

LBRIS

We know
books

HOLLY

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It's an old city, and no longer in very good shape, nor is the lake beside which it has been built, but there are parts of it that are still pretty nice. Longtime residents would probably agree that the nicest section is Sugar Heights, and the nicest street running through it is Ridge Road, which makes a gentle downhill curve from Bell College of Arts and Sciences to Deerfield Park, two miles below. On its way, Ridge Road passes many fine houses, some of which belong to college faculty and some to the city's more successful businesspeople—doctors, lawyers, bankers, and top-of-the-pyramid business executives. Most of these homes are Victorians, with impeccable paintjobs, bow windows, and lots of gingerbread trim.

The park where Ridge Road terminates isn't as big as the one that sits splat in the middle of Manhattan, but close. Deerfield is the city's pride, and a platoon of gardeners keep it looking fabulous. Oh, there's the unkempt west side near Red Bank Avenue, known as the Thickets, where those seeking or selling drugs can sometimes be found after dark, and where there's the occasional mugging, but the Thickets is only three acres of 740. The rest are grassy, flowery, and threaded with paths where lovers stroll and benches where old men read newspapers (more and more often on electronic devices these days) and women chat, sometimes while rocking their babies back and forth in expensive prams. There are two ponds, and sometimes you'll see men or boys sailing remote-controlled boats on one of them. In the other, swans and ducks glide back and

forth. There's a playground for the kiddies, too. Everything, in fact, except a public pool; every now and then the city council discusses the idea, but it keeps getting tabled. The expense, you know.

This night in October is warm for the time of year, but a fine drizzle has kept all but a single dedicated runner inside. That would be Jorge Castro, who has a gig teaching creative writing and Latin American Lit at the college. Despite his specialty, he's American born and bred; Jorge likes to tell people he's as American as *pie de manzana*.

He turned forty in July and can no longer kid himself that he is still the young lion who had momentary bestseller success with his first novel. Forty is when you have to stop kidding yourself that you're still a young anything. If you don't—if you subscribe to such self-actualizing bullshit as “forty is the new twenty-five”—you're going to find yourself starting to slide. Just a little at first, but then a little more, and all at once you're fifty with a belly poking out your belt buckle and cholesterol-busters in the medicine cabinet. At twenty, the body forgives. At forty, forgiveness is provisional at best. Jorge Castro doesn't want to turn fifty and discover he's become just another American manslob.

You have to start taking care of yourself when you're forty. You have to maintain the machinery, because there's no trade-in option. So Jorge drinks orange juice in the morning (potassium) followed most days by oatmeal (antioxidants), and keeps red meat to once a week. When he wants a snack, he's apt to open a can of sardines. They're rich in Omega 3s. (Also tasty!) He does simple exercises in the morning and runs in the evening, not overdoing it but aerating those forty-year-old lungs and giving his forty-year-old heart a chance to strut its stuff (resting heart rate: 63). Jorge wants to look and feel forty when he gets to fifty, but fate is a joker. Jorge Castro isn't even going to see forty-one.

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His routine, which holds even on a night of fine drizzle, is to run from the house he shares with Freddy (theirs, at least, for as long as the writer-in-residence gig lasts), half a mile down from the college, to the park. There he'll stretch his back, drink some of the Vitaminwater

stored in his fanny pack, and jog back home. The drizzle is actually invigorating, and there are no other runners, walkers, or bicyclists to weave his way through. The bicyclists are the worst, with their insistence that they have every right to ride on the sidewalk instead of in the street, even though there's a bike lane. This evening he has the sidewalk all to himself. He doesn't even have to wave to people who might be taking the night air on their grand old shaded porches; the weather has kept them inside.

All but one: the old poet. She's bundled up in a parka even though it's still in the mid-fifties at eight o'clock, because she's down to a hundred and ten pounds (her doctor routinely scolds her about her weight) and she feels the cold. Even more than the cold, she feels the damp. Yet she stays, because there's a poem to be had tonight, if she can just get her fingers under its lid and open it up. She hasn't written one since midsummer and she needs to get something going before the rust sets in. She needs to *represent*, as her students sometimes say. More importantly, this could be a *good* poem. Maybe even a *necessary* poem.

It needs to begin with the way the mist revolves around the streetlights across from her and then progress to what she thinks of as *the mystery*. Which is everything. The mist makes slowly moving halos, silvery and beautiful. She doesn't want to use *halos*, because that's the expected word, the lazy word. Almost a cliché. *Silvery*, though . . . or maybe just silver . . .

Her train of thought derails long enough to observe a young man (at eighty-nine, forty seems very young) go slap-slapping by on the other side of the road. She knows who he is; the resident writer who thinks Gabriel García Márquez hung the moon. With his long dark hair and little pussy-tickler of a mustache, he reminds the old poet of a charming character in *The Princess Bride*: "My name is Inigo Montoya, you killed my father, prepare to die." He's wearing a yellow jacket with a reflective stripe running down the back and ridiculously tight running pants. He's going like a house afire, the old poet's mother might have said. Or like the clappers.

Clappers makes her think of bells, and her gaze returns to the streetlight directly across from her. She thinks, *The runner doesn't bear silver above him / These bells don't ring.*

It's wrong because it's prosy, but it's a start. She has managed to get her fingers under the lid of the poem. She needs to go inside, get her notebook, and start scratching. She sits a few moments longer, though, watching the silver circles revolve around the streetlights. *Halos*, she thinks. *I can't use that word, but that's what they look like, goddammit.*

There is a final glimpse of the runner's yellow jacket, then he's gone into the dark. The old poet struggles to her feet, wincing at the pain in her hips, and shuffles into her house.

3

Jorge Castro kicks it up a bit. He's got his second wind now, lungs taking in more air, endorphins lit up. Just ahead is the park, scattered with old-fashioned lamps that give off a mystic yellow glow. There's a small parking lot in front of the deserted playground, now empty except for a passenger van with its side door open and a ramp sticking out onto the wet asphalt. Near its foot is an elderly man in a wheelchair and an elderly woman down on one knee, fussing with it.

Jorge pulls up for a moment, bending over, hands grasping his legs just above the knees, getting his breath back and checking out the van. The blue and white license plate on the back has a wheelchair logo on it.

The woman, who is wearing a quilted coat and a kerchief, looks over at him. At first Jorge isn't sure he knows her—the light in this small auxiliary parking lot isn't that good. "Hello! Got a problem?"

She stands up. The old guy in the wheelchair, dressed in a button-up sweater and flat cap, gives a feeble wave.

"The battery died," the woman says. "It's Mr. Castro, isn't it? Jorge?"

Now he recognizes her. It's Professor Emily Harris, who teaches English literature . . . or did; she might now be emerita. And that's her husband, also a teacher. He didn't realize Harris was disabled, hasn't seen him around campus much, different department in a different building, but believes the last time he did, the old guy was walking. Jorge sees her quite often at various faculty get-togethers and culture-vulture events. Jorge has an idea he's not one of her favorite

people, especially after the departmental meeting about the now-defunct Poetry Workshop. That one got a little contentious.

"Yes, it's me," he says. "I'm assuming you two would like to get home and dry off."

"That would be nice," Mr. Harris says. Or maybe he's also a professor. His sweater is thin and he's shivering a little. "Think you could push me up that ramp, kiddo?" He coughs, clears his throat, coughs again. His wife, so crisp and authoritative in department meetings, looks a bit lost and bedraggled. Forlorn. Jorge wonders how long they've been out here, and why she didn't call someone for help. *Maybe she doesn't have a phone*, he thinks. *Or left it at home. Old people can be forgetful about such things.* Although she can't be much more than seventy. Her husband in the wheelchair looks older.

"I think I can help with that. Brake off?"

"Yes, certainly," Emily Harris says, and stands back when Jorge grabs the handles and swings the wheelchair around so it faces the ramp. He rolls it back ten feet, wanting to get a running start. Motorized wheelchairs can be heavy. The last thing he wants is to get it halfway up only to lose momentum and have it roll back. Or, God forbid, tip over the side and spill the old guy on the pavement.

"Here we go, Mr. Harris. Hang on, there may be a bump."

Harris grasps the side-rails, and Jorge notices how broad his shoulders are. They look muscular beneath the sweater. He guesses that people who lose the use of their legs compensate in other ways. Jorge speeds at the ramp.

"Hi-yo Silver!" Mr. Harris cries cheerfully.

The first half of the ramp is easy, but then the chair starts to lose momentum. Jorge bends, puts his back into it, and keeps it rolling. As he does this neighborly chore, an odd thought comes to him: this state's license plates are red and white, and although the Harrises live on Ridge Road just like he does (he often sees Emily Harris out in her garden), the plates on their van are *blue* and white, like those of the neighboring state to the west. Something else that's strange: he can't remember ever seeing this van on the street before, although he's seen Emily sitting ramrod straight behind the wheel of a trim little Subaru with an Obama sticker on the back bum—

As he reaches the top of the ramp, bent almost horizontal now, arms outstretched and running shoes flexed, a bug stings the back of his neck. Feels like a big one from the way heat is spreading out from the source, maybe a wasp, and he's having a reaction. Never had one before but there's a first time for everything and all at once his vision is blurring and the strength is going out of his arms. His shoes slip on the wet ramp and he goes to one knee.

Wheelchair's going to backroll right on top of me—

But it doesn't. Rodney Harris flips a switch and the wheelchair rolls inside with a contented hum. Harris hops out, steps spryly around it, and looks down at the man kneeling on the ramp with his hair plastered to his forehead and drizzle wetting his cheeks like sweat. Then Jorge collapses on his face.

"Look at that!" Emily cries softly. "Perfect!"

"Help me," Rodney says.

His wife, wearing her own running shoes, takes Jorge's ankles. Her husband takes his arms. They haul him inside. The ramp retracts. Rodney (who really is also Professor Harris, as it happens) slides into the leftside captain's chair. Emily kneels and zip-ties Jorge's wrists together, although this is probably a needless precaution. Jorge is out like a light (a simile of which the old poet would surely disapprove) and snoring heavily.

"All good?" asks Rodney Harris, he of the Bell College Life Sciences Department.

"All good!" Emily's voice is cracking with excitement. "We did it, Roddy! We caught the son of a bitch!"

"Language, dear," Rodney says. Then he smiles. "But yes. Indeed we did." He pulls out of the parking lot and starts up the hill.

The old poet looks up from her work notebook, which has a picture of a tiny red wheelbarrow on the front, sees the van pass, and bends back to her poem.

The van turns in at 93 Ridge Road, home of the Harrises for almost twenty-five years. It belongs to them, not the college. One of the two garage doors goes up; the van enters the bay on the left; the garage door closes; all is once more still on Ridge Road. Mist revolves around the streetlights.

Like halos.

Jorge regains consciousness by slow degrees. His head is splitting, his mouth is dry, his stomach is sudsing. He has no idea how much he drank, but it must have been plenty to have a hangover this horrible. And where did he drink it? A faculty party? A writing seminar get-together where he unwisely decided to imbibe like the student he once was? Did he get drunk after the latest argument with Freddy? None of those things seem right.

He opens his eyes, ready for morning glare that will send another blast of pain through his poor abused head, but the light is soft. Kind light, considering his current state of distress. He seems to be lying on a futon or yoga mat. There's a bucket beside it, a plastic floorbucket that could have come from Walmart or Dollar Tree. He knows what it's there for, and all at once he also knows what Pavlov's dogs must have felt like when the bell rang, because he only has to look at that bucket for his belly to go into spasm. He gets on his knees and throws up violently. There's a pause, long enough to take a couple of breaths, and then he does it again.

His stomach settles, but for a moment his head aches so fiercely he thinks it will split open and fall in two pieces to the floor. He closes his watering eyes and waits for the pain to subside. Eventually it does, but the taste of vomit in his mouth and nose is rancid. Eyes still closed, he fumbles for the bucket and spits into it until his mouth is at least partially clear.

He opens his eyes again, raises his head (cautiously), and sees bars. He's in a cage. It's roomy, but it's a cage, all right. Beyond it is a long room. The overhead lights must be on a rheostat, because the room is dim. He sees a concrete floor that looks clean enough to eat off of—not that he feels like eating. The half of the room in front of the cage is empty. In the middle is a flight of stairs. There's a push broom leaning against them. Beyond the stairs is a well-equipped workshop with tools hung on pegs and a bandsaw table. There's also a compound miter saw—nice tool, not cheap. Several hedge trimmers and clippers. An array of wrenches, carefully hung from biggest to smallest. A

line of chrome sockets on a worktable beside a door going . . . somewhere. All the usual home handyman shit, and everything looking well-maintained.

There's no sawdust under the bandsaw table. Beyond it is a piece of machinery he's never seen before: big and yellow and boxy, almost the size of an industrial HVAC unit. Jorge decides that's what it must be, because there's a rubber hose going through one paneled wall, but he's never seen one like it. If there's a brand name, it's on the side he can't see.

He looks around the cage, and what he sees scares him. It isn't so much the bottles of Dasani water standing on an orange crate serving as a table. It's the blue plastic box squatting in the corner, beneath the sloping ceiling. That's a Porta-John, the kind invalids use when they can still get out of bed but aren't able to make it all the way to the nearest bathroom.

Jorge doesn't feel capable of standing yet, so he crawls to it and lifts the lid. He sees blue water in the bowl and gets a whiff of disinfectant strong enough to make his eyes start watering again. He closes it and knee-walks back to the futon. Even in his current fucked-up state, he knows what the Porta-John means: someone intends for him to be here awhile. He has been kidnapped. Not by one of the cartels, as in his novel, *Catalepsy*, and not in Mexico or Colombia, either. Crazy as it seems, he has been kidnapped by a couple of elderly professors, one of them a colleague. And if this is their basement, he's not far from his own house, where Freddy would be reading in the living room and having a cup of—

But no. Freddy is gone, at least for now. Left after the latest argument, in his usual huff.

He examines the crisscrossed bars. They are steel, and neatly welded. It must be a job done in this very workshop—there's certainly no Jail Cells R Us that such an item could be ordered from—but the bars look solid enough. He grabs one in both hands and shakes it. No give.

He looks at the ceiling and sees white panels drilled with small holes. Soundproofing. He sees something else, too: a glass eye peering down. Jorge turns his face up to it.

“Are you there? What do you want?”

Nothing. He considers shouting to be let out, but what would that accomplish? Do you put someone in a basement cage (it must be the basement) with a puke bucket and a Porta-John if you mean to come running down the stairs at the first shout, saying *Sorry, sorry, big mistake?*

He needs to pee—his back teeth are floating. He gets to his feet, helping his legs by holding onto the bars. Another bolt of pain goes through his head, but not quite as bad as the ones he felt when he swam back to consciousness. He shuffles to the Porta-John, lifts the lid, unzips, and tries to go. At first he can't, no matter how bad the need. Jorge has always been private about his bathroom functions, avoids herd urinals when he goes to the ballpark, and he keeps thinking of that glass eye staring at him. His back is turned, and that helps a little but not enough. He counts how many days are left in this month, then how many days until Christmas, good old *feliz navidad*, and that does the trick. He pisses for almost a full minute, then grabs one of the Dasani bottles. He swirls the first mouthful around and spits it into the disinfected water, then gulps the rest.

He goes back to the bars and looks across the long room: the vacant half just beyond the cage, the stairs, then the workshop. It's the bandsaw and the miter saw his eyes keep coming back to. Maybe not nice tools for a caged man to be contemplating, but hard not to look at them. Hard not to think of the high whine a bandsaw like that makes when it's chewing through pine or cedar: *YRRRRROWWWWW*.

He remembers his run through the misty drizzle. He remembers Emily and her husband. He remembers how they deked him and then shot him up with something. After that there's nothing but a swatch of black until he woke up here.

Why? Why would they do a thing like that?

"Do you want to talk?" he calls to the glass eye. "I'm ready when you are. Just tell me what you want!"

Nothing. The room is dead silent except for the shuffle of his feet and the *tink-tink* of the wedding ring he wears against one of the bars. Not his ring; he and Freddy aren't married. At least not yet, and maybe never, the way things are going. Jorge slipped the ring off his father's finger in the hospital, minutes after Papi died. He has worn it ever since.

How long has he been here? He looks at his watch, but that's no good; it's a wind-up, another remembrance he took when his father died, and it has stopped at one-fifteen. AM or PM, he doesn't know. And he can't remember the last time he wound it.

The Harrises. Emily and Ronald. Or is it Robert? He knows who they are, and that's kind of ominous, isn't it?

It might be ominous, he tells himself.

Since there's no sense shouting or screaming in a soundproof room—and it would bring his headache back, raving—he sits down on the futon and waits for something to happen. For someone to come and explain what the fuck.

5

The stuff they shot him up with must still be floating around in his head because Jorge falls into a doze, head down and spittle slipping from one corner of his mouth. Sometime later—still one-fifteen according to his Papi's watch—a door opens up above and someone starts down the stairs. Jorge raises his head (another bolt of pain, but not so bad) and sees black lowtop sneakers, ankle socks, trim brown pants, then a flowered apron. It's Emily Harris. With a tray.

Jorge stands up. "What is going on here?"

She doesn't answer, only sets the tray down about two feet from the cage. On it is a bulgy brown envelope stuck into the top of a big plastic go-cup, the kind you fill with coffee for a long drive. Next to it is a plate with something nasty on it: a slab of dark red meat floating in even darker red liquid. Just looking at it makes Jorge feel like vomiting again.

"If you think I'm going to eat that, Emily, think again."

She makes no reply, only takes the broom and pushes the tray along the concrete. There's a hinged flap in the bottom of the cage (*they've been planning this*, Jorge thinks). The go-cup falls over when it hits the top of the flap, which is only four inches or so high, then the tray goes through. The flap claps shut when she pulls the broom back. The meat swimming in the puddle of blood looks to be uncooked liver. Emily

Harris straightens up, puts the broom back, turns . . . and gives him a smile. As if they are at a fucking cocktail party, or something.

"I'm not going to eat that," Jorge repeats.

"You will," she says.

With that she goes back up the stairs. He hears a door close, followed by a snapping sound that's probably a bolt being run.

Looking at the raw liver makes Jorge feel like yurking some more, but he takes the envelope out of the go-cup. It's something called Ka'Chava. According to the label, the powder inside makes "a nutrient-dense drink that fuels your adventures."

Jorge feels he's had enough adventures in the last however-long to last a lifetime. He puts the packet back in the go-cup and sits on the futon. He pushes the tray to one side without looking at it. He closes his eyes.

6

He dozes, wakes, dozes again, then wakes for real. The headache is almost gone and his stomach has settled. He winds Papi's watch and sets it for noon. Or maybe for midnight. Doesn't matter; at least he can keep track of how long he's here. Eventually, someone—maybe the male half of this crazy professor combo—will tell him *why* he's here and what he has to do to get out. Jorge guesses it won't make a whole lot of sense, because these two are obviously loco. *Lots* of professors are loco, he's been in enough schools on the writer-in-residence circuit to know that—but the Harrises take it to a whole other level.

Eventually he plucks the packet of Ka'Chava from the go-cup, which is obviously meant for mixing the stuff up with the remaining bottle of Dasani. The cup is from Dillon's, a truck stop in Redlund where Jorge and Freddy sometimes have breakfast. He would like to be there now. He'd like to be in Ayers Chapel, listening to one of Reverend Gallatin's boring-ass sermons. He'd like to be in a doctor's office, waiting for a proctological exam. He would like to be anywhere but here.

He has no reason to trust anything the crazy Harrises give him, but now that the nausea's worn off, he's hungry. He always eats light