

HEAVEN'S HOLDING OUT FOR HIGH SCORES

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Honorable Mention, Short Story

For one moment, for one aged second, I acknowledge that it might be allright; that because I am abused and worn and tattered, and am objective here in my room, that it's okay.

But it passes.

FROM MY BALCONY, I can see a lot. I can see four of the eight apartments adjacent from mine perfectly clear, and I can see a first-floor-one-bedroom partially through the vast and tall shrubbery that blocks my view of the remaining three. I can see that number 1034 is dealing drugs because innumerable guests come on a regular basis looking anxious, then knock and the door cracks open where two shimmering eyes peer out of an otherwise lightless atmosphere; upon recognition, the host lets them in and twenty minutes later they leave daunted and stumbling, always tripping over the pathway through the garden in between my building and the one I watch. I can see the apartment above that, which now has an amazing high definition TV in it that adorns the wall and plays violent, straight-to-video action movies every night at about 8:00 p.m.; sometimes the venetian blinds are angled so that I can watch and add witty comments in sync with the movements of the mouths on the brainless, bulked-up muscle heads, and sometimes the shades are closed, so I have to watch in the reflection of their balcony door. I can see the lonely bachelor living by himself in a sprawling two-bedroom-with-loft who cleans his windows so meticulously that when they reflect the sunset around six o'clock you'd think they were made of solid gold, and he always does this in the morning before it gets too hot wearing nothing but these ragged jean shorts and a necklace made out of plastic seashells. I can see that below him, the middle-aged couple sharing a one bedroom is going through a trial period in their relationship to see if they can stand living with each other; the woman sometimes shares a cigarette with me and doesn't know it because she can't see me up on my balcony.

At the present time, which is 3:30 in the afternoon, I go outside to get my mail from the complex mailboxes and I run into Eleanor. We always go for the mail at the same time, both hoping that someone has sent us a personal letter that won't include the words "Due by" or "Valued Customer" in the body. On one rare occasion, I was able to steal a smile from her and I got to pet her dog, Misha, who is this little toy poodle that hasn't been groomed since it was a puppy. I can't quite remember what we talked about, probably the monsoon season, but I finally had a vivid image of Eleanor's life. I know that she said nothing about having children; that it was too late, and that she never imagined that she would be living in the desert. Today, though, we don't acknowledge each other and I go back up to my balcony empty handed and watch her crawl back to her house along the path that leads from our miniature post office to her front door directly through the garden, beneath the brush. Once, I imagine, she was a beautiful, blond bombshell and a diva who would strut long legs, gliding over the ground with ease. Now, she is lucky if the joints will allow enough leeway to move in any direction, and she has to be supported by a walker that is decorated piecemeal with patchwork and bells surrounding the center, which is a basket that Misha sits in, peeking her messy, almost

feral head out just enough to make sure Eleanor doesn't go off of the trail. Inching along, she makes her way back, but when she finally gets to her door, I can no longer see her because of the branches and leaves.

I live with one roommate, who is this girl that is more like an ethereal presence than a person; sometimes she is real, but most of the time she isn't. I, personally, would not be living here, though, if she had not invited me to stay. She floats through the house like a ghost, and she allows me to know that even though I reside here, she came first and every decision I make is based upon whether or not it will upset her spirit. Without saying anything, we both understand this. So, on this particular day, it does not surprise me when she appears above me, on her balcony, which although smaller than mine, is more dominant and significant in structure. I can tell she is partially drunk, possibly stoned on prescription pain killers and glares at me with these purposeful eyes. I superimpose the face of King Kamehameha the Great over hers and it looks silly, but it says to me that I have to make a choice—I can either plummet to my death or surrender. When she moves, the image fades and I light a cigarette.

As the light of day diminishes, I look at the clock on my cellular phone and it says 6:23 p.m. This means that the bats will be doing their nightly dance around the higher trees in the garden. I try to blow my smoke towards them just to see if their sonic capabilities will be able to detect it. Even if they don't act like they can, I pretend that they do and keep trying. It is now that a not quite distant guttural sound changes slowly into an incessant yelping squeal. *She needs help, call 911.* I lean forward and my ears perk up. The sound is awful, it is that of anguish, turmoil, and desperation. It is an invisible ball of noise being thrown in my direction, but I don't know how big it is, so I cannot catch it. Misha is screaming—a cry of help. *Is there blood involved? I don't know!* I send out signals begging for it to stop, but it doesn't, it just keeps coming. *Medical attention—how much did you see.* I notice that my cigarette has managed to ash itself because my attention has shifted elsewhere. *Just now? Several minutes ago—it was quiet.* The sound escalates to feeling and then a plethora of images begin to knock me unconscious. It starts in my ear, a slow numb expanding sensation from a bull's-eye on my eardrum, then takes over my lobe. That's when I start feeling Misha's wails become definite and they rap rhythms on my skull. Bang! Bang! Every single blast is spreading the numb sensation through my brain. Bang! Bang! A combination of little sleep, nicotine and the screaming triggers a Meniere's attack that assaults with little pity and I look at the patterns in the grass bordering the walkway and they begin to spin, circling in such a way that I must close my eyes and sit down on the cheap plastic outdoor furniture to prevent myself from falling. The whimpers are no longer sporadic, but one long and droning buzz that finishes me and I give up fighting it and pass out.

A light breeze tickles my nose and this is enough to wake me up. With half open eyes, the first thing I see is the sky and it is a little bit after sunset with a new moon mysteriously ruling. I thank the heavens because Misha has ceased her call. I stand up in a trance and step inside where I can feel the presence of eyes beaming through walls. A voice travels down from the second floor asking if I heard any damned dog screeching when I was outside. I did not reply, but I could hear her saying something about no animal

clauses and memories of *An American Werewolf in London*. The rooms all breathed heavily and I fell onto the couch. The air here has only heard film sound tracks and an all-night, upstairs karaoke that poorly interprets bad pop music, but outside I have heard many things, and instead of movie monsters growling, I have all kinds of flashbacks to a brutal mugging that took place somewhere downtown, and the screams that the victim made as her vulnerable throat was being smoothly sliced open by a vicious hunting knife. I kept interchanging pictures of that lady and Eleanor and faint echoes of the dog's barking rang in the back of my head. I had to call for help because nobody else saw the attack but me. Even though I knew I had done my social duty, I always thought that I could have done more.

The solace accumulating in the living room where I am is scattered by a door slam upstairs followed by the collapse of heavy body mass onto mattress. I can hear the lights turn off. I fall asleep on the couch and dream a terrible dream.

It was a muggy and burning afternoon in some small Pacific Northwest town. A boy reaching puberty exits a weathered Victorian-era house that feels out of place in the neighborhood and this boy leads a young dog, a boxer, into a large chain linked fence placed at the back of the yard underneath some trees. The dog had been acting up and the boy felt that perhaps it could use some fresh air, so he left it caged in the fence and hopped onto a colorful BMX bike and rode it off to some reclusive, distant relative's house to pay a visit. When there, and in mid-conversation, the phone rang awkwardly and louder than normal. The decrepit relation answered; and it was the boy's mother; the mailman had called the police who in return called his mother to warn of impending doom. Gradually, the relative relayed the news, the mailman tried to help, your dog is suffering some form of heat stroke at... The boy rushed back as fast as little legs on little bikes can pedal. When he returned home, he found that the dog was already deceased. Anxiety ensued and the boy cried out for help, but no one could hear him. He imagined movement, but the dog was simply inanimate. His tender eyes whipped by the horrific sight of a lifeless canine corpse; a tongue and a turd hanging a half an inch out of one end or the other, lying in urine. The dog's fur was wet from someone's attempt to cool him down and that made it look rabid. It's water dish was flipped over and leaned against the side of the fence. It's eyes stared out and reflected a tall fir tree in the middle of the yard that it used to frolic around. A car door slammed and the boy's mother came running, tears streaming. "King is DEAD!" yelled the boy and he embraced his mother tightly.

I woke up in a panic and shuffled around tossing pillows aside onto the otherwise barren floor. It was only midnight and I decided I needed to smoke a cigarette. I went outside and Misha was at it again.

I fumbled for my pack of cigarettes, but the screams knocked them out of my hands. I shrieked for Misha to be quiet, but figured it futile and I didn't want to wake up any sleeping neighbors, especially any who lived in the same apartment as me. Misha, Stop It! The noise again grew louder and louder and I moved for my cell, but I flinched, and then ceased to make any further attempts. Then I started to get the vision. Eleanor was in there! She was in her apartment and she was dead, unconscious at the very least

and Misha was circling her limp body that was growing increasingly stiff. The dog was in there trying to wake up her master, her source of food and affection. I saw Eleanor and she was not moving. Every shriek announced the death of Miss Eleanor Spector. Wake up! Wake up! For God's sake, Wake Up! Now I am tom because I know better than to intrude into other affairs. I remember being chastised for the Hitchcockian creepiness of cataloguing neighbors' lives and I paused. The vision became clearer. I would not do anything. I would let Misha disturb my sleep and destroy my otherwise peaceful balcony time in which I give praise to the god of Phillip Morris. What is killing me is that inside it is so quiet and there is no sense of apprehension at all. Please don't let her be in there. I think I could go knock on the door to make sure, or call the police. I can't disturb her sleep though, what if she finds out it was me? BANG! BANG! The vision becomes grisly. It will be three weeks and they will notice that she hasn't paid any bills or responded to any civil surveys, and they will come to the door and no one will answer, but Misha will still be barking, yes, a never ending wail of sorrow. They will open the door and find Eleanor's decaying body, missing flesh and still grasping to a leg of her walker. There will be steam rising from beneath her disturbed and tangled carcass. She will have fallen over one of Misha's dog toys and hit her fragile head on the granite-stone corners of the countertop. Blood spilled—and then the smell. Everyone will cover their mouths and go, "Man, she's been here a long time" and then they will attempt to remove the body but Misha won't let them. She will growl threateningly and they'll have to put her to sleep for attacking one of the authorities! Let her go! I will run out to my balcony just in time and press my body on the cold metal railing and look down as they roll my covered, departed friend out on a stretcher. They will look up at me knowingly. Their hollow eyes say 'you knew'. I run inside without smoking, without breathing, and race for my bed, which I hurriedly get into and cover my entire body with the brown down comforter. But my room has a double sliding door and it is partially open allowing me to hear; mocking me even though I hide. An ever-present discretion that I can't quite swing one way or the other.

I don't sleep all night long, and by sunrise, the calls have ceased. I finally remember that today I have to buy birthday decorations for my apartment this evening, and I slowly uncover my head and gaze outside at the mesquite tree in front of my window. I think about how deep and useful their roots are, and I wonder how deep into the ground the young tree in my garden goes.

I walk outside and, with ease, pull out one thin cancer ridden stick and bum it. Around the corner, I can see one tall, and one stocky figure both dressed in black, and carrying nightsticks. My heart falls past the floor of the balcony and keeps going. They keep moving along the path into my garden below, and walk towards Eleanor's front door, where, for a second I lose them because of the foliage, and I think that at least someone had the guts to do what I could not. Then they appear at the far end of her place and keep walking. Neither one stops until they both are directly in front of 1034. They knock and the two shining eyes seep through the opening door which shuts almost as immediately as it opened. Open up! One of the men kicks the door so hard that it busts the lock and that's when the others show up; five more similarly garnished with badges. It's not difficult to hear the scuffle that is taking place inside and the unhappy

couple next door peeks out of their window to see what's going on. My mouth is agape and my head is again spinning, but I keep standing up and finish my cigarette. Three of the cops bring out two of the residents in handcuffs, reciting the whole rigmarole I have heard coming from speakers on upstairs televisions. The other police officers come out one hour later carrying taped-up boxes wearing rubber gloves on their hands. The door shuts behind them and eventually one comes back with the manager of the complex and I can hear their conversation which proved my previous suspicions about 1034. It comforts me to know they are gone, but I don't linger in it.

I can see that they will be talking for awhile as they enter the building. My heart stops and as I put out my cigarette, I realize that I need to take this opportunity to do what I should have done last night. I grab a pencil and a pad of paper racing to the front office, where nobody is, and few people see me running through their gardens because most of the inhabitants here have caught wind of what has been going on; occupied in live entertainment; mingling outside with each other—Can you believe it? Who would have thought there were drug dealers living here? I get to the front office and I scribble out a note in someone else's handwriting, not my own, and then I tear the note from the pad and leave it on a desk. I reach my apartment and claim sanctuary but instead of going out onto the balcony, I go upstairs and I wake up my roommate to see if she would like me to take her out to a clamored restaurant for breakfast.

