

# fiction ut

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SELECTS #1

# Up to No Good

*Poetry & Prose from Fictionaut*

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# Introduction

BY JANE HAMMONS

Creepy crime, masterful manipulation, unrequited love and a couple of pockets: writers at Fictionaut get Up To No Good.

Not many poems terrify. But “Eddie Says” by Stephanie Bobo does just that. Eddie’s compulsion—cutting the hair from the heads of unsuspecting women is frightening in itself—but it is the intensity of the language that traps us inside Eddie’s mind as he tells his story. Eddie asks, “Do you think I’m crazy?” Then he answers the question for us: “Sometimes I think/I am. Locked in here at night, I crawl/beneath my cot and lie awake, listening/to the secret gears that turn the lurching world./And behind the grinding noise of night I hear an endless roar—as if a million people/were crying out in absolute alarm.” Well, yes, Eddie. You and your kind are out there. And understanding why only makes us more afraid.

We are at the Argo, a drive-in movie theater, representing several American traditions in Gita M. Smith’s “The Late Show at the Argo.” The Argo has “old-fashioned in-car speakers,” but if you think those speakers are there for kitsch or because the managers can’t afford digital ones, think again. The speaker in Slot 23 has a convenient wiring problem that the managers, Marti and Avner, use to profit from the cheating that goes on during the adults-only late show. The masterful suspense structure keeps us guessing about what goes on in Slot 88 until the end.

If the protagonist of Neil Serven’s “Down Cellar” weren’t already there, we could yell out, “Down go into the cellar.” You won’t find a monster, or an Eddie, down there—just Dad. A mechanic, an alcoholic

recovered from a liver transplant, surrounded by his stash of beer. And the tools that he uses with “a mechanic’s talent for distilling the plain and obvious,” as he humiliates, cajoles, and enjoins his son in the effort to deceive Mom, who gets no further than the stairs as Dad lays claim to his boy.

“Blue Pinto” by Mark Reep is mysterious but not in the same way Smith’s story is. As flash fiction, we only get a glimpse of the Quikfill as Sean with his broken nose drives in to fill up and possibly get a smile from Darcy, who works there. The object of their discussion is a “rusty blue Pinto . . . nosed up to a gritty snowbank.” It’s “broken” and “drooping” and “slumps like it’s tired.” The only object of our attention that is not in some way damaged or broken is Darcy. Something makes her smile. But it isn’t Sean.

In “The Underwear Thing” by Stephanie Austin the self-conscious narrator, Kate, attends a party thrown by her ex-boyfriend. She knows a lot about him: the conditions under which he rents his house, that he doesn’t like people going through his fridge, and where the bottle opener is. What she doesn’t know is why they broke up. So after many, many drinks, she asks. The ex doesn’t remember a lot about her, but he does remember that “There was something crazy going on with [her] underwear.” The pace of the story as Kate works her way up to the question and then reels from the response is created in part by excellent dialog, but also by Kate’s constant stream of observations: “He sees me and nods. Daniel sees me. He also nods. I don’t nod. I feel lame when I nod.” Humor with a twist of pain: no ice.

Does your right pocket know what your left one is doing? After you read Cynthia Hawkins’ hilarious “Deep Pockets,” you might want to check that out. The story opens with the protagonist asking himself “What the hell have I done?” Much to his astonishment, and ours, his right pocket produces the answer on a little fortune cookie-like piece of paper. “You have made an ass of yourself.” Hearing the truth in his wise pocket’s words, he continues to ask questions and foolishly do as he is told. The surreal elements are a wonderful surprise in this truly inventive story.

## *Eddie Says*

BY STEPHANIE BOBO

The first time I was nine years old, I guess,  
and Rosie was just six. While our parents  
slept it off again, we sat in the kitchen  
where one of them had dumped a drawer  
onto the table's sticky oil cloth:  
rusty jar lids, frayed lottery stubs,  
several snag-toothed combs, rubber bands,  
a pair of scissors, a key, a sheaf  
of gnawed pencils, grimy Christmas ribbons,  
old postcards, lighters, moldy spools of thread.  
Whatever it meant was more than I could bear.  
Funny, I forgot this till you asked.

Rosie's little hands paced the tabletop,  
like cautious sentinels guarding the  
incoherent landscape of our lives.  
I thought of the untarnished moon.  
I wanted to get her out of there.  
I wanted her to get me out.  
Something big and dark filled me up  
until I disappeared. Then  
the astonished "O" of Rosie's mouth,  
her mirrored rage, dragged me back to earth.  
I had cut off a lock of her hair, it seems.  
We could not cry out.



I was not thinking of this later, many  
years after we were separated, after  
I was finally living alone when  
I knew what I had to do to feel better  
and bought the shears. I thought I was  
invisible, but I wouldn't be here,  
would I, if I really was. I tell you,  
every time I caught a woman and cut her hair  
I felt like I was setting things right,  
but I could never set them right enough.  
Why did I do it? Well, I could.  
It was so easy to slip up on them,  
easy to grab and cut and walk away.  
Even when the sidewalks were paved with ice,  
they often wore high-heeled shoes  
that set them weirdly dancing to turn  
corners or cross streets.

They were unbearably vulnerable.  
At night they floated through my dreams  
like paper dolls, whole flocks of them,  
in synchronous motion, hatless  
even in winter, lest they muss their hair.  
At lunchtime in the Public Garden  
I watched them as they drank their coffee  
and ate their sandwiches. God, I felt rich  
waiting to see which one of them would stray.  
One of them always did, you see.

You'd be amazed how fast and quiet it was,  
how stunned they were when in one flashing  
blow I held the trophy up for them to see.  
Except for the last time when I got caught,  
I always escaped in their loss for words.  
Back at work for the rest of the afternoon,  
I kept touching it in my pocket

just to make sure it was there.  
You know, I feel really cheated when I see  
women who have cropped their hair.

At home later, I was afraid my pleasure  
made an audible hum as I rearranged  
the glorious ranks of locks I kept  
in the silk-bound case they took from me  
when I came here. I hope I get it back.  
I had no favorites, but couldn't resist  
a single stunning row of reds:  
rust, copper, dull brass, and tarnished gold.  
I never did with them those things they said.

Sometimes in fits of self-indulgence  
I counted and recounted them  
for long delicious hours, each lock of hair  
recalling every look of shock  
until a roomful of outraged women  
recognized me for the man I was.

Do you think I'm crazy? Sometimes I think  
I am. Locked in here at night, I crawl  
beneath my cot and lie awake, listening  
to the secret gears that turn the lurching world.  
And behind the grinding noise of night I hear  
an endless roar--as if a million people  
were crying out in absolute alarm.  
I'm not crazy. Everybody hears it.  
They just pretend the world is silent, safe.  
The only silence I have ever known  
was the slack moment when my shears nicked clean  
and left my treasure in my hand.  
Do I hate women? That just is not so!  
Women want me to steal their hair. They ask  
for it! Otherwise, why let me see it?

Something else I remember now. My father  
used to wrap my mother's hair around his fist  
and hold her dancing like a puppet  
at arm's length while he shouted at her  
slut! and whore! and on like that.

I guess they were unhappy. They sure fought  
like hell, while Rosie and I scurried  
from corner to corner, no place small enough.  
When our parents drank themselves to death,  
we were carted off to drift from home  
to foster home. The last time I saw Rosie,  
she was sitting on a bench at Social Services,  
and I was being dragged out the door,  
furious in my helplessness.

God, she was a good little soldier.  
I wonder where she's been all these years.  
She was still so small that her feet  
didn't even touch the floor.



## *The Late Show At The Argo*

BY GITA M. SMITH

The Argo Drive-In late show ended at 11:30. When the last car had gone, Marti doused the sodium vapor spotlight, slipped on double latex gloves and rolled the trash trolley through the semicircular theater lot. An empty pint of Courvoisier, an unfurled Trojan, a baby's sippy cup joined the usual popcorn tubs and soda cans. Nothing special, not like the previous week's find of a nacreous South Seas pearl ring and umber calfskin gloves. She heard the cough of the projectionist's truck about to leave; Avner sounded a see-you-later beep and rumbled out the exit toward Cooley's Package Store before it closed at midnight. In the distance Marti could see flashing blue and red emergency lights where the road bent sharply west. Silently she wished Avner a safe detour around the latest crash.

She remembered to check the speaker wires at Slot 23. She'd had to disable that speaker earlier; best to reconnect its parts while it was fresh on her mind. The couple in the car at Slot 23 had not been ugly about the speaker malfunction, especially since she'd moved them quickly to Slot 88 at the darkest corner of the parking rows. They hadn't come to watch the movie, anyway, Marti knew. The woman had been all over the guy, humping him in the front seat and the back. They'd been oblivious to everything around them.

Marti stretched and craned to see beyond the Argo's fence. On tiptoe she was 5'10" even. To the west, the reds and blues still strobed. To the east, a quarter moon was rising.

Marti moved on to Slot 88. It was the Argo's newest parking slot, created when the need arose one day. She checked around for any trash or unusual leavings. Good: clean. In the weak moonlight, it looked

pretty much like all the other slots with their yellow lines, speaker stands and call buttons, which patrons pressed in case of problems. Its special feature, though, was something she and Avner had created.

“It’s got to be like the bay where the mechanic stands under your car when you go for an oil change,” she had said.

He’d caught on in a blink. “But with a roof to blend with the parking lot.”

He had rented a backhoe to dig the pit one morning when the Argo was closed. Marti reinforced the sides with timbers; four by fours at the corners, two by fours to brace them. They ran PVC pipe downhill away from the pit to drain off water. The bay was big enough to hold a man of Avner’s size plus a toolbox and a folding ladder. It was narrower than the wheelbase of any vehicle except a Mini Cooper’s. Marti drove Avner’s Silverado over the hole, then her own Acura. Avner practiced sliding under the chassis, into the bay and out again. He could reach every part of a vehicle’s underside while in the bay, especially hydraulic lines and brakes.

“No cutters, no cutting,” he’d told Marti as he selected the tools that would stay permanently in the bay. “Lines have to be damaged, but any neat straight cuts can be detected. That way, no blowback.”

“I’ll blow-back you,” she’d laughed, and they’d had sex in the bay.

The roof for Slot 88 had been a challenge, Marti thought as she rolled the trash trolley back to the concession stand. She turned the popcorn kettle off and rinsed out rags. Impossible to create an asphalt roof over the bay, so they had given up on making Slot 88 perfectly identical to the rest. The roof just had to be strong enough to bear the weight of vehicles driving over it, in the event that someone ever did. A flat steel grate slid over the opening, not soundlessly, but quietly enough. Slot 88 had no other slots next to it; no lights illuminated it; by the time the late show started, it was a shadow box.

Cleanup over, Marti exited and locked the drive-in gates. She liked this quiet time after the late show when she was sole custodian. Her employers, an elderly couple from Birmingham, left the Argo’s management entirely to her and Avner. They didn’t update the sound system to digital, keeping, instead, old-fashioned in-car speakers that broke easily. “Just replace what breaks,” the man had said. “And keep a good electrician on call.”

The Argo offered two shows nightly — the early shows all PG-rated family fare, the late shows adults-only. Twice weekly, Marti completed paperwork or refilled soft drink canisters of CO2. Easy-peasy. Her pay, direct-deposited, was not the point. What counted was the opportunity afforded by the Argo.

At her job interview, she had told her bosses, “I’ve always loved the drive-in. It’s an American tradition, and I want the Argo to survive.”



It was nearly 1 a.m. when Marti pulled up to St. Vincent’s Hospital on Birmingham’s Southside. She rode the elevator to 3 North, the surgical intensive care waiting room. A haggard older woman, a sleeping child, a nervous-looking man were occupying chairs below a silent TV screen. The man rose quickly and walked to Marti’s side. “Shelley’s still in surgery,” he whispered. “The guy, the driver’s dead.”

“And that’s your...?”

“Mother in law,” he answered. “Shelley’s mom.”

“Lorne, let’s get coffee,” Marti said and drew him toward the corridor.

“We’ll be right back, Mom,” Lorne called out, then followed.

“Cameras are everywhere, so here’s what we’ll do,” Marti said. “When you buy the coffees, take a few extra napkins. Hand me my coffee and put the envelope in my hand as naturally as if it was a napkin. Just natural movement. It’s all good, all good. Keep talking to me about Shelley and the crash.”

At 2 a.m. Marti entered the apartment, showered fast and slid into her side of bed.

“Mmmmm,” came Avner’s welcome. “Go okay?”

Marti fitted her front to his back. “Your half is on the dresser. It’s more than ever.”



The first client had come to Avner, actually. A plumber checking water lines at the concession stand had griped about his cheating wife.

“Bitch probably comes here to fuck in the guy’s car,” he’d said. “Bet

you see a lot of cheating bitches here. I should come over and catch her. Damn, I could kill her.”

Avner, joking: “Hey man, I could use some extra cash. Let me take care of it.”

Plumber, not joking: “Do you know how to fuck up the brakes on a car?”

Marti, hearing of this later: “Well, do you?”

Avner did, although he didn’t have the stomach for the aftermath. Marti was okay with visiting the hospitals. Each one got easier. Cheating Shelley was their fifth.

The routine was beautifully simple: The paying client told what make and model car and license plate to look for. Marti passed by the cheaters’ slot and, with a practiced swipe, loosened a speaker wire. The cheaters complained and got moved to Slot 88. Avner slipped into the secret bay under their car as soon as the feature started; the couple drove away at the end of the show. They crashed sooner or later, often with fatalities to the woman cuddled up against her lover.

Money changed hands, lots of money. Time went by. Late shows played seven nights a week. People made love in darkened cars as if they were invisible, the last to copulate on earth.

Marti smiled against Avner’s back. Her future was secure. The world would never run out of cheaters.



## *Down Cellar*

BY NEIL SERVEN

Down cellar, my father showed me where he kept his beer stash. It was in a cubbyhole under the bulkhead, where Mom never thought to look. The cans stayed cold there in the winter.

Last year, after his surgery, he promised Mom he would quit. Liver transplants don't grow on trees, was how she had put it. He was taking medication now that made his hands tremble, his notes illegible.

"What do you drink at school?" he asked, and I told him. His eyebrows arched, impressed. Two months into my freshman year at college I had honed a taste for expensive microbrews. They were easier to find in the city.

"You'll have to smuggle me some," he said.

He extracted two silver cans from a paper sack and handed me one. It was his old reliable brand, with the chess knight on the label, the kind I could remember rolling off the top of the kitchen trash, clattering on the floor, when I was young.

A half-finished project lay strewn across his work bench. Before his surgery Dad had been making these wooden desk clocks to sell at the church fair. The cellar was where he had built our dining room table, and before that, my cradle. Now his hands were too shaky to work the table saw. The space still held the dusty odors of cedar and varnish.

We popped open our beers simultaneously. Mom was upstairs, preparing Thanksgiving dinner, and wasn't going to hear us with the exhaust fan running above the stove. The floor creaked above us where she walked.

He picked up a block of wood and wiped off the dust to examine his pencil marks. "Did the girl tell her family yet?"



“No,” I said. “She was going to tell them this week, when she came home.”

“And you said they were Irish Catholic.”

I nodded.

“I noticed that when we visited. The stickers on the backs of all the cars.” He ran his finger along the rim of the can, wiping off the condensation. “Well, in that case you know what’s coming. You can tell your mother now and ruin her Thanksgiving, or wait a month and ruin her Christmas. She may find out before then anyhow.”

He had a mechanic’s talent for distilling the plain and obvious. I took a gulp of beer. A few months ago it would have made me screw up my mouth in distaste but now it seemed watery, like a joke that skipped a line.

I was waiting for the explosion. The rare times Dad got truly angry with me, it would rise up after a deadly silence; he would ask me what the hell I was thinking, being careless like that. But then we heard the door squeak open at the top of the stairs. I mouthed the words, “oh, shit,” but without missing a beat he pulled open the drawer of his workbench. With a wobbly hand he placed his beer in the drawer and I followed with mine. Casually he pushed the drawer shut with his hip. Mom typically took her time coming down the stairs.

“Am I missing a convention down here?” she asked when she emerged.

“Dad’s showing me his clocks,” I said. “I’m going to help finish them when I come back for Christmas.”

He flashed me a sidelong look of incredulity. The man knew I couldn’t hammer a nail straight. But Mom must have bought it, because she nodded approvingly.

“Gary and the others should be here in half an hour or so. There’s a football game on TV upstairs that nobody’s watching.”

Still looking at me, Dad said, “We’ll be up in a minute.”

Mom’s footsteps trailed up the stairs. Once the door closed, I saw a smile creep across my father’s face, widening into a crescent that showed his pearl teeth. He still had great teeth. Slowly he pulled open the drawer and took out our beers. “Guess we better finish up,” he said. He took a long gulp, then set down the can. That’s when he started to laugh. It started under his breath, with his eyes closed, and

before I knew it, his chest was heaving and he had to balance himself against the bench. I had never seen him laugh like this before. “My boy,” he said. “He’s gonna help me finish the clocks.”



## *Blue Pinto*

BY MARK REEP

The girl at the Quikfill's polite enough, no more. Sean thanks her and she says Welcome, but doesn't spare a smile. Hard to blame her, working here; they've probably been held up more than once by guys fitting his general description: White kid in a hoodie, broken nose, looked cold. Well, he can't do much about the broken nose, and he's too cold to lose the hoodie. Still, he'd like to see her smile.

Today gas is up again, and a rusty blue Pinto Sean's not seen before is nosed up to a gritty snowbank. The front grille's broken, the back bumper's drooping, and the Pinto slumps like it's tired. Sean checks his wallet, pumps ten dollars worth.

Inside, there's no line, just the girl— Darcy, a new uniform shirt says.

"No receipt," he says. She nods. Her hair's pulled back, and Sean imagines undoing that clasp, dark curls falling around her face. She closes the drawer. "Was there something else?"

"Just curious," Sean says, "but what's up with the old Pinto out front?"

She looks at him. "It's my boyfriend's." Her green eyes are flat: What business of yours?

"What is that," Sean says, "a '73, '74?"

"'74," she says. "It's not for sale."

Sean shakes his head, no, wasn't asking. "My uncle had a Pinto," he says. "2300, four-speed stick. He taught me to drive, gave me the keys, and I put another sixty thousand on it. Good times. Reminded me, seeing this one."

She nods. Glances at her watch, pulls keys from the register, on her way somewhere. He takes his cue.

“Don’t see many Pintos anymore, is all,” he says. “Hope you guys’re having fun with it.”

She says something, but a truck’s jakebrake bellows. Sean turns in the doorway, cups a hand to his ear: “It’s an awesome car,” she says, and for a moment her smile is big, real, unguarded.



## *The Underwear Thing*

BY STEPHANIE AUSTIN

When I've finally had enough to drink to be able to talk to him, I find my ex-boyfriend on his back porch. He's finishing the last of his beer and talking to a guy named Daniel. The weather is on the cusp. Tree leaves are yellow. I haven't seen a bird in weeks. People on the patio hold themselves in. No one is dressed properly. Wasn't it just summertime? Wasn't it just completely warm?

As I sit down on the built-in bench that my ex-boyfriend and his roommates built when they moved in last year, his phone rings. That was part of the deal with the guy who owns the house. They're supposed to be working on it all the time. This way, their rent is lower. My ex reaches in his pocket, pulls his phone out, looks at the number, and then answers it. He sees me and nods. Daniel sees me. He also nods. I don't nod. I feel lame when I nod. Daniel wears glasses, not Buddy Holly glasses, but vaguely updated John Lennon glasses and his hair, which is brown and longish, is tucked behind his ears. I bet he has a good sense of humor.

"It's Daniel, right?"

More nodding. "And what's your name?" He reaches his hand out to shake mine.

"Kate," I say. I thumb in the direction of my ex. "We met a few months ago at his birthday party downtown."

"That's right. How old is he now?"

"25," I say.

"We're all getting very old," he says.

So then we don't say anything. We just kind of look around everywhere. There are random party-goers. Music is playing. The neighborhood around us is quiet. My ex-boyfriend hangs up his phone and puts

it back in his pocket. His jeans are baggy and he's wearing his running shoes with the laces that always come undone. I point down and he follows my finger. He bends over and ties his shoe, double knots it.

"Hey," he says, "you came."

"Here I am."

"What's up?"

I smile and say, "Nothing is up."

He looks past me. "Did you bring Jake?"

"It didn't work out with Jake," I say.

Daniel excuses himself. His body gets absorbed into the house that is getting fuller by the hour.

Jake was not his name; my cousin's dog's name is Jake. He's confused, but I don't correct him. My ex-boyfriend is relaxed, like I'm a comfortable piece of the background he's used to seeing. He's the host, and he's doing his hosting business, which is being friendly.

"That's too bad," he says. "Jake seemed like a nice guy."

He met him for a half second once when we all bumped into each other at a bar a few weeks ago. The guy was just a guy I'd met that evening who followed me around for awhile because I had cigarettes. We did not sleep together, but we could have. I could have. I wanted my ex-boyfriend to know I was wanted so when I saw him and his friends, I laced my fingers through the guy's and held on tight.

My cup is nearly empty. It's a screwdriver, heavy on the vodka because I made it myself. It's the only thing keeping my head up right now, and it's what speaks this next line: "You seemed like a nice guy too, and we didn't work out."

My ex-boyfriend is never outwardly fazed. He looks at me and smiles like it's no big deal I'm sitting in front of him.

"So, why not?" I ask.

"Why not what?" He asks, as though he's confused as to why we're still talking. "Why didn't we work out?"

My stomach swirls faster and faster and I want to put my arms out to brace myself.

"There was something crazy going on with your underwear," he finally says.

Someone nearby pulls out a pack of cigarettes and offers us one. No, thank you. I have to sit here and pretend I'm not dying.

Our knees are almost touching; they're like two magnets swirling in empty space waiting for a bump in the energy to cling together. It's just going to take one small push and they'll click together. Snap.

"What?" I ask, trying hard to use the moment to hate him.

The liquor starts to like the way his face looks. His jaw is straight and strong. The light from inside is dusting one side of his face while the other is dark, making his features, like his cheekbones, which are smooth and high, stand out even more than usual. He is still for a moment, and my heart pounds. Our banter has shifted, like wading from the shallow to the deep end. He taps his foot. "Your underwear reminded me of my grandma's underwear."

"You spend a lot of time looking at your grandma in her underwear?" I ask. Self-defense, the aggressively playful kind, isn't something I do on a regular basis. Vodka helps. He laughs a little because he isn't sure if I'm joking, and he thinks if he laughs and takes it as a joke, then I will also have to take it as a joke. It's a trick. He is always tricking me.

He said to me after our first date, "I really like you." He said, "You're amazing." "I want you." He stayed all night. He kept a toothbrush in my bathroom. It was six months we were together. My personal record. He'd been with his last girlfriend for three years, since college. One of the things he'd said in his break-up speech was that he'd been talking to this girl again and while he was sure he didn't feel anything for her, he wasn't sure he felt anything for anyone. He was numb. My word was rebound. He said, no, time. He just needed time.

He peers into my cup. "If I know you—and I do—it's about time for you to have another drink."

"Wait. Are you telling me I wear granny panties?"

But he doesn't hear me because he's walking away. I give him the finger behind his back, but then I feel depressed and want to apologize even though he didn't see it. There is space under the bench. I could crawl in and stay there, shivering, shaking, until someone lures me out with the promise of something rich.

I'd planned on stopping after two drinks, but now I have the underwear comment looping in my mind. I have us, in his bedroom, getting me to my panties, me taking them off, him feeling repulsed. I have me getting dressed to go to work, taking off my towel in front of him, slip-

ping on a pair of underwear and him averting his eyes. I have a drawer at home where I keep the underwear and I want to bring it over here, dump it in his living room, and set it on fire. I'm mortified. So, Plan B: keep drinking.

A guy sits next to me, like he'd been waiting for the spot all night, like we're playing musical chairs and jockeying for seats. I notice that he has a pack of cigarettes sticking out of his jacket pocket, so I ask him for one.

My ex-boyfriend is not a smoker, not even socially. He finds the habit weak and disgusting. I used to smoke. It was a long time ago when I was a whole other person with a whole other set of issues. Then, when he broke up with me, which was on a Monday night at the end of summer, I decided to smoke one cigarette. I got in my car and drove to the Circle K on the corner. The cigarette hurt. My lungs had forgotten the way the smoke felt, the choking, gasping feeling followed by a swoosh of euphoria. After that first, long drag I had to put my hand out against the wall of the Circle K. I almost passed out. I couldn't finish it.

The next morning the full pack was on the counter. It was so perfect and new and fresh and I had another one. After lunch, I had another one. By dinner I was halfway done with it. By the noon the next day, I had finished the whole thing.

He knew I was a smoker. He'd see me in pictures with my finger curled around a cigarette. He'd listen to my stories about cravings. He'd tell me he's glad I didn't smoke anymore. It would make him not want to kiss me.

I smoke tonight because I need to. My body hurts without it. I know he could see me. I know at any second he could poke his head out of the door and see the smoke rising from me so I do it fast, trying to get it in. I am immediately calm. I am immediately right. The guy sitting next to me talks about how he only knows one person here, and he feels awkward. He asks me if I'm having a good time. He tells me his name is Alan.

I take long drags and blow the smoke up above me, sending it to God or Whoever, and looking into the house in case he comes back, then I hold it down, away from view. I nod when Alan says something, but keep my eyes on the door.



The nicotine rolls out from my lungs and enters into my bloodstream, heading straight into my head where the booze is hanging out. When they meet, they crash, and I feel dizzy. It's a good dizzy. It's a my-underwear-is-comfortable dizzy. Nothing is crawling up where it shouldn't. It's doing the job underwear was meant to do. I stand up, and Alan looks startled. I say, "You seem super awesome," and I go inside.

My ex sitting on the couch, talking to a girl who has dark skin and light eyes partially hidden under a cascade of silky brown-black hair. She looks Columbian. She's wearing a tank top and jeans, so I guess she forgot about the weather, too. Or maybe her skin is warm from living in Columbia.

He laughs at something she says, and she looks down at her lap, almost self-consciously, like she wasn't expecting herself to be funny. Their knees are touching. I hear him ask, "Are you here with anyone?"

When she shakes her head no, I walk into the kitchen and pour a bunch of liquor in a cup. I can't find a spoon or anything else to stir it with, so I just slosh it around.

A blonde girl follows me in looking for beer. There is a ton on the patio in the cooler. I know he doesn't want people in the fridge. I used to tell him not to stock the fridge if he didn't want people in it.

"There's some in the fridge," I say.

She opens the door and kneels down. "Ah, ha," she says.

With the door shut, she looks around again. I scoot past her and pluck the bottle opener-magnet off the fridge. It says Beer Me in big, exaggerated letters. I bought it for him last summer. I hand it to her, and it ends up in her pocket.

My roommate is here somewhere, and I meander around the party trying to find her. I need to talk to her and tell her about the underwear thing. I need to tell someone about the underwear thing.

Earlier that night while we were getting ready, I said to her that she should just up and go at some point, leaving me stranded so he would have no choice but to hang out with me. Then he'd realize his error. I am still amazing.

She isn't out back, she isn't inside, and she isn't in the garage. I walk out front and look for her boyfriend's car. Eventually, I stand in the space where it was parked and Daniel walks by smoking a cigarette.

He gives me a little wave, and I give a little wave back.

“Hey,” I yell out after him. “Can I bum a smoke?”

“Oh yeah,” he says, reaching into his cargo shorts. He offers me a Camel, and lets me use his lighter. It’s a Zippo.

“Nice,” I say, after I light the cigarette. “Very fancy.”

“I’m a fancy guy,” he says, and continues walking. “Have a nice night.”

“Thank you,” I say after him.

I stand alone in the street and smoke, this time slower and with deliberation. I watch him walk, watch the way his legs go and the way his arms go. He walks like he’s carrying something on his back that he doesn’t want to let go.



I am on the couch for a long time before my ex-boyfriend comes around with the drink he promised me a long time ago.

“I’ve been looking for you,” he says, handing me a drink. “Here.”

What did I do with my other drink? So I drink his drink and he sits next to me on the couch for a long time telling me about this guy Alan he invited tonight. He’s smart. He has a lot of interesting things to say about the world. He’s a really great guy. Blah, blah, blah, Alan, blah, blah, blah, blah Alan. I break the news to him my roommate has taken off without me.

“I’d drive you home,” he says, “but I’ve had too much to drink.”

We’re in close together, which feels strange and out of place. He puts his hand on my arm. My stomach drops. He acts like he’s going to kiss me. He doesn’t. I get up to go the bathroom.

The downstairs bathroom is occupied. The upstairs one is covered in boy. There is a dirty ring around the toilet bowl and grime in all the corners. The sink is coated in soap scum and beard clippings. The mirror is smeared with water marks. I pick up a bottle of mouth wash. It’s old and the top is crusted over in green. Now I smell like Listerine cigarettes. His toothbrush is worn and in need of replacement, but I use it anyway.



The alcohol runs out a little after midnight and the people leave. I pour a glass of water from the sink and chug it, hoping that will ward off a hangover. Alan comes in the kitchen and sets his plastic cup in the sink as though it's a porcelain doll.

I grab his arm and say to hold on. I have to show him something. I don't have to unbutton my jeans because my underwear is poking out the top, but I unbutton them anyway.

He stares at me.

"What do you think?"

"What?"

"My underwear."

He takes a breath and then frowns. "It's nice." He rubs the back of his neck and takes another breath: a quivering, insane breath. "Is this an invitation?"

I let go of the elastic band and it snaps back against my skin. "Oh my God," I say.

Alan flushes. He puts his hands in his pockets and walks out of the kitchen, muttering something under his breath about the cold air. The house is cold. My ex says they are trying to wait another few weeks to turn the heat on, at least until after the first freeze. I find him in his room getting ready for bed.

He tosses me a t-shirt, which I plan on keeping. He tells me he'll be back. His room is smaller than I remember, though it hasn't been that long since I've been in it. It's cleaner than the bathroom, which doesn't say much. I snatch a pair of boxers from his top drawer. When he returns, he has an extra blanket and a glass of water and Tylenol and I am under the covers. He puts the water and the Tylenol on the dresser.

"For you, later," he says.

He gets into bed. I'm on my back, adjusting to the dark. He's on his side, wearing a t-shirt, which is distracting because he always sleeps without a shirt. I have the distinct feeling I could lie awake like this all night, thinking about I don't know what, and going slightly mad from the quiet. I laugh a little about Alan. What a guy, that Alan. He asks me what's funny. I say nothing.

I turn on my side, so I'm looking at the back of his head and almost before I had settled he flips around so that he's facing me. He's been waiting for me to move.

“Are you sleeping?”

“No,” I say. “I’m too drunk to sleep.”

“Me too.” He reaches out and touches my thigh, but pulls his hand back right away. “Are you wearing my underwear?”

“Yeah,” I said.

I’m foolishly expecting, at any moment, for him to say he is sorry. He’s sorry he is disparaging about my habits, he’s sorry he isn’t crazy-obsessively in love with me, he’s sorry about what he said about my underwear, he’s sorry all my dreams aren’t coming true, he’s sorry I’m at his party too old to be this drunk, too old to not understand my own limits, he’s sorry he isn’t solving my problems, he’s sorry I can’t seem to move past him, he’s sorry I can’t say what I really feel, which is that I just need him to be sorry. I need him to hold my hand, or put his foot on my foot, or take off his t-shirt.

It goes on a minute too long. It goes on two minutes, three minutes too long and I’m starting to figure out that he’s waiting for me to take off my clothes or invite him over to this side of the bed. It’s the opposite side of the bed I used to sleep on, and maybe I’m the only one who realizes that. I just have to move my body. Just a little bit.

We face each other with our eyes closed. After a long time, he turns on his back and sighs. I know that means he’s about to fall asleep. I get up to go to the bathroom, then take the extra blanket off the bed and go downstairs.



In the morning, he shakes me awake.

“Kate,” he says, softly.

I’m confused for a minute, thinking we’re somewhere else. And he’s someone else. And I’m someone else. And what did I dream about last night? I think I was in my fourth grade classroom.

“What time is it?”

“Six.”

“What the hell?” I sit up.

He goes into the kitchen and comes out with a mug of coffee. “Want some?” He doesn’t ask me why I’m on the couch. He doesn’t ask me why I’m not with him, upstairs, where the heat has risen.

I stare at him. “I want to go to back to sleep. Let me just go sleep in your room. I’ll call someone for a ride later.”

“Come on,” he says, turning away from me. “I’ll take you home.”

I pull myself together and then follow him out. He apologizes for his truck. It’s full of junk. He opens the passenger side door for me and starts to move everything.

“It’s really cold,” I say, “I don’t care. Just, let me in and turn on the heat.”

He starts the truck—it’s an old Nissan that is probably going to crap out soon—and we idle for a moment. It has to warm up. The heater is pumping cold air. I close my eyes and almost lean on him—almost—but I catch myself and open my eyes again. I look at him from the side. His face is puffy, and he looks tired. He’s wearing a baseball cap, the A’s.

“You’re kind of chipper,” I say.

“I just have things to get done,” he says.

We’re driving down his street, and it’s still dark. No one is out. No joggers. No dog walkers. It’s dead out there.

“What things? What do you have to do at six on a Saturday?”

“We’re moving into our new building,” he says. When he turns, he doesn’t use his signal, which always used to bother me. “They’re disconnecting our servers on Monday, and I have some deadlines.”

“I’m still drunk,” I say.

I’m sitting in the middle of the truck, almost straddling the gear shift. I move around, trying to get comfortable.

“Sorry,” he says.

“It’s fine.”

“You wanted to get in before I could move anything.”

“Fine.”

I turn the heat down, because now it’s blasting in my face and making my eyes dry. I flip the vents up. He reaches between my legs to shift. I should have been ready for that, but I was watching the cold outside and didn’t realize what had happened until it was over.



## *Deep Pockets*

BY CYNTHIA HAWKINS

Garage-sale variety olive-green corduroy, elbow patches, hems too short. His jacket pocket produced answers one afternoon like strips of paper from cracked fortune cookies. The pocket on the right, to be exact. It had been an ordinary jacket, but then as he stood on the corner of Huisache and Market Streets, angled toward the vast parking lot and pausing to pinch the bridge of his nose, eyes closed, he was thinking, what the hell have I done? And the second he jammed his hands into his jacket pockets the right one answered with a small paper ribbon lapping at his knuckles. He thumbed it free. Unfolded it. You have made an ass of yourself, it read in the small, even print of capital letters. At first, he'd thought announcing a weight-loss competition for the women of his office had been a good idea. Now his pocket confirmed what the sick sprawl in his ribs and Annette Demarcolo's middle finger had told him already. It was not.

What should I have for dinner? He tried again, thinking his question.

Vodka martini, his pocket said.

What's my name?

Derek.

Why'd that neighbor kid unstring my doorbell and plug it with marshmallows?

Nothing in response. Empty pockets.

What lottery number will be next to win?

The lining rumbled as he twisted his hand in deep. Nothing again. So there were limits.

Why did I eat the marshmallows out of the doorbell before I fixed the short it made? He asked.

You were teaching the kid a lesson, was the right pocket's response. Did he learn it?

Silence.

Did I learn it?

No, said the paper that materialized in the pocket.

There were limits to what he could ask his right pocket, then, he decided with a knowing squint behind his aviator glasses as he steered his car onto Market Street. Why am I so goddamned handsome? He asked in thought with a laugh. At the stoplight, he dug the paper from his pocket and read the answer with a diminishing grin.

You're not.

He slumped in his seat, the slip of paper flitting free. The light changed. His car remained unmoved. In the big silence squeezing in on him, he thought, Why am I alone? This was a rhetorical, but the pocket rustled. Cars behind him honked.

Vodka martinis, the paper fresh from his pocket read.

He stared down at the words through another cycle of lights, and then his side mirror grew dark with the figure of a man pushing denim cuffs up his forearms. Derek scrambled for the door locks too late and was yanked out by the lapels. Hand in his pocket, he asked, what do I do now? And the curl of paper, stuck to his clammy palm, read, stand still. He could hear the thin smacks of fists like it was somewhere else, a sound on a radio two cars away, perhaps. When he could focus again he realized he was staring down at a string of blood and saliva connecting his lip to the asphalt. There were sirens. A small crowd clustered along the curb. Imagining himself on the nightly news and Annette Demarcolo spewing her drink between her fingers in a laugh, he crawled back into his car and drove fast.

Yet he found himself on Annette's lawn, his car parked, half-cocked on the curb. He ripped off the jacket and threw it into the shrubs clumped under the front windows. He'd driven by here many times and never stopped, thinking as he'd steered past that these same shrubs would have been a good place to hide, right where the drapes gap and the slim vision of Annette in hot-rollers and a slip slurping a Red Bull would surely present itself. Pacing, rumpling his hair, cleaning his

nose with his sleeve, he stopped, leaned to his knees, breathed. What am I doing here? He eyed the jacket. Took slow steps to where it lay, tangled and twisted. Poked at it with the toe of his dress shoe. Then he rifled through the pockets with the gusto of a criminal.

You're going to tell her you're in love with her.

His breath made the paper in his fingers flutter when he asked, "Should I?" He slipped the jacket back on and tried the pocket as Annette's car came over the gutter at the end of the driveway with a thump.

Absolutely.

Dropping the paper on the lawn, he turned to watch as Annette rose from the passenger door, her mouth open, jaw aslant. She clutched her purse, her keys to her chest. Everything in her hands moved with her breath. "What the hell?" Her voice cracked.

"Annette," he said, his hand outstretched. "I'm in love with you."

"That's it!" She hurried toward her front door. "Something's wrong with you and I'm filing another complaint and if you're not off my lawn in five seconds," she said as the front door closed over her puckered face, "I'm calling the police, asshole." Then she stepped aside, into the window, holding the drapes back long enough to point at him and then mime a cut throat. The drapes fell shut again.

He smoothed his hair back. Straightened the lapels. Made his way to the car. As his hands ran down the length of the jacket, he felt something suddenly lumped in the left pocket. A piece of paper, big and folded in random, frantic angles, letters like magazine scraps in a ransom note. Stop listening to him, it read. He hates us.



When I've finally had enough to drink to be able to talk to him, I find my ex-boyfriend on his back porch. He's finishing the last of his beer and talking to a guy named Daniel. The weather is on the cusp. Tree leaves are yellow. I haven't seen a bird in weeks. People on the patio hold themselves in. No one is dressed properly. Wasn't it just summertime? Wasn't it just completely warm?

As I sit down on the built-in bench that my ex-boyfriend and his roommates built when they moved in last year, his phone rings. That



was part of the deal with the guy who owns the house. They're supposed to be working on it all the time. This way, their rent is lower. My ex reaches in his pocket, pulls his phone out, looks at the number, and then answers it. He sees me and nods. Daniel sees me. He also nods. I don't nod. I feel lame when I nod. Daniel wears glasses, not Buddy Holly glasses, but vaguely updated John Lennon glasses and his hair, which is brown and longish, is tucked behind his ears. I bet he has a good sense of humor.

"It's Daniel, right?"

