

# Academ*Fic*

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# ACADEMFIC

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# CONFESSIONS

LIAM KOFT BRIGHT

Finding the body was probably the worst thing that had ever happened to the cleaner. She had arrived early to work that day, hoping to have a moment alone in the faculty common room before she had to wipe down all the surfaces in a farcical attempt to make the campus “COVID secure” for those who arrived after her. But even that measure of peace was denied to her by the obscene, sprawling, grotesque, corpse lying in front of the blackboard. Her struggles with her mental health had been life long, and on and off she had gone through dark periods of substance abuse as a form of self-medication. As the police came to secure the area and examine the scene they found her praying that she would be able to forget all this and hold it together - her family were relying on her.

The victim - M - had been a faculty member in this small department of philosophy, and so the police called in M’s three colleagues to see if they knew of anyone who might have a grudge against M. It was hence a great surprise when this somewhat routine procedure generated not leads but confessions - three of them. What follows are the statements, written and signed by each colleague, wherein they gave their own account of the events leading up to the death of M.

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## *Confession 1 – P*

The following statement, inclusive of this very statement, consists in my testimony concerning the circumstances surrounding the death of M. By “circumstances surrounding” I mean events that i) preceded, ii) played a causal role concerning, and iii) a description of which would necessarily feature in any adequate explanatory account of, M’s death.

M had given a lecture to the faculty entitled “Secularism and Prosperity: The Virtues of an Expanded Middle Class”. In this talk M purported to demonstrate that secular societies, and associated liberal-capitalist political and economic arrangements, were giving rise to new moral systems. And, further, that these moral systems are quite considerably to be

preferred to those which preceded since when put into practice they generate a) material prosperity, b) peace, and c) rational and thrifty subjects.

My colleagues were becoming agitated - as evinced by the manner in which they were shuffling in their chairs, sometimes muttering objections, and glaring, by which I mean, prolonged staring with somewhat squinted eyes, at M. I too wished to press objections, by which I mean I sought to press those objections and if I had been denied my opportunity I would have found some other opportunity to raise these points.

When I was called upon I noted that the following facts could be discerned from available histories: first, that the vaunted rise in material prosperity had been accompanied by environmental destruction which threatened to make this a long run self-defeating strategy and thus not instrumentally rational when considered at the collective level. Second that, further, the distribution of this wealth had been highly uneven, leading to concentrations of wealth that were 1) inefficient according to theories of decreasing marginal utility that are tolerably well confirmed, and 2) liable to generate imbalances in ability to command the use of future resources that would exacerbate both problem (1) and the long run collective irrationality problem. What is more, third, the “peace” discussed had apparently been compatible with multiple world wars of unparalleled destructive power (as measured both in lives and destruction of property, even with prices adjusted for inflation) and imperial competition that had bred enmity that still generates further war and inequalities whose effects I had previously mentioned. Finally, I noted, fourth, it did not seem that the age was so secular after all, considering that M themselves continued to use the basically theological and unscientific language of “virtue” by which to describe the psychological dispositions they preferred to cultivate.

M did not seem too pleased at my intervention, frowning and taking on a more high pitched tone than is typical for them in their reply. Their response, delivered in this manner, was to ask me what I would instead do to better things - I suggested that a system of government which pooled the knowledge and experiences of the full global population could avoid many of the problems I had enumerated. I hence suggested that rather than trust in the continuation of the present world order, I would prefer it if we instead sought to educate the mass of the population in methods of precise reasoning so they may understand their world and its causal order, as well as see through those who would seek to domineer over them by deceiving them. If this were done while at the same time modes of communication were found that would allow

tolerably precise transfer of ideas and sentiments across the various people of the world, and decision making or control structures were modified in order to ensure that effective control of our economic and political resources were evenly distributed, we might hope to solve the problems of collective rationality I had identified.

At this point M joined my colleagues in causing a great noise, such that I could not individuate their objections to me. Suffice it to say they did not seem satisfied with my response, and at once they started brawling. Judging by the sudden spike in my heart rate I was quite shocked at this behaviour. I attempted simply to leave, withdraw my presence from the room and hope that this would compel them to come to terms and resume discussion. M and another of my colleagues - H - did indeed soon seek me out in what I had hoped would be my refuge, the common room. I gathered that  $\alpha$ ) they had resolved their differences, but  $\beta$ ) this was only in so far as it would be useful to work together to silence me.

They both lunged at me, and by an involuntary motion I lashed out in return. The precise details of the ensuing scuffle are difficult for me to recall, and I do not find myself sufficiently confident in much to be able to assert just what happened. Howbeit, this struggle came to an end with me striking M in such a way that they fell to the floor, hitting their head on the way down. H at that point departed the room in what I presume was a panic, given their haste, their failure to say another word to me, and the darting movements of their eyes. I performed various checks to be able to confirm that M was indeed dead. After satisfying myself on this matter, I came home and spent the evening preparing my affairs before turning myself in. As such, even if you had not called for me, I predict with some confidence that I was going to come in today and issue a statement similar to this one.

These are the events surrounding M's death such as I can recall them.

- P

### *Confession 2 - H*

That fool M perished by my hand, and no great loss to the world either! The day that was to prove their last found me in a foul mood, travelling through the hazy smog of a decadent society to come to this accursed institution where authentic Thought comes to die. All around me I saw a

“cosmopolitan” student body, unmoored from anything that might ground them, losing themselves in the supposed pleasures of our technical society - how they sickened me! My lungs choking on the filth their vehicles filled the air with, my eyes blinded by the flashing lights of the banal amusements they flashed upon their phones, my heart sickened by the surrounding drab urbanity of a once beautiful region. Our ancestors had made this place a home by pouring their blood, their very blood, into the soil; it had been sacred to them. And now I must ask to squeeze past two androgynous blue haired degenerates, who reeked of North London smugness, simply in order to enter my office? Intolerable.

So, yes, I was in no mood for M’s lecture to the faculty that evening. In disgust I watched closely how that vile little creature preened around on the stage. Talking about how much our age - this blasphemy, this sin against all that made our nation great, this era of inauthenticity - represented the culmination of shopkeepers’ petty ambitions. This was the sickness of our race being offered as its cure! That half-bolshevik pedant P split some hairs in their typical manner, but of course they failed to get at what was fundamental, since their whole approach to life and what-passes-for-thought constitutes a systematic refusal to engage with the problem to hand. I tried to tell them as much, but they simply ignored me and sauntered off as they always do.

So when I myself had a chance to set M aright of course I took it! In no uncertain terms I told them that what they celebrated as glorious represented nothing more than a concerted effort to suppress, and forget, our actual problems. Death will come for us all, this much we can never escape no matter how wealthy, and in our primal natures we are ever somewhat, however dimly, cognisant of this fact. Rather than face the dread and anxiety this might produce we fill our lives with distracting baubles, and in so doing distance ourselves from anything like a real experience of the world as it is. But this can never suffice, and if we are to really cure what ails us we need to find a way to reconnect with those modes of life that allow us to at least spend our limited time actually encountering each other and nature in a meaningful fashion. Away with this shallow secular prosperity, return to a mode of life that would offer the chance at fulfilment and glory!

M purported to listen and for a brief moment I foolishly allowed myself to believe that something might come of this. In this way I always find myself reeling, facing the blows a cruel fate rains down upon me, as those who seek to block my - our - return to rooted being use all their guile and deception to draw me, us, in, only to better bring about chaos and ruin. For, indeed, at the end of

all this what did M do? They started talking to me about washing machines and radios! Washer women may now cut their chores by a third, M idiotically informed me in that fashion of theirs that always impressed grant agencies. I still shudder at the glee with which M recounted that harlots and fools may dull their minds with podcasts or k-pop or whatever else as they perform their duties.

I will not suffer to be mocked. I am the heir to a people who drove back the Romans, who communed with the wolves of the black forest, who felt in our breasts the language and poems of Goethe before they were ever put to pen. So at this I went to my office and took out my letter opener, then sought out M, who I found in the common room, no doubt in an effort to collude with P. I set upon M with a force like lightning. I slept soundly last night, and before you was my handiwork this morning.

I regret nothing. Though you may now seek to slander me with lies, I am sure a grateful future will look back and see in my deed the call to arms for a race too long abused by M and their like. Tomorrow belongs to me! – H

### *Confession 3- T*

I write this document through tears, and while calling upon the saints to intercede for me, for it is a confession of the deepest and most mortal sin. In full knowledge that life is God's to give or take, and Christ Himself while He was personally present commanded mercy, I yet slew professor M. I should sooner never speak of these events outside the seal of confession, but the secular authorities require that I give an account of myself so I comply, rendering unto Caesar as his is due.

Seeking not to excuse but explain my actions, I should note that I had spent the day in prayerful meditation on the false hopes implanted in our students by the father of lies. I saw people blessed with the gift of intelligence come in and, with no thought to God, turn their attention to utopian projects. I had heard some excitedly talk of "machine learning for social justice" today. I was moved by their idealism, but could not hold back my sadness at how vain their efforts were! Outside of the Word there will be no justice, without His constant aid and assistance there can be no success, and left to our own devices our prideful sin will soon turn even the most idealistic of human designs towards avarice.



So it was perhaps unsurprising that M's lecture shook me so violently. On the evening of their death M spoke to us, attempting to show that by his own power man could bring about a heaven on earth, and do so by actively spurning faith in God and the resurrection. The content was nothing short of a recapitulation of the Ophian heresy, close in fact to blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. I was much grieved to hear M succumb to this, for it seemed that my dear colleague was among those propagating the lies that cause our students to fall from grace. I tried to respond in a sensible manner, praying under my breath for the salvation of M's soul and all similarly lost. Fervently I prayed that they would realise that the happiness they sought for us in this world was an illusion, that only the Heavenly City promised to us would let us live in true wealth and security, that without grace the hearts of men would turn all these designs to the great evil which we are disposed to.

But the devil is like a lion who roams about looking for souls to devour, and on this day he found mine. For after the talk, during some dispute, the deceiver roared into my heart words of wrath, and that sin overcame me. I found myself thinking that rather than suffer Christ be mocked, I should defend His word here and now, by whatever means necessary. With a rosary for a garrotte I finished M off - oh, mother Mary, I pray that you will beg your Son that I be forgiven! - then with a cross I desecrated the body, as my soul was at that point in the throes of a devilish rage that I hope never again to experience.

Immediately I left the scene, but it was only after I got home that night that I realised the enormity of what I had done. I knelt down in prayer, and have been praying ever since, not yet sleeping since the ghastly act was done. But even in the depths of my wretchedness God is kind, and shortly before dawn He granted me a vision of M's soul. Now in purgatory, I heard M lamenting the sins that had earned them such sore punishment before they may be admitted unto the Kingdom. I was touched that among the sins they lamented was included the failure to make the best of mine own teachings, and they also were vexed that it was by exploiting contradictions in their own system that such monstrous sinners were made of P and H. Most strange of all was that the vision concluded with M begging God to forgive them the sin of suicide.

What I have seen I do not fully comprehend, but I suppose that God wishes me to be reassured that M is at least not eternally lost, and is seeking forgiveness for sins in life — perhaps including the spiritual suicide of heresy? Most of all I suppose that the Lord is telling me to seek such forgiveness

myself and hope that I may yet be redeemed, great is His mercy in offering us the sacraments.

I here end my testimony, and accept whatever punishment secular law sees fit to offer me. – T

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The police had been worried this case would generate media attention. Fortunately, however, a royal affair involving the daughter of a famous football player broke at just the right time to keep everyone quite busy. That was the only luck they caught, as no substantial further evidence was recovered beyond the three contradictory confessions. Reviewing the file some months later an exasperated detective inspector exclaimed “are these three lunatics all we have to go on here!?” only for a sergeant to laconically reply “Four lunatics, sir, if you credit Divine revelation.” And that was the last word the police said on the matter. M was dead, that much was apparent. But it was as if everybody in their world had conspired to bring it about without any one of them clearly doing the deed. How such a thing could be possible was a matter for a subtle metaphysician, but unfortunately the best such known to the Met was now permanently indisposed.

The cleaner was laid off soon after. Haunted by the image of the body, she was unable to sleep and grew increasingly listless at work. No tenure for her, and the university’s oft-expressed sympathy did not extend to keeping an inefficient cleaner on the payroll. It is not clear what will come next for her, but she has no reason to believe it will be any better.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Liam Kofi Bright is an assistant professor of philosophy, logic, and scientific method at the London School of Economics. He works on social epistemology, the study of how we do and should produce and disseminate knowledge through our scientific institutions.

## GREEK MACARONI

MAGDA ELENESCU

My last beer was landlocked in the back of the fridge. I don't know why people bring casseroles when someone dies. Just looking at the avocado and orange-colored pans covered with aluminum foil made my stomach lurch. Who could eat lasagna and Greek macaroni after their husband got smeared across Lakeview Road by a hit-and-run driver? In such times, you'd think sympathetic folks would donate hard liquor and barbiturates. But no, I had to drive myself to Pete's Bait Shop and sneak out with a case of Coors hoping nobody from PTA or church saw me.

At the Jenn-Air behind me, Grandma Georgia slapped a spoon into her sweet-smelling spaghetti sauce. "You've drunk enough," she muttered.

I snapped the silver tab on the can, then slurped the beer as I leaned against the fridge door to close it. Before me, the kitchen tilted: gleaming black granite, glistening white laminate, bleached oak floor recently polished to a sheen by Grandma Georgia and her mop contraption.

Just like it was her kitchen again, she bent forward in her wheelchair and stirred the sauce as she spoke. "Tallulah, I overheard you on the phone with Dick's lawyer."

My gut churned, but I kept my expression calm.

She swung her wheelchair around and poked her dripping red spoon toward me. "After Georgette passed away, Dick showed me his life insurance policies for poor Sally and Sam. He said if he died too, those policies would provide for them." Her voice rose. "What do you mean there's no insurance? I can't believe he'd leave Sally and Sam penniless, not to mention, you and the twins. What in the world happened?"

I took another slug, and studied the can. I had a feeling she knew exactly what had happened.

"Tallulah Mae, look at me!" Disgust creased her face.

Sickness rose in my belly. In one gulp, I chugged the rest of the Coors.

Tomato sauce splatted the floor, which was still shinier than in the five years I had been cleaning it. Grandma Georgia's chair whirred as she rolled toward me. "Sweet Jesus," she cried, "Didn't you pay the policy premiums?"

I barely made it to the white double-sink before all the beers I had drunk that day hurled out of me.

I met Dick when I was topless dancing my way through grad school, getting my masters in psychology. I worked in a smoky, dark, red-velvet joint called Ziegfield's Folly six miles east of campus.

At Ziegfield's, I made about a third of my money in dance tips, a third waitressing between sets with my clothes on, and the rest from the 'drinks' men bought me so I'd sit and listen to them. The drinks didn't cost me anything; the bartender gave me soda water, and I'd drop in a lime slice and charge for a vodka tonic. Some guys bought me drink after drink, just so I'd keep listening. I had my regulars who came every week. "Tallulah therapy," the bartender called it. If the night was slow, or if a guy had a good story, or if -- which almost never happened -- I felt sorry for a guy, I listened for free.

The first night I saw Dick was a slow night. Tall, lanky, no beer belly, he wore a navy suit that looked too big and slumped in his chair at a table beside the stage. The Stones sang, "You Always Get What You Need" as a hefty blonde girl whose stage name was Tushie shook her bulbous boobs and pink tee-strapped buns to the rhythm of the strobe lights.

He already had two empty shot glasses on the table when I shouted what was he drinking. "A Bud and a tequila," he muttered. He looked away from the stage and stared up at me. "And whatever you want."

When I returned, I sat on the plastic edge of the chair next to his. I never wanted to get too comfortable, or look like I was. He tossed the tequila, followed it with the beer, then seemed to notice me. He had a weary smile. "What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?"

I drank half my soda water so he'd know his time was half up, and countered, "What's a nice boy like you doing in a place like this?"

He leaned toward me and waved his arm. "Same as all the rest of these poor S.O.B.s. Trying to forget my wife." His gaze lowered. "'Cept there's one big difference between my wife and theirs."

Lots of guys tried to convince me their wife, or girlfriend, was the worst bitch walking the face of the earth. I slurped the last of my soda and straightened my shoulders. Rising, I asked, "And what's so different about yours?"

He looked up at me and his eyes darkened. For a second, I thought he wouldn't answer. Then, "She killed herself two years ago today."

I slid back down onto that plastic chair. And I listened.

The last time I saw Dick alive, I smelled the coffee he set on my bedside table, and squinted at the strips of rosy sky that glowed between the blinds. My side of the bed sank as he sat and leaned over me. His warm lips brushed my cheek. "Here's your coffee, sweetheart," he whispered. "I checked on Madison and Matt. They're still asleep." The bed squeaked when he stood. "I'm just going to run four miles, up Lakeview. Be back soon."

A tinny sound of music started as he put on his earphones. I heard his tennis shoes squeak down the hall, fall silent outside Sam's bedroom, and then again outside Sally's as he looked in on his sleeping older children. I visualized him smiling as he walked through our elegant white living room with its creamy new Italian leather sofas. I heard the front door close, then drifted back to sleep.

The buzz of the doorbell woke me. Seven o'clock. He must have decided to run farther. Must have locked himself out. I padded down the hall in my negligee. Sam and Sally would miss their bus, I'd have to drive them. Dick was going to be late for work. I shook myself awake. "Honey--" I said as I opened the door.

Two tan-uniformed Stone County deputies stood on the brick porch. I slammed the door.

Trembling, I ran to get my robe. In the twins' bedroom, Madison started to cry. I raced back to the entry and swung the door wide. "What?" I said, my heart pounding.

They looked stunned. "Mrs. Turner?" the taller deputy said.

"Yes."

They glanced at each other, and I imagined what they saw, me, barely covered by my pink silk shortie robe, already loosened at the waist, bare legs, red hair flying all around. In the background, I heard both twins howling.

"What?" I said. The twins were getting closer. "What?" The expressions on the cops' faces scared me. The shorter one fidgeted with his hands. Carmine smears edged the cuffs of his sleeves. "Wait," I said.

"Mommy, Mommy! Bad dream, bad dream," Madison wailed as she ran up and grabbed my knee. Matt was right behind, yelling for her to stop, but when he saw the deputies, he shouted, "Po-leece, Mommy, Po-leece," and yanked the corner of my robe as he pointed.

"Yes, I know, Matt." I lifted Madison into my arms. I looked at the short deputy's face, and with the sinking feeling of my life draining away, I knew why they were here. How many times had I told Dick it was dangerous to run with his EarPods in, dangerous that he couldn't hear cars?

I grasped at a straw. I begged, "What hospital is he in?"

The tall one looked over my shoulder, and I knew Sam and Sally were behind me. He shook his head. "He's not."

Sam reached his big teen-aged hands around me. "Come with me, Madison," he said. "Come, Matt. Come on, Sally. I'm going to fix Cap'n Crunch for breakfast." He pulled Madison from my arms. I looked up. Tears were streaming down his cheeks. "Take care of things, Mom."

Suffused with grief and disbelief, I slumped against the wall of the entry and closed my eyes, unable to stop the horror movie fast-forwarding through my brain -- how I had been so sure Dick and I would live to an old age together, how healthy Dick had been, how I had known Dick would not die, how I had purchased the new living room sofas instead of paying Dick's life insurance premiums.

One good thing you can say about barfing, it sure has a way of stopping conversation. There wasn't a peep from Grandma Georgia as I stumbled out of the kitchen and down the hall to my bedroom, just the growl of the garbage disposal.

I lowered the blinds to darken the room, and flopped face down on the bed. I smelled Dick's salty scent on his feather pillow. He was buried, and as I sniffed, I knew his earthly essence would soon be gone.

When I was young, I thought my belief in God might one day return when I attained some older, magically wise age, like twenty-one, or thirty. The morning Dick was killed, after the deputies left, after Grandma Georgia

arrived, I cried to Jehovah, Yahweh, holy spirit, Jesus, Mary, mother of god, begging them enter my waiting, vacant heart. I begged for childish belief, for the hope of heaven, for the hope of seeing Dick again, of finding more than the swirling black hole of infinite cold space.

But now I knew hope was beyond me, as far beyond as it had been when I was five and screamed for God to save me from the devil's fingers, and there was no god, only the promise of hell.

Much later, my bedroom door swished open. I felt large warm hands, Sam shaking me. "Mom, get up, get up. Please. Get out of bed." In his voice I heard a much younger boy's terror, fear that harkened to another time, another dark bedroom, another mother.

The blinds clickety-clicked as he raised them, and the room lightened with afternoon sun.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Magda Elenescu is a cultural historian working on the intersection of gender, art, and religion in the ancient world. Her exploration of this has taken her around the world. She has authored or contributed to books and academic journal articles—and also published some short stories and poetry in a previous life.

## LIKE MOM'S CHILI

MARK SILCOX

“D’you think they’ll shave our heads and paint them blue before or after they attach the electrodes?”

I had been maintaining this shtick for the whole week leading up to our big downtown appointment.

“Jesus,” she said, “which of your favorite depressing novels is that from?” Cassie’s patience was starting to crumble. She fastened her seatbelt and put the car into reverse. “*Brave New World* or some shit?”

“Old episode of *The X Files*.”

“You need to spend more time in the library, bro, you’re running low on material.”

We pulled out of the parking lot of our apartment complex and drove up the ramp onto I-35 northbound. The car juddered and sighed as Cassie stomped on the accelerator. It was a twelve-year-old Chevrolet hatchback we’d put through a lot of ordeals since we had moved in together. The cracked tweedy interior still smelled of pot smoke and buttered popcorn from the previous weekend’s adventures, and the backseat was covered in drifts of surplus paperwork from our grad school applications. We mostly just used it to run errands around town; highway driving makes me super nervous. My dad had promised us a brand-new-used car on the day we graduated. But we wouldn’t be able to collect it if we died in a gruesome wreck.

Cassie glanced over at me as we blended in to the morning traffic. “You look all tense! I think there’s some candy in the glove compartment. Eat and relax - today’s activities should be both fun and profitable.”

“Famous last words.” I dug around until I had located a fragment of un-fresh saltwater taffy and started picking at the greasy wrapper. The colorless wind-haunted exurbs of Oklahoma City blurred past my window. Fresh out of unfunny jokes, I decided to just sit and sulk for a while.

Cassie reached over and squeezed my upper thigh after the silence had gone on for too long. “C’mon, Brian – you remember what Jared was like before he graduated. Totally harmless! I’ve actually missed him a little bit since he moved away.”

“Yeah, he could be fun to spend time with, but that was before...” I let my voice trail off and leaned forward to forage for more candy.

Cassie snickered at me. “Come on, then – say it already.”

“Nah. I mean – I’m sure it’ll be fine. And the money really *will* be useful.”

“Say it! It’ll do you good!” She jostled the wheel back and forth, and the hapless Chevy shimmied to and fro in the passing lane. This was one of the few things she knew how to do to make me lose my cool.

“All right, all right! Fuck. He was fun *before* he, y’know, Sold his Soul to The Man, and traded in his guitar for a tie, and turned into an evil corporate cyborg, etcetera. Happy?”

She quit it with the gyrations. “Yeah,” she said, “I must admit, I never fail to be tickled when you talk like that. Because of course it reminds me of your lovely, wonderful, kindhearted...”

“Oh, shut up.”

Her *sub rosa* laughter turned into a blast of self-satisfied giggles. Cassie was genuinely fond of my parents, but their earnest, slightly preachy leftism – which they’d picked up in the dark depths of the Reagan era and converted over the past three decades into a hybrid car, a houseful of cats named after Latin American revolutionaries, and a pair of matching Green Party memberships – was a source of bottomless mirth to her. She especially enjoyed it whenever I slipped into talking the party line.

As some old disco music came on the car radio and the sun ascended over the crooked panorama of skyscrapers ahead of us, I could feel my mood starting to lift a bit. We had accepted Jared’s invitation downtown because he had promised money and we were dirt poor, having overspent our annual budget with three weeks left before the end of Spring Term. But perhaps this whole gig would turn out to be a minor adventure. “I wonder what he’s gonna feed us for lunch,” I said.

“Probably something made out of the blood of the peasantry.”

“Keep practicing that stuff, Che Guevara - one day I’ll show you the secret handshake.”

#

About twenty minutes later we pulled into a parking garage underneath the city’s second-tallest building. It was a superficially art deco-

ish, but also unmistakably phallic skyscraper that had been full of oil executives until a couple of years ago. When the petroleum market bottomed out, they'd sold off half the office space to other local businesses. Jared worked for a small PR and marketing firm on the seventeenth floor.

The security guard gave us a once-over as we passed through the echoey lobby. I avoided making eye contact, suddenly feeling self-conscious. We stepped into an elevator, which lifted off with a soft metallic purr.

I checked myself out in the door's reflective inner surface. Cheap running shoes a little haggard, jeans and sweater acceptably laundered, but rumpled. "Jeez," I said, "I hope we're dressed up enough."

"Dressed up enough for what? Oh, come on, Bri," said Cassie, "It's Jared. Don't you remember sleeping bag week?"

Back when the three of us lived in a co-op near campus, Jared had once gotten overstressed about exams and completely flaked out for a few days. He had skipped class to binge on anime DVDs, sustaining himself on dry cereal straight out of the box, and shuffling around the building wrapped in nothing but a greasy sleeping bag. With a different type of person the spectacle would have been disturbing, but with Jared you just sort of rolled with it, even when it became clear around day three that he had also quit bathing. His sloppy, freestyle approach to daily life could be infectious. But it hadn't left him with much of an exit strategy once he finished his degree. Which was how he had ended up working in this airless coffin of a building, I guess.

On the eighth floor a couple of guys in tailored suits got into the elevator and gave us both another quickly appraising up-and-down look. Cassie just stared right back at them of course, facial piercings and all. Her flower-print dress was more garden party than business appointment, but the tattoos made everything more ambiguous. One of the pair leaned forward a little as though he was trying to read the patterns on the skin of her right shoulder. He stood that way for almost three floors, and his lips seemed to be moving slightly. Then he sharply looked away, and started talking too loudly to his buddy about quarterly projections or some damn thing.

When the little bell dinged for us we stepped out into an empty hallway. There was carpet the color of roast beef and a row of wood-paneled doors with transparent plastic nameplates. I could hear conversation going on close by but couldn't make out the words.

Cassie crinkled her nose. "Somebody turned up a coffee pot too high."

She was right – there was a bitter smell hanging in the still air.

“So what do we do now?” she asked me.

“Jared said to keep walking ’til we see a sign that says ‘Conference Room Three.’”

We had immediately taken to whispering to each other, and we found ourselves tiptoeing along the squashy carpet. Something about the place made you feel the need to keep an obsequious silence. Perhaps it was just knowing that we were that high up in the air – the tallest building back on campus was only six stories. When we arrived at the conference room door, we paused and took a deep breath together before Cassie nudged it halfway open.

Jared was inside the room. He was wearing a white shirt and a bright red tie and scribbling on something against a clipboard. There was also a polished hardwood table, bare apart from a miniature microwave oven and two white china plates.

He glanced up from whatever he was writing and saw us. “*Dudes!*” he cried out, and swept forward with one arm held out in front of him.

When Cassie’s first impulse was to flinch, he drew back a bit. I rescued him by taking a quick step forward and seizing his hand in mine. Handshaking is a tricky thing for our generation – it feels stilted and uncool, but we still haven’t figured out a better way to greet old friends we’ve never slept with.

“How’re you doing, man?” I asked him. “Never thought I’d get to visit anybody in this place.” It was true – and to my own surprise, I was warming to the novelty of the experience.

Jared’s eyes were on Cassie’s face as he responded to me. “Oh, well...just a temporary gig, y’know, while I, uh. While I ...”

“It’s *really* good to see you, Jared.” Cassie recovered quickly, leaning forward to give him a light hug round the shoulders. “I miss folding the sheets together!” The two of them had made up the co-op’s ‘laundry committee’ the year before Jared moved downtown.

“Aw, man. You’re going to make me tear up. Thanks for helping me out with this project, you guys. I hope the traffic was OK.”

He stepped aside and gestured toward the table. Sitting on top of each plate was a small brown disc of something not immediately identifiable. It was the wrong consistency for hamburger, and had the disturbing symmetry and uniformity of a product never touched by the human hand. Behind the table

were a couple of those ornate office chairs that look impossible to sit in but turn out to be really comfortable.

Cassie and I sat down. Jared set aside his clipboard and stood across from us with the palms of his hands resting on the tabletop. He seemed to go into a brief trance.

Cassie poked at her mystery disc with the tip of a finger. “So, are we, uh, supposed to eat these things?”

“Oh! Aha, um, sorry, I didn’t really explain much of how this works over the phone, did I?”

“You said we’d be part of a focus group,” I reminded him. “I’ve never been in one before, though, so...”

“Right!” He fingered the knot in his tie and glanced back and forth between us. “That’s what you are! We’re doing a little research on...uh...so what we want you to do is, ah...”

It occurred to me that we were possibly being recorded. God help the poor underling who’d have to listen to this conversation afterwards.

Cassie poked at the soft brown disk again, this time with two fingers. “This looks a little like a hockey puck.”

Jared swept my plate up from under my nose and shoved it into the microwave. He set the timer for a minute and a half.

“So my company’s been hired to do some product testing,” he explained. “All you guys have to do is take a few bites of The Product when it’s warmed up, then answer some questions about it.” He picked up his clipboard again and lifted the first sheet of paper to look underneath. Then he flashed us a quick sideways grin. It was the first thing he had done since we’d arrived that reminded me of our good-natured former roomie. “Some of the questions might seem a bit goofy.”

“Just the two of us? Nobody else is coming?” Cassie was playing with her bracelets under the table, something she only did when she was uncomfortable.

“Yeah. See, it’s the first one of these things I’ve run by myself. My boss told me it’d be OK to start small, with people I know.”

The microwave dinged. Yet another weird new smell had crept into the air. It was earthy, a little bitter, like damp tree bark or freshly dug topsoil. Not wholly unpleasant, but not what you’d normally think of as a cooking smell.

“Oh – ha ha! I guess you guys will need forks, or something, if you’re going to actually eat this thing.” Jared dashed out the door, leaving the two of us staring at the tiny oven.

When he had been gone for maybe thirty seconds, I decided to retrieve The Product for myself. The little disc was steaming, but appeared otherwise unaltered.

“What the fuck’s happened to him, Bri?” Cassie whispered. “He’s acting like-”

“Shh!”

I jerked my head toward the ceiling where I thought the invisible microphones might be hidden. Cassie gave me a look that made me instantly realize I was acting like a loon.

“I think he’s just nervous, y’know,” I told her. “New job and all.”

Jared rushed back in with a fistful of plastic cutlery. He passed us a bright white fork each, then quickly nuked Cassie’s plate. While the two of them waited for it in silence I slid my fork underneath my prospective meal, just for something to do really. The thing didn’t hold together at all; it was the texture of a very loosely-packed cereal bar. Jared was watching me and nodding in a way that was probably meant to be encouraging, but honestly he looked kind of nuts.

“Go ahead!” he said when I paused with the soft morsel hovering in front of my face.

I chewed and swallowed. Yuck! The thing was straight-up nasty. Obviously some kind of grainy, chemically flavored meat substitute, but I had eaten vegetarian faux-food lots of times before and not minded it. I struggled not to grimace. Jared tilted his head to the side in exactly the way that might make a small dog seem human-like.

“It’s....” I was talking so that I didn’t have to swallow.

“Hang on!” Jared help up a hand. “Let’s let Cassie try hers first, before she hears your reaction.”

Another awkward few seconds passed while we all ogled the microwave door. As Jared slid Cassie’s warm plate across to her, I tried to catch her eye and provide some sort of warning, but she was entirely focused on the thing she was about to ingest.

“It’s...” she said, after getting through the first mouthful, then swallowed slowly and pursed her lips.

“So I, uh, have these questions...” Jared was fiddling with his clipboard again.

“It’s a little gritty, and...is it actual meat, though?” Cassie gave the disc another prod, but couldn’t seem to make herself elevate a second mouthful.

“So, question one. What was your first impression when you saw The Product? Was it a), appealing, b), unappealing, or c), intriguing?”

“But it’s OK, really.” Cassie was swirling her tongue around her mouth. “I mean, it’s not something you’d want to...but of course, if you thought that-”

Jared’s pen was hovering over his notes. He shot us both a look that struck me as so utterly lost and baleful that I suddenly wanted to be out of there very quickly. Cassie was still waving at the air with her hands, in the way she often did when trying to summon up words adequate to some bizarre (or straight-up nasty) experience.

“Definitely c),” I replied, hoping to cut her off. “Intriguing.”

“Aha!” Hearing this seemed to set Jared a little more at ease. “That’s great,” he said. “Thanks. Just a few more questions. By the way, feel free to finish it off if you want. It’s almost noon; you guys must be hungry.”

I had already set my fork aside, and I left it right where it was. But Cassie braved another morsel of The Product, clearly enjoying this bite even less than the first. “Ugh,” she groaned, “it’s just so, um, so-”

“Which other common food item does it most remind you of?” Jared was speaking more rapidly. “Is it more like a), a hamburger fresh of the grill, b), a sizzling-hot sausage patty, c), a slice of home-cooked meatloaf, or d), your mom’s special chili?”

Cassie dropped her fork, snorting loudly. “Holy fuck, Jared. Did you actually write that stuff yourself?”

Jared shook his head. “It, ah, comes from the manufacturer.” His back straightened a bit. “They do actually research this stuff pretty carefully.”

I managed to swallow a giggle, but not before Jared noticed my mouth twitch.

“They’re a pretty big company. They’ve had a lot of success with this sort of thing in the past. And they actually have a reputation for making stuff



out of high quality ingredients. One of the things I like about Blue Apple” – that was the name of the company he worked for – “is how we really try hard to partner with businesses that...”

Jesus Christ – he seemed to be totally in earnest. “It’s cool, Jared,” I said. “Don’t worry – we’re just new at this whole thing. And you know *us*. We’ve always got ten words for every one that’s necessary.” Cassie gave me a sharp look at that. She was more defensive and less willing than I was when it came to apologizing for conversational liberties. I nudged her knee with mine under the table and pressed on. “Why don’t you give us the rest of the questions?”

“OK. You’re, uh, actually supposed to eat a bit more first, though.” He was starting to look gloomy. The smell of the heated patties had completely filled the air by this time, and would have taken the edge off anybody’s cheerful mood.

I gripped the base of my fork and was about to dig in, but Cassie’s stamina was obviously faltering.

“I don’t know if I *can*, Jared,” she said. “It already feels like it’s doing a little Celtic dance inside my stomach. Do you think you could at least tell us what it’s supposed to *be*?” She started picking the still-warm patty apart with the tines of her fork. “Is it some sort of vegan thing, maybe?”

“I’m actually not supposed to. Or...well...” He quickly scanned both sides of the first page on his clipboard. “I guess it doesn’t say anywhere on here that it’s not allowed. But the way I understood how they wanted this to go, there’s supposed to be a sort of a big reveal, right at the end.”

“A ‘big reveal?’” I reared back from the table in my ergonomic chair. I probably wouldn’t have reacted so strongly if I hadn’t watched an online documentary that week about some engineer in Finland who had discovered a way to make faux sausage meat out of raw sewage.

But Cassie had understood the expression in a slightly different way. “Like, in a Sherlock Holmes story? I guess that could be fun. Like a role-playing game! Remember that Spring break we all played *Mask of Cthulhu*?” She looked down at her plate, inhaled and exhaled, then picked up a yielding morsel between two fingertips and managed a shaky smile. “Okay, down the hatch!”

“It’s dog food.”

The brown matter was already in her mouth before she had time to process this.

“What, now?” I asked Jared. Cassie’s hand closed over my knee, her bracelets noisily jingling.

“It’s...it’s for dogs. It’s a new thing – you heat it up a little, and the dog just goes nuts for it. But what the company wanted to show was that human beings-”

“Nnhhhhh...” Cassie’s hand was over her mouth. She kicked back her chair and rushed for the door. The sounds we heard her make out in the hallway seemed to indicate she might not get to the bathroom in time.

For the first time since we had arrived, Jared looked me full in the face. I leaned backward and met his gaze. In his eyes there was a quiet, muted but obstinate plea for something I had always known I’d never be able to give him.

“Dude,” I said to him at last.

“I guess you’d better go and check up on her.”

I walked out and pushed the door of the ladies’ room open a crack. “You OK in there babe?”

“Just vomiting, sweetheart!” The grandmotherly singsong voice she used made me smile, but I could sense the anger resonating behind it. Then I heard a low groan and an ominous splash.

Jared appeared in the corridor. Somehow, during his five-yard journey across the conference room his hair had gotten tousled and his skinny tie had swung over to one side.

“Is she-?”

“She’s okay,” I told him. “Just barfing a little.”

“Hadn’t you better-?”

“No. It’s a public women’s restroom, Jared. Not unless she says she actually needs me in there for some reason.”

“Are you-?”

“Yeah, I’m totally sure.”

Incredibly, he was still holding his clipboard. He raised it now, concealing his face from me as though he was double-checking some highly pertinent factoid. “I guess we’d better wrap things up right here,” he mumbled.

“Yeah, probably best.”

“You guys’ll still get paid, though.”

“It’s fine either way,” I said, even though it wasn’t really. When he peeked at me over the giant metal clip, I managed a smile and a shrug.

Then, because I somehow couldn’t resist twisting the knife just a little: “Cassie’s parents were really poor, when she was a little kid. Like, *really* poor. Trailer park, no health insurance, no money for groceries.” Law of the jungle, I guess.

“Oh.” Jared frowned, and he got that look that used to come over him studying for a stats exam, like his brain was in danger of overheating. “I guess I don’t understand how that...”

“It makes a difference, man. Trust me.”

#

“...like a couple of lab rats, y’know! Shoving that garbage down our throats, then expecting us to maybe write a fucking radio jingle about it! With that smug goddamn grin on his face the whole time, like he’d somehow joined the *real world* and left people like us way behind, as though we’re some sort of...I don’t know...”

I had taken over driving duties on the way out of the city while Cassie was getting this out of her system. I squeezed her hand, then gently removed it from the gearshift.

“How much of that stuff did you have to eat, back in the day?” I asked her, sympathetic but also genuinely curious.

“What, actual dog food?” He voice stabilized a bit. “None. Whatever happened to my parents, my brothers and I somehow always got decent stuff to eat. But there were half a dozen cans of soft cat food in the cupboard of our trailer out in Altus. I never asked my mom what they were for. But of course, we didn’t have a cat.” She honked her nose into a wad of toilet paper she had swiped from the Blue Apple ladies’ room. “One time, the week after my Dad lost his second job, I noticed two of the cans were missing.”

I lowered the passenger side window a couple of inches. Even in the middle of the city, the outdoor air smelled sweet and vernal to me after having been stuck inside that tower all morning.

“Thanks,” said Cassie, tilting her head back and breathing deeply. “Hoo-ee! Quite an adventure, that was. Thanks for getting me out of that place so quickly, Bri. You’re def my favorite person to throw up with.”

“Awesome to know!”

The car gave a resigned hiccup as we pattered back up the ramp onto the interstate. It had turned into a sunny, optimistic sort of day, and for a while we just looked out at the bright lawns and textured rooves of the newly built suburbs north of the city. A little further along, a giant inflatable gorilla waved to us from a used car lot, and I almost waved back. It struck me as slightly sad that this was the first time since winter we had been more than maybe a mile off campus.

“I just don’t understand what he thought he’d get out of playing that kind of prank on us, Bri. We weren’t ever mean to him at the co-op, were we? It was like he wanted to rub our faces in something. Does he maybe think we’re pretentious for applying to grad school?”

I just shrugged.

She was digging around in the glove compartment now. “Or maybe he’s just mad at *anyone* who doesn’t have to wear a pissant little polyester necktie every day. I hope you didn’t scarf the last candy; I’ve still got the taste of dog burger in my mouth. He must have been laughing up a storm deep inside while we were shoveling that crap into our mouths.”

Usually when Cassie was in this type of mood I would take on an abstracted air, nod my head a bunch, and just let her slowly talk herself down. But I didn’t feel like I could let this last remark pass unanswered. I took a deep breath.

“What? What?” she said, immediately on her guard. “I know that noise!”

Damn it. “Well, I, um...I actually think you might be misreading the situation just a bit.”

“Really? How?”

“I think he was actually trying to impress us.”

She snorted. “Oh, really.”

“Yes, really. Even with the dog burger. I think he wanted us to be amazed by his recent successes.”

She had found another ancient piece of taffy, and was chewing it noisily as she gave me a long sideways look. I kept my eyes on the freeway, which had gotten busier since the morning. “Jesus,” she said eventually, “you actually sound like you’re serious.”

“I mean, I might be wrong. But when you take a job in that field, you’re bound to pick up some fancy notions about the value of what you’re selling, just to get yourself out of bed in the morning. I think he expected us to *like* the dog burger, and then be amazed by the fact that we did. I’d be willing to bet he’s eaten a couple of the damn things himself.”

For the last few miles out of town she was clearly giving my proposal some serious thought. She didn’t say anything else until we were off the freeway and idling down the main drag east of campus.

“I don’t think I buy it, though, Bri. Aren’t you maybe being over-charitable?”

“Unh-unh. I think Jared’s a total fucking idiot, actually.” I sighed. “Which I always sort of suspected, for all that he could be fun to hang out with. Wouldn’t bother me if we never spoke to the guy again. But...”

“‘But?’ ‘But’ *what*? Now you’re being mysterious.”

We stopped at a red light. My stomach was starting to protest its recent mistreatment. “Hey, do you want to stop at that cheap Chinese place one block over? I’m dying of hunger here.”

Vicious elbow prod. “Quit wriggling – ‘but’ *what*, already?”

I took a left turn. I really *was* hungry, to be fair. For another minute or so I could get away with pretending to fuss over navigation, then edging into a tight parking spot between two SUVs. When I pulled up the parking brake, though, Cassie grabbed my arm and squeezed it hard, like she used to whenever she needed something or other really badly from me, from a fistful of small change to a word of encouragement.

“See, the thing is...the guy’s in love with you, Cassie. Always has been, I reckon.”

“Oh! Oh, Brian.” Her eyes got very wide. “Brian, no. I really don’t think you-”

“I don’t just *think* it, Cass. I mean, I really am 100% sure about this. Back in co-op there were, um, incidents. Just a few little physical tells and gestures he made, that I saw.” I didn’t tell her about the time I caught him

sketching her face in red ink from across the breakfast table. Or the time I noticed a cheap bracelet she had complained about losing weeks before sitting on his bedside table. Some leftover, semi-brotherly loyalty I guess.

Cassie was still shaking her head.

“Then, after a while,” I went on, “he knew that I knew. I didn’t torture him over it. But we did have, let’s say, a frank exchange.”

For a minute or two we just sat there in the restaurant’s parking lot looking at each other. The sky had greyed over and a few blobs and spatters of light spring rain hit the windshield. When I made a move to get out of the car, Cassie pointedly didn’t let go of my forearm. She was starting to emit little gasps, building up to something heavier, just like the rain.

“I know. I know.” I said. “Love is strange! It’s just like that guy says in that song – y’know, the one with the Farfisa organ? I mean, what can you do right?”

*“I don’t know! But...dog food, Brian?”*

While I waited for what I thought would be the inevitable wisecrack or one-liner she just stared out at the rain as it intensified, sobbing loudly for a couple of minutes, plucking at the candy wrappers in the cracked plastic divider between us, then sniffing and wiping her eyes with the sleeve of her dress. That’s the thing you always have to remember about Cassie – empathy will always trump irony in the end. Back then, crank atheist though I thought I was, I used to sincerely pray she’d never find out I was just the opposite.

“Come on,” I said as soon as I thought she’d had enough time. “Egg rolls are calling.”

She released my arm and kissed me on the cheek. I reached into the back seat to dig out our busted plastic umbrella. The skies were getting black, but there was a hearty, greasy food smell making its way into the car. We stepped out onto the tarmac and trudged through the warm rain together like refugees.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Silcox is a professor of Humanities and Philosophy at the University of Central Oklahoma. His stories have been published in *The Dread Machine*, *Sci Phi Quarterly*, *Perihelion SF*, *Leading Edge*, *Heroic Fantasy Quarterly*, *Write Ahead/The Future Looms*, and *KZine*, among other venues. His SF novel *The Face on the Mountain* was published by Incandescent Phoenix Books in 2015.

## PEER REVIEW

HARRIETT JERNIGAN

Carlson snickered as she cut the heads off the garden gnomes, patiently sluicing through the plaster and wood with her craft saw, lying on her stomach in Ginnie's flower bed, the moon looking over her shoulder as she freed those deluded grins from their torsos. She'd be done by 2:00, and then she'd go home and have a nice cup of cocoa before bed. But she had to get up on time. She wanted to be the first to arrive at brunch the next morning, to go out and cry in surprise, to help Ginnie discover the mass murder in her begonias. Last month, Beatrice had gotten to brunch first and beat her to the punch of finding the dead skunk wrapped in shitty diapers left at Ginnie's front door. No one likes a show-off.

She deserved it, every bit of it, Carlson thought as she drew Hitler mustaches on the disembodied heads and tossed them around her. She would destroy everything Ginnie bought with the money, didn't matter. When she'd pulled out the new champagne flutes for the monthly brunch, Carlson stuck prosciutto to the bottom of the tray so that Jackie, Ginnie's highly-strung Weimaraner, knocked the tray out of her hands and clattering to the floor, turning the Waterford crystal glasses into hundreds of sparkling razors, shredding Ginnie's fingers. She'd dispatched the new laptop in the lab, lacing Ginnie's can of Coke with the syrup of ipecac she'd ordered online. Carlson had pretended to work while waiting for the sickly-sweet emetic to take effect, suppressing a smirk as Ginnie's face twisted just a tiny bit right before she threw up all over her new MacBook, drenching the keyboard with vomit. Carlson had rushed to the rescue with a tea towel, solicitously trying to clear the sick off the computer, smearing it even more into the keyboard. The day after Carlson went over to Ginnie's house and saw her new front door, a \$10,000 orgasm of etched glass, she covered the whole thing in hydrofluoric acid, smearing the curlicues into toddler scratch, and drilled holes into each corner of the frame, so that the whole thing fell out when Ginnie touched it. Ginnie had bawled. Carlson had encouraged her to file a police report. But she didn't.

Every time Carlson questioned her own sanity, thought about calling the whole thing off, her mind returned to that conversation the year before, when Ginnie had called her study worthless.

It won't work. Your numbers are wrong.



Five years of research say they're right.

No one's gonna take you seriously.

We'll see about that.

When Ginnie had accepted the Diebermann Prize, \$100,000 “for her outstanding contributions to theoretical physics,” Carlson had originally planned to kill her. She hadn't cared when she stole Jim from her; she didn't have to buy as much toilet paper and the house didn't smell like feet anymore. She let the cracks about her weight slide, had even forgiven Ginnie for making fun of her lisp in front of their colleagues at that Christmas party. But the Diebermann Prize was beyond the pale.

Carlson had it all planned out, when to kill Ginnie, how to dispose of her silicone carcass, the alibi. Not that anyone would ever suspect her. She'd initially bought Ginnie's bait, hook, line, and sinker, and had never told anyone else about her research, afraid to look even more the fool. And then it became an advantage. As far as everyone else knew, they were still the best of friends. Ginnie didn't have a clue. Stupid cow. She wouldn't know good data if it sat on her face.

Shooting her in the head was too good, disemboweling too quick. Choking the life out of her wouldn't suffice. Carlson kept a running tally of what everything cost—the gnomes had come from the most expensive garden store in town, a shameful \$200 per ugly little dwarf. Ginnie had bought 13—her lucky number, she always said. Carlson would keep going until the 100 grand—at 5% A.P.R., a generous rate—was spent. Then she would kill her. She might even let Ginnie beg for her life first.

Carlson hacked the feet off a couple of the gnomes and threw them behind her, her stomach starting to go numb, the cold of the ground creeping through her layers, even the thermals. She should've brought a blanket, but she liked to travel light on these nights. She sighed as she thought about their friendship, how Ginnie always ended up with the lion's share. She'd held on for too long. She'd hold on a little bit longer, till the money was all spent. Then, she would end it.

She looked forward to it.

Carlson started gathering her things, packing her saw and marker back into her handbag, pooped, ready to go home. She began humming to herself, The worms go in, the worms go out, the worms come tumbling down your

snout. She didn't hear Ginnie sneak up behind her, shovel raised above her head.

As Ginnie brought the shovel down on Carlson's head, she thought of the Mercedes she'd ordered, more precious to her than her children, far superior to any friendship.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Harriett Jernigan earned her B.A. in creative writing and German studies in New College at the University of Alabama and her Ph.D. in German studies and applied linguistics at Stanford. She then spent the next couple of decades bouncing back and forth between Germany and the U.S., teaching English and German and writing fiction and non-fiction. She has published work in *Apt: An Online Journal*, *Telos*, and *German as a Foreign Language*. She recently returned to Stanford to teach writing and rhetoric. When she's not working or writing, she indulges her two other major passions, baking and fencing.