and in our lives. Forevermore, it seems.

"I think in a small way I am to blame for Dorianna's disappearance," I said to a petrified Poinsettia and perplexed Ogilvy. "And the only way to get her back is for me to revise the story."

"I don't understand," Ogilvy said. "What does it all have to do with me?"

"For millennia, storytellers have been telling tales to scare children into being good, into listening to their elders, into always being honest and I think ... I think the grip these tales had on society somehow manifested real live creatures. Creatures that take children in the nighttime. Creatures that feed off of insolence and ignorance and dishonesty. There's an old quote by a very real, very evil man who told lies for a living that goes, 'If you repeat a lie often enough, people will

believe it, and you will even come to believe it yourself.' These tales we told to keep children in line began as lies. But in time, they have become truths. And the truth is, I think part of a tale I once told has manifested itself in our real world. So now ... now I have to add to that tale to get Dorianna back. And unfortunately, Ogilvy, you have to be the bait."

"Bait!" Ogilvy shrieked. "First I have to figure out if I'm a snake or not. And now you're telling me I'm a worm."

"You're not a worm, Ogilvy," Poinsettia said reassuringly.

"Well that's a relief," he said and rubbed the back of his hand across his forehead in a "Phewww" gesture.

"You're definitely not a worm," I said, repeating Poinsettia's assurance. "But you are the only one in this office that has the stature ... and the nature of a child. Therefore, you are the one who is going to have to fool the creatures that took Dorianna and left these costumes. I'm going to have to ask you to tell a lie. It's the most awful thing I have ever asked of you Ogilvy, but in order to get Dorianna back, you are going to have to make them believe you're a lying child who needs to be punished."

"I can't lie!" Ogilvy cried.

"I don't like this any more than you do. I really don't. But we have to get Dorianna back and I just don't see any other way. I'm so sorry, Ogilvy. After our experience with the Budgen, I swore I'd never put my staff in danger again. I swore it ..."

"But Dorianna is our friend ..."

“Yes.”

“And friends don’t let scary monsters take friends.”

“Kind of ... ”

“Why can’t Mr. Villain do it?” Ogilvy asked. “He lies all the time. It would be easy peasy lemon squeezie for him.”

“He’s in Iceland. And these creatures I may have haphazardly created ... they ignore adults. No matter how much de-aging technology we use on SV, he’ll never look like a child.”

Ogilvy closed his eyes for a few seconds, then whispered, “For Dorianna.”

“For Dorianna,” I said.

“For Dorianna,” Poinsettia said.

Sheepishly**, with his eyes still closed, Ogilvy said, “I don’t ... I don’t like root beer.”

The fake lie came out of Ogilvy’s mouth so quickly. And it was horrific! I could have never imagined him saying something so damaging to all of us. Even knowing it was a lie, his words still cut me to the core.

“No,” Poinsettia said as if she fully believed what he was saying. “Say it isn’t so.”

“It’s ... it’s true.”

That night, Poinsettia and I set up camp in Ogilvy's bedroom. I hid in his giant pile of teddy bears, only my eyes left visible in the mountain of cotton, fake fur, button eyes and downright adorable-ness. Poinsettia painted herself like the corner of the room, then stood in it as still as she could. Completely camouflaged. We wished Ogilvy a good night and he wished us one back (with a, "please please keep me safe" in a whisper after it). Then he clicked off his bedside nightlight and we waited.

And while we waited, I wriggled my arms free and got my infrared night-vision goggles out of the satchel that was nestled tightly against my side. I also got a twist of yummy black licorice out of the satchel. I lowered the goggles over my eyes and popped one end of the licorice in my mouth, and I waited some more.

And waited.

The room and Poinsettia and Ogilvy, they were all perfectly still for hours. And through those hours of staying perfectly still, I depleted my entire bag of licorice. Mmmm, it was so good! It was while I chewed on the very last bite of licorice, my goggles picked up movement near Ogilvy's closet. Just above an electrical outlet.

Something sharp. The blade of a box cutter or a little claw had pierced the wall. It slowly cut a perfect square into the wall. The square popped out and dropped to the floor with a soft thud. No louder than a sleepy snort from Ogilvy's nose.

I looked over at Poinsettia. She was sound asleep while still standing. What a skill, eh!? Imagine how much more awake you'd be during important parts of the day if you could sleep standing up during the unimportant parts. You know, like when you're standing in line for coffee or stuck with no seat riding the filled-to-capacity bus into work or school or ... or talking to the crossing guard about their love of octagons.

Oh sorry, I lost my focus there for a second.

There was more movement in the corner of my infrared night-vision goggles. My attention returned to the square hole in the wall. A gelatinous goo poured from it, down the wall and onto the floor. Through my goggles the goo glowed toxic green. The goo made a pool about the size of single-bed comforter laid flat. The pool began to bubble. And each bubble that popped off the surface of the goo pool turned into a little figure with legs and arms and a torso and a head. Within seconds there were dozens of these little figures. And as they amassed, the little figures grew to the size of small children. Then middle grade children. Then young adults. These were not my Anklebiters, which was a minor relief. When the figures stopped growing they moved together towards Ogilvy's bed. Their arms stretched out in front of them. Like zombies. Or blindfolded party-goers trying to pin the tail on a donkey that wasn't there.

But this wasn't a party I wanted to attend. Or to be happening without my consent. I jumped out of the pile of teddy bears and flicked on the bedroom light. Ogilvy sat up in bed and Poinsettia's eyes popped open, her obsidian black pupils so very striking against the white of the wall behind her.

The creatures stopped and stood statue still.

Now I'd like to describe these creatures to you, but there were no definable features on any of them. Well, that's not completely true. The goo the creatures were made of was green in the light. So I guess they kind of looked like green shadows. But that was about it for descriptors.

"We caught you!" I said unafraid. It was weird, because I didn't feel any of the intense dread I had felt when I was in front of the Budgen more than a decade ago. In fact, I kind of felt like the creatures in front of us might have been just as startled of us as we were of them. "And we want you to return Dorianna right this very second," I continued. "And stop stealing children in the nighttime. Parents the world round are heartbroken because of your cruel actions. A magical part of growing up is making mistakes and learning all the lessons that come from being caught in a lie or from being bad. You can't fault a child for something they know so little about."

"We know that," a deep voice said from somewhere among the figures.

"You know what?" Poinsettia asked.

"Whoa," said the same voice. "We didn't know you were standing there. That's great camouflage."

"I know that," said Poinsettia. "But you know what?"

"We know that you can't fault children," the deep voice said.

“We’re here to teach the lessons. To teach manners. And we know there are a lot of monsters out there in the walls and under beds and behind trees that will lay the fault on the child. And will hurt the child. But believe you me, we’re not at all like those horrible horrible beasts.”

“Did you take Dorianna and leave all of those costumes piled up in our office,” I asked.

“Yes.”

“But that’s horrible, because her father is sick with worry? And we just don’t have the room to properly store that many costumes.”

“We don’t harm anyone,” the deep voice said. “I promise you that. And we always put the children back in their beds after they’ve been through our lessons. And we always make sure they never remember us. Never ever. They only remember the lessons. But you see, like you humans, we sometimes make mistakes. Some of our newer members ... the ones who blinked into existence moments before Halloween ... they got confused. They hadn’t had a complete training session with our instructors before they went out into the night. They thought people dressed up like vampires and mummies and tight-rope walkers and dictionary sellers were really trying to be evil. They thought that everyone, including the adults in costumes, were lying by being something they weren’t. So our new members took everyone they could and filled our classrooms way beyond capacity.”

“Classrooms? I don’t understand,” Ogilvy said. “You take people and make them go to school?”

“Yes, kind of. But it’s a really cool school. While they’re there, everyone wears a neat uniform with a big-tooth smiley face emoji embroidered onto it. And in-between classes you can choose to hang out in our stacked arcade with a slushie machine that has eight hundred flavours. Or ... or ... or you can go to our adventure zone that has rock-climbing walls and a zipline. I kid you not, we even have a zipline.”

“Ugh, school,” Ogilvy said shaking his head. “I think I’d rather be eaten.”

“Wait,” the deep voice said when it finally noticed Ogilvy. “You’re not even a child. Are you even human?”

Upon realizing their error, the goo figures started to shrink down into the puddle on the floor.

“But you’re still taking people against their will,” I said returning the focus to the complex dilemma of stealing children in the nighttime. “And that’s a bad thing. Heck, in this world it’s downright illegal.”

“When we’re done, no one knows the wiser. And the child has a lifetime worth of life lessons instilled in their mind. We’ve been written to believe that what we’re doing is noble and just.”

“Aha,” I said. “So I was right about creators creating you.”

“It’s amazing what a collective imagination, creative energy and a shared history of storytelling can conjure up. Yes, you and people like you put us here, but our story never ends.

And neither does the story of all the scarier versions of us.”

The green goo pool glooped and glopped back to the hole in the wall, like someone had hit rewind on the “life” remote, leaving only one shadowy figure. The one that spoke for all. “The influx of people coming into our classrooms Halloween night backlogged the system,” it said. Its voice didn’t seem to emit from one particular spot on its body; it seemed to manifest itself equally everywhere. “Most nights we’re teaching four or five hundred kids. An easy amount to manage and get home safely. We now have ninety eight million four hundred thousand and some odd people to get back to their homes. And we still have to do our jobs out here in the real world. It’s a mess. A logistical mess! It was actually a crossed-up message lost in the mess that made them confuse your office for a storage room for costumes. We weren’t even there for the girl, Dorianna, at that time. But once again, I can assure you, when the girl is returned to her home, it will be like she never left. Like nothing ever happened to her. Except, of course, she’ll think twice about lying to her dad, or anyone else for that matter, in the future.”

“We want you to bring Dorianna back tonight and to get all of those costumes out of our office!” I shouted.

“That’s fair!” it said matching my tone and volume. “But in return, we want you to remember forever on that words have greater power than you or he or she can ever imagine. They not only affect emotions and imagination. They have the power to affect the course of the living world. To make things that once weren’t real come into existence. Please, be cognizant*** of the words you and your contributors write from here on

out. Because, as I mentioned earlier, our story never ends. It is always being written and rewritten and rewritten for each new generation. Who's to say how those words might change us ... how they might change our priorities."

And with that, the last goopy green shadow-like figure plopped down to the floor and oozed its way through the square hole in the wall.

The next morning I called our landlord and asked about Dorianna's well being. He laughed and said, "Dorianna is currently eating sugary cereal and watching silly cartoons. When she woke up she randomly told me that lying can do great damage and that she'd never ever lie to me. Is there something I should know, Mr. Narrator? And please don't lie to me. You know how much damage a lie can cause."

They only remember the lessons.

Ogilvy and Poinsettia don't remember a thing about the night in Ogilvy's room. But I remember it all. Every last detail.

Is it because I am the one writing the story?

Is it because ...

* A literary trope is the use of figurative language, via word, phrase or an image, for artistic effect such as using a figure of speech. The word trope has also come to be used for describing commonly recurring literary and rhetorical

devices, motifs or clichés in creative works. Literary tropes span almost every category of writing, including poetry, television, and art.

** Sheepishly - ADVERB - has nothing to do with sheep, or moving like a sheep. In actuality, it means in an embarrassed manner due to shame or a lack of self-confidence.

*** Cognizant - ADJECTIVE - having knowledge or being aware of.

A Midnight Relocation (or How The Burlaroo Sent Us Packing)

February 5, 2022

There is a still frame taken from Roger Patterson's 1967 16mm film (known simply as the Patterson-Gimlin film), which has become an iconic image to Bigfoot enthusiasts. If you've done any research on Bigfoot, then you'll know the photo. It shows the big guy sauntering through a clearing along a riverbed. Rocks and branches in the foreground, trees and foliage behind him. His arms swinging as he moves toward some unknown destination. Perhaps a hot spring or a donut shop. The film was made in a place called Bluff Creek, California where large footprints had been discovered in the dirt and mud for many years prior. Since the day this photo was released to the public, it has been debated by scientists and cryptozoologists and people waiting in line for lattes the world over, with most concluding it to be a hoax. Many years after the film was taken, an associate of Patterson's even claimed he was the man in the film, wearing what was simply a modified ape costume.

If you've invested any amount of time in the CTQ world, then you're probably asking yourself, What the heck is this guy going on about? Bigfoot and Sasquatches like him ARE real. Poinsettia even interviewed Bigfoot in the first issue of CTQ way back in 2007. Well, that film image from 1967 never sat right with Poinsettia. She spent years trying to discredit the film and prove once and for all it was a fake, so the real Bigfoot and all the other Sasquatches would be left alone to live their lives in peace. If you recall, it was Bigfoot who reached out to her for the interview when he was ready to share his sad story.

Poinsettia began her quest to disprove the photo at the home of Bob Heironimus, the man who claimed Roger Patterson had paid him \$1000 to wear a costume and pretend to be Bigfoot. Bob Heironimus showed Poinsettia a costume that somewhat resembled the one on the film and he gave her all sorts of details about the day the film was shot, but she left the meeting feeling even more unsettled and unsure than she was before going into it. Bob Heironimus was a very nice man, but his facts didn't quite align with other documented facts from the day and his costume was a shade darker than the one in the famous shot. You and I both know, the colour in things usually fade as they get older.

So Poinsettia continued her pursuit to uncover the truth of the photo from 1967, only letting it go when the real Bigfoot eventually asked her to. Which leads us to the here and now.

In early January, days after the release of the digital version of THE COLD ISSUE, an email popped into Poinsettia's inbox. It was from an account called THEHEDBERRING. And all the body of the email said was, "The answer you seek is in

an offshore account, more north than northwest.” Poinsettia had been working on several stories when this email arrived, so she assumed the cryptic message had something to do with one of them. And it had been more than 14 years since she last thought about Bigfoot, so that connection wasn’t even on her radar.

We gathered around her computer and spitballed ideas as to what the question was, and theories as to where the answer to this question was to be found. One of the stories Poinsettia had been working on was about a mysterious silhouette that appeared on the side of a grocery-store wall in our town when the moon was full. It was a silhouette of several people walking in a line with their arms stretched out in front of them. Some locals suggested it was a foretelling of a zombie uprising. Others suggested it was local teens messing with the minds of the elderly. We know the answer to this now, but in early January it was still a mystery. So we ran with it! The what, we concluded, was, “What was causing this strange silhouette and what did it all mean?”

“The answer you seek is in an offshore account, more north than northwest,” Poinsettia read again after the ‘what’ was agreed upon and we moved onto the ‘where.’ “An offshore account. Could be the Bahamas. Lots of rich people keep their money there so they don’t have to pay taxes on it.”

“But how would that relate to north of northwest?” Ogilvy asked.

Our Staff Villain was spinning a globe. Spinning spinning spinning it. And sighing loudly. ”That’s all I can take,” he said and stopped the spinning with his index finger, its tip

landing right under the words Northwest Territories, which are one of Canada's uppermost provinces. "I didn't think I was the one who'd have to solve this. But for the sake of moving this thing along, I guess I will. Isn't it just so obvious? And just look at what's north of the Northwest Territories."

He squeaked his finger up the globe, stopping it on Banks Island.

Poinsettia, Ogilvy and I smacked our foreheads at the same time. Suddenly, it was so obvious. Banks Island! It is the world's 24th largest island, yet only has a population of around 100 people. It is a cold, treeless island where only the heartiest survive.

Upon finding the where, we started to think it was weird that the answer to the wall silhouettes would be found there.

"Maybe the 'what' comes after the 'where,'" Ogilvy said.

"I guess we'll find out," Poinsettia said. "I'm going to inflate the balloon and head up there this very minute."

And she wasn't kidding. In the the sixty seconds that ran through the very next minute Poinsettia had powered down her computer, tidied her desk, chugged a glass of root beer and hugged us all good bye.

Three days later the office door flung open and Poinsettia tumbled through the doorway and fell onto the floor. Her jacket was shredded in several spots and her neck and face were covered in scratches and bruises. She looked up at us

and in the most haunting tone I've ever heard come out of her, she said, "We need to move our office. Now."

"Get the Emergency Kit," I said to our Staff Villain.

"Get a frosty glass of root beer," I said to Ogilvy. "Stat!"

I had Poinsettia sitting up when they returned. Ogilvy handed her the glass of root beer, which she finished in one big gulp. Our Staff Villain peeled the paper wrapper off a dozen bandages of various sizes and handed them to me.

"May I?" I asked Poinsettia.

"Of course," she replied.

As delicately as I could, I fastened bandages to her wounds. When I was done, more than half her face was covered. When the colour returned to her face and she was able to stand and sit back down on a chair, I said, "Poinsettia, what in the candycorn in a pile of Halloween candy is going on?"

"It was a man in a costume," she said. "But it wasn't the man who everyone thought it was."

"You've lost me," our Staff Villain said. "I thought this was about zombie silhouettes on the side of the grocery store."

"It has nothing to do with that. We were wrong about the 'what'," Poinsettia said. "And I was wrong to ever have gone to Banks Island."

"Why do we have to find a new office?" I asked.

“Because I think he’s heading this way right now, intent on quieting me. On burying Crow Toes Quarterly Magazine forever so his secret doesn’t get out. I’ll say more once we get out of here.”

Poinsettia is the picture of level-headedness at CTQ. So seeing her seriously fret over something wasn’t something to be taken lightly. She knew how comfortable and perfect the office was for us. Only the threat of us being hurt or losing our lives could move us from the spot. I didn’t hesitate. I called our landlord Robert Percival Ledoux III and told him we had to move out. He was extremely disappointed, because we were such good tenants. But he was okay with it. Breaking our tenancy without a month’s notice would only lose us our damage deposit. It was a small price to pay.

We made a few calls and over the next two hours and with the help of our Staff Villain’s H.A.C.K., D.L. Inkwent, our landlord’s daughter Dorianna and a few other tenants who had taken a shine to us in our time there, we got the entire office moved to a temporary location (which I am sorry to say, I still cannot tell you where).

Once we had the plastic off the lunchroom couch, we popped some popcorn and slathered it in real butter. Then Ogilvy, our Staff Villain and I took a seat on the couch. Poinsettia pulled over a chair and sat down across from us. She had a story to tell and we were ready to take in every tiny detail.

And this is the story she told ...

THE MAN IN THE OX-HAIR SUIT

The essence of peppermint mingled with the water droplets and ice crystals that made up the never-ending, low-hanging clouds the hot-air balloon lazily floated through en route to Banks Island. Poinsettia's journeys, either with her father or on her own worldly pursuits, had never taken her to this most northern part of Canada. She was excited to see somewhere new and to maybe solve a mystery, too.

The magnetic needle in the compass she held jiggled and danced, its pointed tip directing her through the clouds with precision. Her compass was her most reliable tool. But calling it a tool was so crude. In her mind, it was like an old friend, introduced to her by her father when she was a child. "Like a good friend, this compass will always get you to your destination safely," he had said as he handed it to her. "And it will always get you home, even if you feel there's no possible way."

Poinsettia was on the right track. She was sure of it. By her calculations, the hot-air balloon was somewhere over Amundsen Gulf, a couple hundred kilometres from Sachs Harbour, which was her final destination. Sachs Harbour was the only populated area on the island, with little more than one hundred people calling it home. She was fascinated to learn that along with the residents there, you could also find half of the world's muskoxen. And when the hot-air balloon

pushed through the last of the clouds and into vast blue sky, it was these grand beasts she spotted first.

From her height, their dark, woolly coats and slow pace made them stand out on the snowy white surface of the tundra. They resembled punctuation on a massive piece of paper. A thousand lost periods looking for the end of the sentences they belonged to, in a novella that had yet to be written.

To the east, Poinsettia could see the Beaufort Sea. She thought she even saw a family of belugas on their backs looking up at her. She thought, if my life was a fairy tale, this is where I'd want it to be set.

With such a small population, she was sure it wouldn't be too hard to suss out the answer to the cryptic email sent to her the day before. "The answer you seek is in an offshore account, more north than northwest," she said as she began the hot-air balloon's slow descent. With the help of the staff at the magazine she worked for, she had figured out that Banks Island was where the answer would be found. But she had yet to discover the question. She was going into the situation blind, with only the compass in her hand, and the compass in her head, heart and gut leading the way. Her hope was that someone on the island would recognize her and would give her a clue or two.

West of the lolligagging muskoxen lay a tiny village. Pops of red and blue burst from underneath the snowdrifts that were piled up along the fronts of the homes scattered throughout the village. Poinsettia drifted the hot-air balloon down to the centre of the village, dropping her sandbags to anchor the balloon as it deflated. It was so much colder than she had

imagined it being. In what she could only believe was a joke by the locals, two pairs of jeans were frozen in a walking motion a few meters from where she had landed. A sign next to the jeans read, WE SAW THE BURLAROO AND IT SCARED THE PANTS OFF US.

“What’s a Burlaroo?” she whispered as she put on another coat, another pair of pants, another pair of socks, another pair of gloves and a balaclava.

“Well, a Burlaroo is part man, part bear and part nightmare,” a voice from behind her said.

She turned around in the basket. A young girl with pigtails, wearing a poofy purple jacket and gloves five sizes too large for her, stood there digging the toe of her boot into the snow. “And what are you?” the girl asked.

“I’m Poinsettia.”

“You’re not a plant,” the girl chuckled.

“No, it’s my name.”

“Oh,” the girl said. “My name is Aanya.”

“Well it’s very nice to meet you, Aanya. I’ve travelled a great distance to be here.”

“Why would you do that? Look around. The only thing here is snow. And more snow. Oh, and look over there! Even more snow.” Aanya chuckled again.

“I received an email yesterday. I think someone here has information for me about a story I’m working on.”

“That’s funny,” Aanya said, but this time she didn’t chuckle. “There are no computers here that connect to the Internet. The only way to contact the outside world is through these big satellite phones they keep locked up in the village hall. We’re too far away from anything to have Internet access or even basic cable. It’s pretty boring if you don’t fish or hunt. I pretty much read all day long.”

“That’s not a bad thing.”

“Oh, I know. I love reading. I love being able to go places in my mind when I can’t go anywhere in real life.”

“This Burlaroo sounds intriguing. What’s the deal with that?”

“It’s pretty scary stuff,” Aanya said. “Do you scare easily?”

It was Poinsettia’s turn to chuckle. While still chuckling, she said, “The tagline for the magazine I work for is, ‘Art and literature for children who don’t scare easily.’ I write a lot of the scary things that go in the magazine. Trust me, I don’t scare easily.

“In the late 1960s, like a million years ago, it appeared on the island,” Aanya said. “At first, people only caught glimpses of it zigzagging through the herds of muskoxen. At first, they thought it was just a bear. Then, people began returning from hunts to find their front doors open and their ice boxes emptied of their meats and treats. Bears

never came into the village. Bears also couldn't pick locks. So the residents began taking turns patrolling the village at all hours of the day. When everyone knows everyone else in this place, stealing becomes a real gutsy thing to do. Anyways, late one night in the summer of 1969 one of the residents on patrol spotted a large, hairy creature climbing through a window of one of the homes in the village. The resident on patrol blew his whistle and woke everyone up. With rifles and torches in hand, the entire population of Sachs Harbour surrounded the house and chanted, 'Come out. Come out. Show us what you're all about.' All the torches had made night look like late day. Like the golden hour where everything looks healthy and rich. The chants got louder and louder and between the chanting was chatter about setting the house ablaze. Even the owner, who had returned from a night hunt, agreed. He knew the villagers would help him rebuild. After several minutes of chanting, a man name Kai shushed everyone and said as loud as he could, 'Come out! Come out! Or we'll burn this house down. You have ten seconds.' The villagers counted down, 'Ten! Nine!' and on 'Eight' a hand ten times the size of a large man wrapped itself around the edge of the door. Soon after that a face peeked out from behind the door. It was so large and scary, two of the villagers fainted. The creature was in plain view. It looked like a cross between a bear and a man. But like, one of those neanderthal men from a billion years ago. The creature ducked under the door and stepped onto the top step leading up to the house. It looked around at the people set on killing it and it screamed, 'Burlaroo!!!' Then it ran down the stairs, through the crowd and into the darkness of night. It was never seen again after that. But since then, tracks of big, man-like feet have been discovered all over

the island. And the creature the villagers named Burlaroo, became a legend.”

“Like Bigfoot.”

“And the Loch Ness Monster. Scary right?”

Poinsettia didn’t answer Aanya. She wasn’t trying to be rude, but her mind was suddenly buzzing. She wasn’t on Banks Island for zombie silhouettes or sculptures of UFOs or procrastinating pixies ... any of the articles she was currently working on. She was sure someone sent her to Banks Island to discover the truth about the Burlaroo.

“When was the last time someone actually saw the Burlaroo?” Poinsettia asked.

Aanya ran the tip of one of her pigtails under her nose and scrunched her face. “Sometimes I can make myself sneeze by doing that,” she said. “I also tickle myself with my hair when I’m thinking.”

“I used to do that when I had long hair.”

Aanya smiled. “My uncle was out in his boat only a few days ago and he said he saw a large man-like creature sitting on a rock on a beach along the west coast of the island. He joked that it was the Burlaroo, but said it was getting dark and really could have been anything. He said he was pretty tired at the time and he thought maybe his eyes were playing tricks on him.”

“Did he say anything else?”

“Hmmm. Just that ... just that it looked like it was looking out at the view. And by the way its body was slumped, it kind of looked sad.”

“Well well well,” Poinsettia said. “I didn’t think my direction would be pointed out so soon, but there it is, laid out in front of me. All thanks to you Aanya.”

She dug her toe into the snow again. “Maybe one day you could take me for a ride in that thing.”

“It’s a promise,” Poinsettia said and lit the flame that started inflating the hot-air balloon.

The hot-air balloon lifted up off the ground. Poinsettia pulled up the sandbag anchors and gave a farewell wave to Aanya. Aanya waved back and continued to wave until she was nothing but a speck on the Earth that was now far below Poinsettia. Poinsettia retrieved her pocket telescope and extended it. The metal end of the eyepiece was frozen and caused a chilly burning sensation when she placed it against the skin around her eye. But the warmth of what she saw through the eyepiece warmed up her blood, which warmed up the metal quickly. She saw families of Arctic foxes tussling in the snow. She saw lemmings peering perilously over cliff edges. She saw caribou playing peekaboo with polar bears. And as she floated further up the west coast of Banks Island, and the animals disappeared leaving only the blinding white of the snowy landscape, she saw something that looked kind of like a bear and kind of like a man, but nothing like either. It had to be the Burlaroo! And it was lumbering through

the snow toward a cave set deep in a Precambrian rock cliff a few hundred feet in front of it.

The Burlaroo disappeared into the cave. Poinsettia landed the hot-air balloon next to the cave's entrance. She wasn't reckless. She knew this could be a dangerous situation. So she prepared herself by keeping the hot-air balloon inflated and by slipping into her Kevlar monster suit, which was able to withstand claws and teeth up to three inches long. She put her jacket on over the suit (because as good as the suit was at protecting her from monsters, it lacked any insulation to protect her from the cold), she popped the cap on her extra-strength bear spray and cautiously walked toward the cave. Why the Burlaroo was the target of her investigation was still a mystery. But even if it had nothing to do with why she was lead to Banks Island in the first place, her cryptozoological curiosity would be satisfied, and she might even get a new story for the magazine out of it.

A few feet into the cave and the world around her was black as ink. She dug a tiny flashlight out of her monster-suit pocket and clicked it on. Its little ray of light bounced along the cave walls then landed on a picture frame. "That's an odd thing to see in a cave," she said. She swung the light around to another wall and saw another frame hung on it. And another and another. She walked up to one of the frames, shined the flashlight onto it and saw a picture of a well-dressed family of humans posing underneath a juniper tree. A frame a few feet away had a picture of three men standing side by side on the shore of a creek. The very tall man in the middle had his arms over the shoulders of the other two men. They were caught mid laugh. She shone the flashlight onto the next frame down the line, then shone it

back onto the picture of the three men. "It can't be," she whispered.

But it was.

She had to do a double take, because one of the men in the picture was Roger Patterson, the man who in 1967 caught the legendary Bigfoot on film. The very tall man in the middle of the picture was wearing what appeared to be a gorilla costume without the mask on. She had never seen this man before. "What's going on here?"

She shivered and shone the flashlight down the cave. The light landed on a pile of wool and fur. A little table was next to the pile. On the table was a sewing machine. And underneath it, a little generator to power the machine. Poinsettia listened for growls or footsteps, but only heard the whistle of wind working its way through the cave.

Another picture was hanging above the sewing table. She walked over to it and gasped. It was the same man in the gorilla suit, but this time he had his mask on. It was the famous Bigfoot photo! But much clearer, like it was taken with a film camera and not a movie camera. "Oh my gosh," Poinsettia said. "It really was a hoax."

A loud roar ripped through the cave and Poinsettia was suddenly lifted up in the air. In the melee, she dropped her bear spray and the flashlight. She couldn't breathe because whatever was lifting her up was doing it by her neck, one of the only places not protected by the monster suit. The flashlight, now lying on the ground, lit up two massive feet covered in thick fur. "The Burlarool!" Poinsettia coughed out.

“And who are you?” it roared.

Poinsettia grabbed at the hand around her neck trying to loosen it. “I’m someone who can’t breathe,” she coughed.

“That’s the point,” the Burlaroo roared. “When you stop breathing I can go back to being.”

“I understand,” Poinsettia coughed. “I know what it’s like to have to hide because of something you got involved in.”

The Burlaroo loosened its grip allowing air to pass through Poinsettia’s windpipe.

“Why are you here?” Poinsettia asked.

The Burlaroo dropped her onto the floor of the cave. She picked up the flashlight and shone it up into the eyes of the very tall man from the photo. He was much older now and had a bushy white beard. His blue eyes had dulled to a blue grey. He was covered in fur, but this looked more like the fur she saw on the muskoxen.

“I lost everything in my life because of that day,” the Burlaroo said. “It grew and grew and became something so much bigger than what we had intended. It was supposed to be a joke. A joke! How can a joke end up to be so unfunny? But they’re safe. And that’s all that matters. They’re safe ... and if you reveal the truth, that safety will disappear. I can’t let that happen. I’ve been hiding too long to let that happen.”

“Is it Patterson? Gimli? Who’s made you run?”

“No! Not at all! I’ve said too much already,” the Burlaroo said. “You must be silenced.”

The Burlaroo reached down and tried to grab Poinsettia, but she rolled away from its attack. As she rolled, she felt something press into her thigh. It was in the other pocket of her monster suit. She removed a device that was the size of a roll of dimes. Stored in that little device was thirty thousand volts of electricity. An immobilizer. She popped the cap off it and slammed it down onto the Burlaroo’s foot. The man dressed like a beast let out an animal howl as sparks lit up the cave. In the brief flash of light, Poinsettia saw an armchair and a portable television, a fire pit and a teapot on a rock in the pit. All the conveniences of a small home filled the cave. But it was the photo of the family underneath the juniper tree her eyes were drawn back to. She jumped to her feet and ran to the photo.

“Noooo!” the Burlaroo screamed. It reached out for Poinsettia as it fell to the floor of the cave, but its claws slid through her jacket like butter, leaving it in tatters. Poinsettia pulled the photo off the wall and ran as fast as she could out of the cave.

“They deserve to know you’re alive,” she said as she ran. The Burlaroo, still stunned by the electric shock sent through its body, rolled onto its back and began to weep.

“They deserve to know,” Poinsettia said again as she jumped into the hot-air balloon’s basket and lifted the sandbag anchors.

Halfway home she noticed her wallet was missing.

THE END

The morning we were to pick up our limited-edition print issues of THE COLD ISSUE, our printer phoned us and said the box of magazines had been stolen. The security camera had caught the blurry images of a large, gorilla-like creature crashing through the print shop. A freeze-frame of the culprit was emailed to us. No word of a lie, it looked just like the beast in the image taken from the Patterson-Gimli film in 1967. It had the same shape. It had the same colour fur. Its arms were in a swinging motion.

“Did Bigfoot steal our magazines,” Ogilvy asked.

“It’s him,” Poinsettia said. “It took him two weeks to get here. But he’s here, alright!”

“Why does he continue to dress like Bigfoot?” our Staff Villain asked.

“He’s dressed as the Burlaroo,” Poinsettia said. “They have similar traits and features, but they’re different.”

“Yeah, Bigfoot is real and the Burlaroo isn’t,” our Staff Villain said.

“He seems to think if he reveals his human form, his family will be in danger. I still haven’t been able to locate them, so I’ll never know.”

“Do you think it was one of his family members who emailed you?” I asked.

Poinsettia grabbed her chin with her thumb and index finger and squeezed. “I thought that originally, but if they did, then they know he’s still alive ... still out there. No, someone else did it and I intend to find out the answer to that one day, as well. For now though, we have to lay low. For now, we have to wait till Christopher can find us a new office and then, in the dead of night, we have to move everything over to it.”

“For a group of folks just trying to publish an art and literature magazine for children, we sure do seem to make a lot of enemies,” Ogilvy said.

“I knew going into publishing, I was entering a dangerous world,” I said. “I can only hope all the good we put into the world can offset that danger a little ... can make everything we’re trying to accomplish worth it.”

“That’s all any of us can hope,” Poinsettia said.

In late January, Christopher sent us a picture of an office building with a crow painted on the side of it. The building would have been perfect, but the crow was a giveaway and we couldn’t risk it. So he continued to search, and eventually he found us the perfect location. The building he found had no signage or any indication of what was inside it. He secretly signed a lease agreement, and late one night, under the cover of darkness, we moved the CTQ office from our temporary location into the building.

The new NEW CTQ office is set up almost identically to our

old new office, with a main office area, a head office for me, a lunchroom and even a weapons/booby-trap room. The man who called himself the Burlaroo has yet to find Poinsettia or our new NEW CTQ office. But we know he's out there looking. And he probably won't stop until he finds us.

For the first time since restarting the magazine, our weapons/booby-trap room might come in handy.

Chill Your Root Beer With Some CTQ-Staff Ice Cubes

June 12, 2022

It's been raining for two weeks straight. The only colour in our world is grey. And grey just isn't that inspiring, is it? Ogilvy says there's a dark cloud hanging over us. He's being literal when he says this, because I'm looking out my office window and I see this dark cloud. But I feel the metaphor in his statement, too.

The time between my blog posts is getting longer and longer. And the content in the posts I write is getting darker and darker. I really wanted to make this a bright and cheery post — maybe talk about the slobbery, yippee puppy the people in the office next door just got, or the ice-cream shop down the road that just introduced its Bathtub Sundae, which is actually served in a bathtub on wheels — but then I'd be hiding the truth from you.

And you deserve the truth.

The truth in this blog post begins with murals.

There are hundreds of murals painted on walls and building faces throughout our new city. It's actually quite a delight to see so much art in the wild. A giant three-dimensional heart is painted on the front of City Hall. And behind the chocolate factory is a painting of several children wearing creepy animal masks with a cloud floating above them shaped like the word DECEIVE. Down every alleyway and up every new street, on cement and brick and corrugated metal, a manifestation of the imagination can be found in acrylic.

Sprinkled among the murals, like cilantro or shrimp sprinkled on pasta, are several paintings of animals trapped in blocks of ice. On the side wall of the building across from the CTQ office is a brown bear up on its hind legs, its torso encased in ice. Behind the health-food store a few blocks away is a beluga whale in ice, only its tail and its bulbous head exposed. The back wall of the safe store has a deer in ice. And on the front wall of the book shop is an elephant in ice. It only has its trunk exposed.

We thought these paintings were nothing more than whimsical eye candy hidden by an Easter-bunny-like artist for us to discover and collect during our daily walks. Unfortunately, whimsy has nothing to do with this art.

In mid-April, a few days after the release of the limited-edition print version of THE WILD ISSUE, we were cleaning up the office, preparing for a well-deserved break. We had a good month and a half ahead of us before we had to start thinking about the next issue. Our Staff Villain, who had returned to CTQ a mere week before we published THE WILD ISSUE (after his little blow up over the “excessive

amount of work” he did on the CTQ: ANTHOLOGY OF POETRY, LITERATURE AND ARTWORK) had planned an excursion to the Bermuda Triangle with a few of his villain buddies. Poinsettia was heading to Wyoming for a two-week axe-throwing course and Ogilvy was heading up to the clouds to visit his mother. Your Humble Narrator ... well, he was planning on sticking around town, planting himself on his patio Adirondack chair, sipping sweet tea and working through his teetering pile of unread books. It was going to be H E A V E N.

I say, “It was going to be ... ” because as we were in the middle of cleaning up our office, our office television gave out on us. Most times this wouldn’t have been an issue. We would have called a cableperson and let them deal with it. But everyone knows Mid-April is not the time to be losing your television signal. It’s when the massive International Writing Championships are held. Every minute of this event is like a blockbuster action movie. Eleanor Keen had reached the finals with her middle-grade novel THE BONES IN BERNICE’S BROTH. She was competing against Linus Podecker, whose young-adult novel PIM was breaking records left right and center. It was hyped as the biggest match of the last two decades. Keen had just finished the last sentence of her penultimate chapter, leaving Podecker shaking his head in exasperation. The camera cut to a close-up of the perspiration forming on his brow ... and then the image on the TV blipped and cut to snow.

We all threw our hands up in the air at the same time and screamed, “No!!!!!!”
“I have to see what happens! I have to! I have to! I have to!”
Ogilvy cried.

“Let’s not panic,” I said. “I think the cable box is on the roof. Maybe a pigeon mistook it for a stool and loosened up a wire.”

The four of us conga lined our way up the stairwell to the roof. Poinsettia quickly found the cable box, and it was apparent something had messed with it. All the cords leading into the box had been cut. “It’s a clean cut, too,” she said, “like it was made by a sharp knife or industrial-grade scissors.”

“Why would someone purposely cut our cable?” I asked, knowing full well the CTQ staff couldn’t answer me.

But someone else on the roof could.

He appeared from behind a very out-of-place pillar in the middle of the roof. The peculiarity of the pillar struck me at first. It wasn’t holding anything up ... like it had been brought up there just to create some place to hide behind. A red bucket was on the ground next to the pillar. Only after looking at the pillar and the bucket did I take a good gander at the the strange fellow now standing in front of us. He had limbs like gnarled tree branches and he wore a yellow plastic smock with plastic pockets running along the front of it. “If only it was this easy all the time,” he said in a voice that sounded as gnarled as his limbs.

“Who are you?” SV said with a scowl.

“I’m Innocent,” he said.

“Of what?” SV retorted.

“No, you moustachioed magpie. My name is Innocent,” he said. “Innocent Davies.”

“Is that your given name?” Poinsettia asked.

“Yes. I get it ... I get it! it’s a unique name and it’s kind of ironic seeing as I’m guilty of so much. But my name doesn’t matter right now. I’m here to tell you that you fell right into my trap. Usually, I’m trapping bears or wolves or Sasquatches. I thought it would be much harder trapping humans. But the four of you proved me soooooooo wrong.”

“We’re not trapped,” I said waving the CTQ staff over to me. When they were by my side I pulled on the roof door. It didn’t open.

Because our office and office building was still so new to us, what we didn’t know before we headed up to the roof was that the door leading out onto the roof locked from the inside. If you didn’t have a key with you, there was no way of getting back in. And of course, we did not have a key with us.

“Ha ha,” Innocent said. “Trapped on the roof and now ...” he picked up the red bucket and flung its contents at us. “Trapped in ice!”

What flew through the air looked like smoking water. We put our hands out in front of us, like we were wizards in the act of casting a spell to stop the oncoming soaking. But we’re not wizards and that smoking water splooshed all over us. And then it got really cold and the clothes we were wearing

stiffened and frosted. From the frost little ice scales formed. The ice scales then merged and expanded outward into pure, hard ice. Within seconds the four of us were trapped in blocks of ice, with only our heads exposed.

Innocent walked up to each CTQ Staff ice block and gave it a good, hard kick. "I did it!" he said. "I've now trapped every living thing on Earth in ice."

"This is going to kill us," Poinsettia said.

"It might," he said. "But I've done this enough times to know it probably won't. And heck, what doesn't kill you only makes you stronger."

"I don't think that statement relates to this situation in any way," I said.

"Listen, don't worry your funny-shaped heads," Innocent said. "Your bodies will go into suspended animation. Your breathing, heartbeat and other involuntary functions will still occur, but at the most basic level. It will be just enough to keep you alive as long as it takes me to finish."

"Finish what?" Ogilvy asked. "Why us? What about the final of the International Writing Championships? We can't miss that! We can't!"

"Whoa! Whoa! Whoa, you garden gnome who's eaten too many carrots," Innocent said to Ogilvy. "Let's attack this one question at a time. Though I may use nefarious means to acquire my subjects, I'm not a bad person. I'm a painter! And the figures trapped in ice are what make my art unique. I can't

paint these things from my imagination. I seem to have been born without one. So I have to have the thing I am painting in front of me. Hence, the four of you looking like giant ice cubes with heads. I picked this building at random. I cut the cable and I waited for the first person to come up here. Instead of one person, I got four. So yippee for me! As for the championships, the quicker we get this done, the less you have to miss. It's pretty exciting this year, isn't it? I'm really rooting for Eleanor Keen. That part in her story where the finger bone rises up out of the broth and points accusingly at Cartwright was terrifying. I can't wait to see how her story ends."

"So you're going to paint us?" SV asked.

"Yup," Innocent said. "I sure am!"

"And then what?" I asked.

"Well, then I'm going to hang up my smock, my palette and my paints. Humans are my last subjects. I think I'll try pottery next."

"This is so weird," Ogilvy said.

"You four ever really looked in the mirror? Do that and then we can discuss what is and what isn't weird. But enough of that," Innocent said and walked back over to the pillar. He briefly disappeared behind it. When he reappeared, he had an easel under his arm and a box in his hands. A canvas stuck out of the top of the box.

My heartbeat was slowing down. It's thump thump thump

was becoming more of a thump thump thump. I looked over at my staff. Ogilvy's eyes closed and his head slumped forward. Poinsettia was breathing in and out in fast, short breaths. Then her head slumped forward. I looked at SV and he gave me a wink before he, too, passed out. I focused on maintaining consciousness as long as I could. I watched Innocent set up his easel and secure his canvas. I watched him squeeze his paints onto his painting palette and then mix them. As he was picking his brushes my consciousness failed me.

Spring is almost over. But as I'm sure you've noticed, it has been a long, cold, wet season. Only a couple of weeks or so ago did the heat of an oncoming summer weasel its way into the air. This little bit of heat melted the ice that imprisoned us.

I opened my eyes and saw our Staff Villain first. He was shaking me by the shoulders and saying, "I know you're still in there. Wake up! Wake up, Mr. Narrator."

I saw genuine concern in his eyes. Or maybe it was just a speck of dirt.

"Oh, thank goodness," Poinsettia said as she peered over SV's shoulder. "We've been in hibernation for almost six weeks."

"But ... but how is that possible?" I groggily said. "How did we eat or go to the bathroom? How did no one come up to the roof in that time?"

They all shrugged their shoulders. There was no easy explanation for any of it.

Our world is built on mysteries, most of which never get solved. That's why we often have to make up answers. To create our own truths. Just to rest our restless minds. I'd like to think Innocent Davies fed us through tubes and maintained our survival. I'd like to think he carried an ounce of decency somewhere inside him. Thinking this makes me sleep better at night.

We took a few minutes to revive our numb limbs, then Ogilvy shimmied down a drain pipe to the street below. Moments later he burst through the rooftop door freeing us from our first trap.

We were trapped in the ice for such a long time that we were weeks behind on preparation for *THE CURIOUS ISSUE*, due for release on July 1st, 2022. We had to jump right into production again. But the CTQ Staff deserved a hot shower, a warm meal and a real, self-initiated sleep. So I said to meet back at the office in two days.

I chose to walk to the office upon my return. My legs were still a little numb from not being used for so very long. I took the scenic route to work, down alleys, through corridors and along side streets. It was along one of these side streets, on a wall that belonged to the bank, I spotted a mural that stood four-stories tall. It was the shoes in the mural's subject I recognized first: penny loafers with two pennies from 1984 tucked into the tongues. They were my shoes! It was a mural of me in a block of ice with the initial I.D. signed beneath it. And it was terrifying!

Innocent Davies, someone we had never met before, had no idea who we were. He selected us at random. But if you've followed our story up until this point, then you know there are people (and things) in the world who do know us. There are people (and things) out there that want to hurt us. We came to this city because we were running from the Burlaroo. We came to this city to be anonymous. But Innocent Davies has taken that anonymity away from us.

My only hope now is that the people coming to this city as tourists or potential residents or conference attendees or lost bounty hunters have no interest in the art on the city's walls. Because someone always knows someone who knows someone else who knows and will tell ...

Ahhh, who am I kidding? We're doomed.

Oh looky look! There's a break in the clouds.

That One Day When We Lost Our Soles

August 6, 2022

My ringing phone woke me at ten to seven. A panting Staff Villain was on the other end. “Help me,” he said between pants. “My sole has melted to the pavement. I fear it may be permanently damaged.”

I held in a chuckle, because our Staff Villain worrying about his soul was something I never expected. As though he could hear my thoughts, he said, “Not that soul you silly wordswilly. The sole on the bottom of my shoe, dingaloo. In fact, it’s the soles on the bottoms of both my shoes. They’ve fused to the pavement and I can’t peel them off. I’m stuck!”

“Just slide your feet out of the shoes.”

He guffawed. “Have you been outside yet? Don’t you remember what we spent the day talking about yesterday? If I slide my feet out of my shoes, I’ll burn them.”

Overnight, a heat dome dropped down on our little city raising the temperature to a staggering fifteen degrees above the monthly average. It had already been stinking hot outside, so a heat dome was not a welcome event. Not at all!!! How hot was it? Well, it was so hot our Staff Villain's moustache lost its twirl. It was so hot Ogilvy was frying his breakfast eggs on the brick sill outside the lunchroom window. It was so hot I had traded my overcoat for a tank top with a smiley face on it. It's the first time anyone has ever seen my arms. So that's how hot it was.

We had never experienced a heat dome before. The name was quite misleading, because last night as we all discussed it, we all had different ideas of what it might look like. Ogilvy thought it was a big glass dome that literally dropped out of the sky and covered the city. He thought extra heat was piped through indestructible tubes that were connected to the sun.

"Seems like quite the undertaking," I had said. "Who'd be able to pull off such a thing?"

"Well Mother Nature, of course," he had said as if it was the only answer.

Our Staff Villain had a similar take, except with a more nefarious culprit lurking behind it. "It's a blackmail scheme by one of three super villains," he had said. "I sat in on a meeting of these super villains once where they discussed the realities of creating such a dome. The cost of materials and labour alone put the project on ice. But that's not to say someone didn't come along and thaw it out. When it's that hot, people will pay a lot of money to cool off."

I imagined it had something to do with the clouds and a circular, invisible force that pushed up into them during certain weather conditions. As the clouds twisted and churned and formed into a dome shape, the air caught underneath the dome became super heated.

It was Poinsettia who set us all straight. “A heat dome,” she had said, “is what happens when strong, high-pressure atmospheric conditions combine with influences from La Niña, creating a vast area of sizzling heat that gets trapped under the high-pressure dome for an extended period of time. Tomorrow it’s going to feel like we’re in a pot on top of a stove burner that’s turned up to 10 and there’s a big ol’ lid on that pot. It’s going to cause all sorts of discomfort.”

Like damaged soles.

Our Staff Villain had warned me not to wear my regular shoes, so I put on my wooden clogs and headed into the oven. He was a half a block away from the office, still stuck to the ground when I found him. His hands were wrapped around his leg trying to lift with all their might. The veins in his neck were bulging. But nothing was budging. Across the street two other folks were struggling to peel the soles of their shoes from the pavement.

“It’s happening all over the city,” he said when he saw me. “Folks are losing their soles. We need to inform the news people. We need to put out a PSA. We need to buy all the bullhorns in the city and shout it out from the rooftops. Don’t wear your regular shoes in this heat. Just don’t do it!”

“We need to get you out of this direct sun first, SV. I think it’s making you loopy.”

“I know my moustache is droopy,” he said. “It’s the worst part of this whole experience. It’s going to take weeks to get its spring back.”

“Exactly,” I said, confirming my original point.

I handed him the tote bag I was carrying, which contained a dozen bottles of water and my back-up pair of clogs. I was starting to smell smoking wood, so it was becoming apparent even the clogs had their limits, too.

He pulled the clogs out of the bag and snickered. “No disrespect, Mr. Narrator, but my feet are much bigger than yours. I’ll break a toe or two trying to get my feet in these.”

“It’s your only option, SV. Don’t put them on all the way. It’ll be awkward, I know. But we just need to get you back to the office until it cools off enough to get you back home.”

He sighed and dropped the clogs onto the pavement. Slowly, he slid his feet out of his shoes and slid them three quarters of the way into the clogs. I could feel the sun turning the skin on the back of my neck tomato red. I could feel little invisible flames running up and down my newly exposed arms. Much longer and I’d ignite.

We hobbled down the street passing person after person trapped on the hot pavement. The only way I could help was by offering them a bottle of water and the assurance we’d send someone to help when we got to our destination.

Little wisps of smoke rose up from the bottoms of our clogs as we stepped into the CTQ office building.

“Well, that was another close one,” our Staff Villain said as the cold air from the air conditioner washed over us. “Now I’m not usually sympathetic to the plight of others, but having just spent the last hour under that blazing sun, I think the first thing we need to do is unstick those other people stuck on the pavement.”

“I don’t think ‘unstick’ is a real word, but that doesn’t matter. I think that’s one of the most noble things I’ve ever heard you say, SV. You sure the sun didn’t melt a bit of your brain, too?”

“Ha and ha,” he said as he kicked off the clogs and darted down the hall toward the CTQ office.

When I entered the office, all I smelled was frying eggs. “That you, Mr Narrator?” Ogilvy called from the staff lunchroom.

“Sure is.”

“Come and check this out.”

I stepped into the lunchroom and saw Ogilvy leaning out the window. He had a spatula in his hand and was in the process of flipping what looked like an egg. “I like ‘em over hard,” he said when he saw me come in.

“What the good golly gosh are you doing?”

“Well making breakfast, of course. We don’t have a stove, but

it's hotter than that on the bricks outside the window. Cooks the eggs up quick and easy. Don't worry," he said sensing my thoughts. "I washed the bricks before I cracked the eggs. Want one?"

"How did you get to work without losing your soles?"

"Awww, I hitched a ride on a low hanging cloud."

"You sure are lucky having those connections. We could have used one of those this morning."

"Oh, BTW, Poinsettia just called. Said she wasn't going to risk flying the balloon in to work today. Oooh, looks like the eggs are ready."

He leaned out of the open window again.

Our Staff Villain's voice carried in from the main office, hooked my attention and pulled me his way. He was sitting on his desk chair with his feet up on his desk. The receiver end of his old rotary phone was up against his ear. "Yup. Yup," he said to whomever was on the other end of the phone. "I kind of thought that. We'll keep our eyes on the sky. I'm sure it'll be a heck of a spectacle."

He slammed down the phone handset and let out a long, "hoooooooooooooo."

I asked, "Who was that?"

"That was Terry Steele from Chanel 4 Action News," he said and gave his limp moustache a twirl. When he let go of it and

it unfurled, his shoulders slumped a little.

“Don’t worry, SV. It’ll spring back as soon as this heat disappears.”

My words seemed to bring him back to where he was before he had twirled his moustache. “Ahhh, yes,” he said. “I was right all along.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It is a literal dome that’s been dropped down on our city,” he said and threw his arms up. “It’s made of invisible, indestructible glass. Gustephanie Klingman, one of the three super villains I was telling you about did it. She actually did it. And it worked.”

“What do you mean it worked?”

“The city paid the ransom. She’s sending her lackeys to remove it any minute now. We can probably see it happening from the lunchroom window.”

We hurried back to the lunchroom where Ogilvy was eating his egg on a piece of toast. He was looking out the window up at the sky. “Haven’t seen a Zeppelin in a while,” he mumbled through his full mouth. “Not since all that marshmallow was scooped up from Mount Havarti.”

We looked out the window. Three massive Zeppelins hovered near cloud height.

“They’re black Zeppelins,” our Staff Villain said. “That

means ... that means Gustephanie was behind the Mount Havarti incident. She must be tracking me somehow.”

“Well that’s just preposterous,” I said knowing full well it was probably true.

Fat ropes with dinner-table sized suction cups fell from the Zeppelin’s gondolas. For several seconds they plummeted towards Earth, then magically stopped as they smooshed onto the invisible dome. The ropes were quickly reeled back up and the Zeppelins flew away. Almost instantly the temperature inside the lunchroom dropped.

I glanced over at our Staff Villain who had a look of contemplation on his face. In real time, I could see the ends of his moustache twirling back into position.

Our quick experience underneath a literal heat dome and the secrets our Staff Villain continued to keep from us got me wondering about reality. It’s such a big concept, I know, but it’s something I find myself questioning on a regular basis these days. What’s real and what isn’t? Is anyone ever really telling the truth? Does the truth even matter anymore? I sometimes wonder if I’m even real. These situations we often find ourselves in are so far-fetched and unbelievable, I feel they can only come from deep inside the twisted imagination of someone else, somewhere else. But then I knock my knuckles on a table or toss a scrunched up paper ball at Ogilvy or suck in a deep breath of the the air I breath on a daily basis and I shake it off, because that’s mad thinking. Reality is bizarre, that’s the truth! And the truth, well it’s different to every individual.

“Oh yeah, I forgot,” Ogilvy said after the dome was out of sight. “I’ve got more news. Depending on how you look at it, it could be either good or bad news.”

“What is it?” our Staff Villain and I said at the same time.

Ogilvy looked up at us, tears welling up in his eyes, and said, “We’ve almost sold out of THE CURIOUS ISSUE!”

“For real?”

Footsteps Upstairs When There Is No Upstairs

September 20, 2022

Last Monday morning's editorial meeting was a real doozy. And that's saying a lot, because most of our Monday morning meetings are doozies. I'm throwing the word "real" in front of this particular doozy of a Monday morning meeting so you know I'm not being hyperbolic. This doozy of a Monday morning meeting climbed up to a whole other level of doozies. You see, during this Monday morning editorial meeting we heard footsteps above us.

Our building only has one floor and there's a thick layer of cement between our ceiling and the roof, so we never hear anyone when they're on it. Never ever! So yesiree, the footsteps were indeed a funny sound to hear. But not ha ha funny. Nope.

We looked up at the our boardroom ceiling and scratched our heads collectively.

Another thing that wasn't ha ha funny was these heavy footsteps stole our attention away from the PowerPoint presentation our Staff Villain was giving at the time ... a PowerPoint presentation he had worked on till three in the morning. He had carefully crafted an argument using graphs and mathematics and catchy buzzwords like "Synergy" and "Osmosis Marketing" and "Solutioning" to try and convince us to devote a third of each issue of the magazine to picking locks. "A different lock each issue," he had said just before the heavy CLOMP CLOMP CLOMP echoed through the boardroom.

Briefly, I was happy for the distraction, because I didn't want to be the one to tell our Staff Villain about the questionable ethics of publishing such information in a children's art and literature magazine. But that happiness quickly turned to horror when a droning moan and cacophonous cackle washed out the sound of the footsteps.

"EWWWRRAHHHHH HA HA HA!!!"

How can I best describe the sounds roaring through our boardroom? Hmmm. Have you ever been next to a glacier when a big chunk of it cracks off? It's like thunder or like a Greek god bellowing. It stops you in your tracks and makes your heart instantly race. Yes, that's probably it! And between the moaning and the cackling, you could definitely hear our hearts racing to get to an unseen finish line. One hundred and twenty beats per minute! One hundred thousand beats per minute! It sounded like a crazy dance song with no guitars and no keyboards ... only an invisible terror on vocals.

"Maybe it's mice," Ogilvy yelled.

“Yeah, maybe!” our Staff Villain yelled back. “If they’re monster mutant mice miserable because there’s no moldy cheese to munch on.”

“Great use of alliteration and great presentation,” Poinsettia yelled. “I’d love to hear more, but maybe we should get out of here and finish up at the Milk-Shake-O-Rama.”

“That’s probably what we should do,” I yelled. “But we’re less than two weeks out from the release of THE HAUNTED ISSUE and there’s still so much to do. We can’t go anywhere. All of our files are here. We need to be HERE!!! Deadlines! Schedules! Milkshakes are not on the schedule.”

“It’s just too scary,” Ogilvy cried. “I don’t think I can be here one more minute. And a milkshake does sound quite yummy right now.”

“Let’s see if I can call someone in to help us get rid of whatever that is,” I yelled.

I retrieved the suitcase-sized yellow phonebook from under the boardroom table and thumbed through the pages to the G section. We hadn’t dealt with many ghosts in our time running the magazine, but it was pretty clear this was a haunting we were experiencing and to get rid of it was going to take a lot more than just waiting it out at the milkshake shop, sipping our cherry chocolate milkshakes.

“Grrrrrahhhhhooooowwwweeeeeeowwwwww!!!”

There weren’t many supernatural snipers in our little city. In fact, there were more ghost pepper picklers than ghostbusters.

The first name under GHOST EXTERMINATION was **Alice's Apparition Alleviation**. It seemed that along with ghosts, alliteration was the theme of the day. I called the number supplied and a recorded message said the business was closed due to a dangerous other-wordly grudge. I called a place called **De-Spectered** and a robotic voice said the number was no longer in service. The last name on the list was **Phil's Phantom Removal**. Phil's was closed due to an alarming number of spirits out for revenge. Ghost extermination did not seem like the safest profession.

By this time, Ogilvy was in tears and literally shaking in his boots. Our Staff Villain and Poinsettia were huddled in their chairs with their legs up against their chests and their arms wrapped around their legs. I don't scare easily, but even I could feel chills doing the conga along-a my spine. I wanted to run away from that boardroom as fast as I could. But we had deadlines to meet!

"We're going to have to ignore it and carry on business as usual!" I yelled.

"Ahoouooooiiiiieeeeeeyowwwwwwoooooo!!!"

We all jumped in our seats. Then the phone rang and we jumped again.

"This is too much for my old heart," our Staff Villain yelled. "And look ... one side of my moustache is starting to droop. You know how I get when my moustache starts to droop."

"We know!" We yelled back.

I picked up the phone and tried to say hello, but another yowl from above muted my voice. From the other end of the line I could sort of hear someone yelling, “Narrator, is that you? Hello?”

I tried yelling as loud as I could, but the screams and howls from above were getting louder. And scarier. From the other end of the line I sort of heard the word “text” before the line went dead.

The staff now had their fingers in their ears and their eyes closed. I wanted to do the same, but the word “text” made me think about my cellphone. There was no way the person on the phone could have been talking about the text in a book or the text on the back of a shampoo bottle. That wouldn’t be appropriate at a time like this.

A partial message appeared on my home screen. It was from Christopher and it was in all caps. It read, ARE YOU OKAY? I unlocked my phone and read the full message. ARE YOU OKAY? SHOULD I CALL THE POLICE? A PRIEST?

I texted back, There are terrifying sounds above us and we can’t move on with our workday. I don’t know what’s worse. The fear of what’s making the sounds or the fear of falling behind on our tasks.

A minute later another message appeared. It said, I wrote a tiny tale once. It’s tiny, so I can share it with you now. It went: He was hired to remove the scariness from certain natural events. Event 1: the fierce storm. Action taken: packed a laugh in every raindrop. Great tiny tale, right? It was based on a real person named Morris Laméduck. At the time, he dealt

mostly with weather events. If you have to stay at the office, he may be able to help you with your little problem.

“EEEyowwwwooooecccc!!”

It’s not a little problem! I texted back. Please send me his number!

An hour later, Morris Laméduck was standing in our boardroom clasp his chin, looking up at our ceiling. The CTQ Staff now had earmuffs on and scarfs wrapped around their heads. They didn’t have a clue he was there.

Some quick Google-ing while I had waited got me acquainted with Morris Laméduck. Morris Laméduck, pronounced La-may-dook, had indeed become quite famous for packing laughs in raindrops. His M.O. or *modus operandi* for doing so was to remove as much of the scariness as he could from storms. He tried to tackle the thunder and lightning, being that’s the source of fear in most storms, but working around all that electricity was too dangerous. He lost a pinky finger and both his eyebrows during his lightning trials. So he moved on to the byproduct of thunder and lightning: rain. Through trial and error, over a period of three years, he was able to invent a super, top secret way of injecting sounds of joy into tangible items, using self-depressing syringes and speakers the size of sand grains. For the rain drops, he’d fire these syringes into low-lying clouds using bottle rockets. Of course, there was much more to the process, but only Morris knew it so he could profit from it. And profit he did. Just to get him to come to the office and assess the situation cost us as much as it would cost to get a soda fountain installed in the lunchroom.

The ghostly screams did not relent. They were so loud now not a word could be heard in the whole CTQ office. Conversations were a no go. So with pads of paper and pens, we wrote out our thoughts. Morris Laméduck was the first to write.

He scribbled for a few seconds, then turned his notepad to me. I can do something with this, it read.

Thank you thank you thank you, I scribbled back.

He scribbled. But it won't be cheap.

Is anything these days? I scribbled back and fake laughed.

Morris Laméduck put the notepad down and put the briefcase he had brought in with him on the boardroom table. He popped the latches and lifted the top. I couldn't see into the case, because I was on the other side of the table, but I could see a pink light glowing up from inside it. The light washed over his face making him look like a Popsicle. He removed a tablet from the briefcase and tapped his fingers on it a few times then handed it over to me. It was a contract with a very large number at the bottom of it. I think Morris saw how terrified the number made me, because he picked up the notepad and wrote down, What's it worth to you get your livelihood back?

"Everything," I said underneath another blood-curdling yowl from above. I skimmed the contract. It was full of legal jargon and non-disclosures and Latin. I marked my X on the signature line and handed the tablet back to Morris

Laméduck. He lowered it into the briefcase and rubbed his hands together. Then he intertwined his fingers and cracked his knuckles.

Over the next hour he removed more than thirty pink-glowing syringes from his briefcase, climbed our little step stool and methodically injected the contents of the syringes into the ceiling panels above us. With each injection, the horrifying howls morphed into something more squishy ... into something more tolerable. With each passing minute, I could feel our day, our office and our magazine returning to us.

The good news is, we're once again on schedule and working hard to get THE HAUNTED ISSUE out by October 1st. The bad news is the CTQ office is definitely haunted by several ghosts. But it's not the most terrifying haunting (anymore). That is, unless you're scared of that mushy sound made when you stir steamy hot ooeeey gooeeey macaroni and cheese with your fork. It's a constant sound and it's constantly making us hungry. But we're working and that's what matters. We can deal with the haunting after THE HAUNTED ISSUE comes out. Or we can just move again. We're getting pretty good at that, too.

The Big Paws

December 1, 2022

We were in a long, drawn-out discussion about SHINY, the theme of our next issue, when I noticed Ogilvy's eyes start to wander. Had I not been the one to have opened up the discussion, my mind and eyes would have been wandering, too. His eyes were slowly moving along a line that ran from our framed original painting of BIG AL AND THE BOYZ by Kristian Adam (the painting that was the cover image for THE COLD ISSUE) all the way across the boardroom to the water cooler. I thought maybe he was following the slow progression of a spider or ladybug.

Our Staff Villain was on this strange tangent about using a cellphone flashlight to reveal a diamond's maximum shine. You'd think talking about something like that would only take a minute or two, but we were thirty-three minutes into it. Thirty-three Minutes!!! Even Poinsettia was fidgeting. Eventually, our Staff Villain noticed Ogilvy's wandering eyes and said, "Am I boring you?"

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Ogilvy said. “But there is a crack forming in our boardroom wall and in all honesty, it’s a bit disconcerting.”

We looked at the wall and watched in horror as a pencil-thin crack crept past the water cooler and inched toward the boardroom doorway.

“I was going to say your choice of the word ‘disconcerting’ was hyperbolic (hyperbolic being our new favourite word in the CTQ boardroom),” I said, “but I am going to have to agree with you wholeheartedly, the crack forming in our boardroom wall is disconcerting.”

“Shhh, listen,” Poinsettia said, quickly hushing our discussion. “Outside ... can you hear it?”

We turned our ears toward the window and listened. At first I heard nothing except the wheezing of our Staff Villain’s breathing. “Stop breathing for a second,” I said.

“I’ll do you one better,” he said. “Give me a dollar and I’ll stop breathing for a full minute. I can do it, you know. In fact, I can hold my breath for four minutes if I really had to.”

“Then do it,” I said.

He held his hand out with his palm up and he curled his fingers back and forth a few times. Reluctantly, I pulled my wallet out of my jacket pocket and fished out a crisp, new one-dollar bill. I placed it in his hand and instantly, he stopped breathing.

It was now as silent as outer space.

But something was hurtling through that silence. A foreboding asteroid bent on destruction. From where we sat, that something sounded kind of like when you accidentally drop an orange on the kitchen floor. Thud. A few seconds would pass and then ... thud. Over and over again.

Sometimes when I am sitting in my reading chair in my home library, I put my book down on my lap mid sentence. I drift off, my eyes staring at the shelves filled with books and framed prints of work that has appeared in the magazine over the years, my mind wandering ... wondering, how is it one group of people can find themselves in peril so much? I'm not wondering about the protagonists of the books around me, nosiree!!! It's the protagonists of the Crow Toes Quarterly story I sometimes lose my thoughts to: Poinsettia Park, Ogilvy the Lackey, The Staff Villain and me, your humble Narrator. Real life is meant to be a series of ups and downs. Joys and heartaches. I get that. And we've definitely had our ups. We've definitely felt a lot of joy. But, we seem to be cursed with a disproportionate amount of downs. Ninety percent of the posts I write in our BLOGGED DOWN section of the website involve people or things trying to hurt us in some way. Sometimes, it all seems so ... unreal. I've begun to think this more often this second round of producing Crow Toes Quarterly Magazine. Maybe, it's all a dream one of us is having. Or maybe it's a story someone else is writing. When certain, unexplainable things happen in the world I live in, it's hard for me to shake that feeling.

As we listened to the thud thud thud, and the thud thud thud got louder, I swear I saw the CTQ staff start to flicker. Like

they were malfunctioning holograms. I gave my head a good shake and the flickering stopped.

“Are you really here with me?”

Ogilvy looked at me with concerned eyes and said, “Look at the walls.”

Where the crack had formed, chunks of wall were breaking away and falling to the floor.

“What’s happening right now?” I cried. “Am I dreaming? Why is everything falling apart?”

Poinsettia got out of her boardroom chair and walked over to me. She put her hands on my shoulder. I could feel them squeezing me. Comforting me. She looked into my eyes and said, “We’re all here with you. This meeting has taken a strange turn, but it’s all really happening. I wouldn’t lie to you.”

“I know you wouldn’t, Poinsettia.”

“If this is an earthquake,” our Staff Villain shouted over the sound of plaster hitting the floor, “then we should probably get under the table. Or get out of the building. Or anything other than stay seated waiting for the roof to collapse on us.”

“It’s not an earthquake,” Ogilvy shouted. He was now at the window, the top of his pressed against it. “It’s ... it’s whatever that thing is.”

To the majority of you out there, unexplained things are typically the basis of stories and myths and legends, real

only in the imagination and in the longing belief that they might be real. I know some of you are lucky enough (or perhaps unlucky enough) to have experienced the unexplained: flashes of UFOs hovering just beneath the clouds, glimpses of human-sized beasts thundering through the bush, flickering spectres at the foot of your bed. You may have even experienced them with other people, which strengthened your belief that what you saw was actually real. A friend of mine, who lives in a real place called Nelson and has told me he generally doesn't believe in monsters and ghosts and aliens, did share an experience on a city bus he had with thirty other people that made him question his beliefs. He told me the bus was stopped at a red light and the driver came over the speakers and said, 'Up in the sky on the left-hand side of the bus, you all see what I'm seeing, don't you?' Everyone shuffled over to the window on that side of the bus and looked up. Including my sceptic friend. Up up high in the airspace where planes fly, a metal object shaped like a football was hovering in place. It sparkled and glinted off the sun. Suddenly, it shifted forward in the sky, moving in a straight line several kilometers in a fraction of a second. Then it shifted up and back to where it had originally been. And then, a millisecond later, it disappeared. Even today my friend questions whether or not what he saw was real. But he concludes that it must have been real because he saw it with other people. I wish some of the things I saw on a regular basis weren't real, but because I'm usually with my staff when I see them, I can't make that assumption.

I just can't ...

We joined Ogilvy at the window and looked in the direction he was looking. If it was just me at the window, I would

have thought I had a terrible fever and was hallucinating. I've been inside the belly of a whale, I've been to a terrible alternate world called NEVERMORE, I've had control of CTQ taken over by a trio of talking polar bears, I've been frozen in ice and I've played intricate games with umpteen ghosts. I've seen tiny toothy creatures pour through the holes in my walls and had my coffee cabinet ransacked by an over-caFFEinated alien. I could go on for several pages about the unbelievable and unexplained things I've seen, but none of it would be as unbelievable as what I was seeing at that moment outside our office building, banging on the wall with massive, closed fists.

Now, I'm going to try and describe this thing to you as best I can and I really shouldn't have a hard time doing it, because as I write this, I'm looking up into its eyes wondering what, oh what, is going to happen to me and our Staff Villain. But I'm jumping ahead a little here. Let's go back to the previous paragraph and continue the description from those massive fists. Long, pink hair grew from the fists and waved back and forth with the movement of them. The same pink hair grew out of the rest of its body, too. The thing stood at maybe ten-feet tall and was shaped like an elephant standing on its hind legs. It didn't have a trunk, but it did have a nose and its nose was as large as a watermelon. With each flare of its giant dessert-plate sized nostrils, heatwaves briefly appeared underneath them. This thing was big and hot and angry.

It noticed us looking at it and bounced over to the window. One of its fists quickly broke through the window and grabbed Ogilvy around his waist. It pulled my dear lackey through the broken window and held him up over its head.

We screamed and cried, “Let him go! Let him go!” But the thing didn’t listen. It tipped its head back and seemed to dislocate its bottom jaw and open its mouth as wide as Ogilvy. A second later Ogilvy was gone, down its throat.

Our Staff Villain fainted and collapsed to the floor like a lawn balloon having all its air released. Poinsettia turned to run, but as soon as her back was to the window the thing reached through and grabbed her by the waist. It pulled her through and held her above its head just as it had done with Ogilvy. I felt completely helpless. I pinched myself hard hoping that what was happening was just a terrible nightmare. But I did not wake. The thing dislodged its bottom jaw again and gulped her down in one quick motion.

I dove under the desk.

Groans and growls flowed in through the broken window. Cars screeched and people screamed. Heavy footsteps faded off into the distance. All sounds out of a terrible dream. I grabbed our Staff Villain’s leg and tugged his unconscious body over to me. He may not have been with me in a supportive, conscious role, but he was with me physically and it’s what I needed. I wasn’t ready to think about Ogilvy’s and Poinsettia’s fate. I wasn’t ready to think about the end, which seemed nigh.

I felt around on the tabletop above me and located my laptop. It seemed as good a time as any to try and eek out one last blog post. You can’t keep a good story from being told. As I began tap tap tapping away on the keyboard, the CTQ office door broke away from its hinges and exploded inward. It bounced off a couple of desks and slid along the floor until it came to a stop against the back wall.

The thing that just minutes ago was outside the CTQ office window, was now bouncing through the CTQ office, pushing desks aside, knocking computers to the floor. All of the noise and destruction was making it hard to write. But I persevered.

The thing stopped at the boardroom doorway and hunched over. Its long pink hair dusted the floor as it turned its head and looked at me under the table. Its mayonnaise-jar-lid-sized pupils were the same glorious pink as its fur. As big and scary as this unexplained thing was, it was one of the coolest things I had ever seen. I wanted to just keep looking at it, but I had to keep typing. Had to get the story to its rightful conclusion.

Some stories, unfortunately, never get to that point.

The thing flopped onto the ground and ever so slowly crept towards me. When I quickly glanced up, I could hear muffled screams coming from its stomach area. I could see hands pushing out from inside it. It was Ogilvy and Poinsettia and somehow, they were still alive.

I typed the word alive and then it grabbed me by the neck and dragged me out from under the desk.

So here we now are, in the present moment. The thing has lifted me up onto my feet. It has placed its giant paw on my head and knocked my hat to the ground while doing so. I'm glad no one else is here, because my hair is a mess. The palm of its paw is smooshy, but a little rough, like a catcher's mit.

An intense heat flows out of it. Maybe, the heat will tame my restless cowlicks. Funny what one thinks about when their

demise is imminent. I need to eek these last few words out, but my one-finger typing isn't getting me far fast. Just know, my dear friends, the past two years have been marvelous. All of you readers and writers and artists gave me back my life. You made me feel real again. You gave me the purpose I thought I had lost forever in 2011. Thank you thank you thank you for all of your support and kind words. If we don't come back from this, I wish you all the best in your endeavours. Never let the challenges of life slow you down. And never ever stop reading.

I can feel the weight of it now. It has now put its other paw on top of the paw already on my head.

Take care of yourselves. Be kind. Be creative. Be ... I'm sorry, I can't get much more out. I have to upload this, because this unexplained thing is now pushing down on me with its big paws

Epilogue – The End Is Never Really The End Except This Time When The End Is Probably, Most Likely, The End

February 17, 2024

The Crow Toes Quarterly Staff have been missing for more than two years now. My hopes are waning. And a waning hope is never a good thing. The Narrator used to tell me, “The only things that should wane are the moon and the name written without a Y on a to-go coffee cup.”

About a year ago I thought I saw the Staff Villain in a dandruff shampoo commercial. I was so chuffed! I went online to watch the commercial again in super slow motion, just to make sure it was really him. The man in the commercial was a dead ringer, right down to the little, hairy nub on his back, which SV claimed was a tiny nub of bone from a tail that had never fully formed. The only difference between the actor and SV was the actor in the commercial twirled his moustache the opposite way. And I know for a fact, SV would rather be dunked in a swimming pool full of cobras than twirl his moustache downwards. SV often spoke of his many doppelgängers. There were so many, in fact, he believed

at some point in his life he had been cloned, most likely while he was having one of his famous 27-minute afternoon naps. “Geesh, for all I know, I could be a clone,” he would say. “It would explain why I remember so little of my life before 2006.”

Ahhh, 2006. It seems like a lifetime ago. It was in 2006 when I first met the Narrator. He had left a voicemail on my home phone at 2:34 in the morning. “Christopher,” he whispered. “He purchased the boots at a curio shop. A sign said they were made for jumping stars. He didn’t know false advertising could be so deadly.”

That was the message.

The next night at the same time I received another voicemail. It was another cryptic message, this time about a zoo full of shadows. This went on for twenty more days. Twenty more strange, nonsensical micro tales that had nothing to do with anything. But each micro tale he recited stayed in my mind. And each micro tale grew throughout that next day into an epic story, spurred on by my imagination, time and that early-morning prompt.

In his twenty-second voicemail, after a micro tale about a ghost that flicked earlobes instead of saying, “Boo!”, he finally disclosed his reason for calling. He said he’d heard about me from a friend, who had heard from a friend of a friend’s cousin’s favourite barista that I was just out of school with a shiny new diploma in Publishing and a spooky middle-grade novel of my own about to be published. He said I was the perfect person to be the real-world “face” of Crow Toes Quarterly. Up until then, the only time I had been the perfect

candidate for a job was when I was chosen to test a new drug that helped grow invisible limbs. Luckily, I was given the placebo in the trials, which means I was given the fake drug, and the only thing I grew was relief. The last thing I needed was another arm or leg. I am so uncoordinated, I can barely manage the ones I've got.

So I spent the next five years delivering magazines to bookstores and manning tables at county fairs and reading snippets of CTQ in school libraries. I promoted and shared Crow Toes Quarterly Magazine with everyone I could. It was the best job I had ever had. As the years passed, I began to see how each CTQ staff member possessed a little of my character. How the Narrator loved to tell stories and study the intricacies of human behaviour. How Poinsettia Park loved to learn and travel and write. How Ogilvy loved to listen and help out wherever and whenever he could. How the Staff Villain was sarcastic and snide, but had a heart of gold. It broke my heart into a gazillion little pieces when they all went away in 2011.

I understood why they had to go. Even from the peripherals, I could sense the danger they were all in. Since day one, there were lots of hushed words and checking over shoulders and wearing disguises. A tone of unease hung over every moment CTQ existed. I'd go into hiding, too, if I knew forces beyond my control were trying to erase me and those forces were now, essentially, living next door.

The thing is, back then I knew the CTQ staff was still out there, somewhere. I knew, because every February 17th, on my birthday, a little cloud would float through one of my windows, and when it evaporated, a stack of birthday cards

and gifts would fall out. The CTQ staff were still thinking about me and I was still thinking about them. Our memories and our mutual respect for each other held so much life.

But this time is different. It's the end of the day, and for the second year in a row there has been no cloud through my window. The end is never really the end, I have been told by many, but in the case of Crow Toes Quarterly Magazine and the Crow Toes Quarterly staff, I think the end is probably, most likely, the end.

The art and literature world has changed. For better or for worse, the change was inevitable. Where words and paintings and drawings once solely came from the human imagination, now machines conjure them up. Where once we were entertained by a tin can in the middle of the street or a good book under the sheets way past our bedtime, now it's all about apps and screens and scrolling. It's a world too complicated for a group of people like the CTQ staff.

Their return to the world of Children's Art and Literature in 2020 was a miracle in itself. Life was so strange back then. It was that strange, uncertainty that made their surprising return even more valuable. We needed escapism. We needed to use our imaginations again. Yes, it was a risk to return, that's for sure. But they took so many precautions to stay safe. In the end, though fate won the battle. Fate has a funny (but not ha ha funny) way of always getting what it wants. Of always winning. SV once said, "Fate is the only thing more selfish than me."

Something as once-in-a-lifetime, as special, as unique (which all kind of mean the same thing, don't they?) as Crow Toes

Quarterly inevitably comes to end. It has to. But CTQ will live on forever in the hearts and minds of the people who read the magazines, the people who contributed art and literature to the magazines, and the people who followed along with all the crazy adventures the staff went on during the ten years the magazine was published.

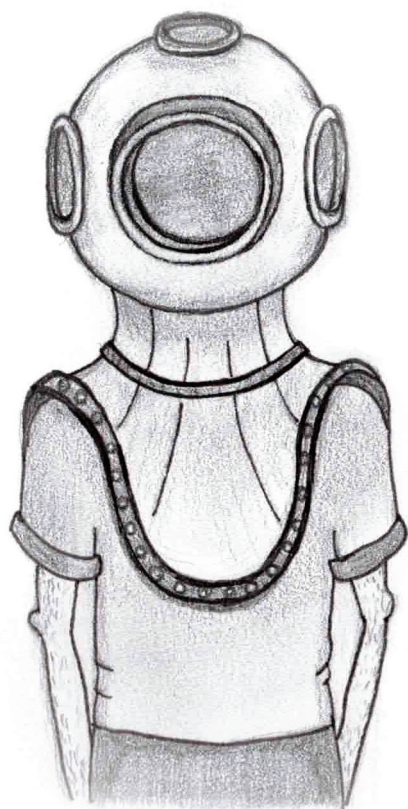
I like to believe that if that big, pink-haired monster really did eat them up, what was at the end of its long, squishy, mushy throat wasn't a stomach full of acid and corn niblets. It was a whole new world waiting to be discovered and written about. I like to believe the Narrator, the Staff Villain, Poinsettia Park and Ogilvy the Lackey have set up a cozy office in a building along Main Street in this new world and they're producing a new art and literature magazine for all the children who live there. I like to believe the story continues on ...

I miss them all so much. My life will forever be richer because of the time I spent with them. My hope is that at some point in your life you find a Crow Toes Quarterly staff of your own. They'll show you who you really are, and just how magical, mysterious, creative and beautiful the world can be if only you open your eyes up to it.

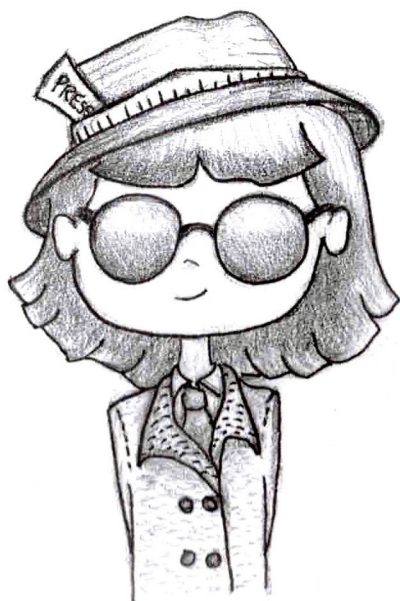
Crow Toes Quarterly Magazine

PART I: 2006 – 2011

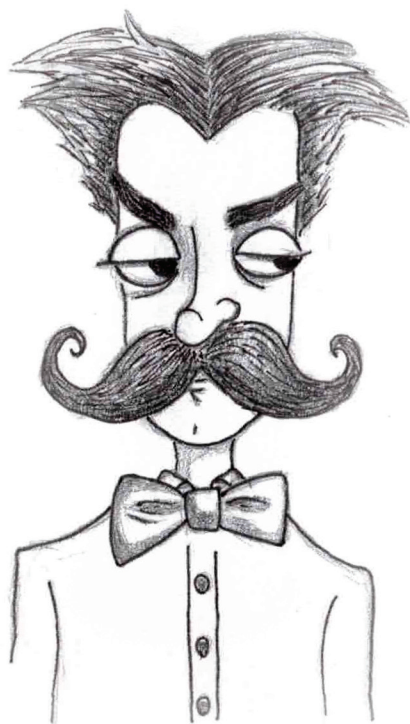
PART II: 2020 – 2022



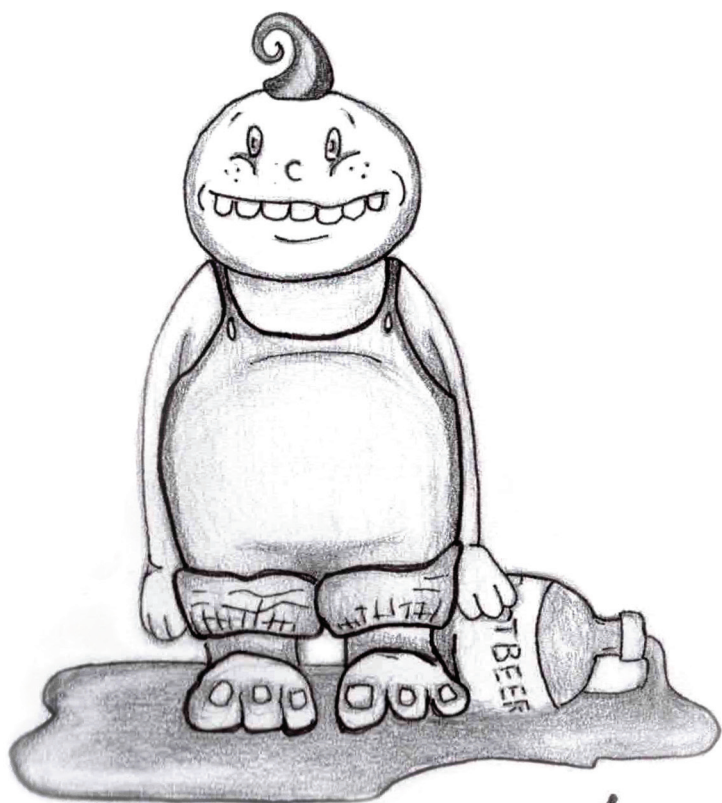
The Narrator



Poinsettia Park



THE STAFF VILLAIN



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The Snowball Magician

By Poinsettia Park

When I was a child, one thing that brought me comfort from all of the unknown in my life was snowfall. Wherever I was in the world, the people around me, the landscape and the architecture may have been different, but the characteristics of snow remained the same: the magic of time slowing down when snow is falling; how other worldly sounds, like vehicle engines roaring and birds soaring become muted leaving only the flutter of the flakes as they pass by your ear; how everywhere in the world looks the same when it's under a fresh coat of snow.

The first thing I'd do when I woke to snow falling outside my bedroom window was run to the kitchen where the old Model C570 Philco radio my father had been using since the mid-fifties was kept. It would usually already be on, because my father always liked to be up-to-date with goings on around the world. I'd listen intently through cereal, shampoo and indigestion medication commercials. I'd listen through news reports about UFO sightings and rats the size of dogs fighting. Waiting waiting waiting for lists of school closures, and for those magical words that spurred kids all over the word into bouts of impromptu celebration: "If your school is on the list, school is canceled. Yes, kiddos, It's a Snow Day!"

Snow days were always spent outside sledding, building snow forts and snowmen and having epic snowball fights. For a few days each year, no matter how different we all were, no matter what language we spoke or who our favourite literary monster was, we all shared the same love of playing in the snow.

My snow-playing days waned when I became an adult, but they didn't disappear completely. On the rare occasion I will still drop down in fresh snow and make a snow angel. And I still toss a snowball or two, but only at our Staff Villain. These days, falling snow elicits more of a nostalgic feeling for me. It opens up a portal in my brain for all of those past snow days in my youth.

A few weeks ago we had our first snowfall of the year up here. When the first flakes flew by the CTQ office window, the four of us stopped. Ogilvy stopped wiping up the puddle below the leaking water cooler. Our Staff Villain stopped sharpening pencils down to the eraser. The Narrator stopped staring at the blinking cursor on his computer screen. And I stopped researching ancient embalming techniques for a future article about mummies. No words were spoken. We pulled our chairs up to the office window and spent the next two hours hypnotized by the gentle dance happening in front of us. When the snow had piled up to the belly height of a Bolivian Banoset, our Staff Villain proclaimed, "The snow's just right. It's time for a fight!"

We bundled up and headed outside where others from the downtown core had gathered. I was quickly hit in the back of the head with a snowball. The fight had yet to begin, but already it was on. I spun around to see our Staff Villain laughing hysterically and twisting his frost-covered moustache. I picked up some snow and tried to ball it, but it poofed out of my hands like dandelion tufts in a strong wind.

I tried again and again the ball broke apart before it was fully formed. Another snowball hit my shoulder sending snowy shrapnel onto my cheeks and up my nostrils. This time it was Ogilvy. "Direct hit!" he yelled before diving down into a pile of snow in front of him.

It had been more than a year since my last fully formed snowball and my rusty skills were making me an easy target. What was I doing wrong? What did everyone else know that I didn't?

"It's too cold right now to use that snow," someone behind me said. "It's got a low moisture content, so it won't pack properly."

I turned around expecting to get a snowball thrown in my face, but was surprised to see a perfectly round snowball being handed to me. "I made this one just for you," the girl holding the snowball said to me. "It looks like they've got the jump on you. It's time to fight back."

Out of the corner of my eye I spotted the Narrator sneaking up on me, his hand behind his head, ready to toss the snowball in it. I spun on the tip toe of my right boot and fired the snowball gifted to me. It cut through the air like a baseball. No deviation or wavering from its path. The snowball hit the exact spot I was aiming for: the Narrator's top hat. The hat flew off his head and flipped a half dozen times before landing crown down in the snow. The impact caused the Narrator to drop the snowball in his hand.

"Yes!" the girl shouted while she pumped her fist up and down.

"That was the perfect snowball," I said. "How'd you make that?"

"You just need to know where to find the perfect snow?"

"And how do YOU know that?"

“Well, I am a snowball master,” she said. “Name’s Ericka Balzarian, but my friends call me Snow.”

Ericka “Snow” Balzarian is a thirteen-year-old wunderkind from Fargo, North Dakota. Snow’s been playing in the chilly white stuff since the day after she was born. Literally!

“So what came first, the name or the obsession?” I asked when we were seated across from each other in the CTQ office a few minutes later, a hot mug of candy-cane cocoa thawing out our frozen hands. I had never met a snowball master before and I knew it would be a disservice to all of our readers if I didn’t snag her for a quick interview. It’s not everyday you get to learn the ins and outs of making the perfect snowball.

“Well I guess they both appeared at the same time,” she said. “Heading back home from the hospital, the door of my father’s car popped open. My baby car seat, with me buckled into it, was thrown into a snowbank on the side of the road. When the car skidded to a slippery slide-y halt and my frantic parents finally found me, I was giggling away, running my chubby little baby hands through all the snow that was piled up around me. When my dad’s heart started beating again, he came up with the nickname then and there . . . and it just kind of stuck. Imagine if he had nicknamed me Giggles instead. I wonder if I’d be a comedian today.”

Snow’s penchant for crafting snowballs began in grade one after a group of boys circled around her on the playground and fired a dozen snowballs at her. She vowed never to get hit with another snowball again and to become the greatest snowball maker/thrower the world had ever seen. With her parent’s help she took out books from the

library and chatted with other professional Snowballers on the Internet. She took several courses at the local recreation centre and wrote a two-act play about making the perfect snowball that won the “Most Promising Young Playwright Award” at that winter’s Icicle Festival. The next year she came first in an all-ages snowball throwing contest. That same year she made the Guinness Book Of World Records for making and throwing the most snowballs in a 24-hour period. It was nine-thousand four hundred and four.

“Would have been nine thousand four hundred and fourteen,” she interjected with a big smile, “but the doctors on hand for the event forced me to stop with two minutes left. They said if my fingers turned from purple to black, they’d have to cut them off and I’d never make another snowball again.”

Three years after the snowball attack on the playground, Ericka “Snow” Balzarian was listed as one of the top five Snowballers in the world.

“What are you doing in our little town?” I asked. “The most noteworthy person we see around here is the lady from the orange juice commercial. You know the one with the talking goat? She has a summer home about ten minutes from here.”

“I do know that commercial,” Snow replied. “Wow, that lady’s big time! I can only dream about being that famous. I’m actually up here to promote a new online course I’m offering on all things snow related. I’m more than just snowballs, you know. I teach everything from making the perfect snowman to constructing the strongest snow fort.”

Still feeling the effects of being hit in the head and on the shoulder with snowballs, I had to cut right to the chase. “I think my life for the next five months is going to involve a lot of ducking and diving from oncoming snowballs lobbed

at me by mischievous coworkers. I need to up my snowball-making game and you're my secret weapon, Snow. What's the secret to crafting the perfect snowball?"

She giggled. "You're not going to believe this," she said through the giggle. "But the secret is heat."

"Heat?"

"Yup."

"Like what's coming through the vents right now? That kind of heat?"

"Kind of."

"Hmmm. I thought heat melted snow."

"It does. But just a touch of heat makes it absolutely perfect."

"I'm intrigued."

"The snow that fell today, it was a very dry snow. Very powdery. Not all snow is this way, but because this is what you experienced, I'll focus more on this type of snow. Most of the time we really want to throw a snowball is right after it snows. Right? And we usually grab the stuff that's closest to us. The top snow. As you noticed, this snow tends to be the lightest, fluffiest snow. Really no good for snowballs. But there are ways around this."

"Dig down deeper?" I interjected. "Because the snow closer to the ground will have been packed more?"

"That's a good one, for sure," Snow said and gave me a high five. "But I'll talk about a few key elements to making snowballs with powdery snow. The first one is time. If you can, wait till afternoon to have your snowball fight. That way the sun has been tickling the snow for a while, injecting it with a bit of moisture. That's a big word in the snowball world. Moisture makes magic, we like to say. Second, look for snow closer to buildings or houses that are giving off warmth. This snow will contain more moisture than snow in the middle of

a field or playground. Thirdly, if you have the will power, use your bare hands to roll your snowball. The heat generated by your bare hands will melt the snow just enough to bond it perfectly.”

“Oh my,” I said. “That could cause some serious frostbite if the snowball fight lasted all afternoon.”

“Yeah. That’s why it’s only effective if you’re making a few snowballs. If you’re going to be at war all day, what you want is a good pair of gloves. Not mittens. Never mittens. They’re made to keep any heat from your body escaping. The gloves will give you the dexterity and the right amount of heat release to pack many many marvelous snowballs.”

“Fascinating.”

“It is, isn’t it? Now that we’ve got all the elements, it’s time to roll that snowball. You were exactly right about digging down deeper into the snow and grabbing the good stuff close to the ground. That top layer has started the packing process of this snow saving you valuable time, especially if you have a bunch of enemies approaching fast. Fill both your cupped hands with snow. Start bringing your hands together while rotating them to pack the snow. Each time you bring your hands together, apply more and more pressure. But be warned, If you start off with too much pressure, the snowball will just fall apart. When you start feeling some resistance from the snow as you pack, the snowball is ready. Stop pressing and start smoothing the ball out so it forms a nice circular shape. Then locate your target and toss.”

“Wow, I never imagined snowball-making could be so intricate and precise.”

“Oh, that’s just the basics. In one of my courses, I talk about creating the perfect snowball from fifty-three different types of snow. And depending where you’re located in the world, the process can differ significantly. I love it! And

you know, I still get the giggles when I run my bare hands through snow. Snow brings me so much joy.”

“Before I head into battle, are there any no nos when it comes to snowball making?”

“Ahhhh, yes. Never forget that snowball fights are intended to be fun. If you’re in it to hurt someone, then you’re not in it for the right reason. A few things to never do when making a snowball: never build a snowball around a hard object like a rock or a golf ball. The potential for serious injury goes up a million percent when you do that; never use yellow snow when packing a snowball. We all know what causes yellow snow and it’s gross and nasty to toss that at anyone. And never ever back down in a snowball fight. If you can pack a perfect snowball, it doesn’t matter how big and strong your opponent is. The snowball does the heavy work for you.”

I escorted Ericka “Snow” Balzarian out of the office and back outside where her parents were waiting for her. As I was thanking her for her time and knowledge a snowball whizzed past my face. “I think you know what to do,” she said and skipped off. I spun around and was suddenly nine-years old again. Kids were laughing and screaming, throwing snowballs at each other. I made snowballs and attacked everyone I could, never missing. Never backing down. I played until the sun disappeared and the frigid temperatures drove me inside. My snowball making skills had been elevated and I couldn’t wait to use them again. I checked my phone for the next day’s forecast and it called for a fresh dump of snow. The first thing I’d be doing when I woke up was turning on the radio and listening for those magic words: It’s a snow day!

The Great Beth of Okanagan Lake

by Poinsettia Park

It was another unsuccessful day in Kickinnee Provincial Park, or so I thought. I was heading back to my hot-air balloon Hemingway when something large breached the surface of the water behind me. It slapped down on the beach and it hacked and snorted and hissed as it cleared hundreds of gallons of water from its lungs, nostrils, and ear holes. I placed my cooler and beach chair down on the sand and slowly turned around.

Three weeks I had sat in the same spot, staring out at the lake, hoping to simply spot the creature, and now there it was, laying in front of me. The creature's neck and head stretched seven feet up onto the beach, its body still hidden by the dark lake water and the quick dropping depth only a few feet from the shoreline. The lake water pouring off its serpent-like skin looked like droplets of oil. The creature's baseball-sized obsidian eyes looked up into mine. The last of the afternoon sun gave them a sad sparkle.

The creature's posture portrayed a feeling of fatigue or resignation.

Or acceptance.

I had seen mythical creatures in the past and had even been fortunate enough to interview a few of them. Despite these Cryptozoological conundrums proving to be intelligent

and hyper aware of their mythology in the greater world, they all had one thing in common: they were all very scary when I first met them. My head had been filled with Internet tales of terror and destruction, and all of that fear that goes along with the things in our lives that don't make sense. But the creature laying flat on the beach in front of me didn't look terrifying or intimidating. It just looked sad. I had a million questions I wanted to ask it, but before I could get my first question out, it said, "Why are you looking for me?"

In late summer 2014, en route to Amundsen Gulf to study a school of Arctic Char that were now teaching Calculus as part of their curriculum, my balloon suffered a puncture from a Red-naped Sapsucker that mistook it for a big round tree filled with sap and insects. I carefully steered the deflating balloon down onto a beach, next to an old, decommissioned sternwheeler named the S.S. Sicamous. Folks up and down the beach ran over to help me free myself from the deflated balloon that had fallen on top of me and covered me like an unbaked pie-crust top. When I could see daylight again, I asked a gentleman with flamingos on his swim trunks, "Where am I?"

Penticton is a funny little city at the southern tip of Okanagan Lake with a population of thirty thousand people, give or take. However, Penticton's population triples from May to September, because it is what's known as a summer city or a tourist town. A neat geographical oddity that separates Penticton from other cities is it is squashed between another lake called Skaha. These two lakes, and its intense summer heat, make it a draw for people who like to sit under the sun and swim in water and drink peaches and eat

wine. I had never been to Penticton before, but through my Cryptozoological research, I had read about Okanagan Lake many many times.

Okanagan Lake was home to the mythical lake monster Ogopogo. And the people of Penticton weren't shy about using Ogopogo's likeness (or artist-perceived likeness) on everything from t-shirts to ice-cream holders to elementary-school sports teams' jerseys. Of course, no one had ever seen Ogopogo, so every iteration of the creature looked a little different. Sometimes it looked like a dragon with a sparkly tail. Sometimes it looked like an overweight anaconda. And sometimes it looked like a dinosaur with flipper feet. I couldn't believe I had dropped out of the sky next to a place I had mentioned in more than a dozen articles over the years.

It took a week to fix my balloon and in that time I talked to dozens of residents who had claimed to have seen Ogopogo. I spent hours in the library and at the museum learning more about Ogopogo from a front-line perspective. I bought t-shirts and ate ice-cream and watched floor hockey games where one team wore yellow jerseys and the other team wore red jerseys. I wasn't just falling I love with Ogopogo, I was also falling in love with Penticton.

"I am a reporter," I said to the creature. "I spent a week in the Okanagan about six years ago and learned all about you. Ever since then, I have wanted to talk to you about what it's like being a mythical sea monster."

"I just started seeing you three weeks ago," the creature said. Its voice was gentle and soft, like fluff from a pillow rubbing against your arm. "What happened between

six years ago and three weeks ago?”

“I didn’t realize you were a reporter, too,” I said and chuckled.

The creature sighed and began to slide its long neck and head off the beach.

“No wait!” I said. “I didn’t mean anything by that. I was just trying to be . . . funny.”

It stopped retreating.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “It has been a very long time since I’ve interviewed a creature as famous as you are. I’m nervous.”

And I was. For three years I had been hiding in a pyramid in Cairo, Egypt. Because pyramids are so thick, it’s impossible to get any type of Internet signal into them. But I couldn’t leave for fear of being abducted by another shadowy organization. Or worse, by the Budgen. I spent those years pretending to interview everyone from Dracula to the Queen of Birmadoo. I wrote ten-thousand-page articles with pen and paper under flickering candlelight and the unsettling, always observant eyes of hieroglyphic pharaohs. But these articles were all concocted with creations of my own imagination. The words that came out of my interview subjects’ mouths were ultimately, my words. The situations they were discussing were invented by me. When the Narrator found me and convinced me that all of our worries were over . . . that the nefarious factions intent on quashing us had disappeared, I knew the first story I wanted to write was about Ogopogo. No matter how long it took.

Ogopogo was one of the most documented sea monsters in existence. There were more photos and videos and witness testimonies of Ogopogo sightings out there than any other cryptid on Earth. I wanted to know how Ogopogo had been able to stay hidden, but through these

obviously calculated appearances, create an industry and an ethos around it. Ethos is just a fancy word that refers to the practices or values that distinguish one person, organization, society, or cryptid from others.

I continued. "My name is Poinsettia and the magazine I work for is coming back after ten years of dormancy. Like you, I had to hide for a very long time, so I wouldn't disappear forever. In your case, disappearance means in the physical sense. I've seen it before. You'd be dissected and researched, which is horrible, but you'd live on in science journals and in the lore of small Okanagan cities forever more through those spoken and written words. For me, disappearance meant . . . from everything. Wiped from existence in the future and all my accomplishments wiped from the existence of the past. Like I never was. And that is why I only started showing up three weeks ago. By balloon, this beach is about two and a half hours from the CTQ office. I started coming here the day after we moved in. I had planned to come here every day until I spotted you."

"My name is not Oggie, or Water Demon or Beast of the Lake. My name is Beth," she said with a new tone in her voice. A friendly tone. "And I am the last of what the locals have called the Ogopogo. I am not long for this world, for I have been swimming this lake for more than a thousand years now. I could tell there was something different about you. I knew you were the one I would make myself known to. I knew you'd be the one who could see me objectively and tell the world about who I really am. About who we really were."

"How did you know that?" I asked.

In early September 1982, Jim and Martine Sunbrite decided to go on a late afternoon fishing trip in their brand-new, ten-foot aluminum fishing boat. Okanagan Lake was glass smooth and a summer heat still warmed the air.

“A most beautiful Okanagan summer night. It was the type of night that reminds you why you live up here,” Martine said as we sipped vanilla lattes on a café patio in Penticton’s downtown core. I had met Martine at a used bookshop a few blocks down from the café during my first stay in Penticton. She noticed me looking for books about Ogopogo and asked me what I was doing. I told her about my fascination with cryptids and the mythology behind the creatures. She chuckled and said she had a story of her own about Ogopogo and if I had a minute or two to spare, she’d share that story with me.

Martine Sunbrite was in her seventies when we spoke, but her memory of that night was crystal clear, like it had only happened the night before. “Jim was so excited to get the boat on the water,” she said. “To see how fast we could get it going with its little four-horsepower motor. To see if we could bring home a Kokanee for dinner. Mmmm . . . Kokanee, rice and green beans might just be the tastiest meal in existence. Don’t you agree?”

I had never had such an exquisite meal, but I nodded.

“Oddly, we were the only boat on the lake at the time,” she continued. “The silence and the stillness of everything made it feel like we were the only people in the world. And as the sun set and the haziness of dusk set in, all of these wonderful silhouettes began painting themselves on the surface of the lake. Trees from Giant’s Head Mountain. Geese flying high up above us. Errant clouds. And that’s when I noticed, off in the distance, toward Peachland, the silhouette

of another boat heading straight at us. It looked like the hull of a boat just like ours up out of the water as it sped along at a very fast pace. And as it neared, we could see a large wake tailing behind it. But this boat wasn't making a sound. Going that fast, we should have easily heard the motor. We should have heard something coming from it. That's when Jim said, 'I don't think that's a boat . . . I think it's . . .'"

Martine sucked in a deep breath and looked up at an airplane vapour trail cutting across the sky. A string of tears rolled down her cheek and tinkled onto the patio table. "I'm sorry," she said. "I always get a little emotional when I talk about Jim and that night. We got to share a magical experience very few people on Earth have had. It made us closer. Because we both saw it, it also made us able to share the experience with others more readily. It's easy to call one person crazy, but to have two upstanding citizens claiming the same thing, it was a little more difficult to label it as an act of insanity or mistaken identity. I remember my friend telling me she once saw a UFO in the sky and that had she not been on a bus with thirty other people, and had the bus driver not pulled over and asked the passengers if they were seeing what he was seeing, she would have never told anyone about it. There is a great truth to the saying 'strength in numbers.' I was Jim's strength and he was mine. And in that moment on the lake, other than the way we saw each other, neither of us had ever seen something so beautiful. As the words 'I think it's Ogopogo' came out of Jim's mouth, the silhouette shaped like the hull of a boat dipped under the surface of the water and disappeared. When the little waves of the wake it had created shrank away, and no sign of it ever having happened was left, we had to wonder . . . did we just see what we thought we saw?"

As with other cryptids, Ogopogo's origin is a mixed bag of half-truths, miscommunicated folklore and grand embellishment. Where a creature like the Loch Ness Monster's infamy grew through a series of sightings, Ogopogo's origins are more closely tied to Native myths, and to the misinterpretation and corruption of those myths by early European settlers. One of those misinterpretations was that the Secwepemc natives regarded the Ogopogo, which they called the Naitaka, as an evil supernatural entity with great power and ill intent. The word "n'ha-a-itk" has various translations, like water-demon, water god, and sacred creature of the water. But the negative interpretations of this word were what the mythology was built upon. The Naitaka was often described as using its tail to create fierce storms to drown victims. To the Syilx, though, Ogopogo is known as n'ǰaxaitk^w (n-ha-ha-it-koo), a sacred spirit of the lake that protects the valley. This spirit was said to dwell in caves under Rattlesnake Island, a small island located directly east of Peachland, British Columbia. The land and shore surrounding the island form part of Okanagan Mountain Park. Rattlesnake Island is also known as Monster Island.

Ogopogo was often described as a fifty-foot long sea serpent. Atop its body is a head some people have claimed to resemble a snake, a horse, or even a goat. In some descriptions, long ears or horns sit atop the creature's head, and its skin is deep blue or dark brown. A well-known British cryptozoologist named Karl Shuker has categorized the Ogopogo as a 'many hump' variety of lake monster, and suggested it may be a kind of primitive serpentine whale such as *Basilosaurus*, that lived 40 million years ago. A local Pentictonite, named Carl Inverness, who claimed to see the creature many times, said

it looked more like two logs bobbing up and down coated in a skin of malarky. The name “Ogopogo” has been traced to a British music hall tune called “The Ogo-pogo: The Funny Fox-trot.” The song was popular around 1924, when the creature was beginning to grow in fame. Allegedly, the song could be heard blaring out of a dancehall in Vernon, British Columbia, which is at the Northern tip of Okanagan Lake and someone casually remarked that that would be a good name for the monster in the lake. The song contains the lyrics:

*His mother was an earwig,
His father was a whale;
A little bit of head
And hardly any tail—
And Ogopogo was his name.*

Beth inched a few feet closer to me. I could now see where her neck connected with her body. Whatever was below the water was massive, and I knew she was continuing to hide it so she wouldn’t intimidate me or cause an accident on Highway 97, which was only a couple hundred meters away from us. With the sun almost set, to the casual driver going 100 kilometers an hour, it most likely looked like I was staring at a log. A weird sight for sure, but not a sight to be remembered or pondered too much.

“I saw it in your eyes,” Beth said.

“You saw what in my eyes,” I responded, “and how could you see my eyes from so far away?”

“I could see from one end of the lake to the other if it didn’t twist and turn like a fidgety snake,” she said. “Our

eyes are like telescopes, filled with hundreds of little lenses that focus in and out, not only on the physical world around us, but on the internal, spiritual world as well. I saw your humanity and your struggle and your genuine curiosity. I saw you taking notes and I read words like “misunderstood” and “vilification” and “set the record straight,” which lead me to believe you’re more than just the average monster hunter.”

I fumbled around in my backpack for my notepad and my brushed black resin Faber-Castell pen given to me by famed oceanographer Michele St. Dupuis after we spent a month at sea searching for the fabled Gomorrah Rock Squid. I used the pen to take notes during my Bigfoot interview, during my interview with the Wizard Marnoff, and even during my ghost-spotting trip to Victoria, British Columbia. The pen was an essential element to all of my important interviews. I tapped it against my notepad as I did at the beginning of every interview and I said, “How have you kept hidden all of these years?”

“It’s actually not as hard as you might think.”

“I find that hard to believe,” I replied. “I’m a five-foot two tall woman. It was near impossible for me to stay hidden. You’re what . . . twenty times my size?”

“Probably thirty or forty times your size,” Beth said. “But you see, I have a world of accomplices around me who can’t speak English . . . who communicate with caws and quacks and squeaks. Over time, we’ve built an understanding and appreciation of each other. It was my father Ignatious who was first spotted one hundred and seventy years ago. It was his appearance that the modern-day mythology was built upon. He wasn’t evil or trying to hurt anyone. He just accidentally bumped into a barge carrying horses, and three of them fell into the water and drowned. It was very sad, because my father loved horses. He’d often rise up out of the

water when they were drinking and tap his nose against theirs. But in the chaos of the moment, three of the humps on his large back were spotted by the man towing the barge. Since then, we have had to use various methods of misdirection to keep so called monster hunters from finding our home and from, as you so correctly put it, catching and dissecting us. We've used fallen trees and lake otters and creek sharks and lines of ducks to give the appearance of something long and sinewy running just under the surface of the water and we've always had the animals helping us with this to do it far far away from where we were . . . from where our home is."

"Monster Island?" I asked. "I mean Rattlesnake Island. Is that where your home is?"

"That's another misdirection perpetuated by a family of Canadian Geese who've passed the process down through ten generations of offspring."

"What do they do?"

"When they tuck their heads into their chest, they can squeeze against one another, chest to bum, to make it look like they're one long creature. Once every twenty years or so, they'll do this at dusk near Rattlesnake Island. In unison they'll rise up out of the water, then dip under the water, then break apart and swim in different directions. Geese can hold their breath for a surprising amount of time, you know."

"What's in it for these animals to help you?"

"Well nothing really," Beth said. "They do it because they want to. Because they know how few of us there have been throughout history. Because, like them, we have blood pumping through our hearts and our veins and for that blood to stop would be a tragedy. If we all just helped out because we can and not because there was some sort of monetary or material gain, don't you think this would be a better world?"

“I do, Beth. I really do,” I replied. “So I’m guessing there was only your father and your mother and you. You say you’re the last in the line. How did that come to be?”

“For a brief time, seven or eight hundred years ago,” Beth said, “the lake ran out of food.”

David Wingdumington, a local historian, picked up a petrified stick laying across the path we were on. We had stopped under the trees of Gellatly Nut Farm Regional Park, which is a 4-hectare park located on the shores of Okanagan Lake in West Kelowna. I met up with him a week after meeting Beth. “This stick has somehow survived here in this park for more than seven centuries. See these marks?” he asked as he pointed the broken end of the stick toward my face. The stick looked like it had been chewed on. “It looks like a human mouth might have been chewing on this,” he continued, backing up what I was already thinking, “but it’s actually the mark of hundreds of Lonnie Beetles chewing at the same time. Have you heard of the Lonnie Beetle?”

I shook my head.

“The amazing thing about the Lonnie Beetle,” David said, “Is it amphibious, which means it can survive on land and in water. It is also a voracious eater. Voracious means it consumes massive amounts of food and still wants more. About seven hundred and fifty years ago the Lonnie Beetle infested the trees growing along the lake and infested the water in the lake. They ate everything they could: fish, kelp, bark, bird nests, algae. Everything.”

According to the historian, the beetle had been introduced to the ecosystem by a European wood pigeon that had lost its way from Northern Scotland. The pigeon was

carrying a piece of wood in its claws it thought looked like a mountain goat. It wanted to show all its friends the unique piece of wood, but after more than thirty hours of flight and the realization that it had gone way off course, the pigeon dropped the wood into Okanagan Lake. Unfortunately, the wood was infested with Lonnie Beetles. And they, in turn, infested everything around them. The result was catastrophic for the ecosystem. Whole species of wildlife went extinct, including the type of fish Beth and her kind needed to survive. When there was nothing left to eat, the beetles went extinct.

“Time was the only thing that would heal Okanagan Lake’s decimated ecosystem,” David explained. “In time, bacteria and algae regrew and fish returned. Then came the birds to feed on the fish. And so on and so on. But some species never recovered. Species that could only be found in Okanagan Lake.”

Like the Ogopogo.

“There were hundreds of us,” Beth said. “But as our food supply disappeared, so did we.”

“What was your food supply?” I asked.

“Kokanee salmon is all we eat,” Beth explained. “They are in abundance in the lake year-round and they carry all the nutrients we need to keep us healthy. We can eat upwards of two hundred Kokanee in one day. Before they began disappearing from the lake, there were plenty enough to keep us fed for thousands of years. As they disappeared, we began stockpiling them. Only my family remained when the lake finally began to regenerate itself.”

The family hid in a series of caves under what is now Kelowna, British Columbia. It’s where the fish had been

stockpiled and it was so far underwater no one would ever discover them. It was only when the Kokanee supply ran out that the family left the caves. And that's when Ignatious bumped into the horse barge and began the mythology of Okanagan Lake's Mythical Monster.

"I am more than a thousand years old," Beth said. "I have seen the world advance from horseback to carriage to motorcar to jetpack. I have lived through famine and flooding and fire and disco music. I've been feared and revered and all without having ever really been seen. Before I go . . . before I return to my parents and the rest of my kind, I want to be seen for who I really am."

"And who are you, Beth?" I asked.

"I am a believer in the magic of human imagination and achievement. I am so happy to have been a mascot for an elementary school . . . to have been the name of meat shops and ice-cream shops and concession stands . . . to have been creative fodder for thousands of artists throughout time. I am happy I leave this life having been cautious of what humans could do to me, but also having been in awe of what humans could do in the world: build societies out of nothing; build the most magnificent machines; cure the most horrific diseases; create jazz music. As in awe as humans are of me, I have been just as in awe of them. And I am so glad I got to live among them. I want them to know that and to never stop searching for me. I may no longer exist in the physical sense, but I will always exist . . . and that is a wonderful feeling. And I am so grateful for that."

Beth didn't say good-bye or share her favourite Kokanee salmon recipe with me. She simply slid her neck and head down the beach and back into the dark water beyond. There was a small sploosh and then silence.

I stood there for almost an hour afterwards staring

out at the darkness, listening for Beth breaching the water. Listening for anything. I had struggled for years with the cruelty found in humanity. I had even begun to lose faith in humans, because of what this cruelty was doing to our fellow brothers and sisters. To our Earth. Beth had every right in the world to feel the way I did, but she marvelled at the accomplishments of humankind. She felt honoured to have been a part of those accomplishments. Even grateful.

A chill crept into the air, reminding me I had not dressed appropriately for the setting sun. It was time to leave. I wanted to cry so hard, because I didn't know if I'd ever meet something or someone so pure again. And that's when I realized the silliness of the thought. Purity was everywhere, if I didn't coat everything in a layer of negativity. Beth made me realize there's a magical creature in all of us, but sometimes our environment and our situation and our circumstance keeps that creature locked away. All I have to do is find a way to free that creature in the people I meet along my journey. And I think I know what is the first step to releasing that magical creature.

The first step is believing.

The Meat Creeps

by Poinsettia Park

Jeremiah and Pietro Kreype (pronounced Creep) unlocked the door to what would eventually be their new butchery and delicatessen, and stepped into what could only be described as, “A junk drawer full of potential.” The one-time radio and radio parts store had been closed and abandoned for more than thirty years. Husks of old transistor radios were piled up in corners and the floors were covered with varying lengths of coloured wires: red, yellow, blue and green. Thousands of capacitors, resistors, antenna coils, transistors and screws were mixed in with the wires. “Oh, there were so many screws,” reminisces Pietro with a smile.

Along with all the old radio bits and bobs lying around, there was thirty plus years of dust, inches thick on every surface, water-damaged and rotting walls, mouse droppings here there and everywhere, and not one working light in the entire building. The place was a mess, but it was the Kreype brothers’ mess now. And they couldn’t have been happier. They had dreamed of owning a butchery and delicatessen since they could first talk. And nothing was going to keep them from fulfilling their dream. Nothing but the slow, steady beating of a heart coming from underneath the floor.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

Neither Jeremiah nor Pietro had read Edgar Allen Poe's terrifying story THE TELL-TALE HEART, so they had no clue what macabre truth could be lying beneath the weathered oak floorboards, but that's not to say they weren't scared. "It sounded like the store was alive," says Pietro. Jeremiah cuts in and says, "It was like we were in the belly of some starving creature that had been waiting patiently for thirty years to have its next big meal. You know, snacking on mice and cockroaches ... biding its time. I wanted to turn around and run away from that place as fast as I possibly could."

But Pietro calmed them both down by stating what we all state when we we're scared, and we can't explain what's happening. "There has to be a logical explanation for this, I said," says Pietro. "Backed-up water pipes or a fan in the basement that has been knocked off its base."

He ran out to his truck and got a crowbar from the trunk. When he returned to the shop, he saw that Jeremiah had swept away a two-by-two-foot space on the floor. "I plugged my nose, got down on my knees and put my ear as close to the floor as I could without touching it," says Jeremiah. "I just followed the sound to its loudest point. And wouldn't you know ... it was right there, dead center in the shop, under the doorway between the front room and the back room. Boom. Boom. Boom."

New floors were on the grand list of to-dos for the deli, so Jeremiah slammed the crowbar between two of the floorboards and pried them up. The old wood splintered and disintegrated easily under the force of the blow. "I remember dropping the crowbar and stepping back. To say I was confused by what was under the floor is an understatement," says Jeremiah.

"Nothing was there," says Pietro. "Just water pipes and electrical wires ... and that sound."

But the sound was now beating stronger under another part of the floor. Near the front window. The brothers moved to this spot and pried the floor up. Again, nothing but what you'd expect under floorboards. "After that second attempt locating the source of the sound, things got really creepy," says Jeremiah.

The heartbeat began emanating out of all the tiny speakers of all the dead transistor radios lying around the shop. And all the little volume knobs on the radios turned at the same time, turning up the volume of the heartbeat. Louder and louder. It echoed in the Kreype Brothers' heads. It moved crooked picture frames straight and fluttered the drapes. "The place really had come alive and I was having no more of it!" exclaims Jeremiah. "I ran away from it as fast as I could! An hour later, with my head safely buried underneath my bed pillow, my phone rang. It was Pietro. He said, 'Brother, bare with me here. Our dream life is closer now than it has ever been. We're just going to have to include a few unforeseen ... I mean, a few unseen elements into that dream life.'"

I had moved to the little city, I am contractually unable to name, in late October 2020, when the CTQ Narrator reached out to me and said his dream was to start Crow Toes Quarterly up again for a new generation of readers and writers. Up until then, I had been very nomadic. This means I didn't have a real home for almost a decade. Wherever I anchored my balloon was my home for the day, or the week, or the month. And whenever I felt my location had been compromised, I moved on.

It didn't take me long to realize that despite its much smaller size, the little town I cannot name was filled with the

same mysteries and misery as towns ten times its size. It was during my first stroll around the downtown core that I spotted something otherworldly. Something paranormal. It made me so excited, because the only good normal is the normal with something before it: sub, ab, para. You get the gist.

A pinkish orb of light was crossing the window of a shop across the street from me. Above the shop's awning was an ornate sign made of wood and metal that read, **THE MEAT CREEPS: BUTCHERY & DELICATESSEN**. A large knife and fork bookended the words. I ran across the street and looked through the window at a hanging meat display. I hadn't seen a display like that in decades. In these modern times, butchery and the public display of animal carcasses isn't quite the draw it had been in the past. The meaning of the word butchery itself is quite dark and aggressive and includes descriptive words like slaughtering and savagery. Not words for a fun story about marshmallows and kittens, that's for sure. Luckily, this isn't a story about marshmallows and kittens.

A chicken, a pig, a cow and two lambs were hanging from hooks. The thing was, it was the intact versions of these animals, but in ghost form. And they were swinging from the hooks, having the time of their afterlives. The animals were reaching out with their claws and hoofs and toes, trying to push the other ghost animals hanging next to them. Trying to make them sway more. And then like that, they were gone, replaced by the slabs of meat they had become.

I pushed through the front door of the shop; my entrance announced by the ringing of bells attached to the top of the door. The shop was empty of customers, but a large, dark-haired man wearing a red apron was pacing back and forth behind a display case filled with deli meats, exotic cheeses and mixed salads, the likes of which I had never seen.

Have you ever heard of a Cranberry Waldorf Salad or Apricot Fluff? Well, neither had I. “Is this place haunted?” I blurted out. The lack of professionalism in my manner was instantly realized. I apologized and said, “Could I please get a hundred grams of Apricot Fluff? And is this place haunted?”

The man laughed and said, “You must be new to town.”

There aren’t many children who know at an early age what they want to be when they grow up. Sure, kids say things like, “I want to be a famous actor, or a policeman, or a sword swallower.” But rarely do they become these things. They usually become accountants or managers of public swimming pools or dog-treat testers. Pietro and Jeremiah Kreype, fraternal twin brothers, knew from the moment they could speak what they wanted to be when they grew up. They wanted to be butchers and own a delicatessen. In fact, butcher was the first word that came out of Pietro’s mouth. And Jeremiah’s first word was deli. Their parents were flummoxed, which is another way of saying they were baffled, confused, and mystified. Where had the boys even heard such words, they wondered. Their parents didn’t eat meat. Heck, they didn’t eat any food that was made using animal products. It would be another ten years before the boys would say the word, “vegan” and it was only to inform their parents they never wanted to be one.

“It’s going to sound absurd,” says Pietro, “but when my mother put me to bed at night, the sound of crickets chirping and frogs croaking out my bedroom window would eventually morph into the word ‘butcher.’ ‘buuuu tcher ... buuuu tcher.’”

“And to me,” says Jeremiah, “the frogs and crickets were saying, ‘deli.’ ‘Dehhhhhhh lee ... dehhhhhhh lee.’”

“Weird, right?” the twins say in unison.

The boys were born thirty-eight minutes apart (Pietro technically being the oldest) in a town in Ohio, in the United States of America, called Frinkville, population 748. They both described a force outside of themselves leading them their whole lives towards their future career. “Every night I’d dream about different cuts of meat and mixing up all those deli treats,” says Jeremiah.

“And every class project from age seven to seventeen had something to do with butchery and running a delicatessen,” says Pietro.

“We tried steering our prospects elsewhere,” says Jeremiah. “We joined the drama club and volunteered with the police department and worked one summer with a travelling circus, but we had to face facts. Our hands weren’t on the wheel. We were being lead in a certain direction and we both knew we’d eventually get there.”

“If we had known what was driving us at the time,” says Pietro, “This would be a much different story.”

In the mid 1800s, my little city, that still cannot be named by me, was built to support a booming gold rush taking place all around it. Yes, the mountains and hills and valleys around the city were filled with the shiny, valuable metal, and people from all over the world were coming here to try and strike it rich. However, when Bert Klamper the Third discovered that first nugget in a creek at the base of Mount Havarti in May 1842, there wasn’t civilization for hundreds of kilometres. He had only found the nugget by accident when his horse spooked

and tossed him in the creek. Bert Klamper the Third staked the land, calmed down his horse and set to task building a cabin a few kilometres from his stake, where the land was a little more forgiving of structures. Within a few years, this one little cabin turned into hundreds of homes and buildings filled with all types of shops and services.

When people up and move their lives from one place to another, they don't just bring their clothes and their furniture with them, they also bring their troubles. A lot of the men and women travelling here to get rich were men and women who already lived on the rougher side of the tracks. Men and women who didn't know the difference between right and wrong and had spent large portions of their lives making enemies. One man, named Ogden Goodfellow, was not only a con man, a bank robber and a cattle thief, but he was also a summoner of dark spirits. Or so he said. Ogden Goodfellow was not a good fellow. He had no intention of getting his hands dirty in the literal sense, by panning and pickaxing for gold. He had come to get rich through theft and manipulation. Goodfellow legitimately robbed banks and stole cattle, but he was a fraud when it came placing hexes and cursing people. He knew how gullible people could be and how easy it was to threaten them with damnation and bad luck. However, a lot of the words he said to fool people into believing he was raising the dead actually worked. Except the dead he raised weren't malicious or even scary. They were the spirits of animals and good-natured folks who liked to laugh and play. They were spirits who looked out for the gold miners and kept them safe.

And when the mountains and hills and valleys were eventually stripped clean of gold and the miners moved on to their next site, the spirits stayed put. The few remaining people in the city shifted their focus and started promoting

it as a great retreat for fishing and hunting. And of course, haunting. Yes, it became a true-to-life haunted town. And a second boom began, which continues to this day. My little city that cannot be named by me, is one of the best places in the world to fish for steelhead salmon and to see a ghost.

Before it was **THE MEAT CREEPS' DELICATESSEN & BUTCHERY**, before it was **ALFRED KNORE'S RADIOS AND MORE**, it was simply called **THE TOY SHOPPE**. It was owned by a woman named Penelope Pringle and her husband Oliver. The Pringles sadly, could not have children of their own, so they parlayed their grief into making toys for and selling toys to the children in their city. They didn't know about Ogden Goodfellow's wicked ways when they were doing all their good. Because there was no real money to be made in wooden toys, Ogden Goodfellow and the Pringles never crossed paths. But Ogden Goodfellow had a prolonging effect on the Pringles' life. "In fact, had Ogden known just how much joy he was making for this couple, I think he would have been horrified," says Thomas Tinker Thompson, the city's one and only historian.

With a chuckle, Thompson says, "The only "joy" Ogden was on record for liking was Joy Bellows, the young lady who ran the saloon."

What Ogden Goodfellow didn't know was three of the spirits he haphazardly conjured up during one of his cons were a trio of siblings named Archie (7), Mary-Elizabeth (8) and Zeke (10). The siblings became orphans after their parents succumbed to a terrible disease that swept through Europe in the late 1700s. Each child lived a long and fruitful life, but they all eventually passed away within three years of

each other. And when they did, they met up in the afterlife as the younger version of themselves, where they began searching for the parents they had lost all those years ago. After decades of disappointment, the siblings gave up the search and accepted their fate as orphans in the afterlife. To face such sadness in life and in death was a cruelty no one should have to endure. But the story of the siblings has a happy ending.

Thomas Tinker Thompson isn't only a historian, he's also the foremost expert of ghostly encounters in our city. When he's not in his little office in the museum, planning dioramas and future exhibits, he's leading haunted walking tours around the city. The Kreye's delicatessen is the last and most important portion of the tour. Thompson keeps his pocket watch tucked firmly in his palm throughout the whole tour so that when the time hits 3:37pm, the tour stops in front of the deli's window. "It's at that precise time that the customers get what they paid for," says Thompson. "A true-to-life, ghostly experience."

At three-thirty-seven in the afternoon, which is the same time I was wandering by THE MEAT CREEPS when I saw the pink floating orb, something paranormal takes place. It's different every time, but the siblings always perpetuate it. I saw animals swinging about on meat hooks, playing with each other. But sometimes the children themselves appear. Sometimes wooden toys appear and float through the air. "It's the kids having the fun they never got to have when they were alive," says Thompson. "It's the kids being kids."

When Ogden Goodfellow's trickery sucked the children out of the afterlife and into the world of the living, the Pringle's grief was like a hook, attaching itself to them and pulling them in. "Here were three kids who didn't have parents and two people who couldn't have kids," says

Thompson. “The fact that the children were ghosts was merely an inconvenience.”

The children entered **THE TOY SHOPPE** at three thirty-seven in the afternoon on a hot July day in 1865 and knew instantly that they were home. After the shock of seeing ghosts in their shop wore off, the Pringles embraced the children. They danced and sang and played together for years afterwards, and when the Pringles passed away after a long happy life, the children stayed in the place that had become their home. The businesses that opened in the shop were always told of the children’s presence. They were always told the kids would not leave. And they were always told their business and their lives would be better for it.

When you don’t know the “why” of ghosts, fear becomes an element of their being. Many of us love the feeling of fear. I sure do! It’s why I watch horror movies and go to haunted houses during Halloween and run across suspension bridges. With ghosts, we shouldn’t let our perceived fear of them turn them into something we have to run away from. Ghosts were people, too. They had lives like ours, full of ups and downs ... always in pursuit of happiness. Some of these folks continued to pursue that happiness long after they died.

Next time you feel like running from a haunted house, maybe reconsider. Those ghosts that are moving things and tapping on your shoulder and whispering in your ear might just be playing with you. Instead of running away, try playing with them. Snatch that floating object. Hide behind a curtain and shout, “Bet you can’t find me!” Throw a sheet over your body and jump out from behind a doorway and yell, “Boo!”

That haunted experience might just be the happiest experience of your life.

"It was Archie, Mary-Elizabeth and Zeke that whispered in our ears at night when we were children," says Pietro.

"They were the ones walking hand in hand down our hallways and into our lives at every turn," says Jeremiah. "Leading us to where we are today."

"Who knows where we'd be had they not come along," says Pietro.

"I know we wouldn't be as happy as we are today if we were anywhere else," says Jeremiah.

They both nod in agreement at this declaration.

The children don't interact with anyone except Pietro and Jeremiah. "It's just always been that way," says Pietro. "The owners of whatever business is in the building at the time get the laughter and the love and the life the children have to offer. Everyone else gets the 3:37pm show in the window."

The brothers share a glance. I've heard twins have uncanny communication skills. In that glance, I see a conversation being spoken. "You're wondering why us, aren't you?" Jeremiah says to me once he breaks his connection to his brother. He's not wrong. I'm sure it's what you are wondering right now, too.

"Did you do any research on Alfred Knore, the man who owned and operated the radio store?" asks Pietro. I shake my head and explain that Mr. Knore isn't the focus of the article.

"Like us," Jeremiah says, "Mr. Knore's life's purpose

was predetermined and directed by Archie, Mary-Elizabeth and Zeke.”

“I know it sounds like we had no choice,” says Pietro, “but the thing is, we all would have been butchers and radio repairmen and store owners had the kids not been there. We just would’ve been doing it somewhere else.”

“The Pringles, Alfred Knore, my brother and I ...” says Jeremiah. “We all have something in common.”

“And the kids knew our commonalities the very moment we were all born,” says Pietro.

When Alfred Knore’s wife died two years after they were married and he vowed never to marry again, it was clear children would never be a part of his life. The brothers found out in their late teens they would never have children of their own, because they were both born missing a piece inside of them that is essential to the creation of life. “They didn’t want us to go through life without experiencing the joy of children,” says Jeremiah. “The joy of having a family.”

Jeremiah smiles at his brother. He then looks past his brother and smiles even wider. All I see is the back of the delicatessen, but I know the children are there somewhere. The time is almost 3:37pm and a chill has snuck its way into the air around me.

A FORWARD AT THE END FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT

Reluctantly Penned By
The Staff Villain

The Narrator asked me if I'd write a forward for this thing and I told him, "Respectfully, there's only one thing I despise more than writing... and that's moving forward." I've always been a firm believer that the best place to be is the place you're at. And when you're already at the best place, what's the point of moving forward?

Of course, the Narrator chuckled and said, "SV, you despise other things way more than writing and moving forward. I know that for a fact you despise fruit without bruises and microfibre sheets and small talk and that one ride at the amusement park that almost gives you whiplash that you think should go all the way and actually give you whiplash and you despise things that aren't in a straight line and on and on and on. No, a forward is a piece of writing that serves to introduce the reader to the author (or authors) and to the book they're about to read, and it is usually written by someone who is not an author of the book. Since you picked out the content in this anthology, I thought it would be fitting that you had the first word about what's ahead for the readers."

You'd think with all the work I do around here, I was the boss of this silly magazine. Yes, dear reader, I was given the task of picking the content for this anthology and also given the task of writing the forward to it. Can you believe it? Seriously, what do the other three even do around here?

So let's do this thing already...

If you've spent any time at all with Crow Toes Quarterly, then you should know our story. I'm not going to go into all the piddly details again, because that would be a waste of both our time. The short and sticky of it is we started this magazine way back in 2006 when social media was in its infancy and you could still buy a new house for less than a trillion dollars. Simpler times, indeed. We were all new to the publishing game back then, having each come from very diverse backgrounds... none of which had anything to do with putting peoples' words and pictures onto paper, stapling it all together and sending it out into the world. But we learned this process through trial and error, through naivete and a few bad decisions, and through an overwhelming desire to get the best spooky, quirky, smart kidlit into the hands of kids and adults who were fond of the type of literature they read when they were kids.

We published the magazine for four years before we had to pack it up and go into hiding. If you don't know why we went into hiding, there's a book available somewhere on the Internet about it. Find it! Read it! And please don't ask me any questions about it. Anyways, the sixteen magazines we put out over that four year period from 200 to 2010 were loaded up with some of the greatest literature and art for kids

ever to be extracted from the human brain. Despite being distributed through bookstores all over Canada and despite having subscribers all over the world, we left CTQ feeling these writers, poets and artists didn't get the recognition they deserved for their great work. We always felt more eyes could've and should've seen their drawings and paintings and short stories and poems... that more people should've and could've shared in the joy and the horror of what they had made.

When we returned to the publishing world in 2020, one of our goals was to repackage some of these stories in an anthology and make it available once more to be enjoyed. Or tossed at a wall. Or deleted. As I mentioned, I was given the task to spearhead this project and after ho humming over it for several months, I finally dove into the back catalogue. For someone who's usually pretty good at cutting and chopping and making harsh decisions, I could barely leave a thing out. Everything was so good. No, everything was great! And it was making me angry.

The Narrator wanted one tight anthology of work from our first four years. But he wasn't going to get that. Not a chance! So, we compromised and decided unanimously to publish a two-part anthology of our first four years, with Part I consisting of work from Volume One and Volume Two, which ran through the years 2007 and 2008.

Ahhh... thinking about grammar and spelling is so hard when all I want to think about is causing mischief and getting into shenanigans. I think I'm done with all this now. I've said enough.

Okay. Okay. Okay. I'll say one more thing and I'll be nice about it. The writers, poets and artists whose work lies ahead helped take Crow Toes Quarterly out of the shadows. They helped establish us as one of the most unique literature and art magazines in the world. Through their generous contributions, when we couldn't adequately compensate those contributions, they gave Poinsettia, Ogilvy, the Narrator and me life. And we couldn't be more grateful for that.

As the Narrator used to like to say, "Read always and always enjoy." Whatever that means!!! I mean, "always enjoy" what? Reading? Crocheting? Yodeling? Drawing moustaches on bus ads? The open ended-ness of it drives me batty. Maybe I'll end this with something different and say, "Please enjoy what you're about to read!"

— Staff Villain, March 2022

Christopher Millin is the author of *The King of Arugula*, *Fowl, Swine and Things That Send Shivers Down Your Spine* and *The Healing Sand*. He once published an art and literature magazine for children called Crow Toes Quarterly. He likes making music with cheap synthesizers and playing with his dog, Tonka. He lives in Nelson, British Columbia. You should, too. It's beautiful there!

After a decade in hiding, the Crow Toes Quarterly staff resurfaced to bring the world seven more issues of its groundbreaking magazine. This act of defiance wasn't without peril. Shady organizations, mythical monsters, caffeine-addicted aliens and mathematics teachers were still trying to make them disappear for good. And that's no good!

Crow Toes Quarterly: More Tales From A Playfully Dark World is a collection of terrifying, hilarious, magical and unbelievable stories that take place between each issue of CTQ. Join the

Narrator, the Staff Villain, Poinsettia Park and Ogilvy the lackey as they battle volcanoes erupting marshmallow lava, pterodactyls, tired interns, unruly bees, creatures missing their knees and so so much more.

How dangerous can it be publishing an art and literature magazine for children?

Open up this book to find out. Or better yet, don't. It'll be safer for you.

