

THE2NDHAND

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CONTRIBUTORS, submit prose—2500 words or less—to THE2NDHAND for our online magazine, which updates weekly. 1) by sending your mail to the following address: THE2NDHAND, 2543 W. Walton #3, Chicago, IL 60622 or 2) by sending e-mail to editors Todd Dills (todd@the2ndhand.com) or Jeb Gleason-Allured (jeb@the2ndhand.com).

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Welcome to the final lit-mag style issue of THE2NDHAND. The short-shorts we've been showcasing here will continue to be published weekly at our Web site, the2ndhand.com (so get thee there), but in this printed space we're moving toward longer narratives, big stories by writers from Chicago and beyond. One writer per issue: stay tuned for THE2NDHAND broadsheets by Anne Moore, Al Burian, Doug Milam, Mickey Hess, and others. Meantime, get this... -TD

BIRTHDAY, WITH GRANDFATHER'S CORPSE

M. Lynx Qualey

The worst thing is, I have to get up early.

"I mean it, Shau'ee. We're leaving in fifteen minutes."

It's not even nine yet, and mama's been shrilling at me for at least an hour. Lucky for her baba's still in Dubai. He would never, ever put up with this much screaming on a Saturday morning.

"Shau'ee!" she yells.

Fine. I kick at the sheets until my feet come loose. Then I sneak out a hand and pull myself down, rolling onto the carpet. I lay there, like a dead turtle, staring at the ceiling. All the other kids, on *their* birthdays, get to sleep late and have chocolate cake for breakfast and go to T.G.I. Fridays or Andrea's with at least twelve kids from school.

But Shau'ee Tamer Idris? He wakes up early and goes to the cemetery.

Mama opens the door and looks in. She sees me lying on the carpet and stamps her foot, giving a little scream. "If you're not standing by the front door in ten minutes, I am giving your cake to the cats." She slams the door.

Can you believe this? And it's like this every year, since my stupid grandfather picked my birthday to die on. I was only three when he inhaled a wad of my birthday chicken, turned purple, put his hands around his throat and fell to the floor—smash!

I dig my heels into the floor and push backwards until my head bumps into

the wall. Maybe this year I'll pretend to be sick.

Mama slaps her palms repeatedly against the door like she's playing the drums. "Remember, Shau'ee, if you're too sick to go to the cemetery, then you're too sick to have a birthday party."

Then she's quiet, probably listening for any sounds of me getting ready. She screams again, slapping the wall. "You have exactly eight minutes to be ready and at the door or I'm throwing your GameCube out the window." She would, too. She has no idea what things are worth. I sit up and drag a pair of pants and a shirt out of my drawers, pushing down on my hair, slipping on my shoes. I go and stand by the door.

Mama hurries by. She sighs and puts a hand to her mouth. "This is how you dress for your grandfather?"

But I know she doesn't really care. She's too busy helping grandma get everything ready, carrying bags and pots to the door. You can smell foul and tameyya, flowers, chocolate. At least somebody's going to enjoy my birthday.

The bawwab is waiting in the corridor, gripping the handles of food pots, and mama takes grandma's arm. She nods at me to hurry down the stairs so they can take the elevator.

On my birthday.

It takes hours and hours to drive to the cemetery, and we have to go through all the dirtiest, smelliest, ugliest parts of Cairo. As soon as we're there, I jump out of the car and have all the food pots and flowers and everything in my arms in about two seconds. The faster we get there, the faster we'll be back home for my party. Grandma leans on mama's arm to walk down the alley, toward grandfather's mausoleum.

"Shau'ee, sweetheart," mama says. "Habibi."

Mama's voice always gets soft and quavery when we first get to the cemetery. I think it's crazy, because all you see is kids playing soccer and old people roasting corn on the cob and women hanging out their laundry. I hurry along with the heavy pots and bags, and she starts to cry.

"There's chocolate in my purse, habibi," she says. "And your first birthday present."

I scramble ahead, setting everything down so I can open the door to grandfather's tomb. The thieves who live there are barely awake, scratching at their faces. The mother is trying to quiet a dirty baby girl. "Go," I say. "Emshee. The madame is coming." They jerk around like puppets and gather up their things, knocking against each other, scrambling to get past me out the door. The boy who's my age looks different than he did last year. More pale. And there's a big scab on his forehead.

I can hear mama getting close. "I don't want to bring the police," she says, loudly.

The boy darts past me, out the door. Lucky for them, they're gone by the time mama and grandma get to the front of the mausoleum.

"Good," mama says loudly. She ducks into the tomb and kicks aside their smelly food, clothes, bedding. "I'm glad that no one has been bothering my father's place of rest." I drag the pots into grandfather's tomb and reach into mama's purse for the chocolates she promised. Of course, they're Egyptian chocolates. Mama wouldn't want to go out of her way for my birthday. I

wander outside to eat them while mama and grandma talk at grandfather and feed him foul and tameyya.

The boy is standing outside, staring at my chocolate. He looks shorter than he did last year. And there's something weird about him. His skin is really white, even whiter than a khawaga, and there's the big scab on his forehead. Then I notice his right hand. The fingers are shorter, stuck together—it looks like he dipped his hand in a pot of boiling oil. I look at the mother. She's squatting in the dirt, tying a scarf around her hair. Her hands are spotted with white.

I walk farther away, then glance back. The boy is following me like a stray dog, staring at the chocolates, his tongue practically hanging out. His left hand looks okay—it's even a normal brown color—but his right hand is a pale white lump, like the stub of a candle.

So, fine. I can be nice sometimes. I drop one of my chocolates on the ground behind me. After a minute, I go peek in on mama and grandma. They're still mumbling over grandfather's body, so I go poke around mama's purse for the birthday present. Of course, they're not even wrapped. SpiderSquasher, Lemonhead...

"These aren't the ones I wanted," I say.

Mama clears her throat.

I pull some more candies out of her purse and go back outside. I almost throw the stupid games at the kid, but of course he doesn't even have a GameCube and, anyway, I can probably trade them for something better. He's sitting in the dirt near me, still unwrapping his one piece of chocolate. I only have a couple left, so it occurs to me that I should probably take it back. But see, I'm nice.

The boy reaches out toward the baby girl, who walks over in that weird zombie way that babies have. She grabs the chocolate and stuffs it in her mouth with both hands, giving him a big smile.

Make me puke.

"Hey," I say to the kid. "What's your name again?"

"Mahmoud."

"You got anything to play with?"

He shakes his head, tracing circles in the dirt. Of course not. Why would this kid have the sense to have any toys?

"There anything cool to see around here?"

He closes his eyes, like he's searching his empty brain, then stands up and nods down the next alley.

"Can't you talk or something?" I ask.

He doesn't say anything, just walks down the alley. Mama would kill me if she knew I was wandering off in the cemetery. She'd scream, Allah, you're going to get kidnapped! Anyway, there's probably nothing to see except a bunch of poor people sleeping next to dead bodies and eating dirt. But I can't help but follow the kid. It's like he's tied a string around my chest and is tugging me behind him.

He ducks down another alley and I follow. I turn the corner and he's stopped in front of a brand new mausoleum door, staring at it.

"So?" I ask.

He doesn't say anything, just shudders and stares at the door. My skin prickles. The wind is giving me the chills.

"Hey, boy. I'm talking to you."

He looks back at me with his big dumb eyes and his weird white face, and then he turns to stare at the door. Allah, the hairs on my arms are standing up so hard that it hurts.

I walk up beside him and touch the door.

"There was a fire," he says, shivering.

"Cool." I shiver, too.

He opens the door with his good hand. It creaks, and there's a burned smell

and something else, like a dead animal. Flies buzz inside. The skin on my legs crawls, like it's covered in a hundred maggots.

"Gross." I have to breathe through my mouth.

Beyond the brand-new door, the whole place is black.

He shuffles in a couple feet, and I go in behind him. My breath is caught up inside my throat. My feet kick against something on the floor, some black pieces of wood. The thieves who lived here must have burned themselves up. The kid is staring at something, touching it with his foot. It looks like a burnt-up sweater.

"What's that?"

"The cat," he whispers.

"Gross." I touch it with my foot, and kind of laugh at how crazy this is.

I hold still for a second, listening to the flies. "What about the body?"

He looks over at me, his eyes wide, like it never occurred to him. Of course. Why would this kid have any imagination?

We both stumble forward, reaching for the coffin. Our fingers are under the stone lid and we pull it off, jerking back as the lid falls on the ground. I'm so excited for a second that I take his good hand in mine and squeeze it. We look in.

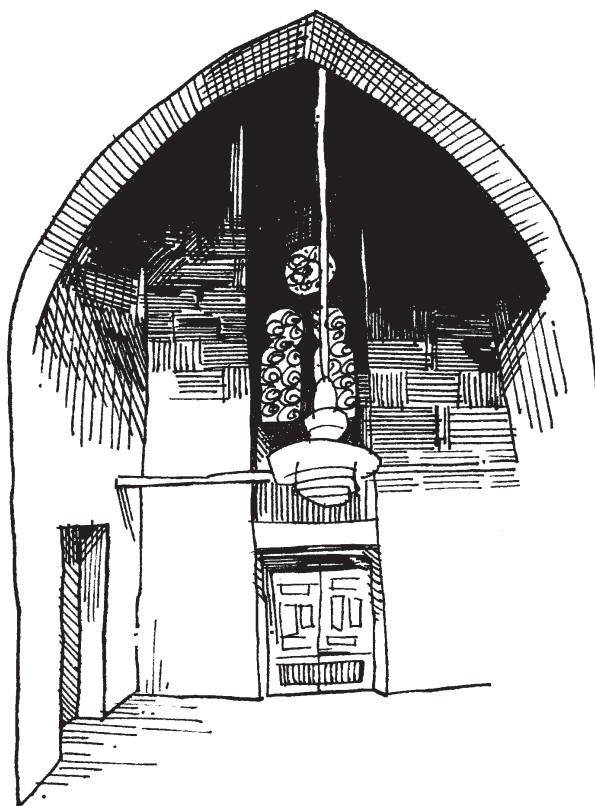
"Ya salaam," he says.

My mouth is hanging open, and I can't say anything. The body is perfect. No, not perfect. But alive-looking. It's this old lady, like my mom's age, and her eyes are closed. Like she's sleeping and she's going to wake up any second. The kid grabs my arm and pulls it to his chest, and I feel his gross stubby hand against my skin. I jerk back, glaring at him. I'll probably catch some gross disease from him. I mean, he probably sleeps in here at night. He probably licks the old woman's breasts.

It's disgusting to have him so close to me, so I push him away, but he doesn't do anything.

"Cut it out, donkey," I say.

He still doesn't do anything, just holds up his stubby hand against his chest. He looks so stupid standing there that I have to shake him. He's really light and then he's up in the air above me, wriggling, and I laugh because he's so light and then I let go and he falls into the coffin with the old woman.



He shrieks and shrieks and I run out, slamming the door behind me. Someone shouts behind me. The thieves are going to get me, I know it, and I race back down the alley toward grandfather's mausoleum. I can hear someone behind me, shouting, but I keep running until I find our family's crypt.

Mama and grandma are walking out, ducking their heads and holding on to each other.

"Let's go, Shau'ee." Mama's mad again, shoving loose hairs back under her veil and brushing the dust off her dress. She and grandma shuffle back toward the car.

"Shau'ee Tamer," my mother yells. "I want to see you walking toward the car. Now." I don't even have a chance to get my breath when she yells, "I will drive off without you."

I'm about to follow her when I look around and see the boy standing next to his mother, pale and staring. His scab is broken a little, and a trickle of blood is dripping down his cheek. I'm frozen for a second. Then I get my breath and I run for the car, dashing past mama and slapping my hands against the glass.

I turn around. The kid is walking after them.

"Come on mama," I shout. "Hurry up."

She looks up at me and makes an irritated face, shaking her big head. Then she comes to a complete stop, petting her veil. He's catching up to them. He probably wants to tell on me, to get me in trouble on my birthday. Get me a good beating on my birthday.

Mama and grandma start walking again, slowly, and the boy is almost right behind them. Almost on the backs of their shoes. Mama finally gets to the car and starts fumbling around for her keys.

"I thought you wanted to hurry," I say.

She cocks her head at me and doesn't say anything. Then she takes the bunch of keys out of her purse and shakes them. The boy is standing right behind us, like a shadow, and finally she sinks a key into the lock and turns it, and I scramble in and close the door, pushing down my lock and I'm safe in the car, behind metal and glass.

He doesn't move. He just stands there, breathing out of his mouth. My skin is hot, and I think I'm going to throw up. I don't feel safe anymore.

"I think I'm sick," I say. "We should probably hurry home before I throw up."

Mama's not listening. She knocks on the circle of wood she dangles from the rear-view mirror. It spins around. "What's the matter with that boy?"

I'm all squeezed up against my seatbelt, waiting for us to go. The piece of wood swings back and forth.

"What's the matter with that boy?" she asks.

Then she shakes her head and turns the key. I watch him in the back window as we drive away. He wipes at the trickle of blood and makes a big red smear across his white cheek. His eyes meet mine, and he lifts up his good hand, smiling a little, then more, and waving. He starts walking after the car, waving, breaking into a jog.

And then somehow, I can't help it. I lift my hand and wave back.

M. Lynx Qualey (www.mlynxqualey.com) fled no apparent persecution in the American Midwest for a life in Cairo, where she writes and wrangles a one-year-old boy.

NEVER DIE DURING WINTER

C.T. Ballentine

When Thomas wakes it is snowing. I am thirty-eight years old, he thinks. If I died today I will have waited thirty-eight years for a blank white landscape, an

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isolating, parasitic cold. I must die in June, he says.

Thomas walks to the bowling alley. He rubs a hole into his coat pocket. He imagines a conversation between the old men in the bowling leagues. He imagines entering the conversation: his arms flail emphatically; he is charming and warm. You get to a point where an original form takes precedence over a high score, he imagines himself saying.

The cat jumps into Thomas's lap, spilling his coffee. He remembers hearing that coffee with milk is worse for stains. He wonders if that is true.

Standing in the mirror, holding his toothbrush, Thomas pretends he is a cellist. The toothbrush is a pantomime bow. The music swells. His toothbrush is electric. He turns it on. A mighty crescendo.

At the bowling alley Thomas smokes cigarettes in silence. He is averaging 157. He hates the old men in the bowling leagues. They are laughing and drinking Michelob Ultra.

One week ago Thomas purchased a purple and yellow silk tie with a monogram and an expensive designer name. Holding the shopping bag, on the train, he felt powerful. His bag was an amulet. He smiled at others knowingly. Today he throws the tie away, the stain will not lift. It was better off in the bag, he thinks.

Thomas imagines himself a virile young peacock when he bowls. Peacocks, he thinks, would have amazing form. He thinks about a children's television program, popular when his younger brother was five. He wonders how people get jobs on children's television. He imagines himself in a peacock suit, smiling and hopping and holding the letter *F*. Such thoughts I have, he thinks. Why do I never bring them up in conversation? Why am I always mumbling?

Thomas finishes a soft pack and crushes it. Do my cigarettes miss me after they are smoked?

At the drug store, Thomas buys toothpaste. For payment he hands the cashier a short poem he has written. The poem goes like this:

*It is winter winter winter
hopeful fragment freezes
I have spilled:
shame shame shame
cry: I I I cry*

This will change my life, thinks Thomas, I will form a bond with this cashier, an affinity. The veils of our insecurities lifted, we will celebrate life. We will play hopscotch with our sorrow, spoon at night with our wounded souls, remembering fondly those days long ago. There will be a fireplace, always burning.

Thomas, at the bowling alley, laughs too loudly, at nothing, to himself. The old men take no notice. They continue drinking their Michelob Ultras.

I am not sorry to lose that tie, thinks Thomas. To cast such things aside is liberating.

The cashier hands the poem back to Thomas. Thomas blushes and pulls out a five-dollar bill instead. He gets \$1.25 in change. Thanks, he says. You welcome, replies the cashier.

The old men at the bowling alley are always smiling. What is the root of their confidence? wonders Thomas. With a deep breath full of courage he walks to lane four and taps one of them on the shoulder. I feel so lost, he says, and you're doing so well. Where did I falter? Have you ever been where I am? How can I surface? I need to, it's dark down here, there's no air and I am drowning.

Looking at himself in the mirror, playing cello with his toothbrush, Thomas feels foolish. He sets his face. The toothbrush continues to buzz. He looks into his eyes. There is shame. He tries to reach through his eyes, into himself, to accept himself, to comfort himself. To feel shame while alone, thinks Thomas, is the winter of the soul.

Leaving the drug store, Thomas thinks of all the people he has known but

never known. Instead of that poem, he thinks, I should have written only one word: *REGRET*.

Don't worry young man, the old man tells Thomas. You just need to work on your form. It's very awkward.

C.T. Ballentine lives and writes in Chicago. He also publishes the zine Aftercrossward Special.

ANIMALS IN THE ZOO

Joe Meno

The zookeeper's heart is broke. His wife has left him and gone with some stranger to Peru. In his grief, the zookeeper has opened all the of animals' cages and thrown away the keys. He has left a note and flung himself into the exhibit of the poisonous African bees. The rest of the animals, sleepy-eyed and lacking courage, do not escape at first. They only stand in the open doorways of their confines and stare, sure this is a trick of some kind. *Ha, ha, ha*, they think. *Very funny, Mr. Zookeeper*. The elephants, using their lovely trunks, feel around the openings, their limbs twitching and momentary, their hearts secretly waiting to be shot with the precision of a well-oiled elephant gun. The monkeys, smarter than most of the animals, convince their neighbors, the gullible but charming pandas, to open their cage doors, sure the clumsy bears will be immediately tranquilized for trespassing. The tigers and lions moan in unison, and also in disbelief, then give up and go back to their grooming. A brave little antelope named Eeka finally marches out of its holding pen. Together all the animals wait and watch, then are dumbfounded when nothing happens, the antelope simply disappearing into the forbidden expanse of the nearly empty park. *Have the doors really been thrown open?* their small animal hearts all ask. Their small animal hearts all answer: *Yes*. The animals hurry towards the entrance of the zoo, still half-believing they will be exterminated before they make it to the parking lot.

At that moment, Emily Dot, a third-grader, is sitting on her front porch, waiting to be punished. She is in trouble, serious trouble. She has been shouting in class again. This time she has yelled, "There cannot be a God! If there is a God, why are there no dinosaurs anywhere in the Bible?" Emily Dot has been known to yell things like this in class, ever since her mother's untimely death. The cause of her mother's death? A car accident. Highly improbable, yes, but it happens, at least several hundred times a year. In religion class, Emily Dot's teacher has warned her to please keep her comments to herself, but it is of no use. Emily is very, very sad. Like the zookeeper; like the world's heart, Emily's too has been broken.

Mr. Dot, her tall and handsome father, unties his necktie and sits on the porch beside her. He is in sales, a salesman, a project manager. He has been known to manage a project or two in his time, you better believe it. "What are we going to do about these interruptions in class?" Mr. Dot asks seriously.

"I refuse to be talked to like a child," Emily says. "I know there is no such thing as God and I won't be forced to think there is."

"No, certainly not, dear. No one can make you think something you don't want to think."

"I've tried to be polite and ask questions, but Mrs. Shields only gets angry whenever I speak."

"I imagine you must try her patience quite a bit."

"Mom always answered whatever questions I had. She never lost her patience with me."

"Yes, she was very kind and very patient."

"She never once talked to me like a child."

"No, she did not."

Emily Dot and her father, Mr. Dot, look up just then and see an amazing sight: it is a beautifully-massive, ivory-horned rhinoceros, quietly hurrying down the middle of their street. It slows to a halt, seeing them, then huffs through its great gray nostrils. It looks from daughter to father, blinking its enormous black eyes, then continues on its way, ambling behind a small yellow house on the corner, disappearing from their sight. In a moment, a spotty-orange tiger follows, then a silvery crocodile, one after the other like a very strange parade, the animals making their way aimlessly down their street. Several lovely white reindeer pause a moment to taste the Dots' hedge, then sprint along, scraping their great antlers along the elms that line their neighbor's small blue house.

"We ought to phone the police," Mr. Dot says and hurries inside quickly. Curious, Emily Dot climbs off her porch and hides behind the great green hedge, watching as a massively round hippopotamus strolls toward her, lolling its heavy tongue over its pearly teeth. It takes a large chomp out of their azalea bush, ignoring the small girl, who curls into a small shadow at its feet. In a moment, the hippo is wailing. Two cheetahs have sprung from nowhere and are making short work of this, a very enormous meal, pouncing upon the hippo's great, wide back, snapping its preposterously large vertebrae. Emily Dot stares up into the twin, mewling jaws of certain death, stunned, when her father pulls her to her feet and up onto the near safety of the porch. The cheetahs ignore the father and child, quite content with the shambling feast breathing its last breath before them.

"We'll be safest up there," Mr. Dot says, and they hurry up the rose trellis to the second story. From their slanted, shingled roof, Mr. Dot and his daughter watch the animals maraud their tiny neighborhood: the Fosters' duplex becomes a temporary Snake House, the Fosters' prized poodles appearing as mysterious bulges in the digestive tracts of several anacondas, the Hamiltons' front lawn becomes a makeshift savannah as ibex and zebra gracefully feed on their magnolias, Dickey Peterson, the neighborhood bully, is accosted by several gorillas who carry him up into the dense shadows of the Willmington's maple trees.

"There's a little gray monkey on the corner there," Mr. Dot exclaims, pointing.

"That is a bushbaby," Emily says. "We read about them in science class."

"Oh, yes. A bushbaby," he says. "Where do they come from?"

"The rain forest."

"Oh, yes. Of course."

They both stare, watching the tiny, furry animal preen itself, hanging from the street sign quite nimbly. They are quiet for a long time, the unfamiliar chatter and prattle of jungle creatures echoing in the twilight.

"I am sorry for shouting at school," Emily says.

Mr. Dot nods and replies: "Yes, you'll have to stop doing that."

Emily huffs and then looks down. "I really miss mom," she mumbles. "I think about her all day."

"I miss her, too, pumpkin. I miss her, too."

Emily itches her nose and sighs, then says what she has been thinking for quite a long time: "Nothing's been right since mom died."

"Yes," her father says, taking off his glasses. "You're exactly right."

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Nothing outside your circle of friends makes any sense anymore. You are not imagining this. The surprise is that you have anything left to depend upon at all. A successful diagnosis, a treatment regimen: fall in love with all your friends at once.