

**Nobody Said You're Special**  
***A Collection of Short Stories by John Valente***

**Show Business**

Let's assume for a moment that there are exactly 13.7 people in this room. I'm not above admitting that it's extremely rude to say that someone without an arm is .3 less of a person but in this instance, quantity of mass is extremely important, and if anything, advantageous.

You see, about an hour ago the room was relatively more spacious and the people inside it were comfortably standing around not acknowledging the man without an arm one way or the other.

But now one wall is approximately 3.5 meters closer than it was before. All the underappreciated space has now become sorely missed as shoulders, chests, and awkward hips and groins—despite attempts at maneuvering certain organs out of the way—are pressing against each other with increasing pressure. Which should explain why—as shoulders bunch and arms start to tug and ache—that 13 people are finding themselves looking at a man without one arm and noticeably less discomfort with a sour mixture of jealousy and shame for feeling jealous.

It had all started innocently enough. The cameras rolling, the audience cheering, the contestants walking in waving one or both arms as they've seen celebrities do during various television appearances. One rambunctious contestant was clearly living out some poorly dreamed up fantasy of their first TV debut as they attempted to "walk like an Egyptian" across the stage. They were jerking around with such malcoordinated verve that two security staff actually walked on screen out of concern and presumptuously grabbed the contestant to help them the rest of the way.

The show's host beamed and ran through his scripted jokes and lightly bantered with each person, his formulaic intonations and surrogate pregnant pauses telling the audience exactly when to laugh or applaud.

“The game is simple. The contestants stood in the room behind me have to hang as many pictures on the walls as they can before the time runs out.” He said turning away from the contestants making a show of putting his hand next to his mouth. “Let’s just hope they don’t have any hang-ups about this one.”

The laughter ripples around as people get the joke or have it explained to them. The producers smile as an actual whoop and knee slap echoes around the room causing more laughter.

“But but but there’s a catch!” His hands flap wildly. “The room has been automated so the floor and walls not only shake but move around as well—how’s that for an unstable home environment!” ‘Oooo’s’ and giggles mix together.

The room was made of four walls with no actual doors or windows, just cutesy cartoon painted versions of a quaint home. The cameras were all tucked away into the walls and furniture to catch any humorous moments. The contestants entered through a gap between two walls which then mechanically whirred shut to prevent any contestant accidentally falling out of the set into the audience.

It was only about 3 minutes into the insanity before the malfunction happened and one of the room’s sides began creeping in closer and closer. Mechanics were dispatched as the audience howled and clapped thinking it was part of the show. But as the seriousness of the situation emerged the tension in the room seemed to grow with every millimeter closer the wall moved.

“Whoops, talk about breaking the fourth wall folks” the host attempted lamely getting only a few nervous chuckles.

Noticing what was happening, the contestants inside started trying to push against the wall to no avail. They tried breaking out of a different wall unfortunately hoping the painted doors and windows were weak spots somehow. Eventually the wall had moved in so close they were forced against each other. Herded like sheep into an ever tightening pen. It was beginning to hurt.

Some of the contestants were crying for help. Others were just crying. Security, staff and even audience members started rushing on to the stage to try and help but couldn't get any holds on the flat surface.

Soon, the lights went out as the power was cut in an attempt to stop the machine. A hush descended over the studio. The helpless cries and pleas of the contestants echoed painfully around the room. Everyone else seemed frozen, stuck, as if forced to keep watching. Out of the darkness, the sound of the wall's unforgiving march continued.

## The Tenant

There I was. In the drabest room imaginable.

I mean truly, eye-depressingly bleak. It was like even the patterns within the same pattern didn't go together. It all kind of beiges its way around your vision showing you that there really wasn't anything to be excited about at all. This was Bachy's room. I had been living in her house for some time now. An unpleasant name I know. She was also an unpleasant woman. I remember one time she yelled at me for a very long time because I had taken my shoes off in the hallway instead of on the doormat. It was a very long time. Long enough that my mind began to wander. Her scowling face in a perpetual frown with a furrowed and beady pair of eyes flicking around me like houseflies. Awful. Really unpleasant.

So why was I in her bedroom, naked, with her hand on my chest and her sleeping unpleasantly next to me? I really can't remember. Let's see. I came home. Scowls. Pointing finger. So jabby. More scowling. Face of ecstasy. Where's the middle part? The bridge that led to all this?

Oh God this room is boring.

The clock on the wall seems to have given up as well. It's all tock and no tick. There's no closure in even listening to the damn thing. Always tock tock. No tick. It's driving me mad. And who the hell gets brown-laced bed sheets? I wouldn't know where to buy these even if I wanted them. Ugh. She probably made them herself. She's always downstairs yelling at me about something and then up in her room doing who knows what late into the night. No matter when I come home, or get up to pee at night, the light in her room is always on and there's the faintest sounds of activity. The scuffle of something boring on the rug. A forgettable item of clothing being moved out of the way.

I have never seen a room so tidy and so untidy at the same time. The floor is clear, the tops of her cabinets are clean with only a few trinkets on them. But the drawers are overflowing with... fabric and... well it looks like food. Obviously it can't be food but I don't know what the hell else I'd call it.

Even her breathing is unpleasant. There's no rhythm to it. Kind of short breaths inward followed by choppy huffs on the exhale that vary in length and force.

She'd clearly had sex before which came as a surprise to me. But before I could really get into the whole "who would actually sleep with this woman" I remembered where I was. It was very odd. I was expecting to be scolded on improper technique or perhaps be dominated into whatever bizarre sex act she wanted. Possibly even killed at the last moment.

But it was *freedom*.

Limbs moved in unison, everything fit around itself neatly, little decisions came as a surprise but were welcomed by the other. It was ecstasy at every touch, a pure feeling of oneness, like a million piece puzzle being put together with ease, an impossible math problem solved with elegance and beauty. I... I think she was actually smiling. Her entire face looked different. No one looks exactly sexy when they're yelling at you over benign things. I guess I never really looked at her apart from when the yelling happened. The rest of the time I was avoiding eye contact, anticipating the next cry of alarm and shouting that would ensue.

"Mmm..."

Her eyes flutter open. She stretches slightly and looks up at me. She holds my gaze in hers for a moment as the clock ticks quietly to itself.

"Get out of my room."

## Gloves

I think for the longest time I just assumed it would all be ok. That I'd wake up one morning and see my toes wiggling in front of me, feel my legs stretching. I'd roll out of a bed and shuffle with bleary eyes into a restroom. My own, personal restroom. I'd look at myself in the mirror with a half-smile and start fixing the insane nest my hair had turned into from the night's dreams.

Instead, I still wake up on the street, my body sore and cramped, any exposed flesh devoid of all feeling. Today I'm holding a near-freezing cup of coffee. It was given to me hot but it didn't take long before the oppressive and bitter winter had its way with it. I shiver under my blanket—more like a towel really—my fingers feel like they're chattering. My hair is a nest but it's been this way for years now. I sometimes joke that if birds finally build a home there I'll have a guaranteed supply of food. It's not funny but people laugh anyway.

*\*Ding cling cling\**

5 cents. Well that's 5 cents more than I had before. 5 cents closer to something. I never really know what until the moment comes. Occasionally it's premeditated. My imagination grabs on to something and builds it up in my head to the most necessary and coveted thing in the world. I become consumed with a fierce desire so powerful that I starve myself for days just to save up enough to get it. Once it was a steak, but I only managed to get an overcooked leather strip from a diner down the road. The nicer restaurants wouldn't let me in. Understandable really. Another time it was a waterproof sleeping bag, that took 3 weeks, I nearly died I think, I was so delirious and so hyped up to finally get it that I accidentally staggered into a bedding department and screamed at the terrified cashier, demanding they bring me something. I don't know how exactly, like I said I was delirious, but they sold me this towel, and I gave them everything I had for it. Right now, I just want some gloves. Ski gloves made for the mountains. Some generous but empathy-lacking individual gave me the pair I'm currently wearing; one of those lovely thin purple knitted pairs with cute white snowflakes on the cuff. Funny thing about gloves with holes between the threads—they don't keep your hands very warm at all and at the slightest bit

of rain become spongy ice prisons. Don't get me wrong, I'm still grateful; it's just hard to keep a positive mindset when my shit came out black and red for the fourth day in a row. I think the dumpster by me is contaminated. It wasn't as painful to pass as the resulting splattered mess made it look, I just wish I had a way to clean it all up. The third time happened while I was sleeping and hence was very much contained in my already soiled pants—which in a retrospect comparison were extremely clean prior to that event. I'm sat in the architectural concavity of what is now... a HOOZIE'S?... huh.. well it used to be a flower shop but the owner passed away after an unfortunate incident involving an unsteady glass case of thorned roses. Once you've been homeless long enough you become a part of the community, learn the best spots to pick up change and through quiet negotiations set up a rotation system so we all get a fair take. This spot used to be particularly lucrative. The flower shop attracted mostly older men and women whose pockets seemed to just dispense loose change much like how my ass dispenses shit. This... HOOZIE's however, is just a generic chain diner that doesn't attract anyone special. Unfortunately I wasn't the one here directly after the incident, Markey was. He's an old-school homeless guy who's been doing this for over 40 years, the kind who could win all the money in the world and would probably sleep outside his mansion for familiarities sake. The lucky sonofabitch. He hasn't got the best vision so thought the huge red display all over the shop front was for Valentine's day or something. Never once clocked the body or the fact that there was so much blood spilling out into the street. Just sat there waiting for change. First a scream, then more screams, then a commotion, then a hubbub, police sirens, questions. He was arrested as a suspect and is now getting free room and board in prison until further notice.

I'm not jealous, truly, right now, I just really want some gloves.

## Run

"No more let's just keep moving."

"I think we have enough anyway, just look at those fingers."

"They're rather dry."

"Well it has been a Moon year, it's unlikely we'll find anything more than seventeen percent hydration."

He felt along the crook of the seventh elbow. The dry patchy skin and wisps of decaying hair felt coarse and empty as if they would crumble to dust at the next wind.

Nothing dies with dignity here. Eyes crooked, mouth open, each and every hand frozen in a position that looks like its final moments were spent desperately trying to claw away from death. Pointless.

The air changed and became still. As if the forest was holding its breath. A soft whistle rustled through the trees just before an arrow dug itself into the tree near his head with a razor-sharp *thuk*.

"They're back, move now!"

They lift their sacks and begin to sprint. Weaving amongst trees and bushes with a hardened grace. Every step deliberate, every movement putting another obstacle between them and the swelling sounds of arrows stabbing everything in their path.

"River right!"

They turn sharply while tying and sealing their sacks. The forest clears and the roar of the river blocks out nearly all other sounds. They throw the sacks as far into the center as they can and watch as the water hurries them away downstream. They follow the river for a few minutes before cutting back into the woods.



“Crater over the log.”

Leaping the nearby fallen tree, the ground falls away from them into a steep concave part of the forest. They land low and slide on their feet along the dirt, gaining speed as a few arrows arch over them. Near the base, they break into a full sprint using the decline for momentum.

“Fifty more feet!”

The thicket begins to thin and the clearing appears. Every step is at full force, every muscle pushing them forward, lungs heave with the strain as their wild eyes dart around taking in every obstacle.

Then the arrow hit.

The head pierces through the sternum and throws one of them forward with such force he gets impaled on a tree and nearly killed just from the impact. His friend doesn't cry out in alarm, nor does he stop. He just keeps running with everything he has.

Stuck and immobile, a second arrow finds its target easier and cracks into his pelvis. In a panic he starts beating his own skull against the tree in a desperate attempt to kill himself. Another arrow cracks into the back of his knee. His screams begin to burn through the forest. Not from the pain, but from the fear of knowing what will happen if he doesn't die before they catch him.

## **Bureaucracy**

Sweat.

"Carrots are a nutritional source of orange. This isn't particularly new evidence but after a thirteen year investigation led by myself, the Ministry wishes to make this information freely available to the public."

"Have you filed an application with the Courts and had it further examined by the Department of Protocol?"

More sweat.

"All proper certifications and Qualified Inspections have been fully realized. I would also like to submit recommendatory citations from several Papers including an approved Procedural Documentation Card from Lt. Tsorlot of the Agricultural Board. His comments were articulated on a premium yield paper versus the common parchment and they read: 'Mmmnyes. Very good.'"

"And your Duty of Benevolence?"

The sweating is now noticeable.

"It was given a 'Lukewarm' rating in The Session but this is simply due to a personal matter regarding my temperamental garden hose."

"We shall deliberate."

The smell is starting to seep further out into the world causing an anxiety which unfortunately only causes more sweating.

"Your proposal has been rejected."

Is it actually possible to sweat this much?

"May I ask for an explanation?"

"You may."

The sweat seems to stagnate in anticipation.

"Under what circumstance was my application rejected?"

"While We acknowledge the thirteen year findings of the report and appreciate your due diligence in contacting the Courts and having it further examined by the Department of Protocol with all proper certifications and Qualified Inspections being fully realized and supplementing recommendatory citations from several Papers including the approved Procedural Documentation Card from Lt. Tsorlot of the Agricultural Board whose comments were articulated through a premium yield paper versus the common parchment and read: 'Mmmnyes. Very good.' We unfortunately found The Sessions 'Lukewarm' rating of your person a most harrowing and troubling indication of the outcome."

"Shit."

"EXCUSE WE!?!"

Icy. The sweat feels very icy.

"I mean I understand. Thank you for your time."

He bowed, turned on his heel, and left the room with a thin trail of sweat droplets following behind.