

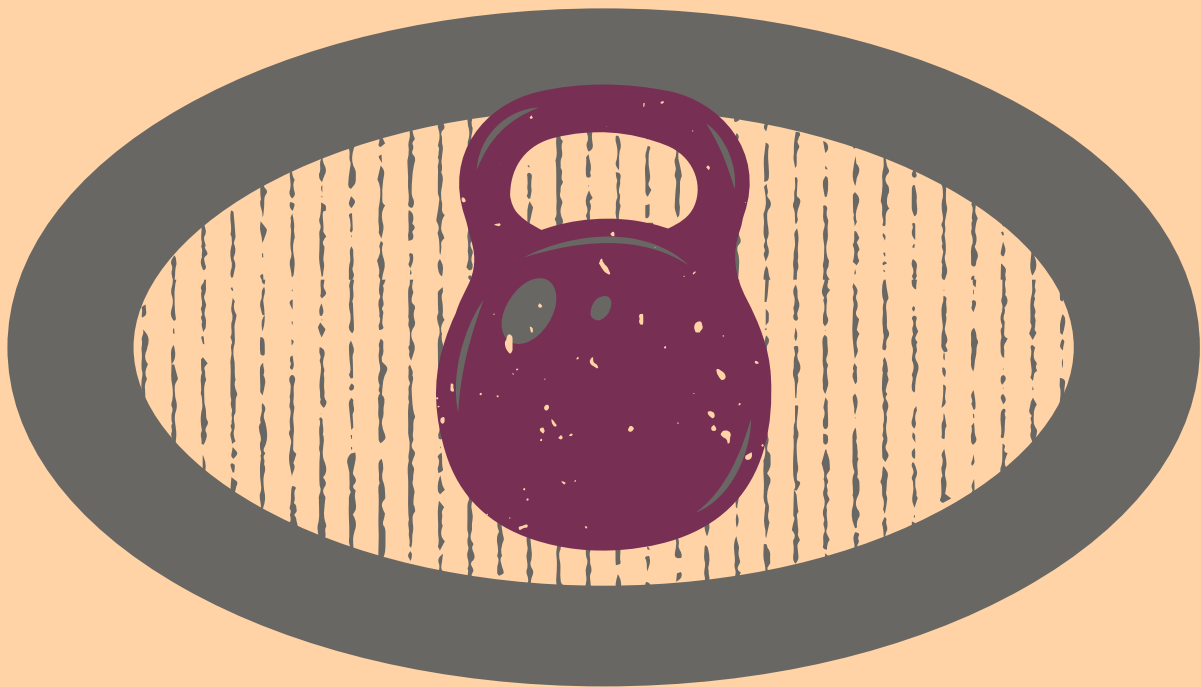
# **SHORT STORY NIGHT**

FEATURING FICTION & INTERVIEW WITH:

***KYLE SEIBEL***

ADDITIONAL FICTION BY:

***DENNIS JOHNSON***



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# At This Week's Meeting of the Young Mountain Movers

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 [tacobellquarterly.org/at-this-weeks-meeting-of-the-young-mountain-movers/](https://tacobellquarterly.org/at-this-weeks-meeting-of-the-young-mountain-movers/)

April 20, 2022

At this week's meeting of the Young Mountain Movers, there would be no talk, Pastor Matt said. Instead, we would be doing an exercise. This, he said, gesturing to a circle of chairs in the center of the room covered with brown butcher paper and held together with painters tape, was The Cave.

What's in there, Robin Dernberger asked.

The answer, Pastor Matt said.

The answer to what, Greg Horne asked.

To the only question there is, Pastor Matt said.

We went into The Cave and sat down in a circle. Pastor Matt tugged his ball cap low and opened in prayer. He led us in singing a church song and then another one. After he put his guitar down, he looked up at us with shiny eyes.

Right now there are kids just like you trapped in a cave just like this.

Just like this? Jeremy Howser asked, poking at the brown butcher paper.

On the other side of the world, Pastor Matt said. He told us to close our eyes. Now imagine it. You're all just messing around with your coach, and that's me, I'm your coach and, we're all a team of some sort, okay? And we do this all the time, just explore together. Except this time, it happens in a way where we can't leave, so now we're trapped and we can't, you know. Get out.

I can get out, Greg Horne said, lifting a corner of the butcher paper.

I can too, said Jeremy Howser, trying to peel off the painters tape without tearing it. Sorry, he said, tearing it.

Pastor Matt reminded everyone that our eyes were supposed to be closed and described our surroundings and how dire our situation was. Do you feel it, he said, his voice shaking slightly. How close death is in this place? Can you smell its sulfur breath? And it's, well, it's just very uncomfortable too. Cold. Wet. You're miserable, is what it comes down to. I mean, there's really no hope. So every breath is one more closer to, you know, dying, and I mean, that fact is staring you right in the face. So now you're basically panicking, right? And remember death's hot breath? Well, it's closer now and—

Greg Horne interrupted by making a long and loud farting sound with his palms and lips. Pastor Matt bowed his head and waited for the laughter to peter out. He looked around at each of our faces and smiled thinly.

See, now, I'm actually glad you did that. Because that's one way to deal with it, I suppose. Like it's all a big joke. But tell me, Greg. What do you see when you close your eyes? Hm? What special treatment do your farts buy you in The Cave? Think about it, I'm serious.

None, I guess, Greg Horne said after thinking about it.

None, Pastor Matt repeated with his eyes closed.

Pastor Matt, Robin Dernberger said. My mom is doing the snack this week and she texted me that she's here with a bunch of Taco Bell and that she needs help carrying and that she's parked in the loading zone out back.

Darn it, Pastor Matt said, opening his eyes and looking at his watch. Okay, well. Darn it. Wait, don't all go. Just one second. Okay, so The Cave is really the world because well, that's the lesson, okay? So please remember to pray for those boys in Thailand, yes, but when they get out of their cave, there's going to be another one, yeah? Because The Cave is the world, do you get that? It's all one big cave and that's why Jesus—okay guys, yeah tear it up, that's right, but you get it? Because what's really outside The Cave is Heaven and that's really where we're going after we get rescued and that's the Jesus part? Everyone gets that? Rachel, explain it back to me.

Do you mean Rachel P. or Rachel W.? someone asked.

Rachel P. is at her dad's this week, someone else said.

Then I mean the only Rachel here today, Pastor Matt said in a sharp voice. Everyone stopped and looked at him.

Rachel Palmers' eyes went wide and darting. Um, that Jesus saves us from The Cave? she said.

Yes, basically, Pastor Matt said, standing and adjusting the brim of his ball cap. He looked around at the torn and crushed paper. Yes, that's basically it, he said.

Greg Horne lingered as the rest of the group rushed out the double doors. Pastor Matt, I think I have a question, he said. How do we know what's outside The Cave?

Pastor Matt was collecting scraps of brown butcher paper in a garbage bag. It's a, uh, do you do metaphors in school yet? Okay, well, it's one of those. It's pretend to make a point.

So it's not a real cave after we die?

Pastor Matt turned to face him. No, no, no. Life is The Cave, Greg. The world is The Cave. After The Cave is heaven. Because of Easter, remember?

Yeah, Greg Horne said. But I think I still have a question though? Because I think, okay so how do we know? Like, if our whole lives are in The Cave, then how do we know what's outside of it is better or even different? Like, what if after this cave there's just another cave? Or what if it's just... nothing?

Pastor Matt looked into his garbage bag and frowned. He cleared his throat and said, Well, but didn't say anything after. His forehead creased. He stayed like that for a long moment. Eventually, he bent down and returned to picking up the shreds of paper. Greg Horne started to leave and was almost out the door before Pastor Matt said, Greg hold on a second. When he looked back, Pastor Matt's eyes were shiny again.

Because of the Bible, Pastor Matt said, in a cracked voice. Because that's what it says. I mean, there's also the, uh, well, I'm forgetting it now for some reason. I mean, I don't know, really. I mean, I'm sorry, I guess. He swallowed. Does that answer your question?

Greg Horne said it did.

Courtney Cousins spilled her Baja Blast and Kenny Lucas ate seven soft tacos before getting sick in the volleyball court and Sharon Hutchinson was pulled aside for a quick chat about being too cliquey and why it's so important to include girls like Kathy Fleming and boys like Gary Medina because they maybe don't have as many friends at their schools, so Mountain Movers becomes a really important part of their week and to keep that in mind, just for next time. And when Pastor Matt was bending down to say this, he took off his ball cap to look Sharon Hutchinson in the eye and when he did, she saw that his hair was different in a way that made her feel sad.

C'mon, Pastor Matt said, quickly putting the hat back on.

They rejoined the rest of the Young Mountain Movers and Pastor Matt stood in the middle of the multipurpose room and waved his hands. This is a good group, he said. Don't you think? I just can't say enough good things about you guys. Don't I say that Mrs. Dernberger? Always how much I love this group?

You do, Mrs. Dernberger said, who had stayed for Taco Bell.

See? I'm serious. Best part of my week, right here, Pastor Matt said.

Other parents began arriving for pick up. They kept their coats on and waited for Pastor Matt to close the meeting in prayer.

Okay gang, let's bow our heads. Heavenly Father, we just come to you tonight in prayer and in fellowship this day, this day you have given us, Lord Jesus, and we thank you God for the opportunity we have to be here and worship you with our relationships with each other. And I just pray for each of these Mountain Movers, Father God, that you may guide them through their own Caves, God, and you deliver them, you rescue them because they are your faithful explorers. Because you are a kind God, a just God, and you do not tempt your children, no Jesus, you merely test us, and uh, the Bible says, the Bible says you will not give us more than we can bear, so I guess that means if it's happening then I can bear it, right? You know, I mean, because—

Amen, Pastor Matt, one of the parents said.

Thank you, Pastor Matt, another parent said.

You can beat this thing, Jeremy Howser's dad said and next to him Robin Dernberger's mom touched the corners of her eyes with a Taco Bell napkin.

Amen, Pastor Matt said, in a voice just above a whisper.

Everyone rumbled Amen in response and the fluorescent lights in the multipurpose room flickered overhead. Coats were zipped, key fobs blorped, and Pastor Matt locked the doors behind us. We sat in the backseats of our warm little cars and drove out into the pale dark, each of us buoyed, at least for the moment, by the unshakeable belief that everyone can be saved.

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# Mr. Bananaman | JOYLAND

[joylandmagazine.com/fiction/mr-bananaman/](http://joylandmagazine.com/fiction/mr-bananaman/)

January 24, 2023

“I’m looking for some friendly faces,” he says, popping the lid off his coffee and blowing on it. “Some students—*former* students, only the brightest ones, just to, *you* know—and I’m not saying you think one way or the other about my situation, but the idea—my lawyer’s really—was to have a few voices saying—not denying or defending, just *saying*—that okay, hey, is this guy perfect? No, not by a long shot, but what he also happens to be is a damn good high school physics teacher. So okay.” He takes a sip of the coffee. “So that’s what I’m asking.”

“Mr. Menninger—”

“Please,” he says, reaching across the table and touching my elbow. “Brian.”

“Brian,” I say, pulling back. “I don’t—”

“Listen, do I need to tell you this? You weren’t—I mean, I reached out to a bunch of other students before you. I guess I’m kind of desperate? Ha ha. Not many takers, is what I’m saying. So far it’s ah, let’s see. No one and possibly you. Of course my lawyer was thinking it would help if it were, you know, more *recent* students. Don’t think that because I asked other kids first that means you weren’t a top student because obviously you were. I mean, c’mon.” He points through the window to the car I arrived in, my mom’s new silver Audi. “Big shot. You know, I see so many kids and it’s always obvious who are the special ones. They’re just *different*. Destined for bigger things.”

I can tell by the way he’s talking that he’s waiting for me to cut him off or say thank you, but the thing is, I didn’t have Mr. Menninger for physics in high school. He didn’t coach any teams I was on and he didn’t run any of my extracurriculars. In fact, the only direct interaction I can recall having with him prior to meeting at this Starbucks was during my first week of high school, fifteen years ago.

Mr. Menninger was supervising the lunchroom. He stood guarding the doors that went out to the courtyard. He kept flipping his walkie talkie in the air and catching it behind his back.

I didn’t know his name, but I wanted to go home.

“Um, sir?” I said after dumping my tray in the garbage. “I’m feeling pretty nauseous, I think?”

Mr. Menninger glanced briefly my way and then kept flipping the walkie talkie. “No, you’re not,” he said.

“Um, I’m not?”

Mr. Menninger hooked the walkie on his belt. “Well, I suppose you could be, but I highly doubt it. You see, *nauseous* means you make others sick. Like, if I were to look at you and feel queasy, then yes, you would be *nauseous*. But here I am looking at you and I feel fine. So you might think you’re nauseous, but I suspect that you’re actually *nauseated*, is that right? Tummy hurts?”

“I guess so?”

“See?” he said. “I further suspect you’d like to visit the nurse. For that you will need a pass.” But then his walkie crackled and Mr. Menninger turned his back to answer. Still talking into the radio, he opened the door, walked across the courtyard, and disappeared around a corner. I waited in the doorway until another teacher asked what I was doing out of my seat.

It ends there, my memory. My only one of Mr. Menninger.

Best guess on why he’s tracked me down is that Mr. Menninger has mistaken me for Derek, my best friend in high school, who *did* have Mr. Menninger for physics and who *did* have a lot of trouble initially and who *did* receive a fair bit of personal attention from Mr. Menninger during our junior year and who ended up not just acing the AP exam, but unlocking something significant inside himself and for that reason, Derek pursued the sciences in college—computers, I’m pretty sure—and after graduating, when Derek joined the Navy, his zeal and discipline helped distinguish his service as a helicopter pilot attached to a squadron that went on top secret missions around the world.

The reason I know this is because his mom told my mom, and my mom told me. Dinner last Sunday. My first after moving back.

“What are you trying to say?” I asked her.

“Well, I’m just saying how funny it is how you boys turned out so different.”

“Not so different.”

“Pretty different, I would say. Especially considering how you two did basically everything the same for so long.”

“Okay, well, not everything.”

“Pretty much everything!”

“Our hair, you mean?”

“Oh my god, your *hair!*” My mom threw her head back and laughed.

In high school, Derek had piles and piles of curly brown hair—whereas I did not—and at the time, for whatever reason, one of the critical yet unspoken conditions of our best friendship was to endeavor to look as similar as possible. We had the same American flag t-shirt and the same clunky skate shoes and the same braided belt and the same single-strap black backpack and I begged my mom for a solid summer to let me get a perm so we could have the same hair too and against her better judgment—to hear her tell it now—she *let* me. Looking back, I can see that okay, sure, I looked completely insane, but more importantly to me—at least to the tenth grade version of me—the day after the salon, at the mall with Derek, someone at the food court mistook us for brothers.

Mr. Menninger continues to ramble in front of me and rips his napkin into little shreds. The more he talks about what it would mean if I spoke on his behalf, the more certain I am that he has me confused for Derek. “Before we get too far along,” I say, stopping him mid-sentence. “I think I should—”

“What, you too?” Mr. Menninger crosses his arms. “You want the gossip column version of events? Well, that’s not happening. Sorry. It’s my personal life, dammit. That’s what this whole thing is about. My *personal* life. And I get it. I do. I get why Mary Anne is gone and why my kids are—well, who knows. But all that is my personal life. I mean, why should it matter to the school board that the person I’m sleeping with isn’t necessarily the same person I’m married to?”

“Well,” I say. “When it’s a student—”

“Former student! *Former* student!” Mr. Menninger looks over his shoulder and then points at me. “And here’s something that’s not in that article on STLtoday dot com or wherever you’ve read about this. Do you know how I met Mary Anne, my wife? No? Well, she was *my* teacher back in Berkeley. Not a professor. A TA, I guess they call them. This was the early eighties too. Quite the scandal. Now, I’m not saying this gives me a *psychological predisposition* or anything—except, hang on, maybe I am. Maybe that’s something I need to be drawing more attention to. *Context.*”

“I don’t think—”

“No, you’re absolutely right,” Mr. Menninger says, rubbing his chin. “What happened with Shannon is something I regret, really I do. I need you to know that. It was a mistake. It was *inappropriate*. That’s the word everyone keeps using, by the way. You know why? Because they can’t say *illegal*. Because it’s not. In this state, an individual who reaches the age of consent may choose to sleep with her old physics teacher if she so wishes. Not that I’m so—well. You get it.”

“I just don’t know if I’m—”



“Look, Patrick, you wanna know the truth? They’ve got torches and pitchforks ready. I’m serious. Parents are *revolting*.” Mr. Menninger drinks the last of his coffee and makes a face. “I know it’s not a hearing. I know it’s an execution. I just thought *someone* would say something. That someone would *want* to.”

“I would, Mr. Menninger, really—”

“You would? Do you mean that? Because—God. I just. Oh man. That’s great. That’s just great, Patrick. So you’re gonna go right before me, okay? The board president will ask if anyone has a statement or something to that effect and you’ll just go up to the mic and say your thing, cool? Doesn’t have to be more than a few sentences. Obviously the more detail and emotion you use the better, I think. Up to you, of course. Just—just *thank* you, okay? You don’t know—well, I told you how much it means. So okay. Thank you.”

He puts out his hand to seal the deal and there are these cold tingles near the base of my skull that I recognize as the unique combination of pity and shame and I know shaking his hand will make me complicit somehow but there I am, shaking it anyway, feeling Mr. Menninger’s dry paper palm against my own and the only thing left to do is ask him where I should be, on what day, and what time he needs me to be there.



I’ve been gone too long with the Audi and my mom is waiting for me in the driveway.

“Here’s my deal,” she says, taking the keys. “I don’t want to have a big thing every time you take the car. Let’s not go back to *that*. So here’s some growth. It occurred to me as I was waiting and texting and calling you that I didn’t mention I was showing the Wilshire Terrace place to the Gaffneys today, did I? No, I didn’t. No, of course not. Because it’s been a pretty long time since I’ve had to tell someone else what my plans are, right? Same as you. Know what? I think this is one of our classic adjustment periods. So I’m in a rush now and maybe it looks like I’m frustrated or maybe I am just a little, but it doesn’t mean that I’m not very, very happy that you’re here with me now, okay?”

In the drawer with the stamps and paper clips and packs of gum, I find my mom’s old address book. Derek’s mom answers on the second ring and gives me his email. I use the old computer in the living room to send him a quick message and he responds before my mom is back from her appointment with the Gaffneys.

*Hey man, he writes. What are you doing right now?*



On the phone, Derek explains that The Atlantic Undersea Test and Evaluation Center—or AUTEK as Derek says everyone calls it—is located on Andros Island, which is somewhere in the Bahamas, about 300 miles south of Florida’s coast and the Department of Defense

chose the spot due to its proximity to a two thousand-meter deep flat-bottomed trench that's surrounded on most sides by shoals and reefs and other smaller islands, making it the perfect sonar environment for submarines to practice good-guy-vs-bad-guy scenarios which would otherwise be disturbed by ambient ocean noise. Derek asks me to guess the name of the trench, but before I can think of anything he tells me it's called The Tongue of the Ocean.

"And it's called that because of—well, you can probably guess that too," Derek says.

"Um," I say. "Maybe—uh, salt content?"

There is a pause and then some noises on Derek's end. "It's just shaped like a tongue, man."

"Ah."

"The shape of the trench. Looks like a tongue. I mean, topographically."

"Right, right."

"Salt content. That's just too—hey, what should I expect? Mom said you're some writer now."

I shift position and try to find my place among the decorative pillows on the living room couch. "No, that's—that's not correct. I'm an *underwriter*. Or used to be. For loans. Banks. It's pretty boring."

"You wanna talk boring? We were only supposed to be out here for a week on this training thing with the submarine folks but something happened mechanically on those big—hey you ever see those big suckers? C130s? You know the aircraft? Well, something broke—*hard down*, they call it—and now we're just stuck out here. And yeah, they'll fix it eventually, but it's been ten days since we were supposed to be home and this is a small island. Like, there's nothing to do here but get fucked up—and Patrick, I mean *fucked up*."

I am back in the food court the day after my perm. The Sbarro's cashier points at me: *What does he want? Him, your brother. Yeah, ain't y'all brothers?*

"Like, there's just the one bar here, right? Normal base you'd have one for officers and one for enlisted. But here there's just this old dancehall. Cheap booze. Right on the beach. And every day—starting around 16 or 17 hundred—that's where everyone goes. Everyone, man. And that's the trouble, really." Derek stops. "Hey, that's my beer. Hey Anderson. No. Yours is over there. Yeah. Asshole." A pause. "Okay, what was I saying?"

*Him, your brother.* "The trouble," I say.

"Right," Derek says. "This thing last night. One of the new pilots—Danny O, we call him, because there's so many Dannys. Anyway, we're all at the bar and it's late and everyone is blackout or on their way. And then this young girl, an aircrewman, starts dancing. I guess

you'd call it a strip tease or whatever. Everyone is watching her. Even me. Everyone, that is, except Danny O. He comes over to a bunch of us and starts on about how someone should take charge, put a stop to it. That as *officers* we should be repulsed by this kind of thing. Can you believe that? He says that we evolved as a *species* to find this display of promiscuity repellent—and Patrick? That is about when I stopped listening. I grab him by the shoulders and say, 'Danny O, goddamnit, pull yourself together.' You know what he says? He's almost crying and he looks at me and goes, 'I think I love her, bro.' I know—I know! So I just go, 'Sorry man,' and punch him straight in the face."

"You what?"

"There's worse stuff going on, I promise you. Hang on, Patrick." He pauses. "What? Yeah, a buddy of mine." Another pause. "Huh? No, high school." Derek laughs. "Yeah, big time. Okay sorry about that. So what's up man? Don't even know how long it's been."

I tell him that however long it's been, it's been too long. I say that I'm back home for a little without saying why and then adding it quickly like I almost forgot, ask if he remembers a teacher from our high school named Mr. Menninger.

"*Remember* him? I know about that whole thing. I mean, I've *heard* from him. No, really. Found me online a couple weeks ago. He's going around begging people to say he was this great teacher or whatever so he doesn't lose his pension."

"Oh right." The smell of the mall lingers from my memory. *Yeah, ain't y'all brothers?* "What did you say?"

"What did I *say*? Nothing. I didn't *say* anything. Oh you know what I *did* do though? I went and blocked him. Makes me sick to my stomach. I mean, I used to go to him after school—yeah, you remember—and we'd be in his classroom alone. Like, no one coming in. I want to say that he'd close the door too. I think I definitely remember that. Who knows, man. Who knows what could've happened if—you know what? I don't even want to think about it."

"I heard—"

"I heard lots of things. Boys, girls, babysitters—some sick stuff. Are you in the—actually, be grateful you're *not* in this Facebook group. You'll sleep easier at night. Because if a fraction of this stuff is—well, let's just say they may have caught him with a student but—"

"Former student though, right?"

"Former, yeah. By about six weeks." Derek's tone shifts gear. "It was the summer after she graduated. He was *grooming* her. Jesus, Patrick."

I pull out the sticky note where I've written the details of Mr. Menninger's hearing. "Devil's advocate, I guess."

“Hang on,” Derek says. “Okay, you’re off speaker. Listen man, I gotta go but hey. I wanted to say something. I’m not gonna pretend like I don’t know about your situation. My mom told me. Sounds like some dirty business. I don’t know what I’d do if *my wife*—I mean, I know you’ve never met them, but Diana and the twins, they’re why I do what I do, you know? What I’m saying is that I *understand*. And then Mom said you had a freak out at work or freaked someone out at work, or whatever. I just want to say that I *get it*, okay? You probably have other folks to talk to, but I was thinking, you know? If you ever wanted to, you could talk to me. Anyway, that’s what I wanted to say. That I’m here for you.”

I’ve been unfolding and refolding the sticky note. My hands are damp and the ink is smeared. Derek’s voice glitches and warps. “Sorry, you cut out,” Derek says after a few seconds, now sounding like he’s at the end of a long hallway. “What did you say?”

The lights from my mom’s new Audi flash through the bay windows of the living room. “Nothing,” I say, putting the sticky note back in my pocket. “I didn’t say anything.”



Across the escalators from the arcade and down the corridor from the movie theater is the food court of Crestwood Mall. The pizza they serve disgusts my mom. She refuses to be within the radius of its smell. As a result, Sbarro’s occupies a near occult fascination in my teenage mind. Whenever possible, I am compelled by a force I do not understand to eat there.

Standing in line the day after the salon, the chemicals from my new perm mix with the grease in the air in front of me. Derek orders pepperoni.

“What does your brother want?” the Sbarro’s cashier asks him.

“Who?” Derek says.

“Him, your brother.” She points to me.

“My brother?” Derek says, confused.

“Yeah,” the cashier says. “Ain’t y’all brothers?”

Derek turns around to look at me and for an instant, I see it. The same face my mom reserves for the pizza we’re about to eat. There and then gone. A nanosecond, if that long. I lay awake at night as an adult man in the bed I grew up in and ask myself if it was there at all.

Derek punches my shoulder in the memory and laughs. “Yeah, sure,” he tells the Sbarro’s employee. “Course we’re brothers.”



On the day of the hearing, I am sitting next to Mr. Menninger on the chairs outside the conference room. The school board is inside but his lawyer is running late. Mr. Menninger is hunched over, elbows on his knees, typing something on his phone. He occasionally mutters *goddamnit*.

When the lawyer finally arrives, she's followed by a wobbly child hidden inside a big puffy coat. The lawyer takes off her gloves and sets down her briefcase and tote bag and backpack. She apologizes to Mr. Menninger. There appears to be a pen mark on her cheek. She shakes my hand. Her name is Paula.

"And this," she says, putting a hand on the head of the boy in the puffy coat, "is Lionel. Say hello, Lionel. Oh, c'mon buddy. No? Ah, that's okay. He's not—well, that's why we're a little late this morning. Not feeling so great, huh bud? No, we're a little under the weather." She turns to me. "You can keep an eye on him, right? For just a second?" Lionel slumps against the wall, playing with a toy banana. "Lionel, this is Mr. Stenhouse and he's—uh, he's going to tell you a story, okay? But Mommy's coming right back. Mommy's just going right in there, okay sweetie?" Paula takes a deep breath. "*I will explain the delay*," she says to Mr. Menninger, straightening her blazer. "Don't say a thing."

The click of the door closing echoes down the hallway.

I watch Lionel bend the arms and legs of his toy banana. "Who's your friend?"

He scrunches up his mouth and looks down. "Um," he says. "Bananaman."

"Hi Bananaman."

"Mr. Bananaman."

"Oh right," I say. "*Mr. Bananaman*."

Lionel tries to get the toy to stand on its own. It teeters then falls over.

"What can Mr. Bananaman do?"

He holds the toy out and shakes it around. "He can dance."

"Wow. You're right. He can."

Lionel looks at me and then back at Mr. Bananaman. He gets up and holds out the toy.

"You want me to have it?"

"*Hold it*."

I take the toy. He sits in front of me. “Can you say me a story on him?”

“About Mr. Bananaman?”

Lionel nods.

I look at the door to the conference room. “Okay, well. Maybe just a short one. So uh Bananaman—right, okay. *Mr. Bananaman*. He’s dancing—he’s a dancer, okay?” I hold the toy out and shake it like he did. “And he does such a good job dancing that he gets to dance in the, uh, the world championship of dancing, right?”

Lionel nods. “But then he gets in trouble.”

“He did? Oh right. That’s right. He did.” I look the toy in the eye. “Mr. Bananaman got in very big trouble. Because, well. Hm.”

Lionel raises his hand. “Maybe because Mr. Bananaman is sick and no sick kids can come to school sometimes?”

There is an exchange of muffled voices coming from the conference room. “Is that why he had to come with your mom today?”

Lionel nods.

“How does he feel now?”

“Um, he feels okay now, I think,” Lionel says. His arms retreat into the sleeves of his big puffy coat. “But sometimes? At school? He gets really feeling *very* sick sometimes.” He pulls his knees inside the coat too. He ducks his head so the collar covers half his face.

“That used to kind of happen to me too,” I say.

Lionel sinks further into his coat so all that’s sticking out is his hair at the top and his sneakers at the bottom. “Does it still?” he asks from inside.

Mr. Bananaman is made from a kind of light foam plastic, one that can bend in all ways, be compressed into any shape, and then, upon release, slowly returns to its original form. I give it a squeeze. “Not really.”

The door to the conference room opens. Paula sticks her head out. “We’re ready to start,” she says.

“I thought—do you want to talk first?”

She shakes her head. “No time.”

“Should someone maybe be out here for—”

“He’s fine. Lionel, baby, are you okay out here alone for two seconds? Let’s go Mr. Stenhouse.”

I stand up. I follow Paula into the conference room and sit down where she points. The school board president explains why we’re here. They call my name. Mr. Menninger turns around and gives me a thumbs up. I walk to the spot where they’ve set up a microphone and everyone’s looking at me, except not like how I pictured it, not like that at all. They’re whispering and pointing to something by my waist. I follow their eyes to discover I’m still holding Mr. Bananaman. Really squeezing him. Face bulging. Limbs twisted.

“Ha ha,” I say.

Paula comes to take it from me, but I can’t let go for some reason. She’s saying, Mr. Stenhouse, please. I’m trying to relax my grip but it just won’t work. Paula snatches Mr. Bananaman away. Everyone’s saying my name. This is what I was waiting for. A moment to turn it all around. To prove them all wrong. I put a finger up and smile to let them know that I’m okay, that I just need two seconds. My eyes connect with Mr. Menninger’s from across the conference room for the briefest of moments and what surfaces in my mind is the memory of him in the cafeteria, flipping the walkie talkie and catching it behind his back. *But here I am looking at you and I feel fine*, he says to the boy in front of him who just wants to go home.

I take a step back from the microphone, put my hands on my hips, and bend slightly at the waist. With my eyes closed, I take a deep breath in, and, as quietly as possible, vomit a column of gray slime onto the patterned carpet of the conference room.

## Car Crash While Hitchhiking

By Denis Johnson

A salesman who shared his liquor and steered while sleeping... A Cherokee filled with bourbon... A VW no more than a bubble of hashish fumes, captained by a college student...

And a family from Marshalltown who head-onned and killed forever a man driving west out of Bethany, Missouri...

...I rose up sopping wet from sleeping under the pouring rain, and something less than conscious, thanks to the first three of the people I've already named—the salesman and the Indian and the student—all of whom had given me drugs. At the head of the entrance ramp I waited without hope of a ride. What was the point, even, of rolling up my sleeping bag when I was too wet to be let into anybody's car? I draped it around me like a cape. The downpour raked the asphalt and gurgled in the ruts. My thoughts zoomed pitifully. The travelling salesman had fed me pills that made the linings of my veins feel scraped out. My jaw ached. I knew every raindrop by its name. I sensed everything before it happened. I knew a certain Oldsmobile would stop for me even before it glowed, and by the sweet voices of the family inside it I knew we'd have an accident in the storm.

I didn't care. They said they'd take me all the way.

The man and the wife put the little girl up front with them and left the baby in back with me and my dripping bedroll. "I'm not taking you anywhere very fast," the man said. "I've got my wife and babies here, that's why."

You are the ones, I thought. And I piled my sleeping bag against the left-hand door and slept across it, not caring whether I lived or died. The baby slept free on the seat beside me. He was about nine months old.

...But before any of this, that afternoon, the salesman and I had swept down into Kansas City in his luxury car. We'd developed a dangerous cynical camaraderie beginning in Texas, where he'd taken me on. We ate up his bottle of amphetamines, and every so often we pulled off the Interstate and bought another pint of Canadian Club and a sack of ice. His car had cylindrical glass holders attached to either door and a white, leathery interior. He said he'd take me home to stay overnight with his family, but first he wanted to stop and see a woman he knew.

Under Midwestern clouds like great grey brains we left the superhighway with a drifting sensation and entered Kansas City's rush hour with a sensation of running aground. As soon as we slowed down, all the magic of travelling together burned away. He went on and on about his girlfriend. "I like this girl, I think I love this girl—but I've got two kids and a wife, and there's certain obligations there. And on top of everything else, I love my wife. I'm gifted with love. I love my kids. I love all my relatives." As he kept on, I felt jilted and sad: "I have a boat, a little sixteen-footer. I have two cars. There's room in the back yard for a swimming pool." He found his girlfriend at work. She ran a furniture store, and I lost him there.



The clouds stayed the same until night. Then, in the dark, I didn't see the storm gathering. The driver of the Volkswagen, a college man, the one who stoked my head with all the hashish, let me out beyond the city limits just as it began to rain. Never mind the speed I'd been taking, I was too overcome to stand up. I lay out in the grass off the exit ramp and woke in the middle of a puddle that had filled up around me.

And later, as I've said, I slept in the back seat while the Oldsmobile—the family from Marshalltown—splashed along through the rain. And yet I dreamed I was looking right through my eyelids, and my pulse marked off the seconds of time. The Interstate through western Missouri was, in that era, nothing more than a two-way road, most of it. When a semi truck came toward us and passed going the other way, we were lost in a blinding spray and a warfare of noises such as you get being towed through an automatic car wash. The wipers stood up and lay down across the windshield without much effect. I was exhausted, and after an hour I slept more deeply.

I'd known all along exactly what was going to happen. But the man and his wife woke me up later, denying it viciously.

"Oh—no!"

"NO!"

I was thrown against the back of their seat so hard that it broke. I commenced bouncing back and forth. A liquid which I knew right away was human blood flew around the car and rained down on my head. When it was over I was in the back seat again, just as I had been. I rose up and looked around. Our headlights had gone out. The radiator was hissing steadily. Beyond that, I didn't hear a thing. As far as I could tell, I was the only one conscious. As my eyes adjusted I saw that the baby was lying on its back beside me as if nothing had happened. Its eyes were open and it was feeling its cheeks with its little hands.

In a minute the driver, who'd been slumped over the wheel, sat up and peered at us. His face was smashed and dark with blood. It made my teeth hurt to look at him—but when he spoke, it didn't sound as if any of his teeth were broken.

"What happened?"

"We had a wreck," he said.

"The baby's okay," I said, although I had no idea how the baby was.

He turned to his wife.

"Janice," he said. "Janice, Janice!"

"Is she okay?"

"She's dead!" he said, shaking her angrily.

"No, she's not." I was ready to deny everything myself now.

Their little girl was alive, but knocked out. She whimpered in her sleep. But the man went on shaking his wife.

"Janice!" he hollered.

His wife moaned.

"She's not dead," I said, clambering from the car and running away.

"She won't wake up," I heard him say.

I was standing out here in the night, with the baby, for some reason, in my arms. It must have still been raining, but I remember nothing about the weather. We'd collided with another car on what I now perceived was a two-lane bridge. The water beneath us was invisible in the dark.

Moving toward the other car I began to hear rasping, metallic snores. Somebody was flung halfway out the passenger door, which was open, in the posture of one hanging from a trapeze by his ankles. The car had been broadsided, smashed so flat that no room was left inside it even for this person's legs, to say nothing of a driver or any other passengers. I just walked right on past.

Headlights were coming from far off. I made for the head of the bridge, waving them to a stop with one arm and clutching the baby to my shoulder with the other.

It was a big semi, grinding its gears as it decelerated. The driver rolled down his window and I shouted up at him, "There's a wreck. Go for help."

"I can't turn around here," he said.

He let me and the baby up on the passenger side, and we just sat there in the cab, looking at the wreckage in his headlights.

"Is everybody dead?" he asked.

"I can't tell who is and who isn't," I admitted.

He poured himself a cup of coffee from a thermos and switched off all but his parking lights.

"What time is it?"

"Oh, it's around quarter after three," he said.

By his manner he seemed to endorse the idea of not doing anything about this. I was relieved and tearful. I'd thought something was required of me, but I hadn't wanted to find out what it was.

When another car showed coming in the opposite direction, I thought I should talk to them. "Can you keep the baby?" I asked the truck driver.

"You'd better hang on to him," the driver said. "It's a boy, isn't it?"

"Well, I think so," I said.

The man hanging out of the wrecked car was still alive as I passed, and I stopped, grown a little more used to the idea now of how really badly broken he was, and made sure there was nothing I could do. He was snoring loudly and rudely. His blood bubbled out of his mouth with every breath. He wouldn't be taking many more. I knew that, but he didn't, and therefore I looked down into the great pity of a person's life on this earth. I don't mean that we all end up dead, that's not the great pity. I mean that he couldn't tell me what he was dreaming, and I couldn't tell him what was real.

Before too long there were cars backed up for a ways at either end of the bridge, and headlights giving a night-game atmosphere to the steaming rubble, and ambulances and cop cars nudging through so that the air pulsed with color. I didn't talk to anyone. My secret was that in this short while I had gone from being the president of this tragedy to being a faceless onlooker at a gory wreck. At some point an officer learned that I was one of the passengers, and took my statement. I don't remember any of this, except that he told me, "Put out your cigarette." We paused in our conversation to watch the dying man being loaded into the ambulance. He was still alive, still dreaming obscenely. The blood ran off him in strings. His knees jerked and his head rattled.

There was nothing wrong with me, and I hadn't seen anything, but the policeman had to question me and take me to the hospital anyway. The word came over his car radio that the man was now dead, just as we came under the awning of the emergency-room entrance.

I stood in a tiled corridor with my wet sleeping bag bunched against the wall beside me, talking to a man from the local funeral home.

The doctor stopped to tell me I'd better have an X-ray.

"No."

"Now would be the time. If something turns up later ..."

"There's nothing wrong with me."

Down the hall came the wife. She was glorious, burning. She didn't know yet that her husband was dead. We knew. That's what gave her such power over us. The doctor took her into a room with a desk at the end of the hall, and from under the closed door a slab of brilliance radiated as if, by some stupendous process, diamonds were being incinerated in there. What a pair of lungs! She shrieked as I imagined an eagle would shriek. It felt wonderful to be alive to hear it! I've gone looking for that feeling everywhere.

"There's nothing wrong with me"—I'm surprised I let those words out. But it's always been my tendency to lie to doctors, as if good health consisted only of the ability to fool them.

Some years later, one time when I was admitted to the Detox at Seattle General Hospital, I took the same tack.

"Are you hearing unusual sounds or voices?" the doctor asked.

"Help us, oh God, it hurts," the boxes of cotton screamed.

"Not exactly," I said.

"Not exactly," he said. "Now, what does that mean."

"I'm not ready to go into all that," I said. A yellow bird fluttered close to my face, and my muscles grabbed. Now I was flopping like a fish. When I squeezed shut my eyes, hot tears exploded from the sockets. When I opened them, I was on my stomach.

"How did the room get so white?" I asked.

A beautiful nurse was touching my skin. "These are vitamins," she said, and drove the needle in.

It was raining. Gigantic ferns leaned over us. The forest drifted down a hill. I could hear a creek rushing down among rocks. And you, you ridiculous people, you expect me to help you.