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Kathleen Fowler

Old Dominion University, kfowler@odu.edu

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Between Molecules, Then Atoms: Could This be the End? (short story) **by Kathy Fowler**

The bullet tore through Theo's nasal passages, forged through the white and gray matter, mangled a path across his occipital lobe, shattered through the bones of his skull, and lodged in the plaster behind his desk.

Theo had chosen a spot along the bridge of his nose as the point of entry. He had always worried over the size of his nose, and if his teacher's salary had ever allowed, he would have had a nose job during his lifetime. He also figured the bullet would easily travel to his hypothalamus, which he knew was a good structure to destroy if one wanted to exit the world quickly.

Theo's death was speedy, almost painless; his medulla oblongata gave out as quickly as he'd hoped, and he would have been pleased to note that his body only jerked a bit and came to rest as quickly as the act of pulling the trigger.

His head was nestled in his chest where it had snapped forward after the force of what he'd done had thrown it back. The hair that showed through his V-neck sweater was matted with blood, its sticky follicles a nest beneath his dripping nose.

Nothing happened for quite a while until, as if he had x-ray vision or some of those night vision goggles he'd seen in the movies, he could see through the thin lids of his eyes, through the veins and pink, though there wasn't any light. What he saw was his chest, in close-up focus, and nothing else, as if the sight chose to reveal itself to him, and his eyes weren't responsible for the view. Indeed, he couldn't look away from the sight if he wanted to. The hair appeared gargantuan. Theo began to worry.

If there were this much blood on a few chest hairs, he worried about how much blood was seeping, or maybe even gushing, onto the Oriental rug that his mother had given him. He hadn't thought about the blood. Another thing that had slipped his mind: his body was going to expel substances onto the carpet. Instead of the mess, he'd focused on the velocity of his death and how he would look in rigor mortis.

At least, he'd gotten rid of the most offensive part of himself, the part upon which he fixated, his nose. Besides his nose, he was proud of his body, which was perfect. He spent most of the school day making sure of that. He'd been teaching science long enough that he could manage a lot of weightlifting in the school gym when he wasn't grading lab exercises and sleepwalking through class lectures. When they came to take the morgue photographs or when his mother arranged his funeral, he would not be immortalized with the nose he'd despised since childhood--only the body he so

carefully conserved. Theo's face was too small for such a nose, inherited from his Greek father, arching and prominent and filled with wiry hairs that he'd meticulously remove every morning.

He worried that the destruction of his nose may have exposed hair that had been hidden.

He couldn't feel anything but his mind racing; he was a disembodied brain floating in a black box with one hole exposing one picture: A nest of sticky matted disgusting offensive body hair.

He wondered if the police would think he hadn't committed the deed--he hadn't left a note. The gun had probably fallen to the floor. The police would be forced to take DNA samples, and they would of course discover DNA all over the bedroom from the wild sex he'd had with Rita only hours before he purchased the gun and rushed to put the barrel to his nose. DNA was as rampant as the germs he worried about on seat cushions in movie theaters and on bathroom doorknobs.

He wondered if they'd think Rita had killed him. He imagined her in her school uniform, peering through the window of her storm door. "What you want?" she'd say. Which was why all the science guys at Granby High encouraged each other to take her home. You could get Rita Lopez to do anything with you, even if she didn't move much while it was going on.

He worried that they'd publish the contents of the DNA samples in the local newspaper, the combination of Rita and him, evidence of his moral misconduct.

It wasn't the first time Theo had worried about his dabbling with Rita, what his mother would think of him, what parasites dirtied the world--wasn't the first time that he'd gone ahead and acted, showing the worrying that it couldn't take over his brain and keep him from getting any peace. Something about that day, some whim, some wile, had propelled him to a pawn shop, had hurled him to his study, had swept his arm up to his nose and pulled the trigger.

Theo thought of the Chinese water torture they'd used during one of the big wars. The one where water dropped incessantly on a prisoner's forehead; an immobile prisoner stuck beneath drip drip drip drip dripping. He wished he'd thought of it before he'd thought of dying, stopping it all, ceasing.

Just when he'd begun to think he was going to spend eternity with a permanent view of his black bloody whorl, the picture disappeared, shifted away and was replaced as if in a slide show, and this time, the picture was animated. What he saw was a black and white cartoon, *Minnie the Moocher*, and a walrus dancing that slow boogie in the dark recesses of hell. The skeletons were singing in the background, drinking drinks from the bar that poured through their bones, *hi-de-hi-de-hi-de-hi-de-hi-de-hi-de-hi!* *Hi-de-hi-de-ho!* Theo mentally snapped his fingers and moved his hips. *Hi-de-hi-de-ho!* Ghostly kittens sucked a mother cat dry, and she deflated to an emptied feline balloon. Theo's mind halted its jiving as Betty Boop was surrounded by the gang of transparent ghouls, ran home, and jumped under the covers. The note she'd left when she ran away came to life and tore into pieces leaving only the words, "Home, Sweet, Home."

During the second run-through of *Minnie the Moocher*, Theo wasn't moved by the music. During the third, he wondered at the sappy "Home, Sweet, Home" message. During the fourth, he wished he could have a cartoon gun and have at his head again.

The Chinese water torture occurred to him on loop number eight.

On loop number 50, he remembered, though it wasn't part of his fragment of cartoon, that at the beginning, Betty had been fighting with her parents, some European father chewing out his daughter. Why wasn't he seeing Otto, the disciplinarian, in his clip? What had he done to deserve to see three-quarters of *Minnie the Moocher* for however long it would be? "Home, Sweet, Home." Why hadn't that part been cut out? If he remembered correctly, Betty had a rounder body in that first part, a fuller figure. He would have preferred to see her bust heaving as she cried to her father.

The walrus danced.

The skeletons poured.

The kittens sucked.

Betty ran.

And Theo kept trying to remember what Otto had looked like as the pictures played and replayed before him. Otto wouldn't appear, and Theo was reminded of his own father whom he was unable to conjure, the man having disappeared when he was small. Mother scrimped and saved and made money selling vacuum cleaners. She even ended up developing the Suck-It-Ups, a chain of rug cleaner and vacuum rental and sale shops that put Theo through teachers college and provided them both with all the niceties she thought important: Oriental rugs, cashmere coats, and fur muffs for winter. Mother kept him well clad and even picked out and purchased the house in which he now lay dead. The desk in his study had been a Christmas present, and Mother told her friends that every professor needed a solid oak desk. He hadn't bothered to correct the "professor" misnomer; somehow Mother wouldn't let that sink in.

On the hundredth run, Theo realized that Betty looked a lot like Rita--black short curly hair, a bosom that bulged beneath her school tie, and long endless legs clad in knee socks and saddle shoes. She even wore the pirate earrings. He was able to watch the next two or three showings without impatience. Rita's voice strongly contrasted with her Betty Boop looks--while Betty squeaked and whined, Rita was terse and hoarse. Mostly all Rita did was shrug and acquiesce. Betty was more like the women Theo was used to, breathy and weak sounding, but still able to run from him as if he were the walrus, the tusks his nose. It seemed that Rita was the only person with the looks he required in a mate who would have anything to do with him. As Betty gasped and dodged ghouls, Theo was reminded of women he'd asked out for dates, how their mouths curled in scorn and their eyes shifted to his nose every time. Mother refused to pay for the nose job, insisting that he was exaggerating and that his nose was the only thing she had left to keep his father's memory alive. That memory, his mother said, was what kept her driven, motivating her to expand and invest and become the most powerful woman in town. "It should do the same for you," she'd said.

Bimbo, Betty's pet or friend, one of those creatures that only exist in animated worlds, dove another time for the doghouse. Theo waited for the note to float down and reconstitute. Home sweet home.

Had anyone found his body yet? Maybe it had been a hundred years since he'd shot himself, every viewing of *Minnie the Moocher* like one dog year to a human's. His mother would be the one to find

him. She was the only one who could get into his house, and he never invited anyone there, except Rita, and that wasn't your typical invitation. Mother didn't worry though, having kept her own key; every Saturday she would arrive with Arni Yahni to keep him nourished.

He hoped she'd know it hadn't been her fault.

Mid walrus dance the movie halted and disappeared. Suddenly, Theo was able to lift his head and look around his office. He couldn't feel the chair back, as if there were nothing beneath him, so he stood up without pushing it away. He was walking through air, nothing of substance beneath his feet. He was elated until he turned around and saw his body motionless, saturated in dark maroon blood, his forehead collapsed and hanging in the hole where his nose had been. Theo gasped, held his hand to his mouth, and moved back to inspect his body. As he suspected, the seat cushion was stained and a thin puddle of bodily fluids mixed with crimson covered the edges. Theo reached out to try to swipe it clean but where he would have seen a hand, his own reaching out, there was nothing, as if he suffered from soldier's syndrome, believing a limb had returned after it had been blown off. He had to get away.

He rushed down the street to where Rita lived with her parents. Normally they didn't get home until late, way after school hours, and both worked on weekends, so he'd often been able to find Rita alone. The walk, which usually took several minutes, was over in seconds. In his present condition, he realized for the first time, he would be able to come through the front door instead of sneaking around the back.

In the few weeks before he died, Theo had been visiting Rita, unannounced, more and more each day. "What you want?" she said every time he knocked lightly on the back door. He'd stare at her lips or the lace of her bra under the thin white button down. "Come over?" Sometimes she would, sometimes she wouldn't, but she always said the same thing before she decided, "Got money?" He didn't consider it prostitution. It was more of a gift, one for him, one for her. And he figured the more money he gave her, the more he would see her, and he wouldn't have to worry about the other men in the science department so much. The thought of Rita--her pleated skirt bunched around her waist and the fat bearded Earth Science teacher huffing over her--had begun to crowd his thoughts as much as his prodigious schnoz.

Now he found himself flying up her stairs, sweeping down her hall, and dissolving through a wall he figured must be hers. There were no sounds to guide him, only what he could see, and the towel and school uniform that were slung over the top of the adjacent bedroom door were sure signs to him.

What he saw made him melt. Atop rumpled bedclothes, two pairs of jeans, and a couple of tee-shirts, Rita lay with her legs wrapped around a slim body. Worse than the picture he had always imagined, instead of the hulking mass of his co-worker, the man who was screwing his Betty Boop, was only a boy. "No," he thought, "no," as he watched Rita turning and shifting, her hands flitting across the boy's back, grabbing and releasing handfuls of his blond hair. When he'd been with her, her beautiful face had always been unemotional, her body inert, only moving when he repositioned her himself.

And then he heard the first sound he'd heard since he'd been able to leave his office, an ungodly sound he had never heard before: Rita was screaming with pleasure, her eyes wide, her hands pressed against the base of the boy's spine. Theo tried to leave but he froze to the spot, his mobility

disappearing. He watched them rest and cuddle and smile at each other until Rita's face went dark. "Do you think I'm a slut?" she said.

And before Theo knew it, the scene he'd just witnessed began again, was reenacted from start to finish, and it took him a while to realize that time had rewound and that he was going to be treated to "Rita and the Boyfriend" in the place of *Minnie the Moocher* for as long as the gods deemed it pertinent.

They deemed it pertinent for what seemed like an eternity. The last time Rita asked her question, Theo had thought, *what does that mean anyway?*, and then the pair receded from view as he was swiftly swallowed by the wall and deposited in the hallway.

He continued to float backwards, without power to stop himself, through the side of Rita's house, into the air, and down the block. The sight of Rita making love had gotten less and less disagreeable with repetition. By the time he had dissolved out of the room, he'd begun feeling paternal toward her, happy that she was enjoying herself, sure that the boy's answer would be a resounding "no." It was something about the gentle way he treated her.

"Maybe I'll end up in that tunnel going toward the light." As if he were being sucked down the nozzle of a vacuum cleaner, Theo zoomed through the air, so fast that trees and streets and homes became rivers full of confetti ripping by him.

"Could this be the end?" he thought and barreled, faceless, without worry or wonder, between molecules, then atoms.

And back in Theo's study, his body was carted off unceremoniously, and his mother, tearless, was on her knees, blotting blood from the carpet. "He was always a mess," she muttered as she turned her attention to the cracked plaster behind the desk where the bullet was wedged in the wall, "even after death."