

Unsaid

fiction by *Ethel Rohan*

Kevin didn't share my excitement over the proofs for Suzie's First Communion photos.

"They're nice," he said. "What more do you want me to say?"

"She looks stunning."

"I said she looks beautiful."

Later, in bed, he turned his back to me, and pulled the duvet up to his neck.

"Sometimes I think you're disappointed in Suzie," I said.

"How could you say that?"

"You never talk about it."

"What's there to talk about?"

"See," I said.

"So she stutters? She's great just the way she is." He yawned.

I turned off the light, and stared into the dark.

One week before the girls' First Communion ceremony, my friend, Laura, still hadn't gotten her Alice a dress or any accessories. I tried to persuade her to go to Danika's Bridal, where I'd bought everything for Suzie. Laura sniffed, said she couldn't justify spending that much on a seven-year-old.

We set out in my mini-van, Laura armed with a list of second-hand stores.

"What's "hand-me-downs"?" Alice asked.

Laura laughed. "They're like treasure."

Poor child, I thought.

Laura laughed again when I told her that I'd had Suzie's First Communion photos taken already.

The first Goodwill store we visited smelled so bad I couldn't draw full breaths—a heady mix of mold and sweat.

I hurried over, and slapped a white bonnet with bright plastic flowers from Suzie's hands. "Don't put that on, this stuff's filthy."

Thankfully, the store had nothing appropriate for First Communion. As we were leaving, the obese saleswoman commented on Suzie's pretty blue dress, and asked her name.

"S-s-s-s-uzie."

The woman's big face blushed, looking at me apologetically.

I pulled Suzie along, wondering again if we should change her name. What message would that send? Kevin always argued.

Another day, on my return from the grocery store, I drove around the corner onto our street and hit the brakes in disbelief at what was coming toward me. Kevin pulled-up opposite me in his Ford F-150, Suzie sitting beaming on his lap and holding the giant steering wheel.

"D-D-Dad's teaching me how to d-d-d-d-d-drive."

"Are you out of your mind?" I asked Kevin.

Later, with Suzie out of earshot, Kevin said, "we were just having fun."

"You could have killed her."

He plodded out of the kitchen. "I never heard her laugh so hard."

As soon as the photographer phoned to say she had Suzie's photos ready, I drove to get them. They'd turned out even better than I'd hoped. Suzie's smooth skin, dark ballerina's bun, and black-brown eyes took my breath away. Her freckles also, just darling, and the slight curve of her full lips that hid those crowded teeth sent a warm feeling through me. When we got back to the mini-van, Susie and I sat staring at the photographs, her eyes also filling.

"W-w-w—"

I felt myself stiffen. "Please, can't you just be quiet for two minutes?"

Suzie drew back from me.

I took her for ice-cream, and struggled to keep smiling as she wrestled with her words, to not finish them for her.

The day of the First Communion arrived. I jumped out of bed and rushed into Suzie's room, ordering her into the shower.

Later, when she didn't appear down to breakfast, I went looking for her.

I listened at the bathroom door, hearing her gagging. She sent me away. I used the key to open the door, and found her leaning over the toilet, retching. She started, wiping mouth with the back of her hand. I spotted the green bar of soap wedged in the drain, teeth-marked.

"Suzie?" The soap slipped from my hand. I coaxed out of her that a classmate had told her that eating soap temporarily cured stuttering, something about the bubbles. Turned out, she and another classmate, George Tompkins, were the only two not reading at the service, and were bringing up the Offertory gifts instead. Some of the other kids had teased them, saying that they were stupid, that they couldn't read right.

I held her damp face in my hands. "You're not stupid, okay? You're smart and beautiful and precious."

She didn't look convinced.

In church, we sat into our assigned pew. I spotted Laura, Mark, and Alice sitting opposite us. Alice looked stunning, and for a pittance. The church filled quickly. Father Richards droned on. My thoughts drifted to the after-party, to Suzie sickening herself with soap.

The choir started-up again. The congregation stood. I looked over my shoulder, watching Suzie move up the center aisle, holding a jug of water between her small hands. She smiled up at me, her mouth crowded with crooked teeth. I widened my eyes pointedly and pressed my lips together. Her mouth closed.

I recalled the sign language class Suzie and I had taken together, up until the speech therapist had advised against it. Suzie still practiced, studying her book in bed every night. She was almost on us, looking radiant. I love you, I signed. She stopped next to me, the water jug trembling in her hands, its contents sloshing.

I jerked my head, indicating that she should continue on to the altar.

She bent, lowering the water jug onto the red carpet. I stared, aghast. She signed "you love me" and then struck her fist to her forehead.

People stared.

I felt my temper push through my face. Move.

She continued to hit her forehead.

Whispers spread like fire.

Kevin stepped past me, and out of the pew. He wrapped his arm around Suzie's shoulders, lifted the water jug, and guided her up to the altar and Father Richards' waiting hands.

I felt Laura's eyes on me, other peoples' too. I continued to stare straight ahead, struggling to remain composed, realizing what Suzie had signed: *you love me dumb*.

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Flotsam & Jetsam

fiction by *Marie Lecrivain*

There is nothing trashy about romance – The Fisher King

With dawn climbing up her back, Bran wiggled her toes as she watched fractals of morning light bounce off the sand. She winced with pleasure as the chilly tide water washed between her toes, tugging at each digit. A third-hand warning regarding the water's toxicity ran through her mind. Back in the late eighties, a woman once swam across Santa Monica Bay for charity and, as a reward for her philanthropic efforts, contracted hepatitis... at least, that's what Bran overheard a man say as he walked by her on the day she knelt down in the sand to retrieve an object that gleamed in the late afternoon sun... a nineteenth-century Victorian pocket watch. The gears were held together by rust, and half the numbers had been washed away, but it sat proudly in the center of her musty altar of "found things."

Bran lived to discover shiny things on the ground, and, on this particular stretch of Venice Beach, a five minute walk from Venice Circle, the only place in all of Los Angeles with a usable roundabout.

Her eyes constantly scanned the terrain at the world's edge, searching for treasures that washed up at a moment's notice. She'd found no better place to indulge what had become her favorite pastime. For fifteen years she had come to this very spot, at different times of the day, standing with her feet in third position, head bent, eyes combing through the sand... searching. She would stand for varying lengths of time until the burning ache in her neck and shoulders reminded her when it was time to go.

Two nights ago, Bran had taken a long look in the vinyl sky blue Hello Kitty pocket mirror she'd found last month. The fine lines around her eyes had deepened into well defined-tributaries over her perennially sunburned nose and cheeks. She looked weathered, kind of tired... and, well, aged! She dismissed the assessment, noting that the surface of the mirror was pitted and scratched from its ocean journey. She reflexively rubbed the top of her spine, and then carefully placed the mirror back on the altar; an old steamer trunk on top of a rickety dresser, covered with a green lace tablecloth, and overlaid with a nicotine-stained piece of crimson dupioni silk that had

once been her prom dress.

To her extreme left sat a collection of bottle caps and tabs she'd woven into an enormous length of twine she'd found five years ago. She preferred bottle caps in hues of Pepsi blue and Coke red, avoiding the commercial glare of Orange Crush, though she would thoughtfully throw the caps into the nearest trash can on her way home. In her worst premenstrual moments, Bran would let down her hair, strip off her clothes, throw this gay length of twine about her neck and parade around her apartment, taking joy in the glints of recycled steel and aluminum as they caught the light of the candles... and she would feel beautiful.

A pile of coins sat at the other end of the altar: wheat pennies, MTA bus tokens, an English ha'penny half hidden under an Irish two euro coin. The rarest specimen was a newly minted coin from Cuba imprinted with the long-haired defiant countenance of Che Guevara. Looking into his face, Bran often wondered what Che's last thoughts had been before he was gunned down in that far away South American jungle, his beautiful body left to rot among what she imagined would be vicious monkeys, tearing out locks of his luxurious hair and waving them around in triumph before sinking their sharp teeth into his tender corpse.

In the middle of her altar was a sapphire-and-diamond ring... the newest jewel in her collection. The day she found the ring, she'd taken her boyfriend, Brom to her favorite collecting spot, something she'd never done with anyone.

Brom was a fellow collector; he prowled the streets in a beat-up truck searching for furniture to restore and then re-sell on eBay as "antiques." One morning, he'd spotted Bran coming out of Cafe Croissant, munching on a pan au chocolat. The smear of chocolate on her chin, along the tell-tale canvas bag clutched tightly under her arm immediately endured her to Brom... or so, he told her, later, as they tooled around Beverly, as well as Cheviot Hills on consecutive trash days looking for Mission Style furniture left out on the curb.

They quickly fell in love, and within weeks, were discussing co-habitation. However, their plans soon became stalled. Both of their domiciles were too entrenched with their finds, and their collecting habits too ingrained to give up easily. Brom tried, repeatedly, and without success, to point out the practicality of living in his two bedroom house with a separate garage, as opposed to her one-bedroom apartment. Collecting was his livelihood, versus her collecting, which, in his opinion, was a lifestyle choice, and, after mentally comparing his collection to hers, deemed her treasures to have no real intrinsic or practical value.

Bran, despite Brom's denouncement, was determined to bring him around to her point of view. She misread his tight smile and acceptance of her invitation to accompany her to the beach at sunset as signs that he was finally ready to acquiesce.

At sunset, Brom, with left fist stuffed into his front jeans pocket, reluctantly followed Bran to the water's edge. He watched Bran as she dug her toes into the wet sand with obvious delight, eagerly waiting for the tide to wash out, her eyes narrowed, scanning the ground. He watched her do this again and again, her actions in perfect synch with the waves. He realized that she'd forgotten his presence. As the sun slid behind the water's edge, Brom pulled his fist out of his pocket, opened his hand, and turned it palm down. He walked over to Bran, swept aside her wind-blown hair, gave her a kiss, told her he was hungry, and that he'd like to take her to dinner.

She smiled, and replied, "Just give me a few more minutes. I feel lucky."

He told her he'd meet her back at the truck. As she watched him walk away, a slight feeling of uncertainty tugged at her heart, but it quickly dissipated as she caught, in the corner of her eye, a flash on the ground. She bent down, scooped up a handful of wet sand, and carefully wiped away the gritty particles from a ring...

A million points of light temporarily blinded Bran as the sun's rays slid across the beach. It had been a couple of days since she heard from Brom. He hadn't returned her calls. She recalled the strange, blank look on his face when she showed him the ring, which she'd placed on the middle right finger of her right hand. He was quiet all the way through dinner, and when she asked what was wrong, he said that he wasn't feeling well. He dropped her off with a kiss on the cheek and a hurried goodbye.

Bran's thoughts scattered as she automatically resumed her search. In the midst of her scans she smiled: this sight was, in itself, a treasure... this commonplace sight she was privy to... a taken-for-granted light show shunned by the early morning joggers plowing their way through the dry sand. Mistaking a moment of satori for a Zen experience, she shivered... any moment now, she thought, scanning the wet ground, her eyes looking past the white hypnotic patterns of foam left on the shore.

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Sideshow

fiction by *Justin Herrmann*

I had just started a new job selling magazine subscriptions door to door. I was a month sober at that time, and it was my first job in longer than that. It wasn't something I was good at. Maybe I didn't have the patience, or the sharp tongue, or the ability to read people, or whatever it is that sales people have. It was something I took to get back on my feet if you can relate to that.

It was my second or third day on the job, and I was walking a neighborhood full of two-car garages, and mailboxes in the shape of things like roosters and boats. Sweat was beginning to soak through my shirt. I could smell myself.

I had seen a couple of kids go into this one house. It was the middle of the day, when kids should be in school. I followed them and knocked on the door. When they answered, I told them I was with the school system, that if they didn't go back, their parents would be notified. A heavysset kid with a buzzcut who reminded me of a woodchuck told me they got out early on the account of a bomb threat. He said it was a good thing they were home because I was probably looking for houses to break into. I told him he was right, that no one expects it in the middle of the day. I said if they needed a job to look me up, that no one would expect kids either. I gave them a fake name.

The house next door had a good looking yard. Well-kept rose bushes with black gravel over the soil as shiny as glass. The thought crossed my mind to pick a rose for Janine, my ex-girlfriend, but I didn't. I knocked on the door of that house instead. An older guy, maybe in his sixties, answered. He was in a burgundy bathrobe. I shook his hand and was startled. I might have taken a step back. Each of his hands had only two big fingers. They looked like lobster claws. Lobster claws made out of flesh.

"Please come in," he said. "It's so hot outside."

"Thank you," I said. I followed him in. I was glad to see what kind of home someone with hands like that would have. The place was clean and orderly like the yard. The chair and sofa had matching rose patterns. The kind I imagined old ladies with lots of cats to have.

"Please have a seat," he said. "Make yourself comfortable. May I get you a beer?"

I'd like to say that this was a tough choice for me. I'd like to blame taking that drink on being depressed about Janine, or saying that I thought taking the drink would help me make a

a sale. But the truth is, I felt like having a beer, when have I not? - and this guy happened to offer. It's that simple.

"The bathroom is down the hall if you need it," he said.

I had taken a piss in some bushes down the street earlier, but I wasn't going to tell this guy that.

He went to the kitchen for the beers, and I had a seat on the sofa. There was a picture on the end table of two people. I could tell one of them was him in his younger days. The hands gave it away. His arm was around someone with a beard. I was surprised to see this other person was a woman. A woman with a beard. They must have been part of a sideshow. I had always wondered if those beards were real.

He came back with two glasses of beer. One in each claw. I would have liked to see how his hands worked the bottle opener.

"This woman in this picture with you," I said, "is that a real beard?"

At that he smiled. I knew that kind of smile. It was the kind Janine used to make when she'd talk about living with her grandmother for those couple years in the Adirondacks as a child, or whenever someone would mention grandmothers, or the Adirondacks, or baklava, which she used to make with her grandmother in the Adirondacks. I've never smiled like that.

"Ah, Francesca," he said, not saying whether or not the beard was real. But the way he said that, ah Francesca, she must have been the love of this guy's life. A lady with a beard. The truth is though, I can almost relate. Janine, she had a thin line of fuzz over her top lip. I think about that lip a lot. Sometimes I'd rub my tongue across that fuzz. It can be things that make someone different that make them appealing. It makes you feel like you have something special. Something no one else does. But I don't think I could handle a beard. Then again, I don't have claws for hands.

He handed me one of the beers. "This might be a bit different for you," he said. "You could say I am a beer hobbyist, or maybe a beer exhibitionist," and he smiled a different kind of smile from the one before. I smiled back to be nice. "This is an Orval. It's from Belgium. Belgians are the real kings of beers."

It reminded me of a bitter champagne, but it was something anyway. "That Francesca," I said, "is she your wife?"

"No," he said. "We used to travel the carnivals together."

"Carnivals," I said. "I wouldn't like all those people staring at me."

"People staring at you isn't a bad way to make a living," he said. "The ones to feel for were the ones like the fire-breathers. They were kids mostly, having picked the trick up somewhere or another, on the street sometimes, trying to earn a living. Their lips would bleed, and they'd have sores in their mouths and throats that wouldn't heal, because as you know, the show must go on. It always goes on."

Those like myself, and the twins, and the Alligator Man, we had it easy. Most of all, I was lucky to be out there with someone like Francesca. Good company is the most important thing in life. Remember that." And there was that smile again.

I couldn't get over it. How he felt for her, this Francesca with a beard, after who knows how many years. Me, when I think about Janine, I am miserable. But that doesn't mean I can stop.

When I was packing my things from our apartment after she left, there was cat hair everywhere. Clumps of it in corners where I'd moved dressers, and all over. I used to hate that cat and all his hair. But I don't know, sweeping it all up, I didn't want to just dump it in the trash. I felt like I should do something with it. She loved that fucking cat. But what can you do with a bunch of cat hair, anyway? So I just left it in a pile in a corner.

She let me see her one time about a week or so after she left. Where we met, how long I could see her, everything had to be on her terms. It was like I was a child or a convict. So we met at a coffee shop a block away from her mother's house of all places. I don't even like coffee and she knows it. Anytime I'd try to touch her hand she'd pull it away. Do you know how that makes a guy feel? There was a time when we rearranged our whole lives for each other, and now I can't even touch her. What about everything we had before? What about how we used to stay up late drinking Old Style on the lawn in front of the apartment and talk about our future together? Our future. How someday we'd buy an old motel somewhere in the Adirondacks and fix it up ourselves, or maybe buy an RV and go from state to state looking for the best baklava in the country. Doesn't any of it count for anything now?

"Sure there are those who put on a bit of an act for the crowd," he was still talking about the sideshow. "Marvin Bocott who was billed as The Pinhead, he simply had an unusually shaped skull. There was nothing wrong with his brain at all, but he played up to the crowd like he was something less than human but greater than ape. The crowd was always amazed at his ability to almost master simple human actions. Like the way he could smoke a cigarette if someone in the audience would light it for him. If you want to know the truth, he was actually a quite skilled violinist."

I had nothing to add to this conversation. Absolutely nothing. I kept drinking my beer and tried to listen to what he was telling me.

"It is all about perception," he went on. "The crowd wants to see something unusual, maybe something unusually sad, and that sadness might loosen their pockets a little for the hard lives they perceive us to have, but mostly it makes them thankful that they have ten fingers and toes. So most of us made a pretty good living by just being."

I'll admit, the idea of it sounds nice. Not having to kill yourself in a factory, or trying to convince people to buy some useless junk. Getting paid to just live. It sounds nice, but what good does that do a normal guy like me. Like I could gamble until someone cuts off my hands to settle

a debt or something, and then I could try to convince Janine to get on steroids and maybe her fuzz would turn into a full beard. Then we could go on the road together and people might pay to watch me get drunk and pour myself shots with my feet. It's not an option for a regular guy like me.

He's right about that perception thing going a long way, though. The way you look at the person you're with, the person you think you love, changes over time. When you're first with someone, everything is milk and cookies. You love everything about them, even their imperfections. But I guess like everything else, you get used to it, you get comfortable, you take things for granted. Things you used to like become a problem. You start saying things, terrible things, things you will regret as much as ever having that first sip of beer with your father while fishing on Lake George, and not liking the taste of it but liking how it made you feel close to him, and just like drinking, once you start, once you get to a point where you say these terrible things, you can't stop. You can't stop until she's gone.

I sat there in this guy's living room and couldn't stop thinking about Janine. I wanted to talk to her. I wanted to say something. "Do you got a phone I can use?" I said.

"Sure," he said. "It's in the kitchen next to the refrigerator. Let me grab us another beer."

But I didn't get up. I didn't know what I could say to her. I couldn't even tell her I was a month sober. But even if I was, what would that matter? What would that change? She would say something like, that's nice, or even, that she's proud of me. What more could I expect? That she'd take me back over it? It wouldn't change our past. I could tell her that I've changed. That I'd be good. That I'd be the me that used to rub her body with lotion after she showered. That I wouldn't be the me that threw her pot of marigolds out the bedroom window for a reason I can't even remember now, the me that told her to wax her fucking lip. But if I really wanted to be honest with myself, I'd know this wasn't possible. I'd know it'd be a matter of time before things went back to how they were.

He came back with a fresh glass in each hand. "This beer," he said, "it's a style called oude geuze. It's naturally fermented and quite sour. Almost like vinegar."

Even vinegar sounded fine to me. We sat and talked. He mostly talked. And we drank more beer. He told me more about the sideshow, and more about beer. I didn't sell him a magazine subscription, and he didn't tell me if that beard was real.

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