

A black metal railing with vertical bars and a horizontal bar with a decorative finial. The railing is in sharp focus in the foreground, while the background is a blurred street scene with buildings and a cobblestone path.

EMPTY ROOMS LONELY COUNTRIES

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“COWBOYS AND
INDIANS”

A SELECTION FROM

EMPTY ROOMS
LONELY COUNTRIES

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COWBOYS AND INDIANS

I make it up the stairs into the VIP room of the club and I immediately smell the testosterone. This is going to be bad. I've no business being here. I'm a fraud. I mean, pretending to be a doctor is one thing – that's old school – but pretending to be a police officer, well, that's different.

They dress you up as a cheerleader and lock you away in dark rooms filled with pedophiles for pulling shit like this.

What am I doing here again?

Yeah, that's right. Alan, a *real* police officer, has recently graduated, along with 11 other men, into the ranks of SWAT, and this is their party. All I had to say was that I was with the SWAT party – I was even on the list – but for some reason, it seemed easier to say that I was a police officer and that I was here to celebrate with my “brothers” who were “also on the job.” I even faked the motion of reaching for my wallet (my badge is in my wallet, see?); luckily the doorman, stopped me before I lost my bluff.

“Yes, sir. This way, sir,” says the doorman, who suddenly becomes Moses as he parts the crowd for me. We make it to a set of stairs. “Up there, sir. You're welcome to drink whatever – it's on the house, sir.” I wave my hand, as if to bless him, and he wanders off.

A tall man with a moustache pushes me against the wall, holding me there with his arm against my chest. “What the...uh...fuck, what's this – shit, look at this here – no, I

mean *her*. HER! THERE! Follow my *fucking* finger and... hold on...It's so loud – I feel like I'm made...made of music. Shit, man, I got a badge. I can, like, fucking shoot people now and...STOP! STOP FUCKING LOOKING AT ME LIKE THAT!" He lets me go and scurries down the stairs.

When I find Alan, he's so drunk that his muscles are no longer working. He's a complete mess. Whatever line there is that separates the sober from the inebriated has been crossed for him hours ago, and if you look at him long enough, it looks more like days. I'm not in the mood to deal with him – not because his clothes are covered in dry vomit or because his vernacular has digressed to a point that makes Tarzan strangely well versed. No, I don't want to deal with him because I want to be in his shoes. He is robbing me of my opportunity to be a fucking moron. It should be me deciphering the fragments of digested food as I watch it pour out of my mouth and nostrils. It should be me crawling on the floor licking her shoes. It should be me telling everyone that I love them, especially you – yes, you, in the black dress with the dark eyes and the impossible ass.

Somewhere in the corner, a group of men are singing, "SWAT! SWAT! SING WITH ME, MY BEAUTIFUL BROTHERS!"

Alan, sitting at the end of the bar, reaches for a large gray garbage container, pulls the container to him, leans forward casually, his eyes closed, his mouth open, vomit spilling out, missing the container completely. It's completely horrifying to watch, hopeless even, but absolutely mesmerizing. A woman next to him is watching him also; she too is mesmerized by his performance. She reaches out and strokes his hair. His eyes open as he turns to her. He smiles, and for a quick second there is cohesion – he's going to say something clever and brilliant, and if he plays his syllables correctly, he's going to go home with her. Instead, he vomits again; this time, every drop lands inside the container.

“Hey,” Alan says, “you came.”

“I’m here.”

“Any problems?”

“Getting in, you mean? No. I said I was cop.”

“That’s cool. I should try that sometime.”

At the other end of the bar, a man falls off his stool and lands right on his ass. His face is without expression, as if he just woke up. Alan, suddenly alert, jumps up. “OFFICER DOWN! WE GOT AN OFFICER DOWN!” And suddenly, along with six other men, he’s running to the man on the floor.

Alan is the first person at the man’s side. He lands on his left knee, his right hand holding the back of the man’s neck. “It’s going to be all right.”

The man on the floor opens his eyes wide. He grabs Alan’s shirt at the shoulder. “Am I hit? Jesus, I was so...so close to retiring...just 18 more years.” He pulls Alan toward him. “Did...did we at least get the fucker?”

It’s heavily apparent that I’m out of my element here. I’m plastic surrounded by metal. I’m Velcro in a world of zippers. I wave the bartender over. “Beer, please. Whatever. Surprise me with nothing dinky.” The bartender reaches down into the cooler. “Have they been like this all night?”

“Actually,” says the bartender, “they’re a lot more subdued now than they were before. But you know how that goes...*you know.*”

“I guess I do.” I realize that whether I pretend to be a police officer or not, my presence in the room is enough to mark me as one, which explains why the women in the room are watching me so closely.

Attraction to police officers, whether it be sexual or social, has always surprised me.

Statistically, the national divorce rate is at 50%, but the divorce rate for police officers is estimated from 60 to 75%.

Consider that studies have shown that police officers are eight times more likely to commit suicide than be killed in the line of duty, and on top of that, five times more likely to commit suicide while going through a divorce. NYPD alone has a suicide rate of about 15.5 suicides for every 100,000 annually, which is amazing considering that the suicide rate among the population of the United States was at 11 for every 100,000 in 1999. In other words, the suicide rate of New York's finest is almost 30 percent higher than the general population. But this is not an American anomaly. In Paris, 60 police officers were reported to have killed themselves in 1995, at a rate of nearly 50 percent more than the average for the previous decade.

Also, the average life expectancy for an American male is 73 years, whereas the life expectancy of an American male police officer is 53 years.

It gets worse. There's domestic violence, depression and alcoholism, among other things. The numbers are not attractive. There's doom at every angle.

My opinion of the profession has always been about the pursuit of a comic book dream, an extension of wanting to be a superhero. Maybe that's where the problem ultimately lies when it comes down to all this nonsense with the divorces and suicides; they are giving up too much of themselves in reaction to the violent collision of a gray reality against a black and white fantasy.

There are those people who can't commit to the lifestyle – like the women stalking every man in this room – who'll marry their way into it and treat it like a fetish. Let's face it, we all want to be Superman or Wonder Woman, but if we can't, the next best thing would be to fuck them.

And if that's not your bag at all, there's always the easy way, as there's an opposite side to every coin.

Simply become a Villain.

Somewhere along the way, I'm doing shots of tequila with Alan and the other graduates. We are all arm in arm, slamming the glasses against the bar, grunting and groaning and asking for more. The bartender finally gives up and leaves the bottle for us. It's a minor victory for us; and I say "us" because I'm officially one of them now. It doesn't take much, just a shot or two and we're all willing to take a bullet for each other.

Alan's sweating pure alcohol at this point. He's practically pissing absinthe. His arms are around me for support and I'm doing my best not to pass out from the fumes. In the meantime, everyone's taking turns telling stories.

"...and the fucker's walking towards me, right. I unfasten the gun, not knowing what the fucking deal was, right. He's like, 'Good evening, officer,' and I'm like, 'What's going on?'" He's kind of nervous, little jittery, obviously on something, and he's like, 'I lost something.' Now get this, right: I hold up the fucking bag of pot, the very fucking bag I found on the floor, right, and I'm like, 'Is this what you're looking for?' The guy smiles and he's like, 'Yeah, man, can I have it back?' Swear to. Fucking. God."

"Okay, okay, my turn. Get this one. This happened...to an old partner of mine. He's driving down the road, middle of the night, driving the squad car home when he sees something, like a flashlight or something, in a video store. He turns into the plaza, shuts off the headlights and parks right in front of the store. He's sitting there, waiting. Finally, he sees it, right. There's movement inside the store. Something's not right. He calls it in, throws on the lights. He sees two kids inside at the cash register. He jumps out of the car, starts running for the door. Door's locked. Meanwhile, his car is still in drive. It's moving right behind him. He turns from the door and the car's right there coming at him. For whatever reason, right, he

jumps onto the hood of the car, as if to stop it, I don't know. The car goes through the door of the store, glass and all, while he's laying there on top of it. The fucking car doesn't stop until it's in the goddamned porn room, man."

"Jesus," I say, "was he all right?"

"I was fine, man. How about you, Alan?"

Alan's posture straightens at the sound of his name. He drops a shot glass as he clears his throat. He gives a drunken smirk that implies that he thinks he's giving a serious, thoughtful look. "Well, I...uh...that's a good story, man. And you're all my brothers, man." He throws his finger at everyone from right to left. "You. You. You. You. You. And you, man." The last finger falls on me. "And...and...I always wanted to be a cop."

And with that, every muscle in Alan's body gives up and he makes the transformation from human being to large and heavy object.

Moving Alan from Point A, the spot where he collapsed, to Point B, the curbside in front of the club, was far easier than it should've been. Particularly because Alan's collapse was a signal for the rest of the officers to collapse as well. It was as if the gravity in the VIP room had suddenly turned heavy. The scene was so perfectly timed and inherently disturbing that for a moment I thought our tequila was poisoned and I was going to pass out with them.

The women in the room chanted, "Officer down! Officer down!" as they dropped one by one, until it was just me. I looked to the bartender, the only other man in the VIP room, and I wondered if we were supposed to fight until there was only one of us. He sensed my fighting mode and shook his head slowly. I could see that he already had a broken bottle in his left hand.

Because the last thing I wanted was a scene, I dragged Alan to the stairway and let his body roll down the stairs. As I

watched his body contort and hyper-extend in every direction as it fell down the stairs, I admit that I was in awe of his training to do so, even in a cataleptic state. They teach these SWAT guys some amazing shit. Once he landed at the bottom of the stairs, I began to pull him by the legs through the dance floor and to the exit of the club.

Once outside, I left him at the curb to get my car. I parked the car right next to him and popped open the trunk.

“What are you doing?” asks the doorman.

I continue to pull Alan up from the ground. “I’m putting this man into the trunk of this vehicle. Fuck, man! This isn’t rocket science! Here, help me lift him...”

“I’m afraid you can’t do that.”

“What do you mean, *can’t do that*?”

“It’s just—”

“Just *what*?”

“You can’t—”

“See this man here? Do you see the state of him?”

“Yes, but—”

“And you know what he’s going to do inside of this car once it starts moving, once it starts *shaking*?”

“Yes, but—”

“So you’d have no problem with the interior of your vehicle getting caked in vomit?”

“Yes – I mean, no!”

“Then we’re in agreement.” I lift Alan by his shoulders, throwing his arms over the bumper into the trunk.

“Sir, I can’t have you put this man into the trunk.”

“Sure you can.”

“No, no, I can’t.” His voice is more forceful now.

I let go of Alan and he lands harshly on his back; his head makes an interesting sound as it hits the gravel. “Yes, you can,” I say matching his tone. “This man is my brother, and if I want to put my brother into the trunk of my car, I have that

right, and you and no one else can stop me. Now, if you please, back off.”

There’s silence for 10 seconds. During this time, I realize that the doorman is a large man, and that he’s looking down at me from about eight inches. With this realization, it’s also clear to me that this man could easily hurt me, very badly. I wait patiently for his knuckles to make contact with my nose. Instead, the doorman sighs. “Your brother, huh?”

“Yeah,” I say.

“I got two brothers myself. Both younger. He’s your older brother, right?”

“Yeah. And I want to take him home.”

Softly, the doorman says, “Don’t we all.” He looks around, shakes his head and lets out a laugh. He bends over and without any efforts at all, places my brother into the trunk of my car. We can hear my brother whispering something as he closes the trunk shut. The doorman looks at me. “I never did that.”

“You never did that.”

“Now get the fuck out of here.”

“Thanks.”

“Yeah, whatever. Go.”

When Alan had his arm around me at the bar, for a moment I felt more like a brother to him than I had in a very long time. You forget these things, you take things for granted, when you have brothers and sisters. You know they are there and you know that you can call them and that they’ll change the world for you if that’s what it took, but it’s easy to forget just who they are.

This is a true story. When I was 3 or 4, Alan always two years older, he wanted to play Cowboys and Indians. He tied me to the tree, tightly and with the annoying precision of an older brother. I remember the tightness of the rope underneath my arms. He had these two silver cap guns, and he ran around

the tree shooting the guns in the air. They were the old paper caps and I could smell the powder as it burned.

My mother, still new at being a mother, still relentlessly protective of us, saw what my brother was doing, ran out of the house, grabbed Alan and dragged him inside.

“Look at your brother, Alan!” she yelled. “Shooting guns at him like that! What on earth are you thinking!?”

I watched the two of them go into the house, Mom red and Alan in tears. He dropped his guns and the metal shined in the sunlight. They don’t make cap guns like that anymore.

Two hours later, my father woke me up.

“Christian?” asked my father. He was almost the same age I am now. He was dressed in his work clothes.

“Yes, dad,” I said, slowly waking up. My arms were hanging over the ropes and were asleep.

“Why are you tied to the tree?”

“Alan and I were playing.”

“Where’s Alan now?”

“Mom took him inside. She was mad.”

My father looked to the guns on the ground and put all the pieces together. He knew enough that Alan wouldn’t leave his guns in the grass like that. He untied the ropes and patted my head. He had the kind of smile that meant a lot to a child and he used it then. “We better go bail your brother out then, huh?”

He took me by the hand and we went into the house.

That’s the thing. Alan was always the cowboy, I was the Indian; he was always the cop, I was the robber; and in the end, he became the superhero to my villain. I’d be bothered by this if it weren’t for the consistency.

Either way, I really wanted to be the superhero.

On the way home, I can hear my brother in the trunk. We’re stopped at a red light.

“I’m in the trunk, aren’t I?” he asks.

I turn down the radio. “Yep.”

“Bound to happen, I guess.” I can hear him moving something. “Where are we going?”

“Home.”

“Mom and dad’s?”

“No. Your apartment. Why would you think that?”

“I don’t know, I guess I miss it. Not the house – just the way it was.”

“Me too.”

“Christian?”

“Yeah.” There’s silence as the light turns green. I don’t move the car as I wait for him to speak. Still nothing. “What, Alan?”

“Nothing. Are we almost there?”

A car behind me honks. I push down on the accelerator. I turn up the volume of the radio to drown out the hum of the engine, and I say, “As close as we’re going to get.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christian A. Dumais wakes up next to his wife in a country that is not his. On the floor is Dudikoff, tail waving, happy to have some attention after a long night of waiting under the bed. He dresses. They leave the house. Dudikoff takes the time to smell everything twice. A car stops and the driver shouts something at Christian. Though he can't understand the driver, he knows that he is lost and needs directions. He explains in the little Polish he knows that he cannot speak the language. The driver blushes, as if he is the one who has lived in a different country for six years without learning the language, and then drives off in a direction that may or may not be the right way. Dudikoff finishes what he started. Later, when Christian is getting ready to go to work, he will see Dudikoff lying on his back, arms and legs in the air. Christian will consider how wonderful the life of a dog is, to sleep all day and not know about things like terrorism and long lines and broken hearts. Dudikoff, looking at Christian upside down, will consider how amazing it would be if he knew how to open the door. The rest of the day will find Christian standing in front of a classroom with a variety of students staring at him as they learn things like phrasal verbs and metafictional constructs. Some will wonder why he is here and not America. They will wonder if he is running away from something. And while that may be true with some expatriates, most of them – like Christian – are here for reasons they cannot properly explain. They know that the reasons involve propulsion and synchronicity, and to explain it would be like explaining how we breathe; sure, you can grasp it and even map out the whole process, but it doesn't really apply to you because you know it happens whether you understand it or not. It will be dark when Christian returns home. Dudikoff will still be upside down. His wife will greet him at the door and they will kiss. The evening will be quiet. They will talk about their day. His wife

will make him laugh. He will go to bed way too late with his wife beside him and his dog beneath him. As he wanders into a dream, he will feel rested, happy and, most of all, loved. Good night, Justyna, and thank you.

FEATURING WORK BY CHRISTIAN A. DUMAIS

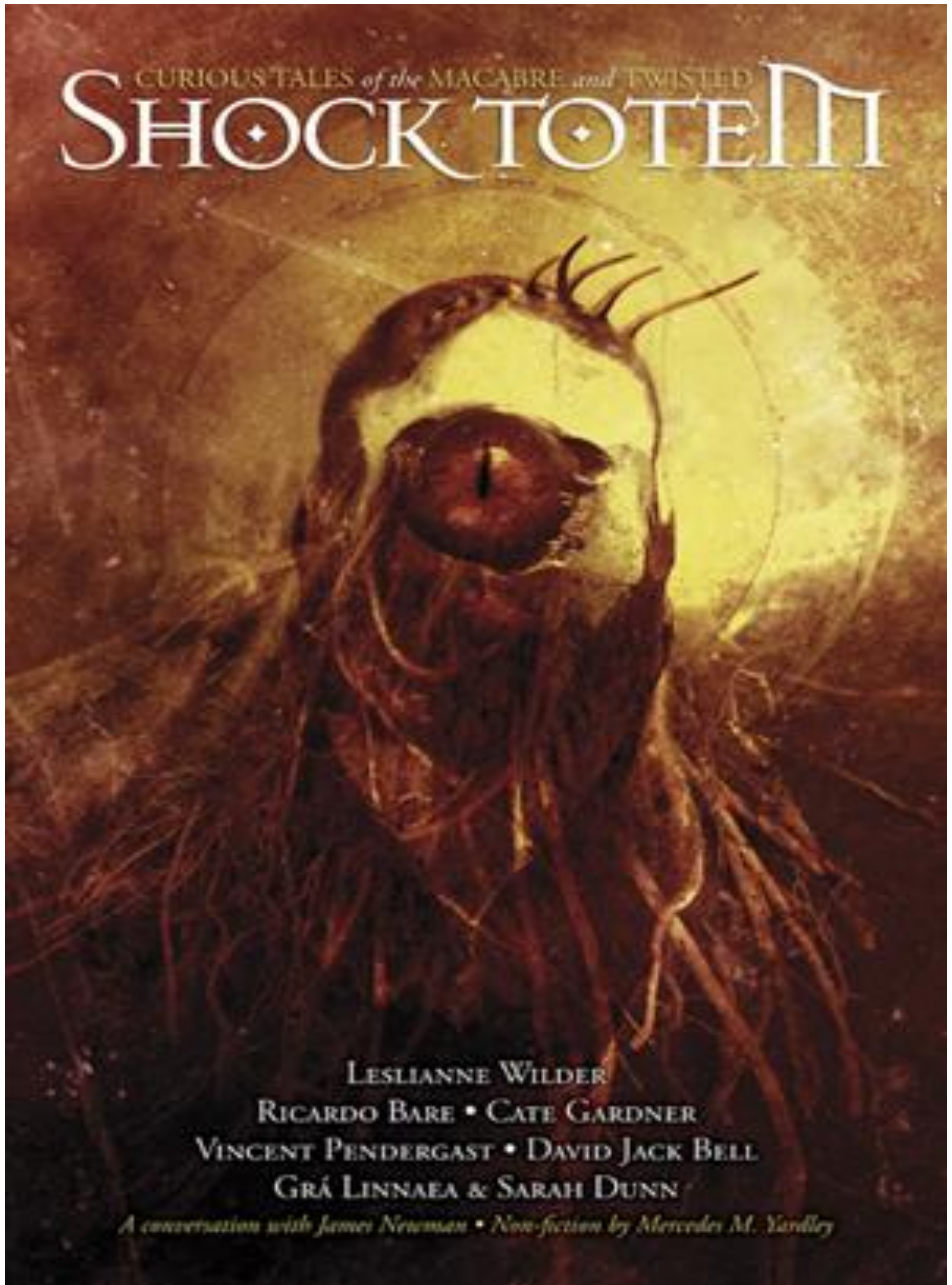


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SHOCK TOTEM

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VINCENT PENDERGAST • DAVID JACK BELL
GRÁ LINNAEA & SARAH DUNN

A conversation with James Newman • Non-fiction by Mercedes M. Yandley

EMPTY LONELY
ROOMS COUNTRIES

collects 27 heartbreaking and funny short stories that span two continents, five countries and multiple universes to explore love, loss and redemption in the 21st century.

PAYING
THE TAB

A prophet says be with the ones you love and the world will sort itself out. It's good advice, but all I'm seeing are a bunch of people too afraid to love. The clock pushes closer to midnight and they're afraid of rejection. Two pounds of anthrax with the potential of killing one-hundred thousand people, dirty bombs, mutant flues,

2+2=5

written on the walls, a collapsing economy ...and you're sitting there still afraid of a two-lettered word.

MAD

DOGS

Why did the Secret Service take the time out from protecting the second most powerful man in the world to completely screw up my life?

Were they under orders to doom me?

THE ILLUSION
OF SWING

I know at dawn I will hate myself because I will have to come to terms with the fact that we could have been starting a REVOLUTION or perhaps a new RELIGION, but instead we got DRUNK, SLOPPY and STUPID inside an era NOTHING like our own.

OCULAR
SINISTER

I thought about my past and how it felt like a succession of UNIVERSES created one on top of another, shaping and altering the architecture of my life, removing details—here, adding things here, until I couldn't quite place what was new, what was old, what was TRUTH and what was MYTH.

