

Longshot Down Undah

by Dennis Mahagin

After the Narcotics Anonymous meeting, they stopped to chat under a maple tree in the parking lot. She said, "Do you want to get some coffee at the I Hop, hon?" . . . He replied, "Awwwww, some place, yeah, but anywhere but there."

They ended up at the Denny's by Portland State, in a window booth across from a counter that's the same, everywhere.

When the coffee came, she told the story of getting trapped on a cruise ship with this prick named Tad, who talked and talked nonstop in a fake Australian accent. "It got real old, real quick," she said, taking a tentative sip. He liked the way she opened the sugar packets with a gap in her front teeth, the little creamer containers succumbing to thumbnail. He said "I can only imagine," looking up to see the young Jamaican waitress in her Kelly green dress humming *One* by U2, holding the refill pot. His hand shook hovering no thanks, above his cup.

"So anyway this guy Tad," she said, "kept saying things like *Guh Die!* and *Oy!* right? Then he threw in . . . like *Defenestration, Subdural Hama Toma . . .*" She said, "he actually said *red skies at night*... He said stuff like 'Crikey that's a knife'," she said, "it was bad, really really, really . . . bad."

He nodded past his jitters, his naked, nascent sobriety. He said, "Yeah, so the phony Aussie Tad, sad killer of the sea cruise . . ." And she giggled. Then they looked

out the window at a darkened Arthur Street, half past ten, streetlights blazing through winter mist, hothouse globes the color of honey.

When she touched his barely trembling hand across the table, his reflection in the glass did the double take. He watched, stolid as any plastic Ken doll atop a wedding cake. Then a voice came said, Be yourself, it can't hurt forever.

He said, "I've only ever ridden a ferry, and I guess the fact is I've been very lonely."

She was quiet, as the waitress returned with the same sly smile. Dreadlocks swinging, she set down their check. They got up to pay, and she said "That's okay," squeezing his hand, "on your worst day you're still thousands of light years ahead of Tad." They laughed some more, and she said, "you never told me what . . . you got against I Hop."

She tucked her head against his shoulder as they stepped outside, together, well on their way since God is pretty romantic, after all, He may have righted the ship.

