



Benevolent Me

Liel Asulin

Alone in a blank, beige office, I toiled away at inconsequential work. On the wall, a glossy gray poster read, "Keep at it." in Courier font. With a sigh that began somewhere deep and sacred, I glanced down at an encyclopedia-sized report, whose extra bold title evoked extra anger. Upon it I discovered a bug dancing. It was a tiny thing—an oval speck shaped like a grain of bulgur wheat. On the back of the bulgur bug, its designer had imprinted two drooping green eyes against a smoky backdrop, a most ghoulish face. I watched as it danced, bending and stretching its legs to and from its thorax. Each followed its own rhythm, a complicated 12-step on a miniature scale.

Between blinks, the dancing bug was flipped onto its back, blown over by the strong gust stirred up by my batting lashes. Legs skyward, its dance became desperate, arrhythmic, a fierce struggle against death's gooey grip. I, having taken interest in the trials of this dancing bug, assumed the role of judge and, with swift, delicate action, ruled in favor of life.

From my lungs came a gentle breath that sent the critter spinning through the air, and like a lucky coin, the dancing bug turned up heads.

With antennae spinning clockwise and counter, the befuddled bug ceased its gyrations, taking a moment and several breaths.

When the First Great Reorientation concluded, the dancing bug was born again, gyrating with gratitude. My insides sizzled with warmth, and I smiled, and I knew I was good.



I raised my eyes to the fluorescent bulbs and stared until the room shimmered. How heavenly their brightness must be for the bug.

There came to pass several breaths—an insect eon—when, audaciously, Dancing Bug tangoed itself into a tizzy once more and I found it squirming, wrong side up on the table, a most unlucky coin.

I squinted through the aura of light still obscuring my vision and gnawed at my tongue until I tasted metallic. This was most certainly

not good. Resolved to set things right, I stretched out my finger and placed it down with care just within reach of the unlucky coin's sticky feet.

Being so small and insignificant, I could not feel it climb aboard, but when I turned my hand over, that haunting face smiled back. "Boo," it said and rushed down my outstretched hand, assisted by gravity and nimble feet. Although my eyes saw the clumsy, ghoulish-backed bug race across my most sensitive skin, my nerves sent no signals to my brain, which resulted in laughter from my lungs. What strange programming. Though I laughed, I judged this unfavorably, for this speck of life had made a fool of my senses. Another not good.

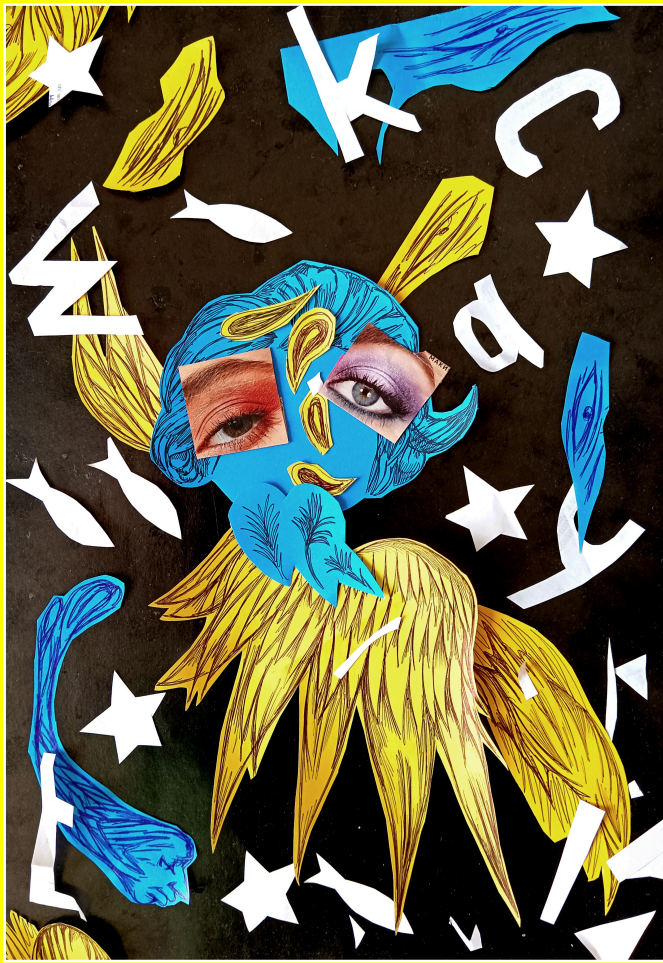
Irrked, I lowered my finger down onto the angry report and, because Dancing Bug was so weightless, the impact was enough to shake the living sticker loose. To my relief, the Weightless One landed upright. After a momentary pause, known as the Second Great Reorientation, (commemorated by leaping from tall heights), the bug began to dance again. Thus, I decided that it would be right to call the critter by any of the following names: the Weightless One, Clumsy Be He; the Ghoulish-Backed Coin; and of course, Dancing Bug. I said these names aloud and I heard that they were good. The race was neck and neck.

Satisfied at last, I set sites on my work when, once again, I found that insolent irritant tail-side up. At the sight of this affront to my benevolence, I became enraged. This loathsome creature had cut its last rug; whirled its last waltz; shaken its last leg.

For a moment—and only for a moment—I cocked my finger and considered flicking the pest from my table, into the Great Buggy Beyond. As my anger crescendoed, the bug began to dance, and the plain text poster on my beige wall spoke clearly from the corner of my eye.

Keep at it.

I stayed my righteous finger, sighed a loving breath that delivered the scoundrel right side up, and smiled at my fate revealed at last. A benevolent bug flipper, bound by beige borders, blessed with a partner with whom to dance.



real questions by organizers

mk zariel

is the venue of the event...in fact...a venue for events?

you've said you're an anarchist. are you really?

does BashBack mean you literally bash at people? (no.)

is the signal thread actually middle school, or does it just sound that way?

are you queer or just gay? living, or just passively

alive? why are we having a meeting for

ten people on a night

when maybe two people can make it?

inclusion is when we yell at each other, right?

do you care about other people?

are you here for the anarchy or the dramatics—

for the solidarity, or the brief moments

when it ruptures in accusations

is it not surreal to be

accused of bigotry by a known bigot?

accused of not being trans enough,

by people who are in fact cis?

is the venue for the event simply a

space for shouting matches?

what the hell are we doing?

Blackbird Sidestep

D. C. Nobes

I wonder sometimes
about the birds.
Is my reflective dome,
the by-product of my
testosterone heritage,
too tempting a target?

I saw him, perched
upon the wire overhead.

I paused.

And stepped to the left.
The sidewalk splat
where I would have been
had I not thought
“What if ...”
But he missed me
today.

The Day of the Key

K. J. Watson

The key appeared overnight, suspended on a wire across the town's square. It became the immediate focus of attention.

"What does it open?" people asked each other.

No one proposed where the corresponding lock might be. Bewildered, the townsfolk simply looked up at the key and rubbed the backs of their necks.

Carla ambled into the square and said, "We should try to retrieve it."

This suggestion animated the crowd. Carla sat on a bench and watched as two decorators extended a ladder. It almost reached the key but had nothing to lean against, which meant that nobody could ascend.

"Someone small could go up," one of the decorators said as she attempted to keep the ladder upright. Nobody volunteered.

Carla removed her hat and brushed some talcum powder off it. The fine particles drifted towards the decorators and up their noses. They sneezed, and the ladder crashed to the ground.

"Send for Salvador," Carla said as she replaced her hat. People nodded in agreement. They shouted Salvador's name and began to look for him.

The notion of a mysterious suspended key piqued Salvador's interest. Although reclusive, he strode to the square and assessed the situation.

"Give me an hour," he said and disappeared.

With nothing to do but wait, the townsfolk grew restless.

Carla took a book from her bag. Before she started to read, she told a nearby woman that people should eat while they waited for Salvador. The idea spread and an impromptu picnic occurred.

After an hour, the sky darkened.

"He's here," everyone declared as they stared up at Salvador. He waved from a wicker basket suspended beneath a crimson balloon.

A light wind blew the balloon to within an arm's length of the key.

"What's it like?" someone called to Salvador.

"It's rusty," he replied, "and looks like a key to an ancient chest."

While the onlookers absorbed this information, Salvador stretched out his hand towards the key. Below him, Carla closed her book with a bang. The rush of air that resulted rose to the balloon and tilted the wicker basket.

The spectators caught their breath. For one perilous moment, they thought Salvador would topple into their midst. Off balance, he withdrew his hand from the key, clutched the side of the basket and saved himself.

"This is too dangerous," he said. "I can't reach the key."

To the sound of a collective sigh of disappointment from below, Salvador manoeuvred his balloon away into the distance.

With a look of satisfaction, Carla rose from the bench.

"Where are you going?" a boy asked her. "We haven't recovered the key. We must work together and stay until we do."

"We won't be able to retrieve it," Carla said. "Even so, we should come together once a year and try. The oxidised key that dangles here has brought us together and exercised our ingenuity."

Thus, the festive Day of the Key came about.



Night sonnet

Kit Willet

When I wake in the small hours,
I sometimes part my curtains
and sit on the bed and gaze out
at the two perfect golden arches
hanging above the hill
as if suspended by thread.
It is there nightly, without fail,
and I wonder if its brightness
will ever wane. The longer I look,
the more colours join its corona
until the whole world is lit up
by the herald of the sky,
beckoning me to join in,
if only there were some place to go.

Always Mooching

Tim Frank

Kramer, from the show *Seinfeld*, had a gambling problem, so he went to the bookies to place one last bet. After that, he would tend to his avocado trees sprouting on the window ledge of his stuffy Manhattan apartment, or maybe he'd sell aluminium siding outside the zoo to tourists wearing sensible shoes and expensive waterproof jackets.

When he stepped inside the betting shop, he was confronted by a group of teens dressed in orange and white polyester tracksuits bobbing silently to music played on bulky headphones, with a mirror ball spinning like space junk catching the light of a setting sun.

A man in a baggy hockey shirt, chewing a wet cigar stub, approached Kramer and told him to remove his vintage clothes and don a complimentary shell suit.

“Why?” said Kramer, eyeing up a juicy Cuban cigar tucked into the scruffy man's breast pocket. “I don't have to do anything you tell me, this is a free country, last time I checked.”

“Maybe so, but in here things are different—there are rules. Now put the tracksuit on if you want to lay a bet.”

So, Kramer relented, shed his yellow bowling shirt and ankle length sack pants and slipped on the tracksuit.

“It’s all crinkly,” he said, jogging on the spot. “It crackles.”

The man with the cigar placed some headphones over Kramer’s ears and disappeared into the quiet throng.

Strangely, the headphones didn’t play music at all, but instead, a morose baritone voice grumbled on about the virtues of salted popcorn, and this lecture meandered on and on like a tedious news report about fishing quotas.

Kramer ripped off his headphones in disgust—he just wanted to gamble in peace and let that sweet action ride. He barged through the undulating scrum, and approached a woman behind the glass counter. She was sucking on a leaky biro and some blue ink had stained her blood red lipstick.

“\$100 on Graveyard Shift, please,” Kramer said, handing over two crisp fifty-dollar bills.

“Your money’s no good here, Mr Kramer.”

“How do you know my name? What’s going on here? Why is everything so weird?”

The woman simply shrugged.

“Look, I’ll give you more money, if that’s what you want. How about \$150 or \$200, will that do?” said Kramer.

“Give me \$300 and you’re good to go.”

Kramer didn’t have that kind of money. Who does? Well, Jerry Seinfeld did, actually, so Kramer phoned him.

“Jerry! I’m in trouble.”

“That’s a shame,” Jerry said.

“Please, I just need a small loan.”

“You’re gambling again aren’t you, you weak, weak man.”

“Jerry—“

“This is like the time you stole my credit card and bought a massive haul of Picante green olives and then spilled brine all over my new couch.”

“But—“

“And then you ran for President and spent all my savings on campaign adverts for buses and radio spots.”

Kramer whined, “I’m a good person, I don’t deserve this.”

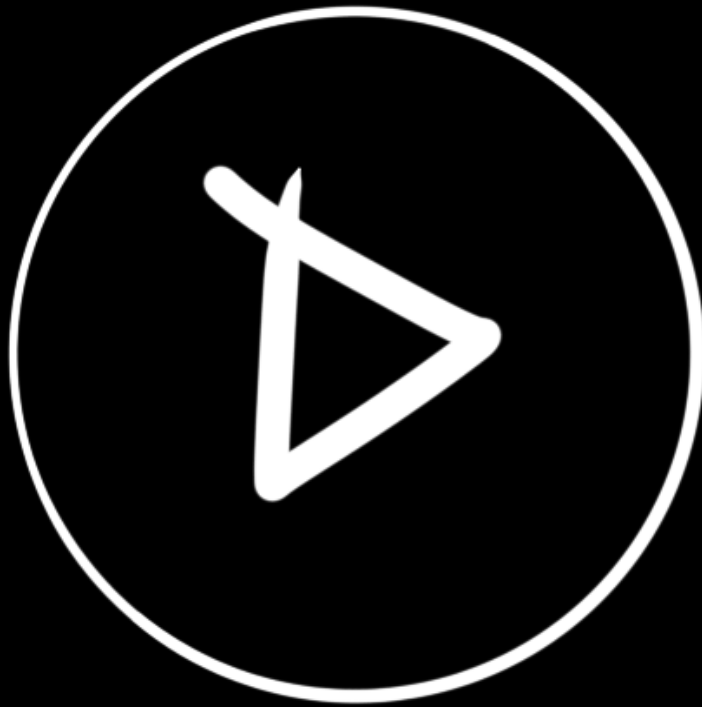
“Goodbye, Kramer,” said Jerry, then hung up.

Kramer slumped his shoulders and shuddered with tears. Before he could slouch out of the room and return to his game of online chess with his only loyal friend, Newman, he was bundled to the floor by the mob of dancing teens, who were stripped naked and munching on undercooked kernels of salted popcorn.

Kramer didn't resist. Somehow, now, it all made sense, and he allowed himself the freedom to enjoy the taut, warm skin pressed against his stubbly cheeks and bare ankles. The mound of flesh remained still for what seemed like an age. Kramer became wistful—gambling was a mug's game that could only bring pain and suffering. He needed to make changes, big changes. Maybe he should treat his friends and family with more respect. He could start by reimbursing Jerry for puking inside the urn that contained Jerry's uncle's ashes. That was an all-time low.

Let's face it, he was a lazy moocher living a pointless existence, and he realised for the first time he might be a little depressed. So, he wrestled himself free from the mass of naked youths, then trekked along the high street to find a dive bar to while away the hours. And as he trudged along, he contemplated unemployment, friendship, and the gaping void that was his horrid life. Boy, he needed to lay a bet right about now. Maybe he would—just once—after first getting wasted and seeking solace in the arms of a good whore.





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Book: Dying of the Light (Wipf and Stock, 2022)

“The Day of the Key” by K. J. Watson

“Always Mooching” by Tim Frank
Twitter: @TimFrankquill
Book: An Advert Can be Beautiful in the Right Shade of Death (C22 Press, 2024)

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