

16

SINGLE SENTENCE STORIES

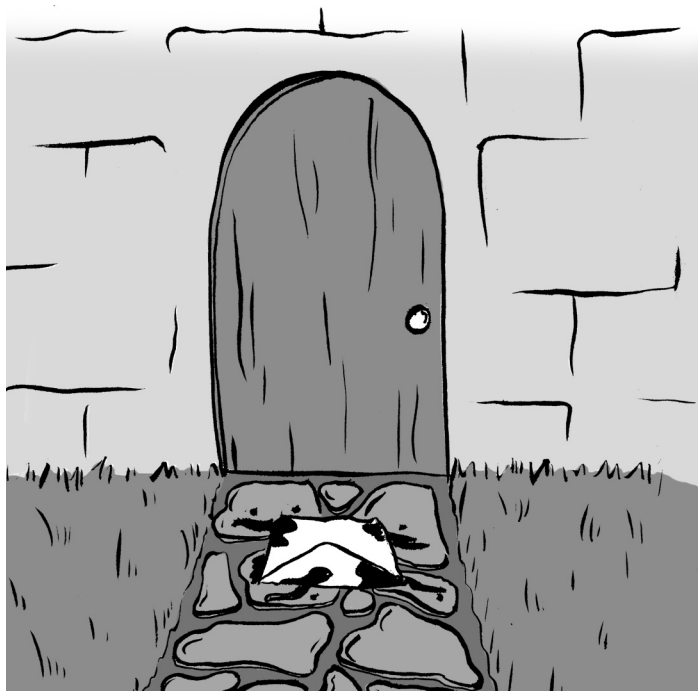
Edited by Matthew Bennardo • Illustrated by K. Sekelsky

LETTERS FROM WITHIN

A.T. GREENBLATT

My Dearest Beloved, I hope this letter finds you in good spirits and excellent health, though I pray you will forgive the quality of this message (it is quite dark here, you see) and I profoundly apologize for the less than, ah, savory delivery of said letter, but it is of the utmost importance that I inform you that The Plan did not unfold quite as expected – which is not to say that I underestimated the Beast, for I fully expected its ferocious teeth (though why any creature needs four sets is unknown to me) and its steely scales and fiery breath (said to melt flesh from bone, though I believe this now to be a gross exaggeration), but I was surprised by its opposable thumbs by which, alas, the monster plucked me up and devoured me whole – but do not despair my love, for you yourself know how overgrown this creature is and I have no want of room in here, though I fear I must entreat you, heart of my heart, for some aid – whether you, my dear, will take up arms in the name of our love, or, at the very least, coax my monstrous captor into swallowing a torch or a lantern (which, though the thought of your angelic face keeps my spirits alight, would be a boon to my poor eyesight) so that

I may gaze upon you the next time we meet as a whole, undigested man – but I pray, my love, when you happen to think of me, your thoughts will remain kind and adoring (for of the many brazen knights who have come to your rescue before, how many have made it this far?), knowing that I am and always will be your ever valiant, steadfast, (if a trifle deflated) Knight.



A BOY, A BALLOON AND THE MAN IN THE MOON

XANTHE ELLIOTT

A true-blue believer, seven year-old Bobby Newcombe laboriously printed his personal message on a postcard addressed to the Man in the Moon, tied it to a balloon and let it go, accompanied by derisive jeers from the rest of the second grade students who called him “dummkopf” for his stalwart insistence that it *could* so and *would* so float all the way to the moon, (*you’ll see,*) and kept vigil night after night waiting patiently for a reply to his earnest request for just a small sign – so many nights, in fact, that the other children grew bored with their teasing and wrote him off entirely, and even his parents began to believe he was “not right” when he conducted a one-boy parade on the evening of the lunar eclipse (in honor of the Man’s impending response, which – Bobby was certain – would be forthcoming at any moment,) and despite their lecturing that eclipses are perfectly natural phenomena in no way attributable to imaginary beings, he did not lose faith – but waited with bated breath as a hush fell across the crowd and the astonished audience

stood agape, watching a winking Moon emerge from shadow... sporting a handlebar mustache.

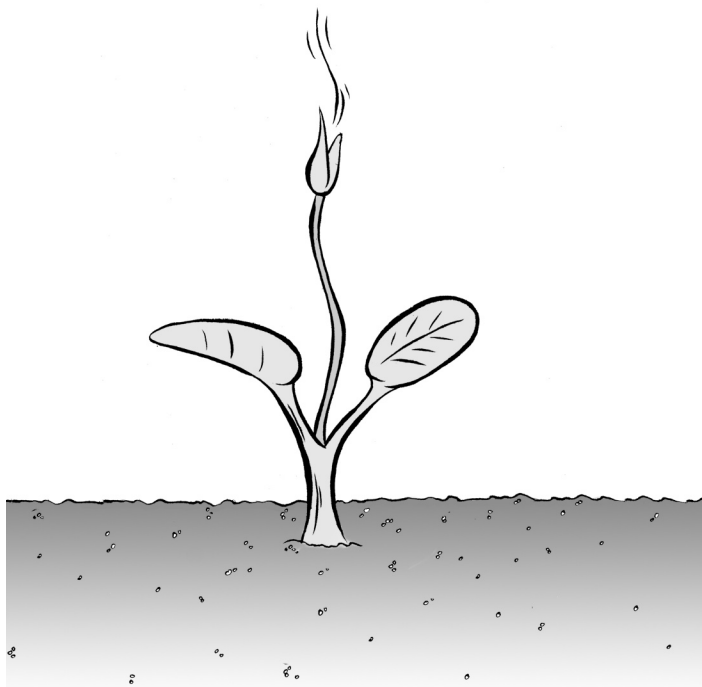


IN BLOOM

RICHARD J. DOWLING

Master Himuro, the famed BioArtist, lived alone in a house of flowers, sat on furniture made from roses and worked at a lotus blossom table, and it was here he received his last commission, which was from a wealthy young man of Florence who wanted a woman made of flowers – not a statue, not a mannequin but a real, live woman – and of course Himuro told the young man that such a thing was impossible, but the Florentine insisted so much that in the end, just to be rid of him, Himuro said he would do his best, and that was why he spent the next two years wracking his withered brains for a way to mold flowers into the object of desire – until finally he hit upon the solution: if he started with the flowering nettle plant of South America (which exhibited the most complex behavior of any known flora) and if he were to add a little of the green sea slug's genetic adaptability, *then* he might have a chance, and, indeed, a year and a half later a woman made of flowers opened cherry blossom eyes, and Himuro stroked her delicate lily forearm and tearfully handed her over to the young man from Florence, and the next day, as expected, her remains were brought back in a

box, but Himuro did not despair, and instead he opened the box and ruffled through the petals until he found what he was looking for – a single, precious bud, the fruit of the union between man and flower, for which he had a pot already prepared.

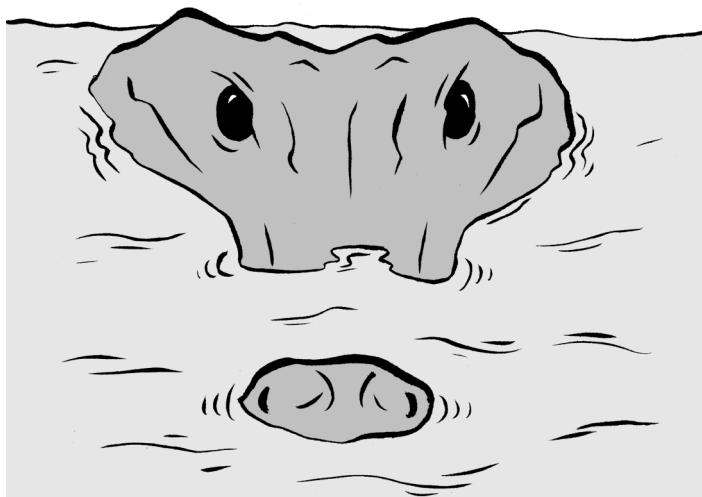


JANE BLONDE

TJ RADCLIFFE

"The name is Blonde – Jane Blonde," she said and flipped her cigarette stub into the dry grass where it started a wildfire that would eventually subsume the better part of three states, although by then she was far away, flying a small plane over the Florida Everglades and keeping an eye out for her arch-nemesis Archy, the Arch-Duke of Archangel, who was supposed to be leading a gang of alligator smugglers through the wetlands to violate the precious sovereignty of America's crocodilian overlords back in Washington, where Jane had received her orders from the mysterious spy-master, M: "We don't know where he'll land and we don't know what he'll do, so we're sending you in, Jane," was all the elderly oligarch could tell her, and now here she was and there he was, Archy himself, up to his beautifully-ripped abs in swamp-water, a trail of alligators strung out behind him on their leads, with helpers on either side keeping the feisty beasts in line until Jane's war-cry of "YEEEE-HAAAA" came shrieking out of the air while her abandoned plane crashed nearby and she herself swooped down in the flying suit that Q had given her until she came to sudden stop in an old

tree that tangled her wings and left her penduluming above the smugglers as she unshipped her AK and let fly a burst across the still surface of the water, wiping out the helpers and the reptiles but leaving Archy unscathed as she abseiled down and made to subdue him despite the struggles of his slick hard body under her hands, which finally led to the two of them entangled on a mud bank where they made unexpected and very dirty love, unaware that a last remaining reptile was making its way stealthily toward them until Jane sat up and fired her Walther right between its eyes and said, "See you later, alligator."



SONGS FROM MY FATHER

LISA MARIE LOPEZ

I wander into the toy store in search of the perfect gift for my daughter, Emma, when I see the man with the silver hair and merry blue eyes smiling at me from behind the counter, a man who makes me think of my father – a gracious man of good deeds, soft hands, and lost dreams, who still wore silk ties with paisley prints and opened doors for elegant women who carried small hand bags and smelled of red rose desire, a man whose soul was as deep as the Dead Sea but more fragile than the Edelweiss flowers he gave my mother – and my eyes fill with tears so melancholy I form poetry with the ABC building blocks, then let my heart brim over with child-like wonder as I take in the other toys I consider for Emma: tiny LEGO men with their busy professions, plush teddy bears longing to be hugged, Big Birds and Cookie Monsters and ticklish Elmos who laugh at the bells attached to my green laces that make my shoes jingle and lead me to the corner of the shop where at last I spot the perfect gift – an animated Christmas doll with golden hair and a golden smile, singing heartfelt songs of hope and joy, goodwill to men, the same songs my father loved and sang to me.



THE SADNESS OF SOUVENIRS

ABIGAIL WYATT

With fumbling, uncertain fingers she turned the key to her dead husband's writing desk, biting back her tears as she gazed on the open drawer: a faded photograph (how innocent they looked on the eve of their very first Christmas), one of Mina's childhood drawings (she was always his favourite child), and then the paper-chase, the postcards, the ticket stubs, the Valentine's cards, and the programmes, an entire life history, in faded images of all the special times they had shared – and there, too, tucked away at the back, her fingers found an ancient buff envelope and, inside it, a rosebud, drier than dust, bled of all its colour, and two used tickets for *La Boheme*, an opera she had never seen.



AFTER

RON COLLINS

It's only after you train all your life (giving up weekends and ballgames and late nights at the club to study control systems and thermodynamics, then later checklists of launch processes, the physics of re-entry, and the thousands of other things they stuff into your head), after you find it's a simple mechanical failure that causes all the trouble (an Allen wrench in basic black which was not designed to fall into the airlock mechanism but most certainly does fall into that same mechanism), only after you find yourself on the wrong side of the ship's skin, watching as Dag and Trina and Lane go crazy trying all the things from all the manuals, guides, and computer simulations that they gave up their nights and ballgames and weekends to study (and then try a few hundred more things that aren't in those manuals), after you realize they can't think of anything else and you're still out here and you cut yourself loose to spare their feelings and you rotate slowly into space for hours, or days, or weeks while your suit drains its battery pack and you shut off the heads-up to save the last few minutes – it's only after all that work, and pain, and suffering, that you look with

your oxygen-starved brain into a universe so deep with its stars and galaxies, with its novae and pulsars and other things you cannot even pretend to imagine, that you say to yourself, "My God, how beautiful you are."



FOR A MORTAL'S LOVE

MARI NESS

Each feather she pulled so painfully from her back might have told its own story, but she burned each one without listening.



THE GLIMMER OF LIGHT ON SILVER PILLS

MEGAN ENGELHARDT

The moon rose and, finally, the wolf inside did not.

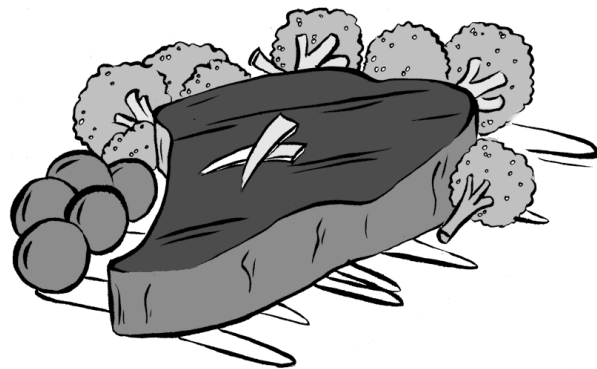


AND THE CHILEAN SEA BASS WAS OVERCOOKED TOO

KIT YONA

Given the inexact science of this sort of thing – really, it's not science at all, but the human mind is always so eager for some sort of categorization to be applied to all situations – it's somewhat difficult to pinpoint the exact moment the evening went awry, shot off the rails, plunged to a fiery death in a craggy canyon, or whatever other descriptive disaster you might feel apt, as there were so very many to choose from: my shaving debacle; the restaurant having no record of the reservation; the bartender spilling whiskey on both my suit and the fresh cuts on my face from the shaving debacle; the mixed martial arts fighter who thought I'd spilled the drink which got on his girlfriend as well and decided to apply a choke hold to signify his displeasure; the sad little crackling sound my smart phone made as the whiskey it had been doused in caused it to short out; the wasabi pea from the basket of snacks at the bar that got caught in my throat and the sounds I made like a faulty foghorn as I tried to get it out – yes, yes, all viable candidates, but it's

unlikely our blind date could have experienced anything worse than the fact you didn't show up.



PRIMER

SUE ANN CONNAUGHTON

Poke, poke, you pop his pouty cheeks like balloons and grasp both his trembly hands, now, let him go, for it was serendipity, ten years ago, when you chose a round coffee table and carpet with three inches of underpadding, in case, in case... so he might fall freely without pain, but along the path, he'll taste the leaves of cuckoo flowers (you'll teach him to sweeten their bitterness with hope), he'll play with rattlesnakes (you'll teach him to bear their stings with honor), so let him go; first one step, then another, three hundred steps, however many it takes, let go.



A HUSHED SPACE

JUDY DARLEY

The ambient sounds of the library cocoon me – papers fluttering, feet squeaking, the whirl of the automatic gates swinging closed, murmurs of enquiries, voices rising forgetfully then dropping sharply in shame – as I inhale a faint smell of wood, paper, dust – the effluence of trees and people – and wonder why you suggested we meet here, of all places, and why not a café or leafy, sunlit park, somewhere we could play and laugh – but then I see you approach, and recognise the darkness in your face, the furrow that runs right through your body, and I know your reason before you speak, before you break my heart in hushed, library-appropriate tones.



ROCKETMAN

WAYNE HELGE

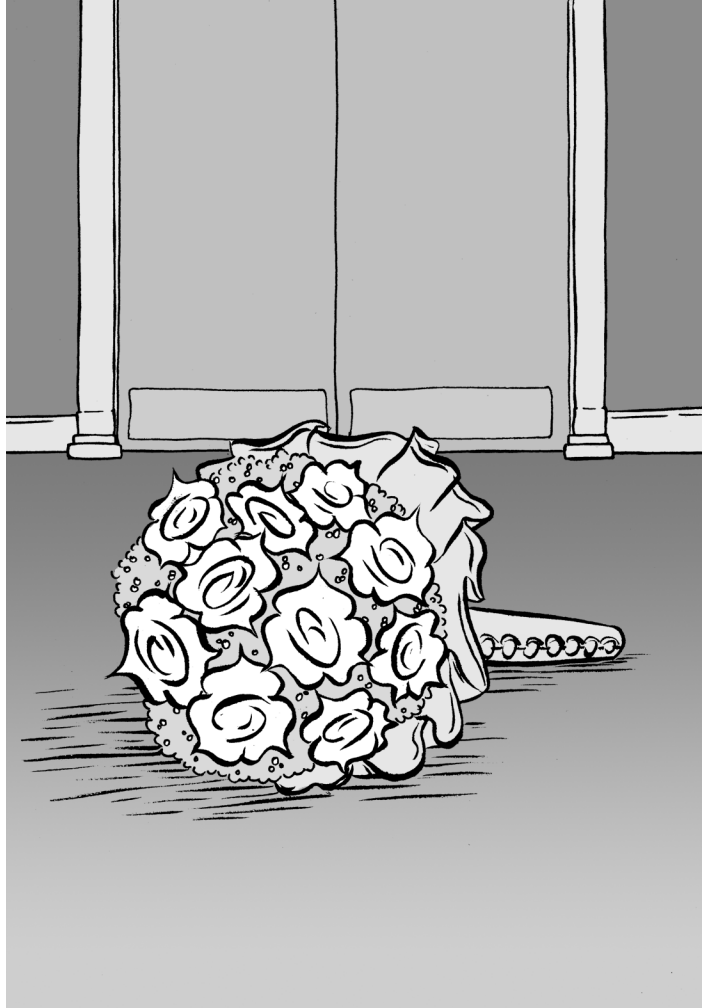
As was their custom, there were three visits: in the first, the ready traveler, the skyward dreamer, he declined while stopping between classes for coffee-extra-cream-extra-sugar, he declined because he was just getting started and just getting to know the girl, not yet ready to leave forever (despite his promise to himself years before, when he had first learned of them while tucked into footed pajamas and sighting Pleiades), and besides there was still time, there was nothing but time; in the second, he sat on a park bench watching three children playing as the overgrown darkness blotted itself in on such a peculiar Sunday, their mother awaiting their return, him lingering, hesitating too long, wondering whether life would bear him out as an incompetent father for just up and leaving now, and of course there was still time, there was always time; in the third, he stood after one last sip of a light beer held steady by hands other than his own and released the plastic straw from between brittle lips, his weight then teetering on brittle legs, and he learned that they had not come for him this time, but their apology was most sincere and reassuring since of course there was still time, there was always time, and surely he'd be ready then.



THE BELLS

J. BROSNAN

Windows, open to hot air, gave ceiling fans little to work with, so people stirred, restlessly, in uncomfortable pews, while tolling bells began wearing on their nerves and the question "Where is the bride?" flew back and forth till the groom, fiddling with the scratchy collar on his sweaty neck, cursed the incessant *gong-gong* from overhead, while bridesmaids whispered in confusion in the sacristy as the bells tolled on, until one of the girls spotted the bouquet that lay on the floor, by the door to the bell tower, hinting at a sudden nerve-inspired flight – but they never thought to check the bell tower, because it locked automatically as soon as it clicked shut, something the bride hadn't known, so voiceless from shouting, exhausted from ringing the bell, she watched from above as they departed.



CATCH A FALLING STAR

JOANNE FOX

Spinning and sparking, I plunged from the sky, as all mother's warnings bounced off the clouds: "Dance too high and you'll trip on a moonbeam" – but we never listen, do we, always thinking we know best (and, let's face it, sometimes we're right) so there I was, in gravity's demon clutches, expecting any moment for my light and life to be snuffed out, when I felt a sudden scratching and tugging, and – oh that dear old tree, I can't thank it enough, for I clung to the twiggy hand it offered, and now here I am, gleaming each daybreak (not high in the heavens, as mother intended, but close to the earth where the sun hits the dew on the crisp golden apples) so you see, we can still shine in unexpected ways, even when we fall.



ONE THOUSAND AND FIRST

ALEX SHVARTSMAN

...this will be the last story I ever tell you, my sultan, and so I humbly beseech you to listen and to delight in it, and to keep your promise of allowing me to finish this very last sentence, uninterrupted, even as the sun is already rising from beyond the Eastern dunes and the executioner sharpens his scimitar; I have told you a thousand stories – tales of flying carpets and bottled jinn, bold sailors and treacherous viziers, magic and wonder and all manner of things beyond the mundane – but this last story is about an ordinary young woman, a woman who caught the eye of her sultan and who managed to survive their wedding night, and a thousand nights afterward, using no weapon and no magic but her imagination alone; the sultan was mesmerized by her wondrous fables at first, always eager for another, but as the years went by she found it more and more difficult to keep his attention until, finally, he had had enough and wanted to hear no more stories – but being a kind and generous ruler he graciously consented to allow the girl to finish speaking before the guards would take her away (everyone knows that the sultan's

word is his bond) and the poor girl swallowed her tears, drew in a big breath and began her tale thus:

this will be the last story I ever tell you, my sultan, and so I humbly beseech you...



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