

## HIGHLY COMMENDED

### Drainage by Carrie Sanders

She woke up on the couch in her coat and shoes on again, the familiar roiling unease washing over her in waves. Her mouth tasted like an old bandage and her fat uvula was lying on her tongue, slug like, from sleeping open-mouthed under the heater in her high rise studio flat. Her head was something delicate and bitter, an egg boiled in tea, and she opened one eye to check the time on her phone which she had trained herself to place on her pillow, without fail. It was 6 am, enough time to ease slowly into this vile day. She reached into her pocket for a cigarette, lit it, fought the urge to retch, and the smoke fed the dull ache in her back and caused the gray hand she envisioned within her to tighten around her heart. As she exhaled, she spoke the first words of the day—*Ah, who gives a shit.*

Nicotine-buzzed and dry-mouthed, she heaved herself from the couch and stumbled to the bathroom, the light still on from the night before. Most of the time she can pass for years younger than 46, but not today. She thought of the dermatologist with the Chinese bedside manner who told her that her “face was slipping from the architecture of her face.” She took inventory of herself; the bags under her eyes, the crowding teeth, the burgeoning under bite and loose jowls—she was melting into bull-dogged middle age.

She poured a packet of painkiller powder in her mouth, gargled, dressed and set out into the Beijing smog. Even the sun was dirty today, and she pulled her scarf around her mouth as she walked towards the metro, shoving her way through the turnstile and charging through the crowd of commuters, elbows out. She swayed with the movement of the subway car as she stood grasping the hand strap above her. She closed her eyes against the nausea she

felt from the jerking motion and the sound of the woman seated next to her clipping her fingernails.

She arrived at her office early as usual and queued up in the elevator line. She joined the rest of the office droids in ignoring the posted warnings about the passenger limit of the elevator and crammed in, holding her breath against the garlic burp smell as the elevator zipped past the lower floors and stopped at 34.

In the office she walked purposefully past the office of her boss, a turtle-headed man with a bozo fringe named Christmas who spent the workday in pursuit of one caffeine high after another. Coffee, tea, coke, coffee again—none of which ever seemed to invigorate his dejected shuffle around the office.

She and Christmas had a kind of truce. They both knew she was a contractual employee and they both also knew he had no interest in managing her. So she withered on the vine, 9 hours a day, messing about online and doing a half-assed job search as Christmas pointedly ignored her and they both counted down the days.

With bloodshot eyes and a sour belly, she logged into her computer and walked back down the 34 flights of stairs to the café in the lobby for her breakfast of coffee and a muffin, which she promptly vomited up in the ladies room. She swiped at her watery eyes in the stall and steadied herself- *Fuck, shit, ok.* .

She went through the motions of her daily routine, looking at the online photos of people she was once close to but who had now moved on to marriage, babies, and out of this damn country. When she arrived on a company package years ago there was an entire staff of newly arrived foreigners and a thrilling, self-congratulatory comradeship among them. Aren't we all so clever and adventurous? Years later she seemed to be the only one left behind, and she had no patience for the new arrivals in town, their earnest wonder and naïve cultural

observations an embarrassment to her. It seemed inconceivable she had ever been that young and hopeful.

Her workmates were mostly young Chinese women that were sophisticated by local standards—office girls who were postponing marriage in pursuit of a career. There was a term for women who were older than 27 and unmarried—left on the shelf. By that definition she was almost 20 years past the sell by date, and surely had gone off. She overheard them commiserating about their parents' panic of not having grandchildren, and was amused at the new trend of marriage markets in which Chinese parents met to exchange copies of data sheets of their single children like trading cards. The customs were alien to her here, and the “girls” seemed so immature but she could see that when one of them had a date arranged that behind the bluster about meddling parents they were aflush with the possibility of finding love. She was haughty in her judgement of them and she knew it. Her worldview was reinforced by the staffroom dramas—aren't we all just piles of unmet needs.

On the cubicle wall above her computer she had posted a page from the motivational desk calendar she received in a holiday gift exchange years ago, “Everything in your life has brought you to this moment,” scrolled in a feminine, lavender font. Had it really—the unremarkable childhood in Idaho, the Sociology degree, the bad jobs, good intentions and failed attempts at doing something significant? All those nasty little snowflakes accumulated to this avalanche she was under?

Her thoughts were interrupted by the feeling that someone was behind her and she turned to see Christmas, coffee cup in hand, rocking slowly back and forth on his cowboy boots, one of the many affections he had adopted from his time in Texas which seemed to give him some kind of cachet here.

“Yes?”

“I need an updated report on this quarter.”

“No problem.”

The truth was she was good at her job and efficient as hell, as she had been there far longer than anyone else. A task like that was a matter of cut and paste and would take no more than 20 minutes but she was glad of the chance to actually do something. She amused herself by writing every sentence with the same amount of letters, then started again with the same report in which she never used the letter “u.” She sent them both to Christmas at a quarter to 6 and spent the next 15 minutes looking at puppies in onesies online.

She walked down the 34 flights of stairs for the second time and left into the humid airless night. There was no doubt where she was headed, no other option but the place she had spent most of her nights for longer than she would even admit to herself. The grimy, appropriately named Alone In Your Pain Bar that was the one place she could be sure that she was, indeed, left alone. It was a place where expat men went to drink and talk to the capricious bar girls who were also on the menu if the price was right and they were in the mood. She was invisible to everyone, as she wanted to be. Occasionally a man would approach, like the gray-haired old Brit whose opening line was “I’ve been here so long the white girls are starting to look good,” but any attempt at chit-chat was quickly severed. The bartender knew to keep the drinks coming without saying a word. Her tab was settled monthly now.

She drank beer and baijouw—a nasty grain alcohol whose taste was reminiscent of the smell of the bar tray at the end of a long night waiting tables in her college days. A purple, blooming, unmistakable smell that came up through her pores all the time now that she was an everyday drinker of the stuff. She smoked and drank in silence from her corner table, illuminated only by the Qingdao beer sign above her. Drinking alone but in public was an intentional choice after many nights of unrestrained drinking in her flat caused too many

missed days of work—at least here she knew she had to make her way home at some point and that created a kind of external limit she couldn't trust herself to heed in her private space.

It was a full bar tonight and she was distressed to see a middle-aged expat man and a young Chinese girl in a Mickey Mouse sweater dress making their way towards the empty chairs at her table. The man made a head-ducking motion towards the chairs and she tipped her head in response. She would make it a short night, then. He ordered drinks from the silent barman, beer for him and a juice for the girl, and turned his attention to her.

“So, fuckin Beijing, huh? What a shit hole.”

She looked over at his Chinese companion to see her reaction, but she was intently gnawing at a snack pack of chicken feet.

“Ah, don't worry about her, she hates China too. She's basically more American than I am. And her English is shit.”

“Yeah, China...” She eyed her full beer and baijiu on the table. She hated leaving drinks behind when she knew there was nothing in the house to take her across the threshold into sleep.

“I'm telling you there is no way I would come back to this pit once my contract is over” he sprawled out his legs and jostled the table of drinks, claiming his space, “even with the fuckin hardship pay.” He gazed towards the bar with an Antarctic stare. The Chinese girl played with her phone. “But what would I do back in the States, right? Sell insurance in Indiana? Bust my balls for a one-bedroom apartment and hustle to get my dick wet on the weekend? Fuck that shit.” He has arrived at his destination, settles back into his chair. “Naw, Asia is where it's at...but not China, everyone here is just trying too hard. I think I'm heading south to gutter Asia next- Cambodia, Thailand. A beach, maybe.” He links his hands behind his head, leaning on the back chair legs. “Yeah, people like you and me, we figured it

out- seeing the world, getting drunk,” he focused his appraising, hard eyes on her, “it’s freedom.”

She rose from the seat and stumbled a bit, her legs getting caught in the chair legs. The baijiu had numbed her limbs already.

“Whoa, lady. I’m just tryin to have a conversation here. Why you gotta be a bitch?”

She lurched out of the bar, her legs trapped in her scarf and strangling her gait. She could still hear the American man griping about her inside. “What the fuck, man? I was just being friendly.” She untangled herself and hailed a taxi, telling the driver her address in the Chinese language that always felt so strange in her mouth, “Maizidian Lu, er shi ba,” and rested her head against the seat, eyes averted from the spinning world.

She awakened moments later to the sound of the taxi driver shouting at her and saw that they had arrived at her block. She handed him a wad of yuan that she knew was too much.. As the door slammed shut and he pulled off into the murky night, she noticed her scarf trapped in the door, dragging on the street towards his next destination. *Ah*, she said to herself, *who gives a shit*.

She walked through the gate of her complex and unsteadily made her way towards home, counting the steps as she always did. Suddenly she was struck by a wave of sobriety and hollowed-out grief so breathtaking that she moaned involuntarily. She leaned against the wall opposite the entrance door to her building and squatted in the shadows. She gritted her teeth, urinated down her legs into the alley gutter, and lifted her head up to the filthy, starless sky.

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## Twelve Years to Grow

By Hazel Turner

Twelve years to grow; to feel the heat of the sun, to see its brilliant light, to wander the hills, to learn my numbers and letters. Then the light would be switched off. My days to be spent in darkness.

The winding wheel cranks and we squash into the cage, a booted, helmeted press of men and lads, tins in hands. A clunk and the doors close. Sudden darkness as if a giant hand has pulled a cover over the cage, allowing no light. I gasp. The damp chill air tickles my cheeks as we sink down and down. A mix of dust and metal fills my mouth. I cannot breathe. A feeling, like my very bones have been sucked into my body and pulled upwards to my throat, grips me. I want to shout out, “Stop! Put the lights on. Take me back up.” But I don’t. I must be a man now, it’s my time. I close my eyes, searching for a chink of light.

I’m out on the hills with my grandad early in the morning just after sun up. Dew, like jewels, sparkles on the grass. “Aye the fairy queen’s been out early again, lad, scattering her gems for the sun to find. But look yonder, see how that hawk hovers. There’s a rabbit warren just there. He’ll have caught a movement. Be still” A sudden swoop, talons out and she dives on her meal. “You’re a chip off the old block” he says as he ruffles my dark unruly hair.

A jolt, my eyes open and we’re down. Fuzzy orbs of golden light seem to hang in the air as the doors open and my eyes adjust. My heart thuds so hard, I feel sure its shaking the pit floor. An army of boots set a beat forming lines, like ants on the scent of sugar. I follow, my eyes fastened on the man ahead. The gaffer leads us, his yardstick in his hand, to measure our worth, lamp atop to light the way. Metal clangs against stone, steady, relentless, as we

trudge through tunnel after tunnel, turning right then left then right again. Doors opening, doors closing. Each passage closed off behind us, keeping its smells, its light and its sounds from reaching another. We stop, ahead of us the seam we will work on. I feel the ceiling pressing down on me and the walls closing in. I feel the land, the outdoors, being grasped from me. Instead cold, dark, tunnels too deep underground for the sun to reach. I gasp again, a shiver running through me. "Somebody's walking on your grave," I hear my nan say.

I look at the canary cage as the gaffer puts it down. Cold steel walls imprison a creature meant to be free. Its flight and song stifled.

He puts the lamp down then hands me a shovel; showing me how we'll work on our knees, grasping the handle with one hand and the shaft with another, taking short stabs that we'll tip over our shoulder into the waiting wagon. "Keep a steady rhythm lad, we work as a team, each of us doing our bit. We split the pay at end o't week depending on how many yards we shift." I close my eyes searching for a song to help me find the steady beat.

I hear my mam as she beats the carpet "Pack up all my cares and woes, here I go singing low, bye bye blackbird" I can't stop myself smiling as I see her twisting her feet in a charleston as she sweeps the floor in her own private dance hall, miles away from her chores. I start to whistle. A chuckle to my left, "Mebbe try old man river, lad, don't want to burn th'self out" Some voices join in "Tote dat barge, tote dat bale get a little drunk and you land in jail." I feel the smiles, my chest loosens and I begin to breathe normally.

Time passes, shoulders and arms beyond pain, working to a rhythm as if they belong to someone else while I, like the hawk, hover above, my heart reaching for the world above. I look at "Barnsley's black gold" on my shovel and pictures come of ferns, bracken and gorse reaching out their leaves to capture the sun, millions of years ago. And here I am cutting and shifting the shiny black stuff so that all the folks can put it on their fires, releasing all that sun

stored for all that time to give them heat and light. How clever the earth is I think and how patient.

“I say, lad, are ye dreamin’ or what,” I hear the gaffer say. “Get tha snap tin it’s time to take a break. Tha’s done well.”

It’s now I realise how hard my hands have worked. I look at them and see them shaking like a pair of cymbals that have been struck. It’ll be a while before they get used to this, that’s for sure.

“Here ye are Joey boy, here’s a bit of bread to ye” Stanley Howarth puts a crust into the canary cage. He whistles encouragement, “Come on boy, give us a song.” A rich tenor voice echoes through the tunnel, “Oh Stanley boy, the pipes, the pipes are callin’...” Stanley gives his pal Tommy a shove and they both laugh. The sound softens the hard, cold space for me, making me feel the warmth of the fire and the smell of ma’s hotpot on the stove for a few moments. My mouth is watering as I tuck into the bread and cheese, ma has packed for me.

“Away and see John Copeland down the end of this tunnel here, then off to the right lad.” Stanley nods to me and points in the direction. “Ask him to give ye a long stand” I see the wink as he looks across at Tommy. Our Harry had primed me for this one – I was one step ahead.

“Right oh” I say and walk in the direction he’d shown, I turn right. My breath catches in my chest as I find myself alone, in a darker and smaller tunnel, the ceiling too low for a man to stand upright. I feel as if hands are clamping around my head squashing me down; more

hands gripping my throat so that I can’t swallow. I close my eyes for a second, willing the pictures to come.

Then I see a glow in front and a man I take to be John Copeland beckoning.

I'd rehearsed my piece many times. "I've to ask you for a long stand. I'll stand here if you like. How long should it be, fifteen minutes or can I have half an hour- I could do wi' the break, sir" He smiles, brushes back a lock of dark hair and nods, a twinkle in his steel grey eyes, that slow, half- admiring, half -amused sort of grin; a bit like grandad's, but without the lines setting it into his bones, and points to a small alcove. I sit down. He turns to his task. A warmth, trickles through me, relaxing my muscles. The light returns.

I'm in the lane, we'd been on the fields. Grandad had caught a few rabbits. "Look here, lad, ye'll not see this too often." It moved so slowly, I knelt to look more closely and pick it up. "Look at its little spades for feet, that's how it digs its tunnels so well pushing the soil behind it an' wriggling forward, sniffin' for the worms."

I was amazed. Of course I'd seen them in school books and seen many a molehill but I'd expected it to be the size of a rabbit. I put it down and watched it stagger across the grass. "It's like the pitmen on a Friday" grandad laughed.

A low boom brings me back. Explosives, I think. Maybe to open new shafts. I look over, he's still there, John Copeland. Shouts and a low rumbling roll around. I stand up, not sure whether I should run. He raises his hand. I crouch down making my body as small as I can. There's a strange quiet then a louder boom follows, sending rock tumbling, clattering, raining, pouring down. I cover my ears and close my eyes. Minutes of crashing, rumbling, roaring soften to pattering; then nothing.

For a time I think I'm blind and deaf. Then I hear his voice. I hear my own sob of relief. I can't see him but I know he's there. "Move forward lad." I do. Bending double as the tunnel narrows, I move on, comforted by the voice, somewhere behind or maybe ahead. Clawing my way forward, knowing I have to be like the mole and the patient earth.

Hours pass. I'm beyond exhaustion. Then I hear it. "Tap, tap" faint, muffled, to my left. The tunnel beckons me and I'm drawn like a moth to the light.

It takes a long time. “We’re nearly there lad.” Now strong hands grip mine and haul me up. I look up into warm brown eyes and the face of a stranger. “ John Copeland’s the name lad. No need to tell me who you are. I knew yer dad well. You’re his spit. By lad, yer mam’ll be pleased to see you.”

I smile dazzled by the light.