



Those Drowned Out Stars

by Tim Lepczyk

There was a loop in my head. Repetitive images and scenes played and repeated. I was trapped when they actually took place, on the couch, with Jenine lunging above me, her arms circled, and hands pointed. She said, it was over between us. The words were full. It felt like packing material pressed around my head, wedged into my ears. My senses were dull as my eyes completed their own circular journey. Jenine's face, pained, flushed, tears beading in the corner of her eyes. Then there was the floor, scratches from furniture and scuffs from previous tenants pulled through the varnish. My head turned to the side, looked out the window of our, or more accurately, my second floor apartment. A scarecrow sat propped in a lawn chair on a wrought iron balcony. It was decrepit, passive, lonely in loose jeans, and a baggy flannel. The scarecrow looked like it wore a mask, a stained Jack Daniel's hat on its head, and sunglasses covered for eyes, which I imagined could see Jenine and I, record this prosaic scene in our lives as the world streamed along our street.

All of this happened five days ago. The gradual numbness began to vacate my limbs, even though I could still hear the echo of her moving bags of clothes, furniture, and potted plants down the stairs, the door empty for her to exit, to flow out of mine and into some other life.

We were supposed to have a murder mystery Halloween party, something like they do at [Lemp Mansion](#), with roles and intrigue. We were supposed to do so much together. I wondered if she'd met someone else, or if it was as simple as our differences in personality? She said, I was too structured, played everything too safe. She said more as well, in the way she shut her eyes to me, and how she held her bag tight over her shoulder, not looking up toward the building as she opened her car door.

Every time I left the apartment the scarecrow looked more sunken, more weathered. The temperature in [St. Louis](#) was still warm in October and not all the leaves had that dry

death-crackle to them. Summer had ended, and with it, so had the humidity which saturated the city and eased into the pores of bricks, the doors expanding until they were locked tight in their frames. Autumn was a time for open windows and the roar of the crowd watching baseball. I did my best to ignore the skeletons rattling in the wind.

At work, away from the sympathetic gestures of friends, the non-eyes from the balcony staring into my apartment, and the beer bottles like headstones on my coffee table, I lost myself scripting code for the company's employee database and intranet. My fingers felt at ease with the light spring of computer keys, the smell of cool, circulated air. Evaluative statements and concepts were broken down to true/false, if/else, a language of numbers operating in the background, authenticating identities, connecting people, businesses, and machines. Perhaps, Jenine was wrong. Perhaps her idea of gradients was naive. The pairings and logic were everywhere: alone/together, risky/safe, sad/happy, poor/rich, alive/dead. If excitement is greater or equal to safety, and love is less than previous variable, value of boyfriend, then delete current variable, value of boyfriend. There was a formula at work. Jenine operated at mysterious levels.

The party planning was not going well. I researched mysteries, tried to come up with roles besides backstabber, lost myself to zombie movies cycling on cable and over-priced beer imported from the [Czech Republic](#).

Halloween was a week away. Gap-toothed, green witch's faces floated in windows, ghosts hung from trees, their sheets billowing in the breeze. In my mystery game everyone would be a suspect, everyone would be guilty. We all had excuses, motives. Open/hidden, no one was honest. Others would be there as well, the bartender from the corner bar, the barista from the coffee shop, neighbors among the brick two-story buildings. We were all complicit.

The sun set near six p.m. and what children there were Trick-or-treating trickled through the streets. Parents clumped on the sidewalks trying to let the children feel a sense of freedom before they blew down from stoops and doorways, back into the legs and bodies of the adults.

My guests began to arrive, and I realized I never mentioned costumes. Two robots shook my hands, they brought six packs of beer, and had pieces of Nintendos, tinfoil, and LED lights flashing amidst boxy bodies and tubular limbs. I was pretty sure I knew them.

There were a few friends in jeans and t-shirts, past the point of style or ironic beer choices. One of my co-workers wore an elaborate Sherlock Holmes get up and peered at my face, his eye magnificent and dilated behind the lens. As people mingled, I withdrew; my hands melted along the walls, the palms damp against the plaster. I drank a beer, toasted a shot with a cowboy and angel in the kitchen. We should play, I thought, the game. But I didn't know how to start.

Laughter bounced along the walls, rang up the exposed brick staircase. What was I doing here? Where was Jenine? I gathered up the index cards of roles. Shuffled them till the edges bent. I imagined them to have the power of Tarot cards; laid out they would tell us who we were. People pressed in close. A gorilla drew the role of seductive heir to an oil empire. This was not going well. A drink spilled on my back. I barked a laugh. It came out more mechanical than any noise the robots could have made.

My voice was loud as the guests quieted down. I began, You're all guests to the lavish house of the seductive oil heir, Celeste Simone. I pointed to, Jeff, the gorilla. He curtsied. His hands gently touching an imaginary dress. The heat seemed to bake off the walls. I continued. Read off the roles. Robots viewed geeks in jeans. The cowboy mimed twisting a mustache. A woman dressed as a zookeeper flung her net over the detective who was not a detective, because that role was mine. But what could I detect? Could I see then that my friends were trying hard to help me forget? Did I really understand what happened between Jenine and I?

The heat gathered along the ceiling and radiated back down. The t-shirt I wore clung to my back. My head felt light, felt like I could faint. I opened the window and stared into the face of the scarecrow. I never really saw him before. There was something odd about the figure, something I ignored.

Without realizing it, I moved down the steps, across the street, and rested my cheek against the green painted grain of my neighbor's door. It was a night of possibilities. The world grew, and I pictured myself walking out of St. Louis, crossing the [Mississippi](#) and heading to the East Coast. Or maybe, booking a flight and sitting in a dark bar in [Prague](#), where the world's best barman passed me a pint without even asking. I leaned on the door. It opened beneath my weight.

A pool of mail pushed across the floor, highlighted in the street lamps. I took a step inside. The party was distant. My friends either blundered on or gave up. The air was different. Pent up. A smell of spoiled food emanated down the hallway from what was probably the kitchen. It was a two story townhouse. I never really knew who lived here.

On impulse, I found the staircase, gripped the railing and quietly took a step at a time. Each step, I paused. Gave it my weight. Tried to keep the noise down. A radio warbled in the darkness. At the top of the stairs, I turned toward the light, toward the framed sliding doors. What would it look like to see through my windows? I opened the sliding door and stepped outside.

On the balcony, the scarecrow's head lolled to the side. It smelled. My pulse surged. I reached for the straw-filled shoulder, touched something more solid. My body jumped. Hand knocked off the sunglasses and cap. I opened my mouth to scream. The night withdrew, and my voice was replaced with a jumble of ones and zeroes that streamed out into the neighborhood, communicating with dying stars and the imprints of planets.

After the police came, after my statement was taken, and the ambulance removed the body, I sat on the curb, surrounded by costumed friends and strangers, neighbors taking in the excitement and gossip, the hangover that was my life. For there to be a mystery, someone had to care, had to have an answer. Sure, we all had our motives, our deceptions. Everyone had a role whether they knew it or not. But sometimes, mysteries are more complicated, sometimes they can't be reduced to a formula. The mystery may not be who killed so and so, or why did she leave, the mystery may not be tied up with how the victim died, and what will happen next. For there to be a mystery, someone needed to notice. I lay back on the cement, not caring if broken glass or cigarette butts got in my hair. The city lights washed the sky orange, and beneath those drowned out stars I wanted to hold on. Feel there was something to grab onto as we revolved out, and further through the darkness.