

In the Face of Death

by Ivan Reyes

The little fat, chunky, pink cheeked boy stood looking at the old man, holding a balloon, with his rotund torso poking out of his undersized blue and white striped shirt. The old man grinned, thinking "Little shit." He was grabbing a can of beans. His shopping cart was nearly empty. A head of cabbage, dish soap, body soap, a toothbrush, floss. Socks. The little boy's mother called, "Malcom!" He went scurrying off towards the frozen section, disappearing behind the shrimp. The old man took his cart in the opposite direction, towards the cheeses, and he tossed a hunk of cheddar into the squeaky cart. Employees were desperately trying to dry off the carts that came in from outside where it poured down in seemingly biblical quantities, and not a sign of stopping in sight. Don't tell me this is it, the old man thought.

Employees scurried back and forth gathering the carts. The manager knew it was a liability. One slip and he'd be out on his ass, with no girlfriend because he knew a woman of that level of beauty was only interested in an average looking man like himself because of the apartment he was able to afford. And this job hinged on that. Everything hinged on something precarious. His happiness hinged happily on his vanity. His vanity hinged darkly on his hidden desires. His hidden desires hinged dumbly on his genes. His genes --

A red haired girl came sauntering in, clocked in, and asked someone she didn't know what the hell was going on and the young man blinked at her presence and finally spoke, he said the carts were the number one priority. She rolled her eyes. He felt rejected. She was totally and completely in the dark about his current feelings of being rejected. He walked away and she grew irritated at the prospect of another shift. She put on her hat, and walked into the back area, where she found a locker that held her name badge and a tube of chap stick.

The water in the parking lot is rising. The manager is thinking about his girlfriend. The old man is getting into his car. When he gets home -- he already knows for an immutable fact -- his wife will be gone, yet her scent will linger. Good riddance, he thought, turning the key. Who needs a cheater, he thought as the engine gently hummed in the rain.

The little boy will grow up and grow into a coffin. So will his mother. So will his father. Nice pine or oak, otherwise wooden coffins lined with satin. Well cushioned. A hundred cars drove down the street. Memories are but disappearing fumes. Across the intersection and down the street from the grocery store there was a bus stop and sat there was an old man -- a different old man.

He puffs resignedly at a cigarette. A man who knows a mortal when he sees one. A man who loves mortals. Mortal heart. Dying lungs. Resigned to it.

His current thoughts: oh, Sophie, where are you now? Are you watching television? Are you happy? I know you're happy. You were always happy. You were always red in the face with living and breathing life within you and somewhere you still are. Somewhere. You always cooked the best. I could eat all day. I miss going to bed with you...

He blushed.

In his red Camaro he roared down the highway in his youth and spotted her walking down a dirt path, lined with unending rows of yellow and green corn on either side. The back of her shirt was dark with sweat.

He whistled out a long, loud piercing whistle into the sky and she heard it as he'd hoped but was more annoyed by it than amused. She

turned and he trekked his red car down the dirt path where she had been walking and sidled up to her and said, "You live far from here?" And he hid his eyes from her. She pointed at a big, red and white two story house beyond the corn and against the mountains, "Just there fella. But you, you look far from home," and she let out a hurtful and condescending giggle.

The bus lurched to a stop. He hopped on. He hands the driver a bus pass. The bus driver took it and handed it back. He nodded at the old man. The old man tried to find a seat. The bus was near full. He sat at the very back on a bench and cracked a window open so that the wind could kiss his tired cheeks and knowing face. The driver held hard to the steering wheel. The storm was taking a toll. The lightning crashed on and off. People looked bemused and distracted in their cars. This was not a good sign for the veteran bus driver. One of the worst storms he'd ever seen, by his estimation. He could imagine a pilot beyond the storms and he dreamed and dreamed and drove the bus steady. He mused about astronauts. How they could see the whole damn thing, the whole damn storm for what it was. Small. Insignificant. Passing. In the vastness of space. There's nothing to hold onto. Sounds about right, thought the driver. He thought of his own birth in Detroit in the bad part of town. His mother was single and she tried her best but had a habit. He thought he'd save her. Maybe he still could. Nothing's ever over. Nothing's ever over. People just give up and fall weak down to their tired knees knowing that another ounce of strength might tap out the well and not knowing how long the road is it may be wiser to stay still. The skies grew dark. His foot was steady. He kept a distance from every car on the road and he reached an intersection with the traffic light defunct. He turned his bus around and parked in the parking lot of a Denny's, he put it in park, he stood up. He said, "Alright, everybody, I'm sorry to say we're sitting here till things lighten up. Now, the traffic light don't work. I can't see shit passed my windshield. Let's just hold tight. I promise when it lightens up we'll be on our way." Just then a small red truck shot

down the road and into the intersection where it met sideways with a pale, beige, gold Sebring and it took the Sebring with it down the road and the cars both swayed until they knocked over a telephone pole and burst into flames, together. The passengers sat looking at the macabre scene horrified.

"See, he was always in the way of trouble if he wasn't causing trouble. Back when I first met him when he met me walking home from a friend's house and he looked so handsome in his dark sunglasses and tight fitting t-shirt he looked like a character right out of a James Dean picture and the way he fumbled with his words I simply had a duty to tease him. And he got so angry though I knew I'd fall for him and it would all be ok to tease him in this way. And we got married and bought a place out in Illinois and things were good till he got drafted and then he went off and I tried to be faithful but eventually the letters became less and less and a woman has to feel something, and sometimes feeling shame is better than feeling nothing and feeling like you are nothing and nobody ever knew. I knew, though. And he came back and I regaled him as a hero and always made sure everything was as perfect as I could make it but he didn't care, he was stuck in some recess in his mind where grenades exploded and young men cried as they died. And I wanted him back but he never found his way out of that nightmare. And then I got sick."

The pale moonlight sits upon a snowy Illinois hospital. A doctor makes his rounds. He walked into room 404 and shook Harry's hand, "Sir, you may want to sit for this." It had started to make its way into her other organs. There was only a ten percent chance of survival. Harry hung his head low holding onto Sophie's hand.

"I shook his hand before I left but he seemed gone. At my desk I shot back some whiskey and ruminated. Being a doctor. All doctors are front and center to god's manic comedy act. He was a shit comedian."

The doctor got into his car. He is heading to his empty home.
"Everyone is dying all the time," he thinks. Once home, he sleeps
and dreams of eternal pleasantries and the central heat keeps him
comfortable.

