

Winter 2016

THE

Opening Line

LITERARY ZINE

Infection

FEATURED:

10 SIGNS YOU'RE INFECTED WITH THE WRITING BUG

Plus

- JOHN SWEEDER - ROBIN SINCLAIR -
- MAX DUNBAR - GARTH PETTERSEN -
- SHIRLEY MUIR -

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INFECTION

By Frances Button | EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Infection.

I write this introduction, somewhat fittingly, whilst wrapped in my duvet surrounded by tissues. Yes, I've fallen foul of the office bug; the one that infected everyone over Christmas except me just so it could surprise me in the new year when I had no impending holiday in which to recover. Life's like that.

Anyway, my poor, unfortunate self aside, our theme of Infection covers so much more than the pesky common cold. I was pleased to see so many different aspects of the theme covered when our inbox was flooded with submissions this quarter. All of our chosen writers took this particular premise to heart:

An infection is a catalyst that spreads and changes something from one state to another.

Within these pages you will find an excellent and varied selection of stories, from junk emails that have unexpected consequences, to the more tradition zombie tale, to a take on feminine curses that had the female contingent of the submissions team reading with something akin to glee (and the male contingent with the exact opposite emotion).

Make sure to check out our interview with OL alumna Kai Kiriyama this quarter (pg. 7 for more details) and don't forget to see ***THIS QUARTER'S THEME*** for ideas on our next issue, out in May.

Happy reading!

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10 SIGNS YOU’RE INFECTED WITH *THE WRITING BUG*

By K.F. Goodacre | *FEATURE WRITER*

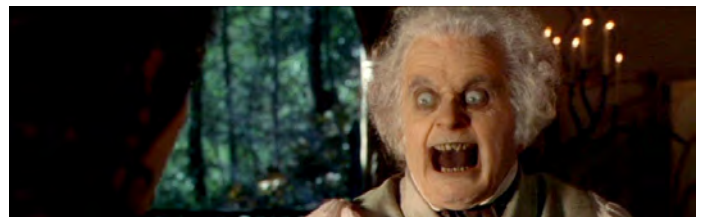
WRITING, LIKE MANY OTHER ADDICTIONS, IS A DISEASE.

Oh, *sure*, the general public might not see the signs because, by nature, writers are a solitary kind. As Neil Gaiman once confessed, “My people... we stay indoors. We have darkness. It’s quiet.” So others are unaware, but we know the terrible truth. Writing is an addiction, an infection, and these are ten signs to look out for - signs that you may not be as ‘in control’ of your recreational habit as you thought.

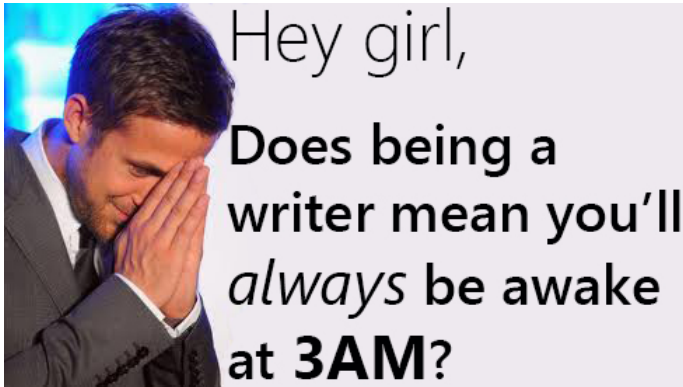
**I'M ADDICTED TO
WORDS**

**THE ONLY WAY TO
GET MY FIX IS TO
WRITE AND READ**

1. You’re reading this to double-check what you already, in your heart, know. The infection is worsening and you’re not sure if it’s you controlling the writing, or the writing controlling you.
2. You’re becoming very skilled at feigning interest in non-writing-related classes at school and university. Meanwhile, you write the next scene in your workbook, on the back of an essay, in your head... wherever. For the older generation, this skill manifests at work, when ‘taking meeting notes’ suddenly and inexplicably morphs into novel planning or a short story. When did that happen? You don’t even know.
3. You’re never really alone, because you have several voices in your head. Don’t be alarmed. You know they’re not real. They’re just your characters, telling you how your next scene is going to go.
4. Nothing, I repeat, nothing pleases you like genuinely positive feedback on your work. I mean it. Pass your exams? Promotion at work? Birth of your first born? Nothing.
5. Despite this elation, you don’t write for the positive feedback. You wouldn’t stop writing, even if no one liked your stories or wanted to read them to begin with. Honestly? You don’t think it’s possible to stop even if you wanted to.
6. You find yourself tuning out if conversations when they become dull, or even when they’re interesting but your muse has shown up (finally, the fickle cow). You see nothing wrong with this, either, because how many times do people check their phones or social media in a conversation? It’s exactly the same, but better, because you get to write in your head.
7. Despite how calm you might usually be, if someone interrupts you mid-creative flow, it’s like that scene from Lord of the Rings when Bilbo morphs into Creepy Fanged Pre-Gollum. It’s not a pretty sight but, dagnabbit, you were writing! Completely justified.



8. On the other end of the spectrum, when you get a new idea, you get so excited that you have to stop whatever you're doing and write it down. You also have to share it with your writing partner/friend who happens to know the basics of the story because you're so proud of the idea. It has to be shared immediately, even if you *are* interrupting date night with Whats-his-face.
9. You carry a writing device with you everywhere. It might be a notepad and pen, an iPad or that one memorable time you ruined your eyeliner on a Nandos napkin, but it will get the job done.
10. Sleep is a *problem*. For starters, you can't get to sleep unless you drift off thinking about your story, but if this results in a new idea (see number 8), time is no obstacle. Okay, so it's now 4am and you have work in the morning, but at least you can sleep for the remaining two hours knowing you won't forget that idea overnight.



Ryan Gosling gets it, courtesy of a bizarre Internet meme

If any of these signs seem familiar to you, there is a good chance you're infected with the writing bug. Sorry to say, there is no cure. In fact, it's pretty much a life sentence. The most you can hope for is a group of very understanding friends and life-time supply of caffeine. Good luck.

If you would like to pen an article for *Opening Line*, we accept topical musings as well as short stories, poems, novel excerpts and illustrations.



If you would like to hear more from K.F. Goodacre, you can visit her website at www.kfgoodacre.com or follow her on Twitter [@KFGoodacre](https://twitter.com/KFGoodacre)

Our next issue will be *DREAMS*

More details on www.openingline.org

Please email: submissions@openingline.org with your entry as an attachment.

SPOTLIGHT ON: PATHOGEN

Q&A SESSION WITH KAI KIRIYAMA ON 17TH FEBRUARY

By Lauren Atkins | *FEATURE WRITER*

FOR THOSE OF YOU WHO DON'T KNOW, **KAI KIRIYAMA** IS ONE OF OUR *OPENING LINE* ALUMNA, HAVING BEEN FEATURED IN A 2014 ISSUE, THEMED 'FUTURES'. Well, she's back! Influenced by tales of magic, deception and monsters, Kiriyama takes her genre-hopping seriously, and she'll be talking with us about her new release 'PATHOGEN: OUTBREAK' on the 17th February.

Make sure to check out the [OPENING LINE BLOG](#) so you don't miss out. In the meantime, why not read up on Kiriyama's PATHOGEN series below. But beware. Here be zombies.

PATHOGEN: PATIENT ZERO

Every outbreak starts somewhere...

- A young girl, hospitalized with a violent strain of the flu.
- A charismatic doctor who promises that she's going to be okay.
- A nightmare virus that threatens to destroy them both.

Reduced to the title of 'Zero', she is dehumanized by her doctors into little more than a series of charts and procedures.

Zero is left to her own devices, telling her story through a haze of drugs, slipping in and out of consciousness and trying to find some kind of inner peace as the doctors around her hustle to find a cure.

PATHOGEN: PATIENT ZERO is a harrowing medical drama, told from the perspective of a girl dying from a mystery illness.



PATHOGEN: OUTBREAK

The second book in the PATHOGEN series, OUTBREAK takes place after the events of Patient Zero, but can be read as a standalone book.

A lot can happen in 24 hours.

- A virus can kill a patient.
- A doctor can end up in quarantine.
- An outbreak can occur.
- And all hell can break loose.

Still reeling from the patient who he had affectionately referred to as "Zero," Doctor Liam Alexander wakes up in quarantine, only to discover he'd been abandoned. With no explanation, he wanders into the hospital, only to discover a nightmare hellscape he'd never imagined.

Battling his own grief, he teams up with a nurse who hadn't escaped the hospital when the dead began to rise.

Together, they must escape the outbreak that has spread beyond the hospital walls, or else become victims of the illness they'd fought to prevent.

THEY ARE
COMING.

August 14, 2015

Why Jason Carpatti is Dead

By Robin Sinclair

“We’ve established what happened. She’s admitted it.” Greenbaum had this sort of snide periphery glance he’d give to me when indirectly judging, a job reserved for the rotund man with the big eyes seated to my right. “What I want to know is... why.”

Ah. A small-town suit’s big chance for one of those movie courtroom drama moments. I get it.

“You know why. You just don’t want to say it yourself.” I wasn’t amused.

“Please, Ms. Chipoletta, humor us.” He smirked.

“A man is dead and 4 women are dying. I’m not sure why you’re smiling. I don’t see the *humor* in any of it.” His face dropped a bit when I snipped at him. *Gotcha, ya little prick.*

“Just tell us what happened, Tina.”

His parents were there, both crying. His best friend was emotionless, only vaguely in the room. My mother was there, but at the last minute Dad had decided to stay outside. He said he’d finish what I started if he had to look across the room at the people who raised the man that did this to me. I think Dad would understand why I didn’t feel the least bit bad about how it hurt Jason’s parents, tortured them really, to hear my my voice say what everyone already knew.

“It’s strange to me,” I began, “to think that the only point to any of this is the reputation of a man we already know to be a fucking monster.”

“Watch it, Ms. Chipoletta,” the Honorable Raymond James drawled low.

“My last test was the week before I met Jason, in May. I hadn’t slept with anyone after - except him. He played shy a few times at a bar, paid for drinks, made subtle hints about *looking for love* that came off less smooth and more like a cute and dumb cliché. He complimented pictures of me online. All the stupid...”

I rubbed my eyes, exhausted from how futile every aspect of this was.

“He told me he loved me, then he fucked me in a pop-up trailer in the woods somewhere in Pennsylvania and now I’m going to die.”

“What did I say!?” A booming voice from the man in the pretty robe.

“This is stupid, Your Honor. You’re going to send me to jail for longer than I’ll be alive and this waste of air is asking me to recount a story that everyone already knows.”

“What we want to know, Ms. Chipoletta, is why Jason Carpatti is dead.” It sounded perfectly rehearsed when Greenbaum shouted it. He was so prepared to deliver his lines, well practiced glances into the bathroom mirror, strolling naked in the bedroom imagining a gavel slamming and a girl sobbing.

“Jason Carpatti is dead because I stabbed him six times with a butcher knife and watched him drown in his own blood.” So prepared... but not for me.

His mother burst into loud, uncontrollable sobs. His father squinted hard, dropping his chin and making noiseless jerks like when the hero's friend dies in an old Western.

My mother closed her eyes, perhaps in shame or maybe simple disbelief. I don't know. She was the only one I couldn't figure out.

It was infuriating, really. I had the least amount of time to live out of everyone in the room, save for maybe an undiagnosed cancer or a poetic bus accident like in that song by The Smiths, yet here I was telling a story the world already knew... all because this bastard's parents wanted an opportunity to save his name and some pocked and pasty worm in a cheap suit was bereft enough of character to say yes.

“There are three others besides me. That we know of. That are certain to be dead within the year. Four of us, Mr. Greenbaum, all healthy before we met Jason. Four people without motive to lie. Four people who had futures.”

“How do we know for sure that none of you...” He started, briefly arrogant.

“I was going to be a teacher. Tracy, the girl who threw coffee at you and ruined your comb-over yesterday morning? She's a veterinarian. We had plans. We were going to fall in love and help people and go on adventures. Now our plans are medications. Being abandoned by our partners. Making cremation arrangements. Spending our last days with tubes hanging out of us.”

“So because you have to die, he had to die... is that it? You think you had a right to do what you did?”

“I could justify it if I wanted to. If that was the point. An eye for an eye, maybe. Or how about thinking of the number of lives I saved – he could be out there right now killing more of us. The good of many versus the good of the one. The truth is,” As I continued, I found myself no longer answering Greenbaum. I was staring at my mother. “I don't care if I had a right to do what I did. I killed him because I wanted to. It didn't have to be the right thing to do, it *felt* like the right thing to do.”

There was a silence.

I looked to the lawyer. “This is what you want?”

I turned my eyes to Jason's parents. “Look at me.”

His mother couldn't do it. His father raised his eyes. He met me with bravery that I respected.

“When it happened, I didn't panic. I thought maybe I would. I had found out about the Tracy girl, and she knew about one of the others. There hasn't been an Unplanned in this state in thirty years. When four of them happen, word gets around. I'd waited for her at work, sitting on the trunk of her car for over an hour before she showed up. She already knew why I was there.

I didn't tell her what I was going to do. I didn't tell anyone. That's what people do when they want someone to stop them.

I just drove to his apartment and kicked in his door. It took three kicks, but it ended up working just like in the movies. He must have been on the couch watching television when I first started kicking, because

the TV was on and he was halfway to the door when I got in. I don't remember what show was on. I walked into his kitchen and took a butcher knife from a block. I knew where they were because I'd slept there one night after being too drunk to drive home.

He was standing at the entrance to the kitchen shouting something, but it was muffled by adrenaline and hate and preoccupation with the scene I'd imagined on the drive over.

I stabbed him twice in the gut. He grabbed at my face and hair trying to stop me, but the blade was already in and he was falling to the floor. Once he was on his back, I started sliding the blade between his ribs and into his lungs, and after a moment I just watched. He wanted to struggle, but he was in shock. He was dying.

Alone, terrified, desperate.
Like I'll be one day."

Greenbaum bit his lower lip. Under his teeth and tightened tongue, he was smiling.

I focused my eyes back onto my mother.

"I was dosed at birth like almost everyone else. *For the greater good.* I know this thing is going to kill me. It'll live and I'll die. He was one of the chosen few, those special growths with a golden ticket to infect others life. He knew it, and he lied. He murdered me. I just lived long enough to return the favor."

<http://robinsinclairbooks.com/>



The Waiting

By Garth Pettersen

The shadows lengthen across the hardwood floor, advancing past broken bits of glass and the overturned coffee table, the stillness a dead thing in itself. I watch the shadows grow like black pools of blood seeping slowly to where I lay sprawled, my back propped against the far wall of what once was our dining room. Waiting. It isn't hard for me. It never has been and it certainly isn't now.

Karyn. She won't be returning. We've been growing apart for years, and now this. This what? This final, complete separation. This no going back. No coming back. A death, a dying. Doesn't everything come to this?

Karyn left this morning. Maybe she left to spare me. Perhaps to join her own kind. It doesn't matter. Nothing matters. I can wait for what comes next. It's all inevitable. And final. No worries. Who's going to worry about making the next mortgage payment? Paying the utility bill? That world has gone. Bye-bye, world.

It's too late. I know that now. When could I have acted? Last week? Months ago, when news of the virus breakout in Nigeria was all over the media? England was far enough away from Africa. Not to worry. Besides, who could take it seriously? The infected were like something out of an American B-movie, stumbling around like Karloff playing Frankenstein's Monster. It was a major hoax. Somebody was making money off this one.

England would have been far enough away – in the Middle Ages. But this was the twenty-first century, the age of the super jet, right? So, those viral anti-bodies or whatever the hell they are, didn't slowly work their way over Africa like blood on a bedsheet. No, they hopped a plane to Europe, to America, to Asia, and to everywhere else except Everest and Antarctica, and it's only a matter of time before they reach there. Before they reach the farthest corners of the globe.

'Corners of the globe.' I like that.

It wasn't the first cases that got the English stirred up. After all, we *are* English. What a load of shite that was. We should've been bloody scared. It wasn't until someone we knew got infected.

For me it was Fred, the accountant at work. He's sitting at his computer, but he's not working, just staring out the window.

"Everything okay, Fred, old boy?" we ask him. He sits there, his face drained of colour. Sweaty, too. His eyes sort of gray, glazed over like he has cataracts or something. Then it was as if he woke up. Gives his head a shake. He looks at me like the old Fred, but with a look filled with intolerable sadness and resolution, like the figures had added up short and it was all his fault.

Then without warning, he leaps to his feet and runs flat out across the office floor. He never hesitates, just launches himself through the nearest large window overlooking the street.

The whole office staff stands as if frozen. Then, as one, we run to the windows and look down the six floors to Haymarket Street below. Fred's body lies splayed on the cobblestones in a misshapen halo of dark red. Some of the women in the office turn their faces away. I hear sobbing and at least one of the men retching over a waste bin. My eyes are glued on Fred's remains. Then, I see him move. He slowly pulls his limbs under him. With too many broken bones to support his weight, Fred begins to crawl. The screams in the street blend with our shrieks from above. At that moment my world shatters.

As my co-workers fled from the office, I called Karyn on my cellphone. She agreed to leave work immediately and meet me at our home.

*

Perhaps if I had loved Karyn more, or myself less, I would have agreed when she insisted we leave at once. We could drive all night, she had said, stopping only for petrol. We could be at her parents' home in the Highlands some time the next day. I told her there was time, that we'd depart in the morning after a good night's rest and a meal. From years of practice, she had acquiesced.

*

The banging on our front door woke us. Though not usually a fast riser, I rose swiftly, without hesitation, pyjama-clad. Karyn followed, slipping into a dressing gown. With trepidation, I peered through the diamond-shaped window of the door. My friend Charles Unsworth met my gaze.

On opening the door, Charles pushed inside saying, "My God, Andrew, I need your help!"

"What's happened, Charles?" I asked, closing the door behind him.

He turned to face Karyn and me. He was holding his wrist.

"It's Carol. She has the virus. It's like she is a totally different person. Like a witch... a... a hag. She attacked me. Bit me on the hand. I had to fight her off. God, she was strong. She wouldn't stop. I knocked her down and fled from the house."

"Did you call the police?" Karyn asked.

Charles deflated himself onto the nearest living room chair.

"I've tried a number of times, but all the emergency lines are overloaded."

"My God, Charles. Look at your hand!" I said.

Our friend's hand was red and swollen, the bite wound puckered and seeping.

"I'll get some antiseptic and plasters," Karyn said. She left the room.

"I'm...I...I don't feel quite well, Andrew."

"This virus is very contagious. I want to help you, but..."

"But you're afraid I'll pass it on to you and Karyn, is that it?"

At that moment, Karyn returned with the first aid materials. "Here's a tumbler of cold water and some aspirin for fever." She handed him the glass. "Now let's see that hand."

Charles downed two tablets with the water, placed the empty tumbler on the coffee table, and offered Karyn his injured hand, like a wounded animal presenting a paw.

As Karyn took his hand, I started to object, saying, "Just a minute, Karyn, I..."

"Andrew is afraid I'll infect you, my dear."

"I'll wash my hands afterwards. Besides, you need our help. Isn't that right, Andrew?"

"Yes, of course. We wouldn't turn you away, Charles."

"No?"

Charles and I watched Karyn cleansing the wound with the antiseptic, then wrapping the wrist with sterile gauze.

Just as Karyn finished, the living room window exploded inward, showering us with pellets of glass. We turned and ducked as if on cue, covering our faces with our arms. A brick careened across the floor. I crossed to Karyn.

"Are you all right? I asked, putting a hand on her shoulder.

"Yes, I believe I am," she said as she lifted her head. I noticed small cuts on her face and neck. I touched my own face and felt similar bleeding wounds.

"Just a minute," I said as I turned and approached the shattered window. I could see a group of youths swaggering down the street, throwing stones and damaging cars.

"It's a bunch of thugs," I said. "This is to be expected. Law and order are breaking down. We've got to leave, Karyn."

"I'll get ready." She turned to go, then stopped, looking over at our friend. "What about Charles?"

The question hung in the air. Charles sat with his head cradled in his arms. Then slowly he raised his

head to look at Karyn. The question needed no answer. Charles' eyes were clouded as Fred's had been. He looked feverish and his face was gray and clammy.

Blood that had seeped through his bandage had blackened. Charles opened his mouth as if to speak, but the sound he emitted was somewhere between a groan and a cry. He reached out to Karyn as he stood, and moved forward. Before she could back away, he was on her, knocking her to the floor.

I launched myself across the room, upsetting the coffee table. I pulled Charles off Karyn and struggled with the crazed creature that had been my friend. My fist beat at his face while my other hand held him away from me. His jaws were constantly working, gnashing and snapping. We fell many times in our grappling, sometimes amidst the broken glass. Each time we rose, I did not know whether it was his black blood that ran into my eyes or my own. I could feel myself weakening, while the fiend did not tire. I knew this was a fight I could not win without a weapon. I grabbed what came to hand and struck him across the head with a table lamp. The ceramic shattered into pieces, but had little effect. I snatched the lamp's electrical cord from the floor and managed to wrap it around his neck. With this I brought him down, and using my knees to hold him, employed all my strength to throttle the life from the man.

I then discovered the horrid truth. I could not snuff the life from this being, because he did not breathe! Whatever sustained this undead creature was not from the air.

I reeled from this knowledge, and the thing was quick to press its advantage. I fell back with it above me. As it made the final lunge at my face with its open jaws, I was barely aware of Karyn thrusting forward from behind it. From the centre of the being's forehead, the tip of her kitchen knife erupted and all life left its body, for the second time.

*

It happened after we had washed the gore from ourselves and had time to check our injuries. Karyn and I decided we must separate. She couldn't bear the thought of harming me. Though our marriage had been in decline, this struggle against a common enemy had bound us as tightly together as we had once been. But now the bond must be broken so one of us could survive. It was Karyn who had to leave. There was no embrace, no kiss goodbye, only a look shared. Then she was gone.

*

The house remains strangely peaceful, given the chaos and the dead. I could sit here forever, watching the shadows. After all, there is no urgency. No one I have to see, no business I must attend to. No regrets. No future plans. Yes, it is a strange peace. With no desires. No, that's not entirely true. I wish Karyn would return.

I am beginning to feel quite peckish.

Garth Pettersen is a Canadian writer living in the Fraser Valley near Vancouver, BC. He has a Bachelor's Degree in History and a background in Education (History, English, Theatre). Garth taught Writing and English at Western Canada College. In 2016 his stories will appear in anthologies published by Horrified Press and Main Street Rag Publishing. Read his blogs on writing at www.garthpettersen.com/

Is that Davey?

By Shirley Muir

She hates being jolted awake by the alarm clock.

But wait, that's the telephone screaming in her ear. Her heart pounds in her throat. Heather rolls over and snatches up the phone.

The clock tells her it's an ungodly five-thirty. Barely light yet.

'Hello, is Davey there?'

'No,' she grunts. 'Er, Davey who?'

'Oh, I must have the wrong number. Sorry.'

The caller hangs up.

*

Now she's been roused from a deep sleep, she waits for her heart rate to subside. Finalising her trip plans online had occupied a good chunk of last evening, 'til well after midnight in fact. Relief flooded over her as she clicked the last flight confirmation for an exciting Turkish villa holiday. Her tired body slipped between the sheets knowing the longed-for break was in place, a reward for six months slogging on a challenging market research contract.

Now the results have to be written up and completed – another few days of intense administrative and analytical work. She enjoys the final writing-up phase of these research jobs. The end is in sight.

The phone shrills again.

'Can I speak to Davey?' A man's voice.

'There's no Davey here.'

'Who are you then?'

'Who are you?' she says, bristling. 'You phoned me.'

'Sorry, it's Davey Bolton I want. I've had an email from him, saying he's stranded in Istanbul and asking for money.'

She struggles her body upright, groggy brain stirring into action. With two pillows propping up her back she concentrates her mind and pushes the hair out of her eyes.

'I haven't sent any emails. When?'

'Ten minutes ago. Is Davey there?'

'I don't know any Davey, sorry.'

'Oh, I wondered if Davey was all right. Nice guy with a lovely wife. It's a shame what's happened to them. Is he not there?'

'You must have the wrong number.'

She hangs up. Something's obviously happened and this is just the beginning. Less than two minutes elapses and again the phone trills.

'This is Jack from Miller Rental Cars.'

'And you've had an email from someone called Davey in Turkey?'

'Yes, I have, and it's worrying me. Is that Kathryn?'

'No, this is Heather Sinclair. My phone number must be on this scam email instead of Davey's. Can you please forward me the email? I don't even know Davey.'

'OK, Heather, apologies for the intrusion so early in the morning. I didn't stop to check if this was Davey's genuine phone number. Give me your email address. Just don't click anything in the email. It's poison.'

She swings her legs out of bed and stumbles into the office, poking her feet into a pair of slippers and grabbing a dressing gown on the way.

*

Her fingers tremble as she clicks on her Inbox and sees the forwarded message from Jack Miller. She is fearful of opening infected emails but she knows she must. Sure enough her own phone number sits at the bottom of the scam email. Alongside is a tweaked version of what was probably Davey's email address. She reads the note in the message body.

'I'm writing this with tears in my eyes, I had a trip to Istanbul (Turkey) for a short vacation unfortunately I got mugged at the car park of the hotel where I stayed, all cash, credit card and Cell were all stolen from me but luckily for me I still have my passport with me. Please send me money, regards Davey.'

To Heather, this sounds both naive and unconvincing. Nevertheless the hairs stand up on the back of her neck. Istanbul. She's just booked her own flights.

*

She Googles Davey's correct business number and calls him. It's light now, a decent hour to phone. His number and her number are identical save for one digit.

'Are you Davey Bolton? This is Heather Sinclair. My phone number's on a rip-off email saying you are stranded in Turkey.'

'Yes,' a jaded voice says. 'I am so sorry. As you can gather, I'm not in Turkey, only wish I was. Your phone number is like mine, isn't it? 667 instead of 669? I am getting calls every few minutes.'

'Well,' she says. 'I can continue explaining to people phoning me just what's happened to you. They'll be grateful to hear that you're not in real trouble. Would that help?'

'It certainly will. And I was supposed to be starting to fit out Mr Patel's pharmacy premises today. But now I'll have to stay here with my IT specialist and decontaminate the laptop and reset my email accounts. It will take me the rest of the day to apologise to all my customers.'

'I'm so sorry this has happened to you, Davey. I'm only glad I can do something to assist,' Heather said.

'Thank you, that's very kind,' he says, his voice shaky. 'Losing this work will cost me best part of five grand, so there'll be no holidays for us in a long while. And Istanbul is definitely top of my bucket list. What a coincidence. It almost made me laugh.'

Heather thinks he sounds close to tears.

*

Armed with a cup of coffee and a notebook to take details of the phone enquiries for Davey, Heather concludes that she won't make a start on the last section of the research project today. She fully expects the phone to keep ringing every few minutes. But she doesn't mind if her day can be usefully spent sorting out Davey's difficulty.

Several local business contacts ring her during the morning and she chats to them about Davey, whom she had never heard of until dawn today. High quality joinery work from Davey is the common denominator. He's hailed by all as a competent and skilled tradesman.

And they all ask after his wife, Kathryn.

Mid-morning, the local church minister, Andrew calls.

'Hello Andrew, have you had this scam email from Davey Bolton, too?'

'I have. We are customers of his. Davey carried out a piece of fantastic restoration work for the church choir.'

He was very proud of it and didn't even bill us.'

The Reverend Andrew expresses concern for Davey. He knows that he and his wife are under severe strain due to her recent illness. It has caused Davey to lose a lot of days off work and Andrew worries that their finances may be under pressure.

'Davey doesn't need this kind of setback right now,' he says. 'I'll pop round later and see Kathryn. I married them in St Margaret's only last year; it was an enchanting wedding.'

'Oh Andrew, that is so sad. I have never met Davey but I have been overwhelmed by the outpouring of support I have listened to today. The people who have phoned me obviously like and respect Davey.'

'Yes, Davey's a perfectionist and his work diary is always full,' Andrew says. 'You can't fault his excellence or dedication, and his optimism is generally unwavering. In fact, they are a delightful couple. When you see them together it's clear Kathryn is the love of his life. She's a real treasure.'

Heather is shocked to hear in the ensuing phone conversations that most of Davey's contacts – from his compromised email list – actually believe he's stranded in a Turkish police station.

Until this morning she reckoned she herself could spot a spoof email a mile away. Now she's not so sure that others can when they know and care about the victim involved. It seems to cloud their judgement. But she understands perfectly why that would be, and why people today want to check whether Davey does in fact need assistance.

Callers continue to suggest ways they might lend a hand to Davey and Kathryn to see them through this crisis. *Does Davey need money? Can I send a cheque to his wife? Does he want flights back home? I'd like to meet him at the airport.* Offers stream in.

One woman divulges to Heather that Kathryn has recently suffered quite a late miscarriage and it has affected them badly. She even volunteers to visit Davey's mum and reassure her that Davey and Kathryn are both all right and this is just an unfortunate computer scam.

A call from the pharmacist comes through. 'I'm sorry but I've just had this email from Davey. Is he OK? I know he called to say he wanted to delay the work on my new shop for a day, and that's not going to inconvenience me at all. Suits me better, in fact. Now, is there anything I can do to help?'

Heather is relieved on behalf of Davey that at least one thing is turning out well today. He will be reassured to have his important shopfitting job to start on tomorrow, instead of bemoaning the loss of an important source of income.

The pharmacist is another customer of Davey's who marvels at his skills and professionalism. 'Sorry to have troubled you,' he says, 'I bet you've had a busy day unravelling Davey's unwanted email muddles. Well done you.'

She smiles to herself and rings Andrew back.

'Andrew, can you help me with something, please?'

*

By evening the calls have faded to a trickle. It's been a roller-coaster of a day, and now it's done. Her research project has lain untouched but she can tackle it tomorrow. A day away from it will do both her and the report good. She will look at it with fresh eyes in the morning.

After a long and interesting day she finally climbs into bed.

*

A fortnight later the market research assignment is bound and has been submitted to her client. Her invoice is in the post on the way to the client. Heather boards the plane to Istanbul. She stows her coat, takes her window seat and fastens her seatbelt. Heather wears a smile as she gazes out of the window at the bright blue

of the sky.

This much-needed break will refresh her mentally and physically now that the six-month intensive work stint has concluded. And the very welcome client fee will be in her bank account when she returns. Her destination is a rented villa an hour's taxi ride from Istanbul airport. Sunshine, swimming pool, reading and relaxation beckon. Bliss.

A slim man with shoulder muscles outlined through his shirt stops at her seat row. He shoves a chunky holdall into the overhead locker above her head as if it were weightless. As he slides into the aisle seat, a woman sits down next to Heather in the middle seat. The couple retrieve their respective seatbelt halves and connect them with simultaneous metallic clinks.

Heather turns to her neighbour, extending her hand.

'Hello,' she says. 'I'm Heather.'

'Hello,' the woman says, taking her hand and offering a soft smile. The woman's fingers are freezing despite the warmth of the plane and the lovely summer sunshine outside.

'I'm Kathryn Bolton and this is my husband Davey.' She lays her hand on his knee and her smile displays straight, pearly-white teeth. Her pale, thin face glows with pleasure.

Heather warms to this young woman.

'I'm so excited,' the woman says to Heather with an air of confidentiality. 'We won this holiday in a raffle at the church, which we didn't even remember buying tickets for, did we Davey?'

'We didn't, love, and that's a fact.'

His face lights up as he clasps her delicate hand in his, like a precious jewel. As they gaze at one another Heather watches his eyes. They sparkle with love. He strokes his wife's hand as if it were rich velvet.

Heather counts herself blessed to have finally met this charming couple face to face. She feels for a moment like an intruder in their private bubble.

<https://fidrawritings.wordpress.com/>

Mens Rea

By Max Dunbar

The doctor's waiting room was crowded, and this was usual. What wasn't usual was that the crowd was mainly men of around Mike's age. The usual pensioners and professional time-wasters seemed to have taken the day off. The men reading freesheets or leaning against walls looked fit and well.

Mike stared at the display ticker above Dr Frisby's door. Moments slipped by.

Mike had been registered with the practice for eleven years and it had always been run with whipcrack efficiency, but not today. People were called in, others left, but not many. Mike was not happy – he needed to be at the glassworks as soon as. So many of the lads were off sick, and it'd been a struggle to get old Colgate to approve even an hour's leave for a goddamn GP's appointment.

He was still waiting to be seen when Resh appeared. Resh and Mike had known each other since school.

'Jesus, it's like standing room only here,' Resh said. 'You too?'

Mike said he didn't know what Resh meant. Resh shook his head.

'I think you know exactly. Let's talk.'

They went out onto the front porch. Dr Frisby had her practice on the LS6 side of Meanwood, across from The Hungry Bear. Resh lit a cigarette. 'Are you here because of the bleeding?'

Mike thought of denying it, opened his mouth, and the truth fell out of him. 'I was at the lads' parents evening, right? And I'm sat there listening to the girl talk about key stage scores and school trips and all this, and I thought I'd sat in something. I happen to glance down, and my jeans have gone dark. This is like, in a big open plan room with kids running about and mums and dads, people we know, sitting at tables. I listen to the girl talk for what feels like infinity and I can't bear to look down or breathe through my nose. As soon as it's over, I get Leo and Flynn in the car and drive back like a maniac. I feel soaked from the waist down and I can smell myself – it wasn't like shit, not that rich, aggravating smell that shit has, but like...' He gazed ahead. It was easier if he wasn't looking directly at Resh but kept his eyes on the road and The Hungry Bear and the Asda across it, and the people milling and the cars slipping through the circle junction.

'Like an after-taste, when you've been eating tomatoes,' Resh said. 'And with a kind of *metal* taste to it?'

Mike wheeled to face his friend. Embarrassment was forgotten. 'Yes! No matter how much I shower, I can't get that taste out of my nose.'

Resh nodded. 'I was on a date. Electric Press, champagne, suit, the works. All going fine, except that I happen to drop a napkin around the time when the Greek mezzes arrive, and I see it trickling all over my shoes. I got out of there quick – I didn't even make an excuse, I just ran. Ellen must have thought I was crazy. I had to walk home – no taxi would take me because they could see I was splattered in blood.'

Relief broke through Mike in a wave. This was happening to someone else too! There was someone who *understood!*

'Is this happening to anyone else? Do you reckon?'

Resh blew a smoke ring. 'I reckon so. I mean, it's like we're all meant to be modern men now but if you were suffering from depression or impotence or something like that, would you tell the world? I don't think so.'

'How long's it last?' Mike asked. 'I've had toilet roll stuffed up there for three days.'

'I don't know,' Resh said. 'But here's my advice – go to the Cohen's Chemist on Monk Bridge and get some of those incontinence pads. They don't chafe, and you can't see the lining.'

*

When the doctor was finally free, they went in together. Dr Frisby said she probably knew what this was about.

‘But first, the PCT says I have to ask you some questions.’ She read from a worksheet on her desk. ‘Have you recently engaged in penetrative anal intercourse? Have you introduced any kind of foreign object, particularly any edged instrument such as a hammer, letter opener or ridged vibrator, into –’

‘I don’t think either of us have,’ Resh said. ‘At least not recently. I know you can’t break patient confidentiality and all that, but am I right in thinking that you’ve seen quite a few guys with this specific problem?’

‘Dozens,’ Dr Frisby admitted. ‘And my colleagues in Casualty have had more turning up there.’

‘So what is it about?’ Mike asked.

‘I don’t know. All we know is that there’s been an enormous increase in patients who present with rectal bleeding. There’s no profile – I’ve had gay men here, married men, teenage boys and men pushing sixty. It seems to taper off at retirement age – none of my OAPs have complained about this phenomenon, and it does also look like you have to be at least in your teens to get the continuous flow.’

Mike thought of his sons, eight and ten respectively. Did the kids have this waiting for them?

‘We’re all men,’ Resh said. ‘That’s your profile.’

Dr Frisby nodded. ‘That’s right. Not one single female patient presents with this thing. And do you know, it’s not just blood that you bleed. I have a cousin up at the path labs in Wetherby and she’s seen samples containing blood, skin tissue, semen, mucosal and endometrial tissue – general waste, and some things you don’t expect to find in the male body at *all*.’

‘How long does it last?’

The doctor played with the amethyst ring on her middle finger, twisted it this way and that. ‘The bleeding generally lasts for seven days maximum.’

Seven days, Mike thought.

‘People have also reported changes in mood, stomach problems, weird cramps. All I can tell you for now is the standard GP advice – cut down on alcohol and caffeine, exercise more, eat right, keep your body generally fit and well and you’ll get through it. I’ll refer you for the usual scans but it’ll be a six month wait and most likely the specialists will find nothing.’

‘I guess that’s all we can discuss.’ Mike got up to leave.

Dr Frisby said: ‘Not quite. Can you get on the couch and pull your trousers down? The Trust says I need to check for fissures.’

*

True to the doctor’s word, Mike’s bleeding eased off, then finally ended. He was able to forget the whole thing had even happened, until the fourteenth of the next month, when the discharge recurred. At the time he’d been at work, buzz-sawing through a patch of silica in front of the new apprentices, and he’d had to make excuses and flee for the bathroom, which only had the sandpaper-green dispenser towels.

A man could get used to just about anything, his father had always said, but Mike couldn’t get used to this monthly trauma of colectoral flow. It wasn’t just the bleeding itself, or the stomach pains that accompanied it, or the random urge to weep or the taste of aluminium and tomatoes in his nose. As the weeks went by, Mike sensed subtle changes. His ideas didn’t carry the same weight they used to, either at work or at home. A new exec took over the plant – a brassy blonde with leopardskin jackets and Ocado shoes – and cut his hours without apology or explanation. He spent a lot more time on the school run, or doing the ironing with the TV on. He slept more, and deeper, with striking and confusing dreams. When he watched the news he noticed that any senior interviewee, whether from the armed forces or industry or entertainment, was a woman. He had to deal with a pregnancy scare before Christmas because his wife’s period didn’t come that month. The test came

out negative, but Pat still wasn't buying tampons. She didn't seem upset about the pregnancy scare: she went out with the girls a lot more and came back drunk and singing at 2am. Not that they wouldn't have been able to afford a third child, come to that: his wife had been promoted to area manager at her own work, and they were making more money than ever.

His friend Resh was the only man Mike knew whose life had been positively changed by this curse. Since he was a teenage boy Resh had wanted to be a famous entrepreneur, but every business he'd set up had collapsed, sometimes in social or legal controversy. Finally Resh had hit big with the *Manidom*, a sanitary product designed for men. The *Manidom* hit supermarkets just after the new year – 'Fits snugly inside any rectal aperture; feather-light for discretion and comfort,' read the typing on the box – with billboard coverage and TV adverts featuring Coldplay, Simon Pegg and Nick Frost. With his tagline 'You'll forget it's even up there' Resh had invented one of those commercial products that pass forever into the public consciousness. The last Mike heard, Resh had sold his flat on the Beckhills and moved to Los Angeles.

With his world fraying at the edges, Mike found himself staying up at night, scrolling through the internet with a glass of Jim Beam. The web buzzed with ideas about the curse. A lot of the internet lads were saying it was a mass conspiracy by the 'feminist establishment' to destroy the male species altogether. There was apparently a cabal of lesbian vampires that had introduced some new chemical into men's bodies, possibly through water fluoridation. Mike read on, but his heart wasn't in men's rights activism. He didn't want to hurt people, he just wanted the world back how it was.

He stopped reading the MRA sites and got into alternative health. He found a local Wiccan group that met in town and would be discussing the curse at their next meeting. Mike turned up on the night. He was the only man present, which made him nervous.

'We don't get many guys along.' The course leader was a small woman with a hoodie and pink dreadlocks. 'What's your reason for coming?'

'I read on your forums that you have a lot of ideas about the problem that men have been having,' Mike said.

'The bleeding?' There was whispering and sniggering from the group. Mike had grown used to whispers and sniggers since the curse. He told the course leader that he wanted to know what had caused the monthly bleeding, and whether it could be reversed.

'Well, we're just amateurs,' said the course leader. 'To get those kind of answers, you'd need to summon the Moon-Goddess.'

'But that sounds ridiculous,' said Mike. 'There's no such thing.'

But the other Wiccans weren't so sceptical. They liked the idea of summoning the Moon-Goddess. They began taking off their clothes and dancing around the library, chanting in some silly, Gaelic-style language. Mike walked out: the idea had clearly been a waste of time.

On the drive home he got stuck behind a party of raucous females in an expensive convertible. It was a sunny spring, and the women shouted and catcalled at the young men, walking the pavements in long shorts.

*

One day Mike was walking the Meanwood Valley Trail, alone. His wife had taken the boys to see a friend named Melissa in her London townhouse for the weekend. From the social media chatter he'd seen, Mike suspected that this Melissa woman might be more than a friend. He really didn't care any more: the marriage had six months to run at best.

The trail was popular with dog walkers, families and conservation volunteers. When the woman called his name, Mike assumed she was someone he knew, though he couldn't place the face.

'Have we met?'

'I don't believe so, but you asked for my summoning. Here, let's have some privacy. I know how you men get embarrassed!'

The woman made a small, intricate movement of the hands. The landscape around them grew dim and

greasy. Trees, dogs, people around him looked suspended somehow.

‘Let me guess,’ she said. ‘You’re wanting to know how the curse can be taken off.’

The Moon-Goddess looked like a hippy, but the practical kind of hippy that can negotiate with police and fix the generators when they break down. She had dyed green hair and glasses and stripy tights and clumpy boots. She looked a hale and attractive fifty-something.

‘Yes. That’s what I want to know.’

‘Well, it can’t,’ said the Moon-Goddess. ‘It’s your punishment.’

‘Punishment? What did I do wrong?’

‘Not you personally,’ said the Moon-Goddess. ‘It’s more the male gender in general. You know, when it all began, after the Light, women were the original sinners. Your jealous Yahweh god made them bleed and bear children, all because of that stupidity with the snake and the apple. Yahweh never considered that a little knowledge might be a decent thing and that we all have to leave the garden sometime. Now, Mike, there’s been a change in personnel, stars have realigned, and the debt is now considered paid. It’s time for you men to suffer for your centuries of plunder, dominance, conquest and rapine.’

‘But all that was hundreds of years ago. I’ve never colonised anyone.’

‘No, but you hurt women all the same. I know about the girls you bullied in secondary school, the woman you raped at college, the women who’ve been groped and harassed and denied the opportunities to live a life that reflects their talents, all because of you and men like you.’

‘Come on, young men are stupid.’

The Moon-Goddess looked at him with pity and a kind of helpless understanding. ‘And old men too. I’m sorry, Mike.’

‘So this is how it’s gonna be?’

‘For at least the next few hundred years. You never know, you might like living in a matriarchy. Some men get a kick from it.’

‘A society run by women?’

‘Why not? Your guys screwed it up. Time to give the sisters a chance.’

‘But you got to see. This isn’t natural.’

When the Moon-Goddess laughed, the wind kicked up and made the trees shiver in delighted unison. ‘*Natural!* Tell me, young man, is there anything natural in the *world*? What is man? What is woman? And who is to say that humans are still not evolving? Your brain is changing, Mike. I can *feel* it.’

Mike had enough of this. He turned tail and ran. He had been playing on the trail since he was four, but now he got lost. He ran through endless forest, weird, misbegotten plants and curving, crazed stone paths. Storms and sunbursts passed over the sky. He saw no other people, but odd-looking birds flew overhead, leathery wings beating against the treeline; and every so often there would be a rounded, reverberating grunt from something somewhere... an aurochs, perhaps.

He slept where he fell. In his dreams he saw waterfalls of foaming blood, the blood becoming water, the water birthed rowans and oaks that sprang from fast rivers in an eerie, surreal speed. He heard laughter, and bells.

Nothing is natural, Mike thought. Everything is connected.

*

When he awoke he was back in the world of reality. He knew because he was bleeding. He was early this month. Or maybe he had slept for days.

He was leant against a tree in a clearing somewhere. His *Manidom* felt soaked. He had grown accustomed to carrying spares. He changed himself with practised ease. There was a plastic jar on the stony floor beside him, the kind with a lid. He wrung the used *Manidom* into the jar. Blood, gristle and internal waste filled the jar.

It was around half an hour’s walk to the house. Mike made his end of Meanwood in twenty minutes,

not caring about the stares he drew from the people coming out of Waitrose and East Arcadia. He was wild-eyed and covered in twigs and grass. In one hand he carried his jar of blood.

He wondered if Pat was back yet. *How long was I dreaming?* In any case, the day was getting blue around the edges and it was time to start thinking about dinner. Mike found himself cooking all the meals these days. Whatever happened, he would have her dinner on the table by the time she got home.

Something with tomatoes.

<https://maxdunbar.wordpress.com/>



Touch-screen Viruses

Infected by the heroin
of propaganda wantonly
distributed by guileful
groomers, lone wolves hole up in dens
pecking and pawing at keyboards
and touch screens, exploring dark-web
corridors in search of cut-rate
catalysts that'll help them pipe bomb
their way to immortality.
Strung out on power and praise, these
programmed predators patiently
pursue their soft-target prey and
terrorize us as well: we, who
watch the carnage from our dens; we
media junkies who've become
addicted to viral strains of
violence and propaganda.

by John Sweeder

<https://jsweeder.wordpress.com/>



Lust is biology. Infatuation
is psychology. Love is
theology.

- Mark Amend

When you are in love
you can't fall asleep
because reality is better
than your dreams
- Dr. Suess

in•fat•u•a•tion

an intense but short-lived
passion or admiration for
someone or something

synonyms: passion,
enchantment, obsession,
crush, fascination, rapture

see also: Romeo & Juliet



Lust

- (n.) 1. intense sexual desire or appetite.
2. uncontrolled or illicit sexual desire or appetite
3. a passionate or overmastering desire or craving
4. ardent enthusiasm; zest; relish

Well, Valentine's Day is coming up. (So is Pancake Day, don't forget.)

LOVE. INFATUATION. LUST.

Three very different things... or are they? We want your stories about love, infatuation
and/or love this quarter.

**Our submission inbox
(submissions@openingline.org)
is open NOW and
our deadline is 11th April 2016.**

Happy submitting!