

Volume One

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Emerald Tales

A Bimonthly Journal of Short Fiction



Masks
(Appearances can be Deceiving)

Contents

<i>Ashley</i>	<i>Lisa Rusczyk</i>	1
<i>Tricked You Good</i>	<i>Guy Belleranti</i>	4
<i>Heart and Soul</i>	<i>Teresa Tunaley</i>	6
<i>Promoting a Good Image</i>	<i>Ragna Brent</i>	7
<i>The Honor System</i>	<i>Paula Stiles</i>	10
<i>A Deck of Cards Tells All</i>	<i>Hal Sirowitz</i>	13
<i>The Black Swan</i>	<i>Darla J. Bowen</i>	14
<i>A Steady Life</i>	<i>Jason Flum</i>	16
<i>This Mask I Wear</i>	<i>N. L. LeBlanc</i>	21
<i>Barbecue</i>	<i>James Hartley</i>	22
<i>Operation: Totally Ducked Up</i>	<i>Lori T. Strongin</i>	26
<i>A Versatile Visage</i>	<i>Lindsey Duncan</i>	34

Emerald Tales

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Ashley

by

Lisa Rusczyk

He has a big nose and his black eyes are too close together. His bushy, long brown hair reminds me of my childhood Collie, Ashley. Why did I agree to this? I've always heard blind dates are disastrous.

He has his yellow rose on the table. That's how we're supposed to find each other. I smile gracefully and sit down across from him.

"I'm Mack," he says.

"Julie." I don't want to be here, but it's a free meal and I like sushi.

"I'm not much for breaking the ice," he says and takes a deep sip of his sake, "But this seems to help."

I realize then that he doesn't want to be here either. Our mutual friends set this up, saying we'd hit it off right away. As I watch him pour more sake offering me none, I fiddle with my chopsticks. Our friends just want another couple to do things with, but I can see this will never work.

The waitress comes and I order a martini. I'll need the drink as much as he does, if this is how the rest of the night goes. Silence between us while the rest of the diners laugh and chat.

After I get my drink and fold my napkin in my lap, Mack finally talks. "Being an artist. That's you, huh." It's not a question or even a way to open a conversation.

I decide to answer as though he were genuinely interested. "I paint and sculpt. I teach, too."

"I would hate teaching." He swigs more sake.

The waitress takes our orders. More silence, then he says, "Want to see my fake nose?"

"Your what?"

He reaches into his pants pocket and pulls out a plastic hook nose and sticks it over his own. It makes his already too big nose enormous. He looks more like my collie Ashley than before. I can't help but grin just a little.

"I like to wear it out. Makes people think."

"Think about what?"

"I don't know. They look, though, and that means they think. People don't think enough."

"Why do you say that?"

"You're the artist. You tell me why they don't think enough."

"People think all the time."

He picks up the rose and pretends to smell it with his fake nose. A couple nearby are staring. "How do you know that?" he says.

"How do you know they don't?"

"You watch tonight. You'll see them thinking."

I realize he's going to wear that big nose for the rest of the date. I look around. More people are staring. "You're a strange man."

"We're all strange," he answers. "Some of us just don't hide it as well. Or at all."

I sip my martini and glance at a few of the waitresses. They are pointing and laughing at him. At us.

"I have something for you, too," he says after a moment.

"What's that?"

He reaches in his pocket and pulls out another fake nose. This one isn't as big, but it has a huge, gaudy gold nose ring covered in fake diamonds.

"Put it on."

"No. Oh, no. I won't."

"Go ahead. What are you afraid of?"

"I don't like being looked at."

"And you're an artist. Of course you like being looked at."

"I like my art to be seen, but I don't want to stand out in a crowd."

"Try it," he says as our sushi is delivered to the table by our grinning waitress.

"But I have to eat."

"You can eat with it on." He smirks, the first emotion he's shown all night, and hands me the nose.

"Has anyone else's nose been in this thing?" I can't believe I'm actually considering this.

"Just bought it today."

"Why?"

"I told you I'm bad at breaking the ice."

I smash the thing onto my nose in a hurried gesture. I feel foolish and the fake nose is light but burdensome. How can I get my hand roll in my mouth with this thing on? I can see the sparkle of the fake jewels so close to my face and know if I stick my tongue out I could lick them.

"Now eat," he says and dips a piece of his roll into his soy sauce and wasabi mixture.

I pick up my hand roll and do the same. I get some juice on my fake nose. I hear someone laughing nearby. I look over to see who it is. Just another table of diners, obviously getting a kick out of the weirdos with the noses.

We eat in silence and I have to keep wiping my fake nose. He keeps glancing up at me from his food, a glimmer in his eye over that huge piece of plastic on his face. I think he's enjoying this.

I think I am too.

When we are finished, he says, "I'll walk you home. You live nearby, right?"

"I'll be fine," I say, but surprise myself by realizing I want him to.

"Not safe to walk around the city with that schnoz on your face. Especially with that skirt."

He noticed my legs. I'm glad he did. "Okay. I live two blocks up."

"Let's get out of here." Without removing the fake noses, we leave and walk up the street towards my apartment building. People stare, they laugh, and I do wonder if it makes them think.

"Mack," I say, "Why do you want to make people think?"

"On a personal note, or more generally?" His voice is soft.

"Generally."

"I think people see things too quickly and just accept their first impressions."

"Personally," I say.

He pauses and turns to me. "I didn't want to be judged by what you saw when you walked in the restaurant. I wanted you to think about me. As a person."

"Why?"

His voice is still soft and his fake nose is drooping a little. "I've heard a lot about you. I've thought about you. I wanted you to think about me before making a snap judgment. I'm not a hero or an astronaut and I know I look rough around the edges. I just wanted to give you a perspective of the real me. And I only had one chance to do it."

I smile. I can't help it. The bushy hair, the eyes too close together, the ridiculously large nose. Now he's staring into my eyes and we're coming closer together. Our fake noses bump, then he turns his head and I feel his lips on mine. I pull my arms around his shoulders and he wraps his hands around my hips. We kiss as the cars pass and the people stare at the two weird ones with the face costumes making out right there in the street. And I have a fleeting thought that they are all thinking something they haven't before just as I lose myself in his embrace.

We pull apart. He says, "I guess we should get off the sidewalk."

"Want to come up to my place?"

"I'd love to. But the noses stay on."

I laugh. "I had a collie when I was a kid. His name was Ashley. I loved that dog more than anything."

END

Tricked You Good

by
Guy Belleranti

Dirk laughed from behind his clown makeup and pointed his gun at the vampire-costumed couple. "Your jewelry," he said to woman. "Give it to me. And you--" he waved his gun at the man "--toss your wallet on the couch."

Both did as ordered, and Dirk laughed again. It was so easy picking out targets on Halloween night. He could walk the sidewalks, and no one noticed or cared. He was just one of many costumed figures out and about. Then, when he saw the chance, he rang the bell at someone's house, and when they opened the door...

"Tricked you good," is what he always said, flourishing his gun at the same time. He'd already robbed three places tonight, leaving the owners tied and gagged and the lights off when he left.

And this couple -- apparently he'd caught them just before they left for a costume party. Vampires! Ha! He was the one who going to suck someone dry. Take their cash and jewelry and add to his evening's haul.

Dirk tucked the woman's necklace, bracelet, and two rings into one of the big pockets of his clown suit. Nothing of outstanding value, though one of the rings did have a small diamond in it. He riffled through the contents of the man's wallet. Lot's of credit cards, but those weren't of any use. "Two twenties and a ten?" he snarled. "Is that all you have?"

"I don't carry a lot of cash," the man said.

"Yeah, but I bet you've got more in the house. And you--" Dirk looked at the woman "--you've probably got a box stuffed with fancy jewelry."

"We aren't wealthy people--"

The front doorbell chimed, and children's chatter reached his ears.

What the hell? He'd turned all outside lights off. Couldn't the damn brats take a hint?

"Not a sound," Dirk whispered, waving his gun. A minute went by and the voices faded away back toward the sidewalk.

Now, where had he been? Oh yeah, more valuables in the house. He shot a glance around the room. Some nice artwork on the walls, new-looking furniture... Okay, maybe the couple wasn't rich, but they must have more that would make his visit worthwhile. He'd just have to search a bit.

Dirk whipped out a length of rope. "Lady, turn around while your husband ties your hands."

"Tie her hands?" the man squeaked. "I--"

"Shut up and do as you're told," Dirk ordered. He threw the rope at the man. "Tie her."

The man's eyes burned in anger. "Sorry, dear," he said to the woman as he wrapped the rope around her wrists.

"Now her ankles," Dirk said, tossing a second rope.

A minute later she lay on the floor trussed up like a turkey.

"Excellent," Dirk exulted. No one else had rung the bell, and things were going perfectly. He'd give the house a quick search and then be on his way. But first, he had to tie the man and then gag both. "Sit on that chair," Dirk ordered pointing at one of a straight-backed set. "Then put your hands behind the chair back."

The man hesitated, then slowly sank onto the chair.

Dirk grinned. "I must say I'm impressed with your vampire outfits. Impressive Dracula style clothes, and the make-up looks natural, too, almost as good as in a Hollywood film. Too bad you're gonna miss your party." He pulled out another length of rope. "Okay, Mr. Vampire," he said, leaning in, "time to-- Aaa!"

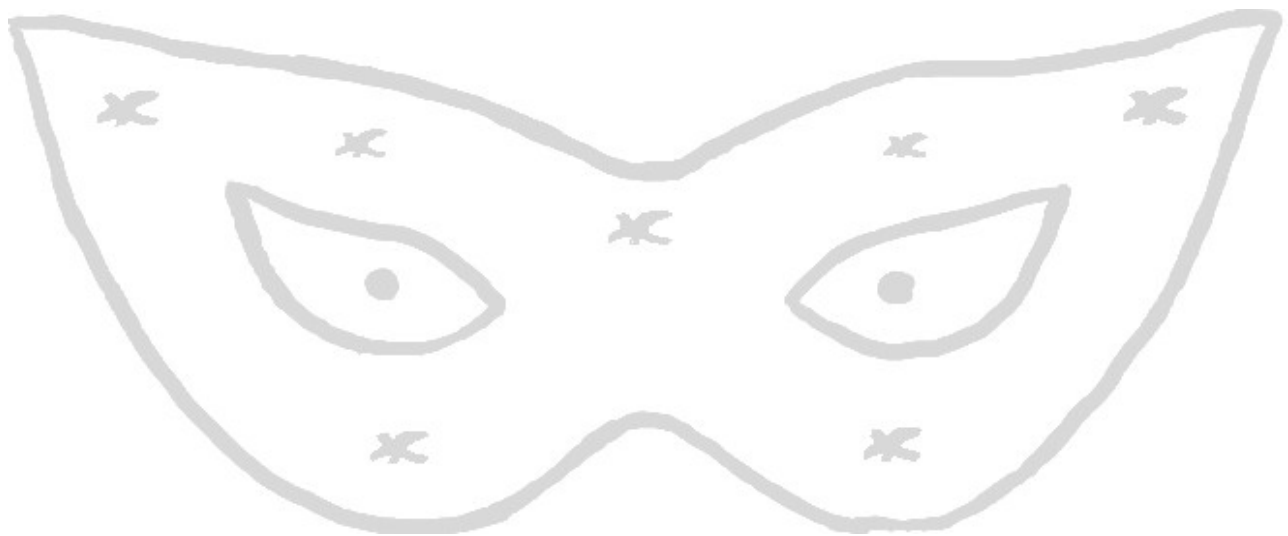
Dirk screamed as the man's jaws fastened down upon his gun hand. The gun clattered to the ceramic tile. Dirk screamed again, his eyes popping in horror, as the man's mouth released his hand and fastened on his neck.

"What are you..." Dirk's head spun. As he sagged to the floor, he saw the woman fling off her bonds and move in, fangs extended.

"Nice fake knots, darling," she purred to her partner.

The man nodded a silent reply. Blood dripped from his mouth as he said to Dirk, "And you, my foolish clown, thought we were in costume." He turned and urged his mate, "Come, dear, replenish yourself. Drink up."

END



Heart and Soul

by

Teresa Tunaley

Why has beauty forsaken me,
Looked upon with such distaste,
Or a spinster must I be,
On my oath, I beseech thee,
I seek but only this answer,
No more from my lips shall I bequeath,

The chosen one you seek,
Will look beyond this façade,
For beauty is but skin deep,
There within lay a precious soul,
For it is this that remains unblemished,
Sat aside your heart as eternal companion.

Promoting a Good Image

by

Ragna Brent

Tiffany flounced into the office, her jacket over her shoulder and costume jewellery tinkling with each step. She threw down her fake Versace bag and slouched into her chair.

Erin looked up briefly from behind her monitor.

“Mr Hardcastle was looking for you,” she said, as her fingers tapped on the keyboard.

Tiffany sat upright in her seat and pushed her bleached blonde hair theatrically from her face.

“Oh, I wonder if it’s about the new promotion.” She puffed out her substantial chest and flashed Erin one of her veneered smiles.

“No, I don’t think so,” Erin quietly said, trying to avert her eyes from the obvious. “He was moaning because you were late and muttering something about the managing director visiting.”

“The MD is coming? Oh, I’ve heard he’s sex on legs. Just as well I wore this then,” she said, standing up showing Erin her long fake-tanned legs and a minuscule piece of material. ‘As for Hardcastle, the jerk. Oh for God’s sake it’s only ten minutes - and it wasn’t my fault, it was the vagrant outside the office.’”

“Tiffany don’t call him that - he’ll hear you one day,” whispered Erin.

She shrugged and reached for her bag.

“And do you mean Richard?” Erin asked, pushing herself away from the desk. She stood up and began collecting up the files.

“Oh my God you actually know the Bum’s name?” she said, her face grimacing. “Tut, that’s so typical of you. Erin.”

Erin ignored the remark. She was well used to Tiffany’s put downs. She’d known from the look she’d given her on her first day that Tiffany thought herself above everyone else. Erin was a plodder; that’s what her school reports had always said. This was reflected in her work, too. She was quiet, got on with all that Mr Hardcastle asked of her, and never made a fuss even when it meant working over. Tiffany, however, was completely opposite. Her attributes being her figure and the flawless mask she called make up. She was nothing but smiles and ‘Yes Mr Hard castle’ to his face, but behind his back her comments were vicious. She’d managed to master doing as little as possible, but with intentions of getting somewhere within the company at no expense. Already Erin had found her taking credit for her work. Erin said nothing. She’d thought there was little point.

“So why did Richard make you late?” Erin said, a few moments later standing by Tiffany’s desk. By this time, Tiffany had retrieved her make up and was reapplying her eye shadow contorting her face in the hand mirror.

“I told him what I thought of him, and then I ended up getting into an argument.” She put down the shadow and picked up some black eyeliner.

“There’s no need for you to be so unkind, he’s a lovely man. Nobody knows why he is in the position he’s in. Maybe he lost his wife or a child. You really shouldn’t judge.”

“Erin, there’s every need. You need to wake up, and realise arses like him have to be told. Oh Jesus, I bet it’s you that brings him the Starbucks every morning.”

Erin blushed.

“I knew it. I knew it.” She laughed, zipping up the make up bag turning her attention now to her hair. “Anyway, I don’t think we will having more trouble him. I told him how it is, that we don’t tolerate ’his sort’ around here. I told him to go and find somewhere else to sleep. He didn’t think much to that idea and called me a heartless bitch and then said what comes around goes around - whatever that means? He even had the cheek to mention I was going to be late.”

Erin smiled and thought how right Richard was, she was nothing but a heartless bitch. Richard didn’t deserve that. She’d make sure later she’d apologise for her colleague’s rudeness. She’d noticed him there every morning for the last few days, and yesterday bought him some breakfast. She knew it wasn’t much, but all she could afford. It was more of a gesture to let him know people did care, unlike the Tiffanys of the world. He’d been so grateful. They’d exchanged a few words. He had a soft spoken voice and a gentle demeanour. She wondered how such a lovely man had ended up on the street.

“So, how do I look?” Tiffany pushed her hair back from her face and pouted.

“You look fine.”

“What do you mean I look fine? Is that all?” Tiffany glared.

“You’re stunning as ever,” Erin said, as she turned her back and looked to the ceiling.

Mr. Hardcastle stood in the doorway.

“Oh Tiffany, I see you finally managed to join us today then?”

“I’m sorry Mr. Hardcastle, it won’t happen again,” Tiffany said, in one of her sweet voices.

“Okay... but don't let it happen again. Now girls, I’d like you to introduce you to our new managing director.”

Tiffany sat upright, put her bag under the desk, and grabbed some papers to make herself look busy. Erin moved back to her desk to hide behind her monitor.

A tall dark clean shaven man, entered the room. He was wearing an expensive suit and an aroma of expensive cologne surrounded him.

Tiffany stood to greet him paying attention to see if he was wearing any wedding rings. Erin recognised him straight away.

“Richard,” she exclaimed, with a huge grin on her face. Tiffany sat back down, her mouth dropped open.

“I believe we may have already met.” Richard smiled

“But how come you were...” Erin asked. Tiffany was speechless.

“Well, let’s just say I call it my little social experiment. Some use Face book & MySpace to check out their employees. I like the more hands-on approach. How better to find out what your staff are really like.” He looked across to Tiffany. She went to open her mouth, but he moved across towards Erin.

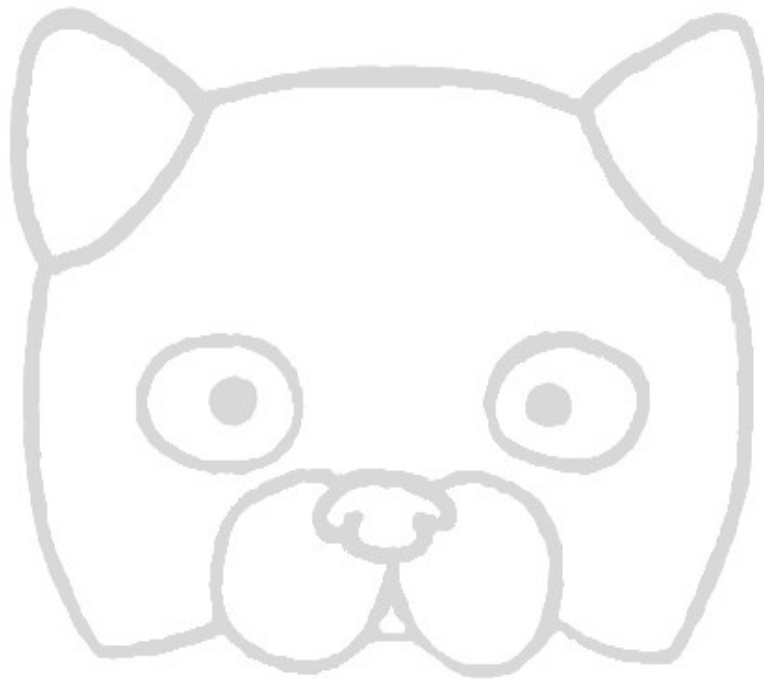
“So, Erin.” He sat on the side of the desk. “I believe I may owe you a few coffees. How about I repay you with dinner this evening?”

“Oh, that would be lovely,” Erin said, blushing.

“And I’m sure Tiffany can hold the fort now with her expertise in the workplace. After all, how did you put it, now? You work your butt off for some flashy arseholes.” Tiffany looked at the floor.

“I think Erin and I have some important things to discuss - like her new promotion, and how no member of my staff is indispensable.”

END



The Honor System

by

Paula R. Stiles

The woman glared at him over the counter, moving some of the perfume bottles that surrounded her out of his reach. She was obviously having a bad day and had decided it was his fault. He wondered what he looked like to her. If he tried, he could figure it out. He had a few tricks for it, but he'd long since lost interest. Whether he looked like her violent ex-husband, the man who had abused her when she was ten, or someone as minor as the customer she'd had a fight with yesterday, it didn't matter. Whatever idolon he represented, she'd have to hate. It was part of the test.

And she was all about taking her frustrations out on him. He gave her five minutes to establish that she wasn't going to cut this stranger a break before he moved further into the department store.

Places of commerce always brought out the worst in people. Greed, envy, jealousy, paranoia, fear of theft, lousy self-image, they were all front and center. As he shambled down the large, glass-lined hall with its roof all skylights, he took in the general reaction from the crowd. Though he didn't actually *do* anything, people recoiled, grimaced or caught his eye and quickly looked elsewhere as if they saw him through a glass they kept dark. He was probably coming across as homeless--filthy, raw-eyed, in ragged clothing, drunk, stinky. People responded badly to smell. He could predict what they smelled by how they reacted to him. They'd give up Heaven itself if Heaven smelled like a dumpster.

Near the fire exit in Baby Clothes on the second floor, he encountered his first mark, the first card in the deck of his day. He spotted her hiding away from the world in the stacks behind the clothes. She was in her mid-thirties, a bit pudgy, clutching her purse and looking around with tears in her eyes. He could have read her mind, but playing that joker card with marks never worked as well as getting them to tell him what was wrong.

He caught her eye. At first, he thought she'd look away. Homeless addicts and drunks had a tendency to be mean and aggressive, which only increased their isolation. Most people saw him that way and brushed him off with a curse and a shove. No one, on or off the street, wanted to think too hard about how just a few bad choices here and there could bring you to that space in life.

There always were exceptions, of course. Like that young streetwalker he'd once talked into not getting into a car with a bad trick. He lived for those. Salvation. Did humans think that only they cared about whether they lived or died, prevailed or failed? As far as he could tell, the answer was, "Yes". Some of his colleagues could get partisan about their charges, over who deserved a second chance more. Did the humans know that? Of course not. This job wasn't about being recognized.

As he approached the woman, he saw that she was pregnant. She gave him a nervous glance, looked away, then looked back. Maybe she'd seen something in him, something of power. Curious. Most humans weren't that perceptive. He drew closer.

"Are you all right?" he said.

She bobbed her whole upper body instead of just nodding. "I...I was looking for a stroller." She added, unnecessarily due to the bulge in her stomach, "I'm gonna have a baby." She was younger than he'd first thought, early twenties but hard-used. She also looked familiar.

"Well, I don't work here," he said, "but I can probably help you."

Her eyes widened. With a casual twitch of his fingers behind his back, he saw what she saw: not a street drunk but a store clerk, arrogant and judgemental. His unexpected offer was making her reassess him.

"That would be really nice," she said.

He looked around, scanning through the aisles and their material goods, then led her over to a shelf along the wall that he had passed a few minutes before.

"I don't need a big one," she said. "Portable's better." She covered her belly with her purse. "I just hope Charlie doesn't get angry. Charlie doesn't like it when I spend money."

"Not even for the baby?" he asked, even though he already knew the answer. He'd met a thousand Charlies before.

"He didn't want it." She rubbed her nose and sniffled. "Charlie, he...he tries hard, but he's got a problem, and it's real hard for him to get off it. I know because I only got off it like a year ago." She sniffled again. With another glance at him as if her view was changing once more, she admitted in a lower voice, "Well, no, he's not, really. But now I'm knocked up and I gotta have a place for the baby. Only, I'm worried he might hurt it. I thought, 'cause he had a job and money, that it would be okay, but...."

He understood. Most addicts didn't actually live on the street.

Her previously unspoken fear hovering between them, she reached out and touched a dark-blue stroller, the lines of her face all drawn down in fear and worry. The stroller was plain and light-weight, but sturdy-looking, with thick poles going down each side.

"This one looks okay." She leaned over to check the price, then pulled a small wallet out of her purse to check her funds. "I think I can swing that. Charlie's gonna be pissed, though."

Overhead, a Muzak-like tone went off--complicated, like a cross between a death knell and a balalaika. He wondered if it was coincidence or one of his colleagues warning him about something.

"You look familiar," she said, just as a tall, burly guy dressed in a long coat and a suit barged up the escalator. The woman, girl still really, shrank back, but the aisle by the strollers was wide open. Charlie spotted her immediately and strode over. Up close, he didn't look nearly as officious. His suit was rumpled, his eyes red, and he swayed a little while he walked. He hadn't come up from the street; he had some kind of nice job. But he'd be down there soon enough if he didn't lay off the blow.

"You bitch, Cara," he snarled. "Spending my hard-earned money on that little 'it' again?"

At that point, he stepped in. "Hey," he said mildly to Charlie. "She was just looking for a stroller. Picked out a real solid but inexpensive one, too. Nothing to get excited about."

He knew that the words were wasted, but they had to be said. He wasn't testing Charlie, anyway. Charlie looked like a lost cause, at least for the moment. A long-term project for another colleague.

Charlie deigned to notice him for the first time. He could tell that Charlie saw a homeless person, not a very tall one, either, what with Charlie being an obvious bully. "Get the fuck out of my business, buddy," Charlie said. "This here's my wife not yours."

As Charlie took a menacing step toward them, the woman spoke. "Leave him alone, Charlie. He was only trying to help." She moved up beside him, glaring at Charlie, a protective hand over her belly for her child but unwilling to let him take a beating from her drug-crazed boyfriend. And then he remembered her.

She'd given him quite a time over talking her out of getting into that car. The fact that women and girls had been disappearing from that corner for years hadn't changed the fact that she was strung out and jonesing. Unless she got in that car and gave the john whatever he paid for, she wasn't going to get the money for that fix. But he'd finally talked her down, finally got her to walk away, to wait for a less scary john.

A couple of days later, he'd taken a beating from a couple of street bullies who saw him with a dark face and heavy accent that they decided offended them. She'd broken it up, yelling and shoving at them and calling them "a couple of trailer-trash pussies". It had been incredibly dangerous for her, of course. He'd only let them beat him because they'd been dying to hurt someone. So, he'd provided them a ready victim. Still, to have her rescue him like that had done his job just as well.

It was so easy to forget, sometimes, why he was here in the first place, why they were worth the effort. Even he lost faith in his job sometimes. Until he found a new mark. Like her.

He smiled at Charlie now, smiled *down* at him. He stripped away Charlie's fantasy of him as easily as ripping off a scab and gave Charlie a taste of his true form. Cloudy wings spanned the entire floor, penetrating the walls. Beside him, the girl gasped and clapped a hand over her mouth. He hoped he wasn't scaring her into premature labor before he turned his full attention on Charlie. He bathed Charlie with a little light of truth, giving Charlie a good look at his face. For Charlie, it was like looking at the clearest, most brutally honest mirror in the world.

"Ahh!" Charlie cried. He turned and fled without a single look back, shoving through startled crowds of shoppers who had seen and heard nothing of the encounter.

"I remember you now," the girl said at his side.

"And I remember you," he replied, just as quietly.

She turned and headed to the dressing room, where she found a chair and sank down onto it. He followed her. "You saved my life," she said.

"Yep," he said. He sat down next to her, to dispel any lingering intimidation. Sometimes, it took a while.

"Twice," she said. "Charlie was...I didn't know what to do."

"It's not a rationing thing, you know," he said. "One miracle per lifetime. That's not how it works. It's more like an honor system. It's complicated."

She nodded. Then she buried her face in her hands and started to cry. He waited until she wound down. Finally, she lifted her head. "Now what?"

He took her tear-stained hand. "Now I take you home and help you pack. You've got a baby to get ready for. But first, you might want to finish buying that stroller."

END

Deck Of Cards Tells All

by

Hal Sirowitz

Masks or appearances can be deceiving,
father said, which was why I took all my first
dates swimming. It takes time to see a woman naked.
Sometimes, you never do. You never get beyond the mask.
Clothes are like masks, they hide your identity somewhat. The
chance of seeing them au natural may not be in the
cards. What's in the cards? Usually a Jack, Queen, and a
King. The rest
of the cards are just numbers. But the people
card are there to remind you that there are usually two men to
only one woman. The competition is ruthless. There are lots
of people who are damaged goods, emotional as well as
physical.
Therefore, your chances of getting her to bed is not
very good. If you get her there, you'll want to know
if she's authentic, if all her parts are real. The worst thing
you'll want to do is compliment her on her features, only to
find out later that one of them, her nose, was fixed.
She'll think you're easy to deceive. But if you see her in
a bathing suit, you'll have a pretty good idea of what
you're getting. It may not be the world's sexist nose.
But at least it's real. Remember this: A lot can go wrong,
but less can go wrong if you're starting with a full deck.
And what is a full deck? It's when all your cards,
especially the Queen, are accounted for.

Black Swan

by

Darla J. Bowen

The golden lettered invitation had been enclosed with her orders. With a shudder of anticipation, Tolla showed the steward her invitation and gained entrance to the Royal Masquerade. It was not often the orders provided her the opportunity to seek personal vindication.

Tolla's gown was black with midnight-dark pearls stitched to the bodice. Obsidian feathers covered the long flowing sleeves and the edges of the skirts' multiple flounces. She wore black, leather gloves and concealed her scarred face behind a feathered mask. Her dark hair was piled high on her head with ringlets coiled beside her ears. No one saw Tolla, but everyone watched as the Black Swan gracefully entered the massive chamber and joined the Masquerade.

Held in honor of Queen Norann's twenty-first birthday, the Masquerade was well attended by the local gentry as well as by representatives from the neighboring kingdoms. The revelers danced and conversed under the crystal chandeliers while servants, donned in the blue and silver of the royal livery, stood about to refill glasses with wine and assist those too tipsy to a seat against the mural covered walls. Queen Norann sat poised on the dais, appearing to all to be pleased with the merriment of those present. Her smile widened with genuine joy when she saw the Black Swan glide into the room.

Musicians played another lively, country tune, and the dancers spun in interlocking circles across the marble floor. Their masks and dress depicted them as seasons, woodland creatures, merfolk, supernatural spirits, and elemental beings. All enjoyed the freedoms of the guise they had donned for the evenings' festivities.

Tolla recognized Lord Fallow even as he bowed deeply, kissing the hand of a swaying lily. Though his face was hid behind the mask of Winter, she knew his mannerisms all too well: the slight turn of the head when rising from the kiss; the laugh when the young, damsel blushed, pink cheeks visible from behind her floral mask. It was him. Tolla was happy to find him so comfortable in his surroundings. He was obviously looking for some sweet maid to enjoy once the dancing had concluded.

Through the holes in the mask, Tolla looked to Norann. She noted the approving nod. With soft steps, Tolla glided past Lord Fallow. She stopped briefly to peer at him. His dark blue eyes had locked with hers. She made a small curtsy, then giggled as was so common among young women of the aristocracy. She turned and continued on, out through the opened arched doors and into the garden beyond. Just within the glow of the light from within, she stopped and waited. She knew he would not be able to resist the temptation.

Insects chirped from the trees, and pigeons cooed from their pens. A full moon hung overhead, casting silvery light onto the wakening trees and flowers of the garden. Fresh blossoms scented the still cool, spring breeze. Tolla almost lost herself in the beauty of the night, but was brought back to reality when she heard the clicking of Lord Fallow's approaching boots. He paused briefly. The door closed, quieting the music. He approached.

She could feel the warmth of his body as he pressed in close behind her, brushing against the flounces of her skirt. He grasped her shoulders. Leaning against her, he blew gently on her ear, then proceeded to kiss her neck.

Tolla could not help the goose bumps that sprang up across her skin. At one time, she had longed for and welcomed his touch. Then she had leaned that so had many other women. So had Norann. He would caress her late into the night, then would leave to join another paramour, perhaps in a neighboring estate. One night she had confronted him. Their voices were soon raised, and they struggled against one another. The sheets had twisted around her, and the heavy curtains of the bolstered bed had knocked down the candelabra. He had left her to the flames.

Tolla braced herself for his embrace. His hands slid slowly from her shoulders, down her arms, then to her breast. Thankfully, she wore a heavy corset.

He continued to kiss her neck and along her cheek bone, gradually turning her to face him. "Such a beautiful black swan to grace the queen's party." His voice was low. He kissed her on the forehead, then gazed into her eyes. "Can I see your true face? I will show you mine." He smiled broadly as he removed his mask. Bright teeth and a thin dark moustache and goatee. Blue eyes with dark lashes and a mane of dark brown hair.

Lord Fallow was as handsome as she remembered. But she remembered the pain of betrayal and abandonment more. And she knew her orders. Tolla removed her mask.

There was a glint of recognition in his eyes as she plunged the wooden handle of her plumed mask into his chest. Still holding her shoulder with one hand, Lord Fallow stared at her. With the other, he felt his chest and the widening crimson stain on his white doublet. "Tolla?" He slumped forward against her.

She pulled out from under his weight. He tumbled to the ground; the mask handle breaking on impact. The sound of merriment inside was muffled by the closed doors and thick curtains. The insects chirped and the pigeons cooed. She knelt beside him, checking for a pulse. It was faint and slowing.

"Lord Fallow, you should not have betrayed the Queen," Tolla whispered. He stared up at her. She leaned forward and kissed him, tasting blood. "You should have been wary of all those you betrayed. Not all are willing to be played with."

Standing, she smoothed out her dress and wiped the blood from her mouth. She heard a rattle from Lord Fallow, then watched as his head went limp against the hard ground. She pulled a smaller, feathered mask from her corset and tied it behind her head with thin, black ribbons.

Without another look at the body on the ground, Tolla returned to the Masquerade. She watched Queen Norann turn from a nobleman she was speaking with and see her. The Queen smiled. Tolla curtseyed, then made her way around the room. She sipped some wine, then sat the glass aside. She danced with a man dressed like Fire, then politely excused herself when the next song began. Her orders completed, the Black Swan left the Masquerade.

END

A Steady Life

by

Jason Flum

“Look behind the mask,” Beth said. “That’s what he said, right?”

I nodded, words caught in my throat. I looked at her and saw that she held a book in her hands.

Beth ran a hand over the cracked cover knocking some dust loose. She traced the cartoon image with her shaking fingers and lifted the cardboard cover on the spiral rings.



His last breaths were labored, but right to the end Papa’s eyes sparkled with a familiar twinkle. My sister and I sat by his side day and night during those final weeks, alternately sleeping and holding his hand. He had mostly raised us on his own, and we each silently prepared ourselves for the inevitable hole that would be left in our lives.

Papa was a well received film director in his time. Caught up in the blacklist scandals of McCarthy era politics, he was forced into an early retirement, though he always insisted he had never done a thing that was unpatriotic. It was not hard to believe him, given that he lived his entire life by the motto “a steady camera and a steady hand leads to a steady life.” To hear him talk about it, he could never forgive the time wasted from making films with the political nonsense his colleagues had involved themselves in. He never returned to Hollywood, even after his official pardon.

When he was making them, though, Papa’s films were works of art. They were known for their verisimilitude and unswerving probing into what makes people tick. When other directors would have cut away from an uncomfortable scene, Papa held the camera on his hero’s face just a little bit longer, allowing the truth of the moment to play out. He took an unwavering look at middle America as seen through the eyes of his typical hero: always a Jimmy Stewart type (an actor he much admired and regretted never getting to work with), never a Cary Grant (too good looking, too “larger than life” for Papa). It was a shame he made only seven films, he could have been bigger than Demille.

At any rate, Papa had Beth and I to raise, and the schedule for a film director certainly would have interfered with that. He raised us to be firm, strong, determined people like the heroes in his movies. He even gave us nicknames based on two of his favorite characters. I was Industrious Ant or I.A. (my name is Anthony, just like the role Davey Greyson played in *Industrious Life*), and Beth was Worker Bee (after Jolene March’s role in *Beatrix and Daniel*). The names served another purpose aside from connecting us with his work: they were his way of giving us a subliminal push to work hard and make something of our lives.

We followed his model for hard work, for better or worse: Beth became a lawyer, and I pursued my dream of being a writer. It was Papa’s drive and constant push to be the “strongest we could be” that informed every decision Beth or I made; though, the road that led us there wasn’t quite as straight-forward as Papa would probably have liked. I had published three novels over the past five years and had nearly completed my fourth when Papa took a turn for the worse.

Besides each other, Papa was the last link Beth and I had to our family. Our parents had died in a car accident when we were very young. There apparently was an aunt somewhere in the family tree, but Papa immediately stepped forward to raise us. He was our mother's father, and apparently Mom and Papa had had a falling out many years ago. He didn't approve of our father as he was an "aimless wanderer," which was not at all acceptable in Papa's book (especially since in three of his films the "wanderer" proved to be the main antagonist, trying to lure the steadfast hero or a member of his family into a life of crime or wickedness.)

Perhaps it was for that very reason he so quickly moved to take us in after our parents had died. Our relationship with Papa was never perfect. He was stern and firm; though to me there was never a doubt that he loved us. Beth didn't see that. While, I told her many times that it wasn't so, she always believed that he took us in only because he had to, that he never really loved us. After all, Beth reasoned at the tender age of six, Papa and Mom didn't get along, and Mom was great to us, so there must be something wicked about this old man with the sparkling eyes.

It didn't help matters that Papa often referred to the "mistake" his daughter had made in marrying our father. As he told us many times whenever we did some "recklessly childlike" thing growing up, he had taken us in just in the nick of time. Beth always got very quiet when he made those remarks.

Things came to a head one night when Beth had stayed out too late. Papa and I waited for her to come in, he with a cup of coffee in hand, me with a glass of milk. When she finally, quietly closed the screen door behind her, Papa let loose with a tirade about the dangers of disobedience. He reprimanded her as he always did: he called her a "reckless fool" and a "mindless idiot," the affectionate "Worker Bee" forgotten. Beth just stood with hunched shoulders and folded arms.

Leaning on the table with the hand that fifteen minutes before had lovingly poured my glass of milk, he said, "Maybe I didn't get you from your parents early enough after all. Your mother's blood runs too strongly in your veins, Beth." His hands curled around the edge of the table, his knuckles white.

Beth retorted in a voice I'd never heard her use before, "You never loved us and wished our parents did die! You only took us in because you had to, you evil man! And you probably were a Commie, too!" She stomped off in a rage, slamming her foot into the table leg and knocking my glass of milk to the floor, shattering it.

Papa stood frozen for a moment and then, in stiff motions, his hands rock-steady, wiped the milk from the floor and picked up the shards of glass. I was too horrified by what Beth had said to move. When he finished, he sat back down and wrapped a hand around his coffee mug.

I sat with Papa in the kitchen that evening, watching the old man. For the first time, I realized just how old he was. He held his head in his hands and a sadness settled on his shoulders. His eyes, which continued to sparkle as they always had, looked almost empty. "I failed her," he breathed.

"No, Papa, you didn't. She's young and I'm sure she didn't mean it." Beth is two years younger than me. She was fourteen at the time. She didn't have much of a memory of our parents besides a vague recollection of a "powdery smell" of dad and mom carrying her up the stairs to her bedroom at night. She had always resented their leaving us, but was fiercely defensive of any who made a comment against them. "She didn't mean what she said," I tried to reassure him.

That night started a rift that lasted for far longer than I could have anticipated. Beth held onto that anger against Papa, against our parents' death, against the unfairness of it all for the next three years. She tried to run away several times, but Papa always had her brought back home, and the resentment deepened. She only had me as her confidante, and she tried to turn me against Papa. Being older, I understood a little more what he was trying to do with us, and I did my best to reign her in.

Things finally got better when she went to college. Perhaps Beth matured during those years, though she still resented Papa for what he had said to her back on that night in the kitchen. She was civil to him when she came home, but she didn't really spend much time with him beyond our "mandatory" family dinners.

Our little family of three splintered. I was the linking force, keeping close to both Papa and Beth, though the two of them seldom talked to each other at all.

That is, until Papa got sick.

When he was told he had only a few months to live, I was forced to put most of my writing on hold to care for him.

Beth at first didn't react. It was only when Papa was confined to his bed that she came back from California.

One late night while Papa slept, she told me that she had never truly gotten over what he had said to her. "It's just like, it hurt enough to not have Mom and Dad around any more. It was like he sullied their memory with what he said, and I just don't know if I can forgive him."

"Why did you come back then?" I asked.

"He raised us. I owe him that much." That was all she said on the subject. She stayed at his side, helping me care for him. It was only a matter of time, but it was clear that a full, real reconciliation was probably never going to happen between Papa and Beth. She was too stubborn, and he was too sick.

On a sunny Wednesday morning, Papa reached out for me. His hand trembled slightly, something I could tell he hated. His pride in "steady living" informed everything he did, including his ability to hold his hand as still as a surgeon, with or without his camera.

His breath barely a whisper, Papa beckoned me to come closer. I leaned in. He smelled of rubber and vinegar. There wasn't a trace of his trademark Polo cologne lingering about him, but I swore I could smell it anyway hovering under the hospital stench.

"Ant.," he sputtered. "My Industrious Ant. The . . . mask. . ." he was seized with a coughing fit.

"Papa," I said, choking back tears, "I don't know what you're saying."

He shook his head, his eyes watering. He swallowed hard and I could see it was painful.

"The mask. Look behind the mask."

Papa smiled and laid my hand on the bed beside him.

He fell asleep then. I watched him for a while before Beth came in from work. When he woke up again, we asked him what he had meant. "What mask, Papa? What did you mean?" Beth asked, wiping his forehead with a damp cloth.

He couldn't remember having said it.

We asked him again several times after that, but we always got the same answer. He couldn't remember having said anything, and he certainly didn't remember what he had meant by it.

A week later, he was gone.

After the funeral, Beth and I took on the daunting task of cleaning out a house accumulated with the dusty memories of a full life.

Papa's words, "Look behind the mask," echoed in my mind. What could it mean? I thought perhaps it had something to do with one of his films, but I had seen all of Papa's movies many times and didn't remember any of them having anything to do with a mask (at least, not a real mask: Billy Mumbler was about a man in suburbia who led a double life in the big city, but I couldn't make the connection mean anything). I couldn't make anything of Papa's mysterious message until the fourth day, when we had finally brought ourselves to work on his bedroom.

I was in the process of folding some of Papa's shirts into a box to donate to Good Will when Beth said, "Ant. Look behind the mask." Her voice was a near reverential whisper. "That's what he said, right?"

I turned around and saw that she held a book in her hands. Beth ran a hand over the cracked cover knocking some dust loose. She traced the artwork with her shaking fingers. On the cover of the book was a raised image of a mask like the one Lon Chaney wore in *The Phantom of the Opera* in 1925, one of Papa's favorite films. She looked at me, and I silently nodded.

She lifted the cardboard cover on the spiral rings. The paper inside the notebook was yellowed and crinkled. Papa had clearly read it many times. It felt almost like breaking a trust to be opening this book he had intentionally never shown us. I reminded myself that he was gone and there was no one else who the words inside mattered to.

Beth flipped through the notebook and found that most of the pages were blank. Only a couple of pages had writing on them in a flowery, small cursive. It wasn't Papa's solid block printing at all. I knew, somehow, immediately whose handwriting it was.

It looked very similar to Beth's.

"Is that . . .?" I said.

"Let me read it," she said with her eyes closed.

She began to read.

June 12, 1968

Dad,

I wish I could make you understand. Billy isn't just a passing phase or someone who "comes and goes," as you put it. I'm sorry you can't understand that I need to stay with him, and I need to be with him. I don't know how else to put it.

It makes me so sad that you have never gotten to know Anthony and Elizabeth. They are my heart and my life.

Billy is being shipped overseas though, Dad, and I need to follow him. It isn't an easy decision, but he needs me by his side. I realize to you, of course, this fits in with exactly what you would expect of me. Do you remember your nickname for me as a girl? You called me your Little Phantom. I suppose it was because it was what you thought of me, flitting here and there, not staying 'steady' as you liked to say. I suppose I'm just doing it again.

I can't take Anthony and Elizabeth with me. I need you to take care of them for me, to watch them and raise them. I don't know how long I'll be gone. This has been a difficult decision for me – you have no idea how difficult – but I see no other choice. The children's father needs me, and so I must go with him.

It's up to you how you want to tell them about us. Tell them we left and will return, tell them whatever you want, but please take care of them, Dad. Watch them, and teach them. Love them.

I am enclosing two thousand dollars in the back of this notebook. I know it's not much, but it will help, at least to start.

Use this notebook to write down for us the moments we'll miss, the things Anthony and Beth do. Things have never been good between us, Dad, but maybe you can fix things with your grandkids.

Love,

Your butterfly.

For several moments, Beth and I just stared at each other. Words didn't seem right. Then, Beth flipped to the back of the notebook.

The money was still there, tucked into a pocket on the back cover.

Beth flipped through the bills, and another piece of paper was tucked in against the back cardboard cover. She opened it, and her hand flew to her mouth.

The paper was an official military stationary, informing Papa of the death of William Garrison and his wife, Elizabeth Garrison on July 14, 1969.

A moment of heavy silence filled the room. I couldn't process what we had just seen. Finally, I managed to say, "He lied to us."

Almost instantly, Beth shot back at me, "No, he didn't. He protected us. It was Mom and Dad who left us. They abandoned us. Papa took us in, and I treated him so badly." Tears were streaking her cheeks. I moved to hug her, no longer the rigid attorney she had trained herself to be, following Papa's example, but my scared little sister who didn't know who to trust. "He took us in, and he cared for us. He thinks I hated him and I didn't, Anthony, really, I didn't. I was just so angry. I couldn't understand why he talked about Mom that way, and really, it was him all along who cared for us."

"I think he knew how you felt," I said. "How could he tell us after all that time that they had left us? He couldn't. He must have felt it was his responsibility to raise us, and he stayed steady, like he always said. He didn't even use the money Mom sent for us."

Beth nodded and wiped the tears from her eyes. "What do we do now, Ant?"

"We go on. You continue practicing law, I continue writing. We stay steady as Papa would have wanted us to."

"You're right," she said. "Take the money, Ant. I don't need it, you can use it more than I can. But. . ."

"What is it?" I asked.

"Can I keep the journal?"

"Why do you want it?" I was surprised by her request.

"I want to remember Papa. I want to remember what he did for us."

"You can keep it, Beth." I said.

She smiled through glistening eyes, and hugged me again. We closed the bedroom door behind us as we left, Beth clutching tightly to the journal.

Things went on as they usually do. Every now and then I think about Mom and what Papa did for us. I think about how through all those years it was Papa who wore the mask in our family hiding his real role in our lives from Beth and me. It was, after all, Papa's own "steady life" and willingness to hide even his own true motivations that, in the end, united us as a family.

This Mask I Wear

by

N.L. LeBlanc

This mask, this facade I wear
Upon my face, covers my hair,
So that not a soul can see
The person I've come to be,
A far cry from the real me.

No more than a shield it is
Over the remorse I feel of this,
So that I may seem cold as stone
As I cut those I love to the bone...
Fear lights your eyes as you pick up the phone.

"Help," you say, "for our forces are down,
"Help, for there's no one around
"And we suffer, alone, the criminal's wrath."
I hear you as I run from the emotional bloodbath,
Taking your money and dignity in my path.

Regret as I may, you've left me no choice;
You've ripped me at the seams, stolen my voice,
You stood and did nothing as they threw me out,
Leaving me poor and desolate, out and about,
And I have no choice but to stand and shout.

I wear this mask, not because I am afraid
Of landing in jail, of seeing my crimes out laid,
But because I am terrified that you might see
Some essence of the real me
In the face of the friend you thought me to be.

Barbecue

by

James Hartley

The yard is littered with bodies, halves of bodies, body parts. I managed to get into the tool shed and lock myself in. I've been looking out through a crack in the wood. My wife managed to avoid death for a while. She was one of the last to be killed, but I just saw her torn apart. I don't see any humans alive in the yard now. Is that somebody coming toward the tool shed?



It was no big deal having Glert and Afna Hafanar for next door neighbors. Those were the names they went by, they didn't even try to get us to use their real Bofanian names which were about fourteen syllables long. Glert and Afna looked almost human, and they spoke almost perfect English. Better English than a certain family down the block who I won't name.

Glert and I both worked long hours and got home late, so we didn't see each other much except on weekends. Still, he was a nice guy, friendly, and always willing to help out. One time I was having a lot of trouble with my mower, and he came over. He seemed to have a real good grasp of machinery--which I certainly do not--and was able to get my mower going for me. Having a second thumb on the opposite side of each hand seemed to give him extra dexterity. Felt a little funny shaking hands with him, though.

My wife Doris was really friendly with Afna. After the two of them got the kids on the school bus they would get together for coffee or whatever. Oh, they had a few adjustments at first, but nothing big. For instance, Doris likes real cream in her coffee. Not half-and-half, not milk, and certainly not that powdered "creamer" stuff.

"You like our Earth coffee, don't you, Afna?"

"Yes, Doris. It is one of the wonderful surprises, getting to a new planet and finding something this good."

Doris went to the fridge and pulled out the container of cream. "Here, try some of this. It makes it even better."

Afna picked up the cream container and looked at it, then sniffed at it. Seconds later, she got a horrified look on her face and her normal slightly greenish complexion turned to a bright lime color. "Ewwwww! What is this?"

"It's just cream. You know, the richest part of milk."

Afna had pushed the cream as far across the table as she could and was sitting there taking long, deliberate breaths. Slowly her face faded back to its normal shade. "Milk is the liquid that your cows produce to feed their young, right?"

Doris had a puzzled look on her face. "Yes, this cream comes from cow milk, that's the most common. Other animals produce milk, too. Is that a problem?"

"Doris, our people do not eat or drink food products derived from animals. I'm not talking about just Glert and I, I'm talking about all Bofanians. I think your term for it is 'vegetarian.'"

"Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't know. But I think the word you want is 'vegan', our vegetarians drink milk and eat other foods made from it, or other foods like ..." She paused, noticing Afna starting to get greener again. "Anyway, those who eat no animal foods at all are called vegans. Wait a minute." She went over to the cabinet and handed Afna a different container. "Non-dairy creamer, that should be OK, and some people say it tastes just as good in coffee."

Afna put some in her coffee, tasted it, and nodded. "That is good!"



Doris managed to get used to non-dairy creamer in her coffee, it was the only choice if she was over at Afna's. She had a few lunches over there, too, Afna's meals were heavy on salads. Which was fine, Doris ate a lot of salads when she was on a diet kick. One night they invited our family over for dinner. We had salad, some things I think were tofu, other veggie stuff, and fruit for dessert. The kids weren't thrilled with the food, but I had taken the precaution beforehand of giving them a stern lecture and threats of grounding if they didn't behave. If you want the truth, I wasn't thrilled about the food either.

When we got home, I asked Doris, "How come they don't at least go for those 'Bogus Burgers' you can buy in the frozen section?"

"Ken, those are made to taste and smell like meat. Probably make them sick, even if they are all vegetable products."

After that, Doris went out and bought one or two vegan cookbooks so she could invite Glert and Afna over to our house for dinner. The kids and I tolerated it, but I made it clear to Doris that I didn't expect her to use those cookbooks except when the Hafanars came over.



The Fourth of July Neighborhood Barbecue has been a tradition for several years rotating among various back yards, and this year, it was my turn. I had a real nice propane grill, and a couple of others would bring theirs over so we would have plenty of cooking capacity. We were going to do burgers, hot dogs, chicken, even ribs. We would have a good supply of beer, the good stuff like Coors or Molson, none of that "lite" junk. Soda for the kids, of course. And Jim down the block is going to make up his specialty, Fishhouse Punch. That stuff is dynamite. You think you're drinking fruit juice, then halfway through the second glass paralysis sets in.

All the people who had been living in our neighborhood for a while knew about the barbecue and just came as a matter of course, there were no invitations. The Hafanars, on the other hand, had moved in during the Autumn after the last barbecue, so I figured we ought to take the trouble to invite them.

"Glert, Afna, have you two heard about the big barbecue we have every year on the Fourth?"

"The Fourth? That is one of your culture's ritual celebrations, is it not?" asked Glert. "We try not to intrude on activities sacred to others."

"Oh, come on!" I said. "Yeah, it's one of our holidays, but I certainly wouldn't call it 'sacred.' Don't worry about intruding. It's for everyone in the neighborhood; you certainly fit in there. We'd love to have you join us."

I think Glert was about to accept the invitation, when Afna said something to him in their language. There was some chatter back and forth, which of course I couldn't understand, then Glert said, "Ken, we appreciate the invitation, but we think it would not be wise. Afna has heard about this, and says you will be cooking great quantities of your food, your 'meat' there. I know you are aware of our dietary restrictions. We fear we might get upset or sick or ... something."

Afna chimed in, "Later, when most of the cooking and eating is finished, then we might come over and socialize without fear of giving offense. Would that be OK?"

"Of course, of course," I said. "You're welcome to come over any time, whenever you want."



The weather for the Fourth was clear, warm, and sunny, but kind of windy, a stiff breeze out of the northeast. Did I mention that the way the street runs the Hafanars' house is southwest of ours? Why would I mention that? What possible difference could it make?

By four o'clock we had everything set up. The wives took care of a long table loaded with potato salad and macaroni salad and things like that. We had all four grills hot, and we started throwing food on to cook. Hamburgers and hot dogs would be ready first, and there were already lines waiting for those. The chicken and ribs were cooking, too, but they'd take a little longer. It all smelled great. The breeze was wafting the smell of cooking meat right toward Glert and Afna's. I hoped the aroma wouldn't bother them too much.

It was about a half hour later that I saw Glert, Afna, and their kids come out of their house and start over to our yard. I had thought they were going to wait until later, but I had told them to come over whenever they wanted. I waved in welcome.

Doris had seen them too, and she came over to me. "They look strange, I've never seen them turn that color before."

She was right. I'd seen their normal slightly green hue and the lime green color when they got upset about our food, but this was a real Kelly green. "Something else," I said, "their teeth, almost like fangs, I never saw that before either. Why would total vegans have fangs?"

Doris never got a chance to answer before we found out. Glert grabbed one of the men and ripped his throat out with the fangs. Afna grabbed a small boy and literally bit his head off because the neck was so small. One of the Hafanar children picked up a dog and severed its spine with one bite. Everyone was screaming and running around.

Glert went over to the grills and stood there inhaling the aroma of cooking meat, and as he did he grew. The rest of his family joined him, and soon Glert and Afna were almost twenty feet tall, their kids at least twelve feet. At this size, a single bite could decapitate even an adult human or bite a torso completely in half. Their extended reach meant that very few escaped. Soon the yard was littered with bodies, halves of bodies, body parts.

I managed to get into the tool shed and lock myself in. I've been looking out through a crack in the wood. Doris somehow managed to avoid death for a while. She was one of the last to be killed, but I just saw Afna tear her apart. There are no humans alive in the yard now. The Hafanars are looking around like they are seeking more victims. Uh, oh, Gler't's nose is twitching like he smells something, and he's coming toward the tool shed!

END



Operation: Totally Ducked Up

by

Lori T. Strongin

“Guess what?”

Julian rolled his eyes at his lycanthropic roommate and took another sip of his Bloody Mary, before setting it down on the marble coaster. “You’ve done something that’s caused mass chaos and inflated the insurance rates on my clan’s ancestral home?”

Talbot huffed. “It was only a small fire, so you can stop bringing it up all the time, you know.”

“Fine, then. What’s so important that you look like you’re ready to explode all over my Turkish rug?”

The smile returned to the werewolf’s face. “Brennan just called. He needs a babysitter for Michael while he and Nora visit her mother in the hospital. Old bird broke her hip Irish clog dancing this time. Anyway, he needs a sitter for the baby until Friday afternoon. You game?”

The mention of little Michael Pole brought a smile to Julian’s face. Despite his best efforts to dislike Talbot’s godson on the basis of his godfather alone, the toddler had somehow endeared himself to the vampire. “When are they bringing him over?”

“They called from the car. They should be here in about twenty minutes.” Talbot practically vibrated in excitement. “It’ll be his first sleepover! We can tell scary stories and make s’mores. We can even pitch a tent in the yard, like a real camp out!”

Julian smacked the hyperactive werewolf with a rolled up newspaper. “Down boy. Michael is only nine months old. The child’s barely crawling and you want to turn him into the next Great Outdoorsman?”

Talbot shrugged. “Well, I am the best babysitter in the world. I watch anywhere from twenty to forty five-year-olds everyday at the preschool. One single baby should be a breeze.”

Suddenly, Julian had a very bad feeling about this.



The moment she stepped through the doorway, Nora Pole, nee Kavanagh, thrust a drooling Michael into Julian’s arms before he could drape a spit rag over his shoulder. “Ta! I know it’s short notice, but we really do appreciate this. Brennan and I should be back from hospital by tomorrow night,” she continued in a rush, her Irish lilt making it a bit hard for Julian to follow her ramblings. “Now there are clean nappies in the big pocket of his overnight sack, extra milk, which needs to be refrigerated, his dummy’s under the blue jimjams...”

“Nora, I have watched him before, you know,” Talbot said, taking a giggling Michael from Julian’s arms. He tickled the baby. “We always have a great time, don’t we, little guy?”

Michael gurgled and blew a spit bubble in reply.

“Yeah, well, you know how banshees get...” Brennan said. Nora elbowed her husband in the ribs. The blow made him morph into his ferret form. The white rodent chattered indignantly and turned around in circles on the floor a few times, before resuming his human shape. The baby laughed. Julian felt like doing the same.

The shapeshifter rubbed his bruised belly. “Oww.”

“We’ll be all right. Don’t you worry,” Talbot said, gracing Nora with his most charming grin.

Julian never trusted that smile.

“We’ll play with Michael until he’s tired, and he’ll fall asleep in no time,” Talbot said. “Trust me.”

Nor did the vampire trust anyone who ever spoke the words, ‘Trust me.’

Nora looked around, flustered, her red hair flying about like a faerie on fire. “Did I forget anythin’? Oh! Michael’s teething. He’ll chew on any summat he can get his hands on, so watch yer fingers. He’s a bold one, he is. Just like his Da.”

“I’ve got it, Nora. Really,” the werewolf said, rolling his eyes.

“The bairn gets narky without an afternoon nap. And, don’t forget to—”

Brennan put an arm around the banshee’s shoulders. “Come on, babe. We’d better go before we’re late and your lovely mother gets some nice orderly fired.”

Nora glared at her husband. “As useful as a lighthouse in a bog, you are.” She turned back to Julian and his roommate. “I know I’ve forgotten somethin’ important.”

“We are two grown men, Nora,” Julian said. “Together we can handle the care of a single child. You’ve left the hospital’s contact information, and I’m sure Wolf Boy here has your cell phone numbers. If we need you, we’ll call.”

Talbot held up one of the baby’s small hands. “Wave bye-bye to Mommy and Daddy.”

Michael made a small gurgle of protest and reached for his retreating parents.

Nora kissed the baby’s forehead and Brennan ruffled the Michael’s messy dark hair. “Don’t worry, champ. It’s only one night. And besides, you’ll have a better time with the bat and the furball than I will with your Grandmom.”

“Brennan!” Nora growled. “Shut your Blarney hole. Ye’d best be better behaved when we visit Mum.”

“I swear upon the Emerald Isle,” Brennan replied and held up his hand Boy Scout style. He led her out the door and down the front steps.

“Have a good time,” Talbot called after them. “Say ‘hi’ to Mrs. Kavanagh for me!”

Brennan scowled and flipped the bird over his shoulder as he and his wife climbed into their vintage Gremlin and drove off.

Finally, Julian thought with a sigh. I thought the banshee and her pet rodent would never leave.

The hallway fell silent after their departure, save for Michael’s baby chortles as he pulled on the chain Talbot wore around his neck. The werewolf smiled at his godson. “So, what do you want to do first, kiddo?”

“Bah!”

Julian nodded his head. “‘Bah.’ I see you’ve been getting eloquence lessons from your godfather. He’s just as articulate as you are.”

“Hey, that’s not...ouch!”

The vampire saw sharp, tiny teethmarks sunk into Talbot’s thumb. The werewolf stuck the digit in his mouth while Michael and Julian both laughed.

Talbot pouted for a moment, removed his thumb, and said, “I know, we could take Michael to the park!”

Julian raised an eyebrow. “It’s eight o’clock at night.”

“Would you rather go at high noon when the sun’s up?”

He shuddered. “Point taken.”

“Besides, the park’s nearby. It’ll be fun. And a great way to meet the ladies, too.” He shook his shaggy blond hair like the dog he was. “Young, attractive men with a baby—it’s a guaranteed chick magnet.”

If he had the power of speech-thought, Julian would have set the werewolf’s wagging eyebrows on fire. The vampire shook his head and leaned closer to whisper in the infant’s ear. “Your godfather is a nut job. You know that, right?”

Michael merely clapped and giggled as the three left the ancestral manor house under the light of a waning moon.



The park, only three blocks away from Julian’s estate, sat on a gently sloping riverbank, just outside Woodstock, New York. The trees were in full bud, some approaching flower. A shallow stream meandered past, small surface ripples glinting like tiny diamonds in the moonlight. The sea of grass stopped just shy of the stream’s edge where a few stray patches of bulrushes hid nests of resident waterfowl. A few elegant swans swam in middle of the water and a family of mallard ducks, a mother and her seven hatchlings, paddled along the shore.

There were no signs of other people in the park, it being nighttime and all. Julian had to admit it was the perfect evening for an outing.

Talbot pushed the baby carriage through the grass, while little Michael, drooling and babbling, sat up and pointed at the ducks, bouncing in his seat.

They stopped under a willow not far from the riverbank and laid out a plaid blanket to sit on. Julian plopped Michael at the edge of the duvet and kept a hand on his back to prevent the squirming child from wriggling away to explore, while Talbot set out some snacks. When he finished, the werewolf started a game of baby-tug-of-war with one of Michael’s self-discarded socks.

Julian smirked at his roommate. Finally, a playmate on his own level.

Michael soon grew bored of the game and tried to toddle away to explore. Each time, Talbot would crawl after him on hands and knees and pull the fussing child back to the blanket. Julian watched in amusement, sipped from a thermos filled with tomato juice and wondered who would give up first—the midget or the mutt.

After the seventeenth round of fetch, the werewolf threw his hands up in the air. “That’s it. I’m tying the little booger down. He doesn’t need a babysitter, he needs a full-time sheep dog!”

Julian grinned. “Just make sure you don’t give the baby your fleas.”

“You could lend a hand, you know.”

“Aren’t you supposedly the baby expert? ‘Best babysitter in the world,’ were your exact words, I believe.”

Talbot crossed his arms. “Are you mocking my skills in childcare?”

“If the flea collar fits...”

“Why would Nora and Brennan always call me to babysit if I’m so bad at it?”

It was a question Julian had often asked himself. “Perhaps Brennan’s loyalty to his friends outweighs Nora’s good sense.”

“Shut your mouth, Bat Boy.”

“Make me, you overgrown puppy.”

Talbot lunged. Baring his fangs, Julian forced the werewolf to the ground. They rolled around on the grass, the vampire trying to smother Talbot’s face in the wet grass while avoiding the werewolf’s attempts to leave him heirless.

The wolf kned Julian in the stomach. He groaned, but got in one good ear twist before rolling off and landing on his back, gasping for air he didn’t actually need to breathe.

That’s when he heard it.

Complete silence.

Julian popped up quicker than a toaster timer. “Where’s the baby?”

Talbot leapt to his feet. “Michael? Michael!”

Had he been alive, Julian’s heart would be pounding like a punk rock drummer on speed. Gods only knew what trouble the tot could get into.

Or what Nora would do to him if she ever found out they lost her offspring.

Julian narrowed his eyes, blocking out the ambient light of the moon. Things looked clearer in complete darkness to his vampiric eyes.

Something shifted down by the riverbank. “There!”

Uncomfortably close to the water’s edge, Michael crawled towards a duck’s nest half-hidden by a patch of bulrushes, giggling as if he hadn’t just given an undead citizen a heart attack.

Suddenly, the small boy morphed from his chubby baby self into a small, fluffy, mallard duckling, mottled feathers and all.

Julian felt an aneurism form, right behind his skull. “No. No possible way...”

“He transformed,” Talbot whispered, green eyes wide in disbelief. “Not even a year old and he can shift already? Brennan was ten the first time he morphed!”

Michael-the-duckling cheeped and waddled towards the river.

That jolted the vampire from his stupor. He and Talbot ran towards the shore. Both lunged at the small fledgling at the same time. The infant-cum-water fowl squirmed away as easily as he did in baby form.

“Michael! Stop!” Julian called. He waded into the river, cold muddy water soaking his Berluti loafers and Pierre Cardin socks. He’d gone only two feet in when a flurry of feathers dove at him, quacking like a deranged bath toy. Both he and Talbot screamed, shielding their faces and ears from the mother duck’s rage.

Julian grabbed the back of the werewolf’s shirt and dragged him behind a large bush several feet away. With a sinking feeling in his gut, he watched, helpless, as the maternal mallard shepherded duckling-Michael into her nest with the rest of the brood.

He blinked and tested a painful bite on his ear for blood. “Brilliant, Wolf Boy. She’s gone and adopted Michael. Now what do we do?”

“We have to get him back,” Talbot panted, voice shrill with panic.

“Of course we will. But do you want to go up against her again?”

“Do we have a choice?”

Julian ran a hand through his dark hair. He’d seen riots and stake burnings and all sorts of violence over his years on the police force. But, though Julian would never admit it, he was damn near terrified of that quacking pillow. “One of us needs to distract her,” he said at last, “while the other grabs Michael and figures out how to change him back to normal.”

Talbot nodded, but then grew pale. “Oh no.”

“What?”

“Do you remember what Michael looked like as a duckling? Can you pick him out from the others?”

The vampire shook his head and rubbed damp palms on his equally-damp trousers. “I counted seven ducklings. That would be eight now with Michael.”

“Not good odds. Let’s just hope we pick the right one.” Talbot stood. “So how are we going to go about Operation: Totally Ducked Up?”

Julian scanned the riverbank. “Change into your were-form and chase her away from the nest. I’ll wade in, grab Michael, and hope she doesn’t notice.”

“What about getting him back to normal? I don’t know anything about shapeshifters, other than Brennan using his ferret form to sneak into bars before he turned twenty-one.”

Julian ignored his shaking hands. “We’ll deal with that later.”

“Right.” Talbot took a deep breath. “Ready?”

“No.”

“Okay, go!”

Talbot sprinted towards the nest and transformed mid-stride, bones elongating and shifting; tufts of golden fur sprouting up all over his body as hands and feet flattened into paws and a long, thin snout grew from his face.

The mother mallard flew out of her nest and dive-bombed the werewolf. Julian ran in the opposite direction, approaching the nest from behind. Falling to his knees in the muddy shallows, he pushed the brown-tipped stalks aside. Eight tiny fluff balls squawked at him like little bath toys looking for a tub to play in.

But which of the wriggling things was Michael?

Suddenly, a duck-shaped missile shot in front of his face. Julian cursed and fell backwards into the water. Wolf-Talbot jumped in front of him, barking and howling to get the duck's attention fixed back on him.

Julian scrambled out of the muddy water and clamored back over to the clutch of juvenile ducks, sorting through the mottled things like a crazed shopper at a Black Friday sale. The ducklings either pecked at his hands or rubbed against him like a cat begging for a bowl of cream.

They weren't soft to the touch. Or cute in any way. Certainly not.

Damn it, which one is Michael?

He spied a duckling towards the back of the nest sporting a shock of disorderly brown feathers on top of its head that reminded the vampire of Michael's messy mop of hair. Sending a silent prayer to Vishnu, Julian grabbed the cheeping chick and backed away from the nest.

Honk!

The Flying Menace headed straight toward him. Julian ran. He covered his head with one hand and holding the duckling to his chest with the other. "Talbot! Where the hell are you? Get over here!"

Honk! Honk!

The duck squawked and flew around his head like a warped weather vane, biting his arms and ears. Julian tried to swat her away but she wouldn't back down.

Times like this he regretted being a vegetarian vampire.

"Julian, duck!"

"No, sh—"

"Duck! Now!"

Oh.

He dropped to the ground, bracing the duckling with his hands. From the corner of his eye, Julian saw Talbot morph into the wolf, then lunge and smack the mother mallard with his front paws. Together, they dropped like a lead weight into the water, dousing the vampire with a second shower of mud. Talbot released the thrashing duck and loped over toward Julian, shifting back to human form on the way.

The mother mallard swam to the bulrushes, squawked at them one last time, ruffled her feathers, and returned to her nest.

After all the quacking, cheeping, screaming, and barking, the silence was deafening. Talbot helped Julian stand and together they stumbled over to their picnic blanket. They flopped down, both men exhausted and gasping for breath.

The duckling squirmed in Julian's hands. He opened them just enough to peer at the fluffy thing encased within his palms. The chick looked back at him, blinked, then changed transformed into his baby self, babbling as if the Battle of the Bird had never happened.

Michael crawled on top of Julian and poked his forehead. The vampire couldn't find the energy or willpower to move. "Why didn't you think to land on the duck in the first place, Wolf Boy?"

Talbot wiped a splotch of mud from his face. "I thought it would be less traumatic."

Julian's eyebrow rose. "For whom?"



"So how'd my boy do?" Brennan asked the next day, cuddling his sleeping son as Julian and the others stood in the alcove by the front door. The sooner the Pole's left, the sooner the vampire would get his sanity back.

"He was...charming," Julian answered at last.

"Couldn't have been better." Talbot gave Nora and Brennan his most innocent smile.

Julian prayed that neither the banshee nor the shapeshifter would figure out what really happened the previous night. If Nora ever found out about their little 'escapade'...well, he'd likely have to kiss his hearing good-bye.

"Really? No problems at all?" Nora's eyes narrowed. Julian squirmed.

"Should there have been?" Talbot asked.

"Well, no. I suppose not. Not with Julian here."

Talbot sputtered, but Julian raised his hand, cutting off the werewolf's reply. Now was not the time.

Nora smiled and kissed the baby's forehead. "So, what did ye lads get up te?"

"We, um, went for a walk in the park," Talbot said. "Lovely time. Beautiful evening."

"That sounds fun. Michael loves the ducks down by the river," Brennan said. "Crawls after them every chance he gets."

The vampire and werewolf exchanged a glance.

"How was his teething?" Nora asked.

"No changes." Julian smiled at the memory. "He got Wolf Boy's thumb before we left—"

"Now I remember what I wanted te tell ye!" Nora smacked her forehead. "Changes! Yes! Michael can already shapeshift, the brilliant little sprog."

Julian had to remind himself to blink.

"It's amazing," Brennan said, pride in his voice. "The first time he did it, he transformed into a cat and jumped out the window. Nearly gave us a heart attack! Nora's mom thinks it's a good sign, him developing powers so early in life."

Julian didn't know whether to be proud for Michael or terrified of him. The boy wasn't even in his Terrible Two's yet!

"Well, we'd better get the little guy home," Brennan said.

Nora helped him buckle the baby into his car seat. “Sláinte, ye two. I hope the bairn weren’t too much trouble.”

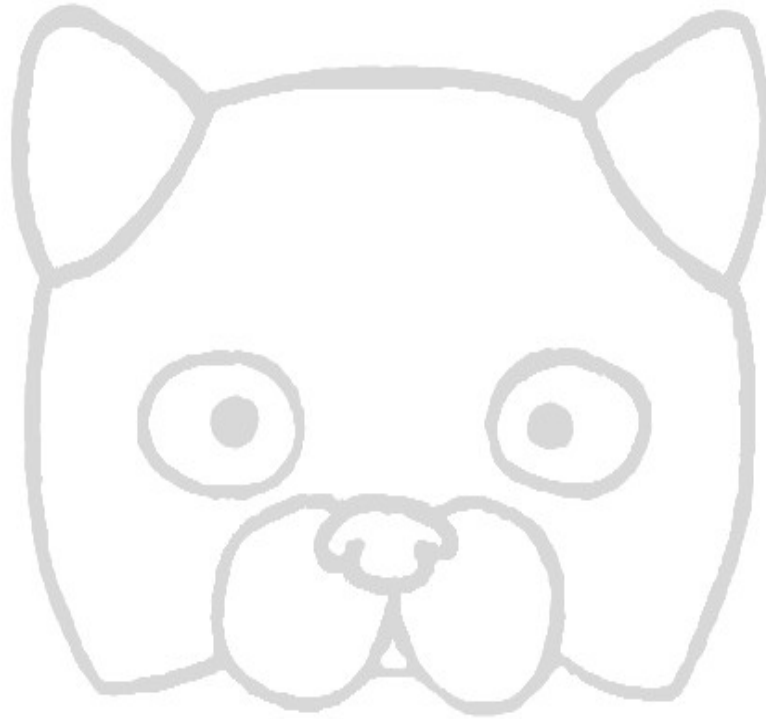
“None at all,” Julian murmured. He crossed his fingers behind his back.

“Well, I owe you guys lunch,” Brennan said. “See you.”

Julian nodded, hurriedly shutting the door behind the Pole’s. He caught Talbot’s eye with silent entreaty and the werewolf nodded in understanding.

It would be best never to mention the ducks again.

END



A VERSATILE VISAGE

by

Lindsey Duncan

She's a very versatile visage, Sadie Sidhe of the silver screen:
She plays dowager, housewife and debutante,
Slipping skin and changing shape to match the scene -
An aesthetic and genetic diletante.

She plays dowager, housewife and debutante,
Each face perfectly tailored to match
an aesthetic. And genetic diletante
is the skill that enables each theatrical catch.

Each face perfectly tailored to match
With the current mode; and following style
is the skill that enables each theatrical catch –
Not with talent or drama, but with visual guile.

With the current mode and following style,
She sheds each identity for something chimerical -
Not with talent or drama, but with visual guile
She loses herself in a way not metaphorical.

She sheds each identity for something chimerical:
And when sloughing away the remains of her soul,
She loses herself. In a way not metaphorical,
The pieces mean nothing without center or whole.

And when sloughing away the remains of her soul,
Slipping skin and changing shape to match the scene,
The pieces mean nothing. Without center or whole
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