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ABSYNTHÉ

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// POETRY BY KAVYA CHANDRA //

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THE DEFT CHRONICLES

Part II: A Sinking Ship Brayden Knox

A surprising amount of people contacted me after Part 1 of this story was published in the October issue of Absynthe. Most who contacted me told me it was an insane story and a fun read- trust me I know, I lived it- but even more people contacted me to ask if it was made up. Well, let me start Part 2 off by saying this is all real, non-fiction, truer than true bullshit that my friends and I lived. We may have done a great job suppressing the events that occurred the Summer of 2016, but the scars will always be there.

So, where did we leave off? *Ah, yes!* Carol paying us in a disgraceful amount of under the counter money and a cheap ass bottle of wine. Despite this insult of a payroll, we stayed. You will find we always stayed despite the screaming alarms telling us to leave. Our skulls were a little too thick and our hearts a little too hopeful. I'd like to start off with an incident that happened only a few days before the restaurant actually opened. The day came and we could hardly believe it was true. After months and months of hard labour we were finally able to put the paint ponchos away and swap them for our fabulous Deft uniforms- a basic black t-shirt. Upon opening, business wasn't exactly booming. This is in part because a lot of people assumed the restaurant would never open so didn't even bother trying anymore, but also because the actual interior of the restaurant had one table. It seemed like a joke most weren't willing to test out, but we didn't work two months to build a restaurant from the ground up to go an entire shift without any customers! We sat out-front in the hostess stand with hopeful and warm smiles, doing our best to welcome just about anyone into our shithole of a restaurant. But alas, no one came, and

once Carol caught on his business was failing, things started to change a little.

Let me start by telling you that the heat we experience in our hometown is just insulting. When you are outside there no is breeze and rarely any shade, just straight up stinging, burning heat that had been responsible for the many cases of heat stroke we had experienced months prior. Therefore, since there was only table in the restaurant, all other tables were outside in the sun.

With black tables.
Black benches.
Black uniforms.
And black umbrellas.

It was *HOT*- and not in a sexy way. We stayed inside as much as possible so as to not get sun stroke for the fifth time that summer. Once Carol realized business was not booming, he made it mandatory we spend the entire shift, customers or not, outside under the sun at the hostess booth. What's worse? Because business was awful, he thought of the genius idea to put a broken cooler he stole from a dump, outside at the front, with boxes of premade meals for people to purchase. This included bento boxes filled with seaweed salad, a variety of rolls and shrimp tempura. Yum, right? *WRONG!*

These boxes sat in the beating sun for 8 hours a day, hardly kept cold by the cooler that never reached the temperature it legally had to be at. In fact the health inspector had told Carol numerous times he could not sell food out of it, as it was basically useless. It was not at all to our surprise when these boxes didn't sell. We were throwing out so

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much food at the end of the day we could have fed a small British family. Maybe we would have spared them, took a few home for the family, but we weren't willing to risk the food poisoning.

Within two weeks of being open, Carol was never around. During the day he took joy rides on the boat we built and sent his parents in to spy on us in his absence. The sad part was, his parents were the only customers we had on most days, and even they complained about sitting in the heat almost every time they came. Besides that, most days were dead, followed by even deader dinner shift. The few nights we actually had costumers; Carol took it upon himself to do all he possibly could to give the guests the best possible experience at his restaurant, as he cooked for the dinner shift. This started with playing some rather creepy form of Japanese abstract music. One song that seemed to come on frequently often had to be muted- per customers request- as it consisted of 3 straight minutes of saying 'fuck' in differing tones, and that was it.

If the music didn't set a poor tone for creepy dinners, Carol himself did a great job at making everyone who came in extremely uncomfortable. Often Carol would present customers with food or drinks they did not order and told them to sample it. He would be relentless with these 'on-the-house' samples, taking alcoholic drinks out to young girls who weren't even drinking (and likely because they were not of age). When costumers refused, he would just keep trying with something else. I know what you may be thinking; "*Sweet deal, free drinks!*".

No friends, this guy was nastier than the scum under a bus seat.

As he would pass us- bringing unsolicited drinks to our customers- he would tell us to add them to their bill. Some of these shots were \$12 and made for some very angry customers, and understandably so. We were often left to the dogs, trying to explain why drinks they didn't want, need or ask for were

on their bills. This was one way Deft lost many of the few customers it did get.

Another way we often sent people running from the restaurant was when Carol came to the restaurant high off his ass every dinner shift. Yes, our boss came in absolutely smashed on all kinds of different drugs. When we didn't catch him rolling a joint on the kitchen counter, he came high and ready to cook some awful food. My personal favourite was when he came to a dinner shift high on shrooms and demanded I put the new flat screen TV he purchased in the cooler at the front. When I told him this was a terrible idea he yelled at me, in front of several customers, until I shoved the TV into the cooler. A few hours later, clearly coming off his high, he yelled at me again in front of the customers to take the TV out because I would break it in there. Often in tears, I would have to apologize to anyone who witnessed his drug-enraged blowouts and did whatever he asked. Again, my friends and I had every chance to leave. Hell, if we told our parents what we were experiencing they would have MADE us leave. But we didn't. As Khalid would say, we were too young, too dumb and too DANG broke. So, we kept on keeping on.

On one of the days Carol decided his dollar store Titanic was more important than his brand-new business, my best friend and I had one on of the most ridiculous experiences of our lives. While the chef working the day shift was cutting avocados, she managed to stab herself in the hand. Yes, she fully Romeo and Juliet stabbed herself in the hand. Quickly, she cleaned the wound and stormed off to the pharmacy before we could blink. The first thing we did was call Carol, as surely, he could come in and cook in absence of the day chef as she had left without asking. However, Carol claimed he was unable to come because the trash boat we built was sinking, along with him and whatever gullible tourist he managed to scam onto his boat, in the middle of Lake Huron.

"Sweet!" We thought, "*We can get the*

The Deft Chronicles

rest of the day off.”

Nope, nope, nope!

Carol, the daft idiot, demanded we stay open and serve anyone we can, despite the fact that there was no cook. There are two things that are required to complete the minimum recipe to make a restaurant. One, is a server to bring you the food. The other is a cook to MAKE THE GODDAMN FOOD! Despite missing one of these integral pieces, Carol, in his sinking idiocy demand we stay open or lose our jobs.

So, we did.

And it was just our luck that we got three tables immediately after hanging up the phone with Carol. With our best warrior faces on, we approached each table with a quivering smile and took their order. Once submitted, we immediately sprinted back to the kitchen and did our best to make their meals. To our surprise, the customers loved our food. “Thanks, we made it!” We told them with pride as we cleared their dishes. This led to quite a few good Yelp reviews- which the restaurant did not deserve- but hey, we earned them.

Throughout the summer, and all this chaos, many staff came and went. Carol had attempted to hire other chefs, other waitstaff and even a few mangers- but none of them lasted more than week. Only the core 5 of us made it nearly to the end of the summer. By this time, I was the acting manager, making everyone schedule and ensuring things were being properly. I had had no prior experience to any type of leadership such as this, but I was quick to adapt given the ridiculous circumstances we were in. When most people open a restaurant, they work 24/7 at the business, making sure to build good relationships with tourists, town folk and other business owners around. Instead of the drive we expected to see in Carol when he opened his business, he was busy screwing up his own reputation in town and getting his ass sued off.

We had heard so many awful rumors about our boss all summer, none of them shocked us anymore. *He steals money from his parents. He takes advantage of underage girls. He once forced someone to snort cocaine in the middle of the lake on his ship ‘or else’.* We had heard it all by this point and stayed. We knew he was a bad guy but at this point we felt it was our responsibility and reputation on the line if the restaurant went to shit. That was, until we experienced a situation in which he drugged a surrogate mother. Yes, Carol took it upon himself to take a weed cookie to a neighbouring shop and give it to the young girl working the counter. He began to giggle when she ate it and she asked what was so funny. He told her it was a weed cookie and immediately the poor women start balling. It turns out this woman was applying to be a surrogate mother for her boss and had her testing a mere few days later. Of these tests, included a drug test in which she would now test positive for marijuana. What’s more, is she was supposed to go pick up her young children from day care an hour later and couldn’t because she was now high. Luckily, the owner of the store sued his ass for ruining her only chance at getting a child- as she had an illness and couldn’t carry a child herself. This was just about our last straw, but we only had a week or so to go before summer was over. Considering all he had done, would it really be rude of us to leave him hanging for 2 weeks? The answer would be ABSOLUTELY FUCKING NOT! the next day when we came in after one of his nightly ragers in the restaurant. Someone had puked all over the patio and onto the neighbour’s patio, who had also informed us they found their infant eating a joint someone from our patio threw onto theirs! Carol then had the nerve to ask us to clean the vomit, but that was it. We hit our last straw and we were gone. Finally, and maybe a little too late, we left. After everyone told us all summer we were working for a terrible person, we finally left. Carol had the audacity to be mad after stripping our summer of making any good money and experiencing things no 18-year-old kids should have to. Not long after we left a rock found its way through Deft’s front window. The town had declared

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war on his business, on his parties and on all the scams, lies and drugs he was forcing onto our once beautiful town. Even a few months into our school, a private investigator contacted my friends and I regarding an open case on Carol. He drove all the way to where we were attending university and private interviewed us for hours. After the awful summer we had, we spared no details. We had no idea who hired this man but we were going to tell someone who was willing to listen our story. And now here I am with you. DAMN, it feels good to say all this! For many years, I think my friends and I blocked what happened to us that summer out- as for the most part- it was rather unbelievable. We should have told

our parents, should have left when others did. But we didn't, and we paid the price for it. But damn, does it make for an interesting story. If you're still with me, thank you for reading! Carol has now officially attempted to sell his shitty business for a stupid amount of money and is now sailing around Europe as a maid, on a yacht, with his child bride! (Yes, I said child bride, but we won't get into that.) Finally, my small-town sleeps in peace and no longer has to smell the stench of that llama looking sloth man. I hope you all learned a lot from this story, because I sure have! Stay funky & so very fresh my friends!

Bray.





YELLOW BELLY

Shaun Phauh

She's left her book out, and I can't help but look.

*My lover's wart sits neatly
at the bottom of his palm.
I stare often
when he doesn't think I can see.
My eyes drift to the
mound of skin.
I feel the shame.*

I hear the sound of the front door opening, and I quickly put the book back at the same spot on the bed, and leave our room. Open the fridge and act like I've been looking for food in the kitchen. I touch the wart on the bottom of my palm, and I can envision its roots digging deep in the skin.

I had asked her once what she wrote in her journal, and she told me it was all poetry.

"I'd like to read some of it," I told her.

"No, it's personal stuff." She said, and an itch began on my ankle.

When we went to bed that night, I could envision the journal, now sitting in her desk drawer. I didn't put my arms around her as I had to scratch at my ankle every time I thought of the journal.

She left early in the morning for work, as I pretended to still be asleep. As soon as the door clicked shut, I pulled the blankets off my body and looked at my ankle. The skin had turned red and inflamed. I had bled a little over the sheets, and scabs were starting to form, brown crust looking like the backs of beetles.

I listened for her sounds as she went about the kitchen, making breakfast for

herself. The sounds of her feet shuffling, filling a glass of water, and the sounds of cutlery quietly striking against each other.

The front door opens and closes, and I crawl over the bed to grab her journal.

*A dog ran across the street and was
run over.*

It wasn't gratuitous in its gore.

*The dog was thrown off the road and
into the*

*grass. It landed on its back and
its body was still all together.*

*I watched the rigor mortis
forcing its legs up, and even then,
dead and turning cold,
it was happy.*

For a moment the itching subsides, and there's this big relief that goes through me, like the foam of a good soap has suds'd its way through my body.

I read another one.

*I watched a man hiding in the bushes
staring into the window of my neighbour.
She was an adult woman watching TV
in a big fuzzy onesie.
and this man's head was
peeking above the bushes. His black hair
almost invisible around the greenery.*

Filled with relief, I put the book back before I go through all her poems at once.

That night, as we sleep together, I can't stop thinking about all her poems, and I'm scratching at my ankles the whole time.

"What're you doing?" She groans, in a half-sleep. "Stop fidgeting."

Yellow Belly

"Sorry," I say.

I move further away from her to continue scratching at my ankles. I can feel the hardness of old broken skin.

The next day, when she's gone, I pull the blankets away and see flecks of red on the sheets, along with flaked skin.

I run to the book of poems for relief.

*I made soup out of carrots and
mushrooms
chicken stock as the base.
I felt watched.
The mushrooms float
further away from me.
Their gills black
fuzzy and full of spores.*

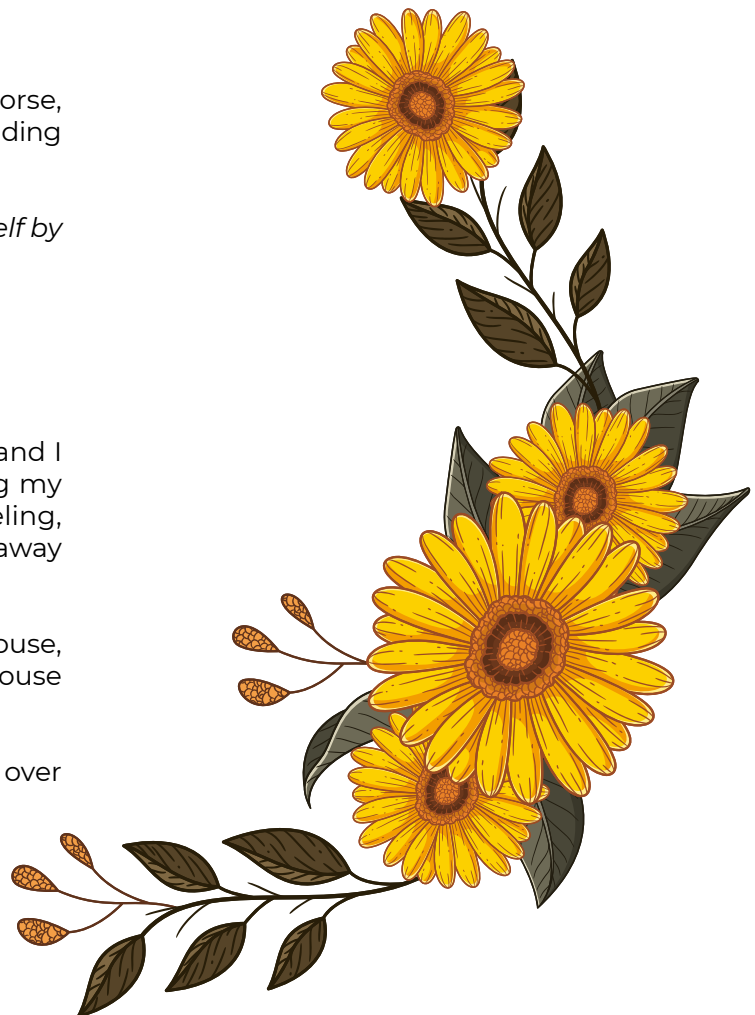
This time the itching becomes worse, as I go from line to line, but I can't stop reading as I continue scratching at my ankles.

*My grandmother tried to kill herself by
swimming out to sea until
the tide took her far away
and drowned her.
Instead the waves just
spit her back to shore.*

The itching burns up my ankles and I scratch harder. I use two hands and dig my nails deep in the skin to remove this feeling, but it only gets worse, like ants nibbling away at my nerves.

I don't notice the sounds in the house, and I don't realize my lover is still in the house until she opens the door to our room.

And she sees me here, crouched over her book and bleeding on the bed.



HALF YOUR SOUL.

Remi Akers

I don't want to exist here anymore
In this corrupt space that lapses with stoicism.
Half-hearted messages of love flutter in the sky
And explode into passionate fits of rage when we offer criticism.

There is no longer a rhyme or a reason;
The search for truth was abandoned for self-confirmation.
We formed our realities under false pretenses
And this home can't be escaped through meaningless convictions.

I don't want to be here at all
If we continue to capitalize on human defeat
And assist a system founded in fallacies.
By ignoring our errors, it's the life-force of minorities we deplete.

We try to dichotomize everything we see
But, instead, we've split our souls in two.
The tools we've made for mending are flawed—
They were designed to keep us broken, but this we knew.

BURNOUT

Remi Akers

Aren't you tired
Of being afraid that Earth will expire—
That chaos will become commonplace
And you won't find a single face
Showing signs of sincerity?
So, where do you go for clarity
When nothing seems corporeal
And you can't disclose how you feel?

Can we start at the beginning
To shut down the dreaming
Part of us that causes us
To seek some sort of catalyst
When we already know one does not exist?

Aren't you tired
Of tiptoeing as you walk the wire—
Of not being able to be anything but silent,
Then discovering you've been complacent
To measures of worth based in hegemony?
So, how do you expel the apathy
That accompanies having your voice
Suppressed by the illusion of choice?

Can we maybe change the ending
Of the story we're telling
In plain sight, on the site
Of the decadence that erupts
When we are ruled by primitive constructs?



THE LEGACY

Kavya Chandra

in the mountain behind the valley

the man with the golden chain sips on his distasteful
mead, little men tugging onto his beard: the dirty
sunset cannot seep itself in behind the mountains where
nothing grows- disgusting mead, but mead that must
continue down his slit throat, mead that wouldn't
forgive the consequences he must face

death is an enemy, a friend who mustn't be turned away

the man with the golden chain cannot feel his
hands, his feet, his legs: the gashes with blood
oozing out of them are not worthy of attention
for bleed he must, to pay the price of having
loved someone, so the bitter mead stays and
curdles the insides of his chest, his heart, his lungs into
dust- a constant drum of all things great stuck in
his throat, for perhaps that would make it hurt less,

death is an enemy, a friend who mustn't be turned away

when the sun turns its face, and trees grow apart
and little men forget the man with the golden chain,
there shall be flowers in the garden of the dead:
they would shy away of touch, and burn the ground
beneath their stems, and smell of disgusting, wholesome
mead granting men insanity and permanence, always

death is an enemy, a friend who will never be turned away

THE BLOOD OF THE COVENANT

Kavya Chandra

Mother talks, mother speaks, mother tells
her children all her disciples, all the holy words
picked and christened with sincerity and respect:
mother talks, mother speaks, mother tells,
till her children are asleep.

Around the merry go round, there's each:
the God, the Messiah, the Mohammad,
a fine, fine gathering- parts of a whole,
parts of the parts divided in their loud whispers
of faith, of love, of trust, of brotherhood

In the garden which it sits in, there's no greenish
green, but quite a lot of yellow: a dirty withering exhaust
and the stark red of the merry go round is the bloody
brown of rusted promises, stained with the air of lies,
defeat, cheat, or sheer barbarity, quite bitter-sweet,

The sky's a jolly fellow, and though even it has remorseful days-
years, centuries in this case- it keeps quiet in its routine of
sunshine, sunset, no rain: the Gods demand sacrifices, they demand
love, faith served with a fine and mutual taste of inhumanity, but you
must remember, the blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the
womb:

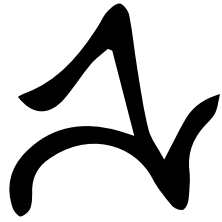
Mother talks, mother speaks, mother tells
her children all her disciples, all the holy words
picked and christened with sincerity and respect:
mother talks, mother speaks, mother tells,
till her children demand death.

YELLOW BRICKS AND CANDY STICKS

Zack Weaver

Lo I the man, whose dreaming mask did muse
A Trout Captain whistling a bird song tune,
Sunshine people twirl whilst Babette Baboon
Knuckle skipping, neatly sipping plum booze,
A band of crickets buzzing on kazoos,
Accordion playing clock sings at noon:
"I'll love you forever, from womb to tomb".
Rubber ducks are giving out honeydew-
The crowd parts, "this is fucking ecstasy"
exclaims that trout captain, meeting mine eye
"dissonance reigns not here, song tells of life,
you can't truly exist in fantasy:
Wait too long and naught will come with each sigh
And you, a monster overcome with strife"





THE HELL OF ADMINISTRATION



Jaime Boyd-Robinson

Dust dances with the wind across the crossroads. Daria closes her eyes as the grit makes her tear-less eyes drier. She stands in the middle of the crossroads, a box in her hands. There is no one around for miles. Something about too many hauntings. Something about too many red eyes in the dark.

Hands shaking, Daria kneels down and places the box gently in the hole already dug. She tries not to think about how many other lost souls have placed a similar box in the same hole. Souls saturating the bone-dry ground instead of rain. She reminds herself that their sacrifices were probably worth it.

That her sacrifice is worth it.



Her chest constricts at the thought of her sister lying on her hospital bed. So frail. So small. She used to be big and full of life but now Death—a quiet old man in a weathered suit, a briefcase on the floor beside him—waits by her bedside. Waits for her to give up. But her sister will fight. She has to.

Daria takes a matchbook out of her pocket. The matchbook shakes as if it too knows what she's about to do. Inhaling, she strikes the match, a tiny flame alighting at the end of it. She exhales slowly, forbidden words escaping her lips as she lets the match fall. *De stella quæ dilexerunt, et sub terra oriri ex ore exhibit gladius acutus vocatio.* At first, there is no reaction as the flame lands on the box. Then. It bursts into flames. She jumps back as the flames lick at her jacket. She bats them away, her eyes wandering to the flames in front of her. Words made of cursive and ash hover among the hottest of the flames. Please hold while your summons is complete. Daria blinks and the words disappear, leaving her wondering if they were ever really there.



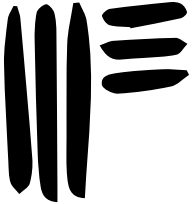
The wind whips up around her, tangling its wispy fingers in her hair. She closes her eyes against the dust blowing in her face. She places her hands on her ears to block the shrieking that fills every inch of her head and threatens to melt her brain.

Just as soon as they started, the wind and shrieking die down. Daria blinks open her eyes. Removes her hands from her ears. Standing in front of her is the most beautiful person she's ever seen. There is no sense in describing them as their appearance keeps changing to fit her desires with every blink of an eye. She has to look away for fear of blushing. No wonder people sell their souls so fast. One look at this person and they'd hand their soul over without any prompting.



The Hell of Administration

“What can I do for you, my dear Daria?” The demon’s voice is starlight, warm, alluring, muddling up Daria’s thoughts. She shakes her head, disentangling the wispy notes. The forum she found the summoning spell on warned that demon voices are spells themselves. Their voices will wrap you up and make you feel safe. The forum warned that, if you fall under their spell, you will give away more than just your soul.

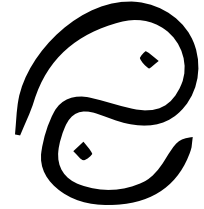


Daria eyes the demon.

“How do you know my name?”



A lazy grin spreads across the demon’s lips.



“I’m a demon. I know everyone’s name,” it says. “And I know you’re here to trade your soul to save your sister’s life. But here’s the thing: I can’t let you sell your soul. You’re too nice for hell.”

Daria blinks, takes a step back as the demon’s words bounce around her head. Too nice? How is she too nice for hell? Sure she’s donated to charity, gave money to the homeless, and looked after her sister while she’s sick but she doesn’t see how that makes her too nice for Hell. Her lips part in preparation to ask that question, but the demon holds up a hand.

“With the amount of shit happening in the world right now, we aren’t exactly looking for souls. Hell is a bit...overcrowded at the moment. A soul like yours would be perfect to torture, but because humans outnumber demons right now, we cannot accept yours.”

Daria stares at the demon, her lips opening and closing like a gasping fish. Not selling her soul means her sister would die. The thought of living without her, without hearing her precious laugh, or her dancing steps walking through the halls of their apartment leaves Daria feeling as if she’s been punched in the gut.

“Then what am I supposed to do? I can’t just watch as my sister wastes away! *She deserves to live.*”

The demon raises its eyebrows, tilts its head. She can suddenly feel the flames from earlier wash across her face, but she refuses to let the shame get to her. Her sister needs her to be strong.



“I could take someone’s life for hers, but you wouldn’t be able to live with that guilt, now would you.”

Daria looks away, crosses her arms as a grin creeps back onto the demon’s lips.

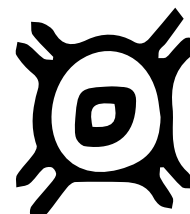
“Do I get to choose whose life is sacrificed for my sister’s?” She straightens her shoulders as she turns back to face the demon. A trickle of hope settles in her gut as a list of names of terrible people scrolls through her head. The world could do without another murderer.

“Perhaps you are not as nice as first perceived. But no, you do not get to choose.”

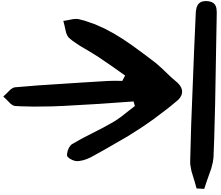
The trickle of hope struggles through the acid in her stomach.



“I do, however, have another proposition for you.”

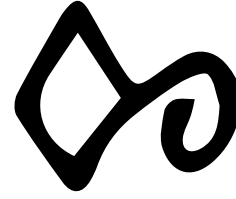


The Hell of Administration



Daria's crossed arms tense across her chest.

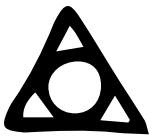
"What's the proposition?"



The demon steeple its fingers in front of its face. The hair raises on Daria's arms at the satisfied look upon the demon's face. She can't help but feel as if no good is going to come out of this.

The demon glances at the sky, the muscles in its jaw tightening. It tilts its head as if listening.

Daria's eyes dart around, as if suddenly realizing the town might not be abandoned despite its stories. She feels exposed. She hasn't really thought about selling her soul until now. Saving her sister's life has always canceled out that thought. But making a deal with a demon is probably the worst thing she's ever done. Making deals with demons is usually for greedy people, for those who want someone dead. Who's to say she's the judge of how long her sister lives? Isn't she just as greedy as the rest of them?



But she's already come this far. And her sister is not a bad person. She deserves to live.

"Tell me what the proposition is."



The number 014 taunts her, urging her to push open the door and see if her deal is really worth it. Her hand trembles as it settles on the door handle. The words of the deal still tickle her ears. She wasn't expecting the offer the demon made. She still wonders if selling her soul would have been better.

The door is silent as Daria pushes it open. Instantly, her eyes find her sister lying in her hospital bed, attached to a multitude of wires. Those wires always made her sister look more robot than human. A shaky smile graces Daria's lips as she notices the colour returning to her sister's cheeks. She sits in the chair that Death had so long occupied and takes her sister's hand. The demon warned that it would take some time before her sister is fully cured. But Daria doesn't care. Her sister will live.

Buzzing fills the room and Daria jumps. She looks around, searching for the source. A tiny rectangle buzzes across the flower-filled table beside her sister's bed. Daria snatches it, the buzzing stopping as soon as she touches it. She reads the message on the tiny screen.

Press the red button. Your job starts now.

Daria's shoulders slump. She was hoping to spend more time with her sister. Might as well get this over with. The demon has already trained her on what to say.

She presses the red button.

And is instantly transported to the crossroads where she made her own deal. A woman in her fifties stares at her in confusion.



"I'm sorry. There are no demons available right now to answer your summoning. Can I take a message?"





THE FIRST ROUND

Spencer Wells

Ever since I got a good mark back in English class, I always wanted to know how to write. Before I go any further, please excuse me for starting a story off with “ever since” because I know it’s cliché and I literally spent a solid hour-and-a-half trying to think of something better – the end result being that I just really couldn’t. If you ever see me down the halls, please don’t be afraid to suggest a better intro for what I was trying to say. Where was I? Oh, yeah...

I got the inspiration to do well in class from doing a book report on my great-grandfather’s book he published in the late 1940’s, called “The First Round”. It’s about a bar he opened up in the late 1930’s that used to serve discounted liquor to the poor and unemployed. He told tales of people from all walks of life coming through his doors, from mafia heads to federal agents, jazz superstars to up-and-coming blues players, and everyone in between. Typical American dream story, though I believe he was born in Newark to parents that moved from some remote farming town in Ohio – I really couldn’t tell you the name.

My story (which would ultimately lead into telling his story) started when I was born 20 years ago. In case you didn’t want to be bored with the other details, the relevant part comes back when my aunt offered to pay me \$70 to clean her attic. Her back was hurting and didn’t want to bother paying tenfold or so for someone else to do it. I grabbed a sterile mask – the ones you wear at the walk-in clinic – and some latex gloves under the kitchen sink. All the while trying to hold my breath, as the old cleaning appliances and mothballs created a pungent, disgusting odor. I donned my dingiest clothes I could find so I didn’t have to worry about getting dust and dirt on my clean garments. Jeez, I sounded really posh there, didn’t I?

The whole ordeal took a solid three hours or so. I was keeping my eye out for valuables and objects of interest – I guess I was just tired of seeing dust-caked old furniture and women’s clothes that look like they belong in a museum (or a Goodwill). The

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dresser in the corner still had a ton of cobwebs and dust layers on it, and the single pull-out cabinet was hanging open ever-so-slightly. In what I had failed to notice before now drew my full attention, which ended up being a mistake given that I accidentally fell through the open hatch to the second floor.

When I hit the ground in an abrupt, violent scream under a great deal of pain to my twisted ankle, my aunt quickly ran up the stairs. “What happened?” she yelled frantically as her thunderously aggressive footsteps shook the floor, the same way someone would if they wore cinder blocks on their feet. I calmly told her that I fell, like an idiot who didn’t pay attention because that’s who I was exactly when that happened. As if fortune was on my side for a moment, the pain quickly subsided, and I insisted on climbing the ladder again to retrieve something. Though, I quickly found that climbing a ladder with one foot does not come as easy as I would’ve imagined. Frankly I was surprised by my own resolve to see what was in that cabinet, and I feared that I would be setting myself up for disappointment should I not have found anything worth the time and energy.

It was just a checkbook with my long-since deceased grandfather’s bank details on it. Wouldn’t be worth scrap now, but there was something I noticed; his penmanship was so aggressive that the contents of the last cheque he wrote was slightly ingrained into the next blank cheque. It was made out to a publishing company in Pennsylvania – that much I could tell from what was still readable in the print. I may have watched Scooby-Doo a couple times when I was a kid, but I knew right away I would not have the skills nor the tenacity to fully investigate this on my own. Fortunately, my aunt knows pretty much everything about my family, so I figured this was a good opportunity to take a shot in the (hopefully not too) dark.

Sure enough, she told me that the cheque was made to Ribston Publishing to purchase a copy of *The First Round*. Though my grandfather had plenty of copies at his office in Tampa, his health was failing to the point where doctors advised he remain at his Newark residence until treatment was available. And since he couldn’t bother sending anyone out to fetch an original copy, he decided to buy one from the publisher. The classic example of buying McDonalds knowing damn well you have a fridge full of food at home.

I asked her if she had a copy herself, and she said no. Again I was at the mercy of my own expectations, but not all hope was lost. It just so happened that the public library had a copy in the ‘archival’ section – the reasoning behind the quotes is that I wasn’t sure if that was meant to insult the condition of the piece, or if there was an honest motive as to place it there. It was hard to find on that day I went to search for it, being all mixed up with legitimate archives and journals that reeked of that same mothball stench that I had to suffer in my aunt’s attic. The cover was stained and slightly torn, with the writing on the preface only slightly legible. I’m surprised the library even accepted it, though I imagined they wouldn’t be the first ones to judge a book by its... well, you get the joke.

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The whole plot of the book was horribly written. Bless my great-grandfather, but most of the work I did for the project was deciphering the old-timey dialectics and inconsistent sentence structure. Maybe not so much of a challenge for a New Yorker in the depression era, but a hell of an experience for a college student in the digital age. But it was workable; I could still picture myself in his shoes, which I would imagine having hard soles given his mention of having a poor back. My teacher gave me a 93% for the book report; not only because I followed every guideline, but I managed to sell her the idea that this book spoke volumes to the value of recording history, and the praising of service to the public during troubled times. She loved it so much, she didn't even stop to think that all of this could have been bullshit. I wondered if it was too good to be true, but then again, I did take a shot in the dark. If pride was the issue – knowing I was representing my great-grandfather inadvertently – then I can say with certainty that I enjoyed writing that report.

“That’s a great story. Hey, we should go pay for the drinks.”

“Sure, the first rounds on me.”



DREAM GIRL

Julie Musclow



Look for me on a starry night where the wind
blows on the sea.
Search high and low and there you'll find the
key to discovering me.
Beware of the monsters that lurk inside for
they have been set free.
Just watch for a girl in her dreams swinging
beneath a tree.

UNBROKEN

Julie Musclow

You make me forget what it's like to feel broken.
You make me forget what it's like to feel unspoken.
You make me forget all the pain that's been caused.
But most of all you are the eyes that see through my
flaws.



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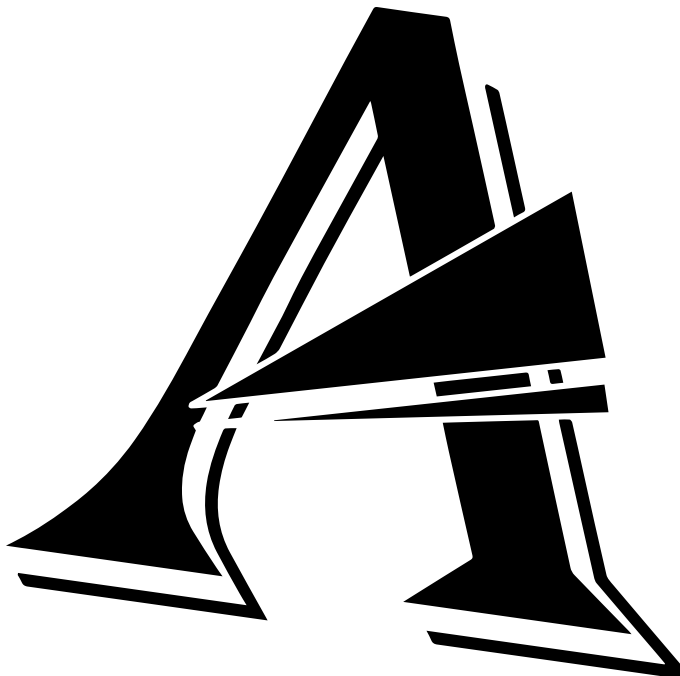
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